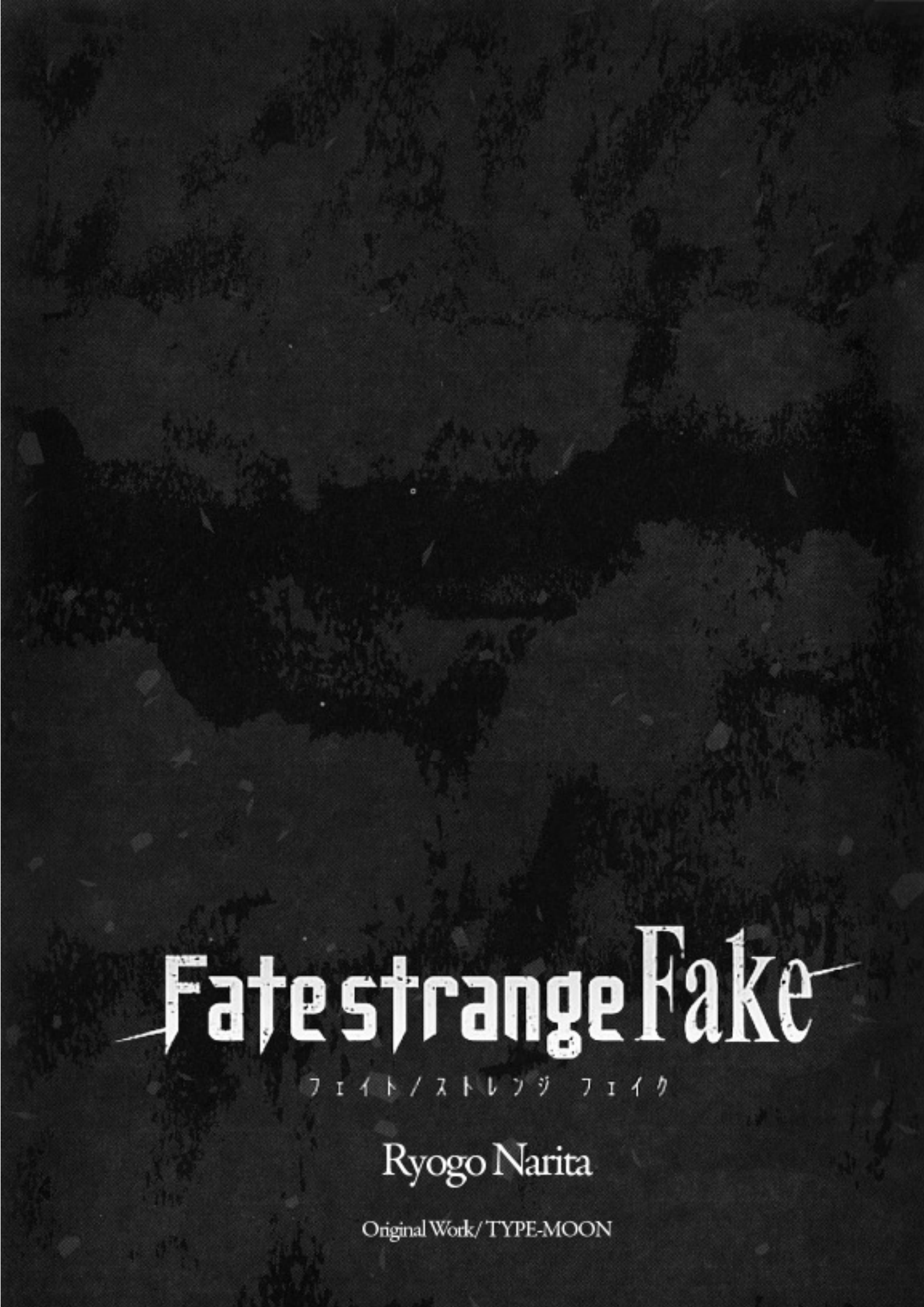

Fate strange Fake
フェイト／ストレンジ フェイク
9
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Fate strange Fake
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Fate/strange Fake 9

Fate strange Fake

フェイト／ストレンジ　フェイク

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DESIGN:WINFANWORKS

Fate strange Fake

フェイト/ストレンジ フェイク

CHARACTER































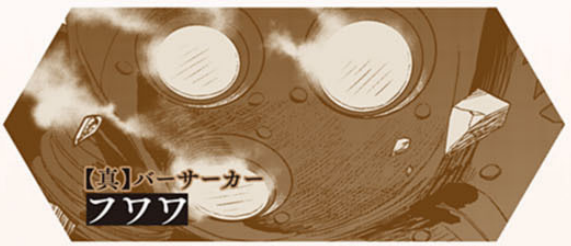

【真】アサシン
幽弋のハサン


【真】キャスター
フランソワ・プレラーティ


ファルデウス・ディオランド


フランチェスカ


【真】アーチャー
アルケイデス


【真】バーサーカー
フワワ


バズディロット・コーデリオン


ハルリ・ボルザーク


【真】ライダー
ヒッポリュテ


シグマ


エルメロイ教室の生徒たち


ウォッチャー








セイバー
リチャード1世




サンジェルマン


アヤカ・サジョウ

Extra Chapter

“From the fertile lands of Thermae”

Fate/strange Fake 9

Extra Chapter: From the fertile lands of Thermae

Oh, this is the end for me.

The queen gathered her thoughts under the intense rain.

What a regrettable way to go.

The queen gathered her thoughts under the sound of her creaking tibia.

Dying here is not the problem.

The queen gathered her thoughts under the warmth of the rock-solid fingers crushing her neck.

The gods... Goddess Hera's trickery is not to blame.

The queen gathered her thoughts under the smell of the shed blood of the Amazons.

Our guardian goddess Artemis.

The queen verbalized her wish under the heat of flames from the destroyed city.

My father, war god Ares.

The queen composed her prayer under the vision of the whole world being covered in dark shade.

I beseech you. I wouldn't mind if it takes an eternity. May this legendary hero one day find the real answers to the doubts he had about us. May he learn that we are not petty warriors who would employ shameful stratagems to lower his guard. Us dying in this senseless slaughter is not the problem. All warriors of the tribe, myself included, lived our whole lives ready for this happening. Sacrifice willed by the gods is not different from the land's disasters and plagues. But dying while the hero will kill us thinks of us as cowards...

The queen never got to hear the sound of her tibia shattering completely.

Because sound was already fully lost from her world.

That alone is the regrettable part.

In the short instant between her neck breaking and her consciousness vanishing...

The queen saw god within herself.
And that's when she realized it.

No... There's one thing more regrettable. My apologies, legendary hero.

What face did her killer, the first legendary hero she ever admired, make when killing her?
As she was losing her sight and hearing, she had no way of knowing.
But at the moment the queen received her invitation to Hades, she left behind her regrets toward the hero who killed her.

I beg your forgiveness with my whole heart, you of glorious radiance, you destined to become a true hero and eventually ascend to the rank of the gods.

The enormous axe in her hands fell to the ground, making a dull noise.
Her life met its end at the same time as this last sound she heard vanished into the lands.
The blade of the axe, soaked with her wish, was still glistening after leaving her hands.

...What I've done to you was...

Prelude

“One Roaming the Netherworld and One Returned from the Netherworld”

Prelude: One Roaming the Netherworld and One Returned from the Netherworld

Kuruoka Tsubaki was dreaming.

Her skin was covered in dark, ghastly, tenebrous, mud-like darkness.

The darkness was strangely warm. Her slumbering consciousness was sinking into the cradle-like comfort of the darkness.

The girl in the dream was having another dream.

The darkness enveloping her–a distortion in the world–had gaps that flickered with light like a slide projector.

She was in Snowfield City.

She could see the shadows of the skyscrapers devoid of people and the light of street lamps.

She was deep underground.

She could see the long and thin shadows of a cage and the light of pale-blue will-o-wisp.

She was on a giant Japanese-style building like the ones that appear in her country's fairy tales.

She saw the flying shadows of animals, the curved shadow of a kimono-wearing bird, and a silver glimmer caused by the latter.

She was in nothing but pure darkness.

At the depths of a world where nothing had form, she saw a faint wavering light.

She was in a cavern surrounded by a beautiful vortex of bare rock.

Behind the three-headed beast, she saw a flickering color resembling the sunlight filtered by the green leaves of a luscious tree.

At every moment, the scenery surrounding the girl was replaced by the next one.

Hundreds, thousands, millions of worlds.

But strangely enough, she could interpret all of those as part of the same world.

Who was showing this to her? The pathogen consuming her brain or the Servant still linked to her soul?

While the background of Tsubaki's dream shifted without further effects, the origin of the

microorganisms consuming her body—

The descendants of a distant something that the Kuruoka family collected in southern lands and injected in Tsubaki after using their magecraft to make it better/worse—

guided the child into one gloom.

When she saw a small bonfire flickering amidst a dense fog, she felt signs of throbbing deep inside her head, and for a short time, her slumbering mind returned to her.

She didn't exactly wake up. She was still in the unclear state of dreaming within a dream.

The slumbering Tsubaki was drawn to the bonfire—and then she got the impression that the figure sitting by the flame said something to her.

Within the all-covering mist of uncertainty, she could see a man wearing a striking suit, like he was dressed for a party or was a TV model.

"————, ——————————?"

The child still couldn't understand the meaning of the man's words.

But there was one thing she could tell:

The figure switched from talking to her to talking to someone in the darkness behind her.

"————, ————.————————."

Tsubaki looked back.

All she found there was infinite darkness being swallowed by the bright bonfire–

But she knew it.

She knew what the whole darkness around her really was. She knew its warm embrace.

She knew it was the being who saved her from the real darkness.

"...Mr. Black?"

The moment Tsubaki said this name out loud, the darkness envelop her whole body—and the background switched back to thin cage.

And, illuminated by the blue flame, Tsubaki gradually fell back into her muddy doze.

The second before sunk back into slumber—

Tsubaki suddenly remembered the blinding glow that was next to her last time she was in the thin cage.

Not the figure by the bonfire. The glow that was already by the cage from the start.
Feeling lonely that no one was around anymore, she muttered in her head:

Where did that... golden person go...?

× ×

Heaven and earth once were one.
The land where mankind took root was a mirror image of the celestial sphere.
They formed a Trinity, although not the one that the term is normally interpreted as.
In the ancient times, all was connected as one, and was expressed as merged parts of the gods.

The king, his nation, mankind, the era—parted ways with the gods.

After an epic journey and battle to create heaven and earth separately, the Age of Man was ultimately formulated.

Alternatively, some tell that the gods parted ways with humanity by their own hands because they understood that this was the form the world would take no matter how they tried to resist it. Only the Hero King who accomplished it all knows the truth of it.

The king with all-seeing eyes ascertained his fate since infancy.

The pure-hearted boy king used his all-seeing eyes to watch the state of the world and its people, the king turned into an arrogant hero trampled all there was through fear and accomplishments, and the king returned as the Wise King offered his soul and wisdom to accompany the citizens in their personal journeys.

Then what lies in the interstice between them?

Fate/strange Fake 9

This is a story about the interstice.

The original king discarded the Age of Gods and took the first steps in the Age of Man.

He was humanity's peak accomplishment and the greatest grace offered by the heavens. He cleared the path for the tale of the creation of heaven and earth.

This individual was the impossible interstice between heaven and earth. In other words, between humanity and the gods.

And in the present-day Snowfield, he was rebooted.

It all started when a goddess associated with the entity departed to the netherworld.

And with a treatment measure previously set up by the entity's Master.

This fact was consequence of many other interacting factors—

But despite this event that could only be described as a miracle, the entity didn't immediately recolor the world's atmosphere.

There was no special surge of magical energy, nor any of the glow and impact from when a regular Servant summon occurs.

It was as if he was sending a message that nothing significant happened and everything was operating within normality.

Despite the manifested entity being—

an interstice whose existence was wholly impossible in both reality and telltale.

× ×

Snowfield, top floor of the Crystal Hill

The event happened so naturally that the many mages present at the scene—the members of landkeeper group commanded by Tine Chelc—couldn't notice it.

Much like no one questions how the sun rises from the east every day, or how breathing doesn't require dedicated thought, no one paid mind to event occurring there.

The body barely held in place by Tine's magecraft, an insignificant corpse until a moment ago, was reconstructed into what was simultaneously the same individual and someone completely different.

From the moment it opened its eyelids and awakened its mind, the entity was fully aware of

what it was.

Thus, the entity looked at the sky.

Despite the galestorms that continued to rage, its cloud had cleanly vanished while he wasn't looking.

Despite the sky remaining azure, it carried a chill resembling clear ice.

The goddess symbolizing the skies fell to the underworld and all heat was being stolen by the nanostorm west of the city.

Under the skies mixed with void, the entity sensed a presence that made him smile wide like a mirror and utter:

"The tribute to the end of times is dancing in the sky."

At first glance, the entity's appearance was that of a human/god.

By modern standards, his appearance was strikingly youthful.

A being in the interstice between childhood and adulthood, built symmetrical like a statue.

Standing by the window, the entity circulated 100% purely human magical energy throughout his body and quietly smiled.

"When you let the gods deny your beastly nature and lost your will... What parameter of humanity do you think you are testing?"

× ×

"Could it be—"

Enkidu's voice, directed at the eastern sky, was dispersed by the galestorms.

After keeping company to their archenemy goddess in her last moments, Enkidu was running toward the storm of violence brewing in the west, trusting Saber and Assassin to deal with the leftover issue in the temple where they previously were. But then—

Along the way, they detected one powerful mass of magical energy gaining life, causing them to stop and let their bewilderment show in their face. The doubt in their heart escaped as raw words.

"Could it be—Is it really you?"

Curiously enough, those were the exact same words Enkidu said when they first manifested in this land.

But the emotions in the delivery couldn't be more different.

On the first time, it was out of joy because they pictured an unbelievable reencounter with their friend, allowed by an whim of fate.

In contrast, Enkidu has now said these words out of pure doubt.

In this land and era—

Something has manifested, and they were powerless to predict in what ways he would be different from the friend they knew.

Chapter 27

“The Red Little Riding Hood of the Semina Apartments, Unraveled—or, The Mages Shot the Wolf I”

Chapter 27: The Red Little Riding Hood of the Semina Apartments, Unraveled—or, The Mages Shot the Wolf I

For the purposes of this telling, we'll be referring to the college student as "A".

The student "A", who recently moved to Kurokizaka's Semina Apartments, loved his solitude.

So much so that when he saw the child of his new neighbors waiting for someone to appear by the elevator, when she asked him to press the button for their shared ride, his desire to get away from her triumphed over his concern for her situation.

Therefore, A paid no mind to the girl's visible scars and signs of mistreatment, believing that they would never interact again in his life.

But a minor coincidence greatly changed A's life.

"May I ask you one thing?"

A girl inside the elevator's mirror talked to him.

Her stuffed knapsack had a complex smell mixed of wildflowers, grasses, and herbs. A could tell from her appearance that she was still at school age, so he suspected that she was coming from collecting greenery from Fuyuki's mountains as a school assignment.

There was a lot here that A had no way of knowing.

For example, that part of what he was smelling had the automatic effect of the hypnosis frequently practiced by mages.

She was standing diagonally behind him, interposing her image with his reflection in the mirror.

Her age was somewhere between her late teens and 20s.

A surmised she was younger than him, but not by much.

Her straight hair was solidly colored black and she wore glasses. The girl gave off the impression of someone who didn't belong in society, but A found himself unable to take his eyes away from the girl.

A was trapped in a sensation of sleep paralysis as he heard the girl talk.

"Please care about this girl."

That was when A first noticed it:

A kid in a red hood stood between him and the girl in the mirror.

The "Red Little Riding Hood" in question, just as surprised about this, naturally looked up to see the face of the bespectacled girl in the mirror.

The instant that the glasses girl and the "Red Little Riding Hood" entered the same field of view, albeit on different sides of the mirror, the next words of power entered A's ears.

"I'm not asking you to risk your life."

Slight movements on the girl's fingers caused the twigs of the sprouts protruding out of her knapsack to twitch unnaturally.

But that never came to A's attention.

A's eyes couldn't move away from the face of the girl in the mirror.

"I just want you to… reach out to her if anything happens. That's all I ask."

This hypnotical suggestion was engraved in A's heart.

The glasses girl pressed the 12th-floor button, and as A and the Red Little Riding Hood lived on the 11th floor, they got off the elevator one story earlier.

He remembered that the 12th floor was home to the owner of the apartment complex, Mayor Himuro.

The girl was the same age as the mayor's daughter, so he guessed she was her friend, but wasn't interested enough to take his thoughts any further and cut the speculation short at "This girl says weird things". He returned to his apartment without saying anything to the hooded girl.

That was the whole story.

After that, A expected his days to continue as usual.

However—

The hypnosis cast by the unnamed girl with glasses was unquestionably taking root in his mind.

Whenever he saw the girl struggling to press the buttons, he unconsciously pressed the 11th-floor button.

It was a natural action, considering he lived on the same floor—but starting then, whenever he got off on the 1st floor and found the girl entering, he naturally pressed the 11th-floor button before walking out.

Since no one was there to witness this fact, it began to be told as a ghost story.

Therefore—

The narrative missed the part where the red-hooded girl would always say "Thank you" with a smile.

But that divergence was inconsequential.

The biggest discrepancy between Fuyuki's popular horror story of the Red Little Riding Hood of Semina Apartments and what really happened in Kurokizaka was in A's actions.

On an Autumn night, immediately after he heard a violent fight, roars, and screams coming out of the neighboring apartment—

someone desperately knocked on A's door.

The knocking came from a low position like it was a child slamming her short arms against the door.

In the horror story, A ignores her, deeming the fight to be entirely the neighbors' business, fails to save an easily savable life, and pays the price for it in the last scene.

But his fate had been twisted by one mage.

On the real night of the crime—A opened the door when the girl knocked.

There was only one issue that the mage didn't anticipate:

This action didn't branch the story into the route where the red-hooded girl is saved. It was the start of a greater tragedy than the one told in the horror story.

× ×

Present day, west Snowfield, the former site of the Neo Ishtar Temple

In the forest, after the blessings of the goddess descended to the underworld and the threats of the flood and the galestorms passed.

Since Enkidu's power previously traversed through the entire forest, the sturdier trees still had their roots in the ground, but most of the younger trees were knocked down and washed away by the cataclysmic water and winds and by the intense battle disturbing the flow of magical energy in the area.

Most of the forest would still be intact if goddess Ishtar's blessings weren't conflicting with

Enkidu's magical energy, but nonetheless, the area looked like a tornado had passed through it, which is exactly what happened.

Numerous animals and plants were missing from the forest, and the only smell permeating the air was one of mud mixed with broken trees.

However, this bad air quickly dispersed.

By the fiercely blowing swirl of storm that appeared out of the cumulonimbus replacing the hurricane.

"This presence... It's that bowman that was in front of the hospital?", said Saber–the Heroic Spirit arriving at the devastated temple–before looking at the cumulonimbus.

His Master, Ayaka Sajou, reached his side.

She arrived guarded by a group of El-Melloi Classroom students and alumni. Her reaction to finding Saber was only two words long.

"Doing okay?"

"A lot better now that that hill-sized Berserker is off our case. But we didn't get to defeat her, so she must be hiding somewhere... I know she didn't go into spirit form, so she's gotta have some way of making that colossal body of hers invisible."

Depending on the situation, learning that a monstrous Heroic Spirit is capable of stealth could drive some to despair. Saber, however, relayed the information with a grin.

"What's so funny?", said Ayaka, short on patience.

"Nothing. I was just remembering the sting I felt on my skin during one of my major past battles. That Berserker and... that other guy in the western sky that looks like thunderclouds incarnate make my blood quiver the same it did when I confronted tremendously powerful armies.", boldly answered Saber.

"Major battle...? You mean a war? You were fighting against humans, right?"

"Yes. Although, of course, the opponents I'm talking about include the entire enemy army. I'm talking about their combined presence rooted in the characteristics of their land and climate, their history, and each soldier's convictions, so there's no way to make a comprehensive comparison here, but..."

With a wide smirk, Saber appraised whatever was at the center of the raging cumulonimbus kilometers away.

"I didn't think a single soul could go as wild as them. That's one way to get people jealous! Right, Ayaka?"

"Wrong..."

"Really? You're a logical one, Ayaka! That also has me jealous! I wish I had what you got!"

"Some king really needs to work on his envy issues."

Ayaka was ever as baffled by his banter, but even then, a vision was still always present in the background of her thoughts.

Images of the dream she had that morning.

Saber's blood-colored past.

The smell of blood entering her nose there was vivid despite it being a dream, and that stench was probably engraved in Saber's soul.

Ayaka was not versed enough in magecraft or Heroic Spirits to have any productive thoughts on the matter.

And for that reason, she was frightened.

Frightened that she would become a burden to Saber, who continued to fight despite having a soul marked by such things.

But I'm past the point I could back down. Can't let myself stop. I'm a Master now, whatever that means.

She was aware that she made herself a participant in a fierce fight.

Part of her wanted to dismiss this sensation as the heat of the moment driving her crazy.

But Ayaka knew from the start that she wasn't wholly sane.

For the longest time, before she came to this city, she always felt herself strangely detached from gravity.

She spent her days only running away from her fear of the Red Little Riding Hood and unintelligible guilt within her.

If anything, the bond she tied to Saber after coming to this city is what finally grounded her.

Being Saber's Master was what connected her to the world.

One wrong move was bound to cost not only her life, but the lives of Saber and the mages around her, or maybe a large number of citizens.

No, she had a high chance of still dying without making any wrong moves.

In the lurid battle from a while ago, Ayaka witnessed the surge of power of a goddess. She saw with her own eyes that this pile of rubble was a floating temple moments ago. This reminded her that human common sense had no place in her situation.

Shoving her anxieties further down her throat, she took a deep breath to steel her resolve. Next, she asked Saber a question:

"So, about the... was it a goddess? Did they defeat her?"

"Looks like it. After the temple fell, the air around her went back to normal."

Saber was taking Ayaka's hand to help her climb the rubble, but his eyes were looking another way.

The temple crumbled into a pile of rock before, and now it was crumbling further, with the edges of the still-solid debris gradually turning back to sand and dirt.

In the center of the rubble, they found the body of a woman lying down.

"Fillia..."

"Seems like she was the vessel of the goddess... Do you know her?"

"Yeah... I'm here because this woman forced me... in that castle... in the forest..."

— Don't try to stop me, Sella. I'll use the Holy Grail to revert the outcome of the Holy Grail War.

She could recall Fillia saying that to a woman very similar to her.

Fillia eventually turned her back against this "Sella" and walked to the city carrying Ayaka.

She could even remember the awe she felt when Fillia picked her up as casually as she would pick up a purse.

When Ayaka was already feeling lost in the current situation, a torrent of memories confused her further.

– You can do what I need.
– You are what I need.

– You have no right to decide the end you'll meet.
– I'll give meaning to your life.

– The usurper of the Holy Grail reassembled in foreign ground.
–The cornerstone for the reboot of the Einzbern.
–That's what you will become.

– Why does something like you exist?
– I don't care about your origin story.
– All that matters is that you and I are the same.
– Something that has no reason to remain in the world unless we accomplish something.

– I'll make you into a Master.
– I'll mark your limbs with Command Spells.
– I'll give you meaning.
– You'll steal the Servants of the defeated Masters.

– Your entire past is a sham. A fabrication.
– Your entire being is a sham. Incomplete.
– Your entire will is a sham. Exaggerated.
– Your entire future is a sham. A swindle.

– So I'll turn you into something real.
– A real tool. A Mystic Code.

– I'll blur the impact of the Red Little Riding Hood etched within you.
– Participate in the Holy Grail War.
– If you don't want the Red Little Riding Hood to consume you, that is.

Ayaka felt a sharp stab in her head.
But it wasn't pain.

She felt like her brain was being strangled by a snake.

The headaches and discomfort she previously felt whenever she tried to remember something were taking a different form.

Previously, it felt like her memories were trapped in metaphorical ropes, but the knots were abruptly untied and her brain was flooded with memories she wasn't trying to remember.

Locking the eerie feeling deep within her spine, she directed a question to the Rider Masters next to the collapsed Fillia.

"So, uh... Is she dead?"

She was the person who forcibly sent Ayaka to the US, but she was also one of her very few acquaintances.

Faced with the fact that something was lost from the narrow world she earned for herself, Ayaka felt her feet disconnecting from gravity.

But the answer delivered by one of the mages–Toosaka Rin–was not what she expected.

"Her body is still alive. She's pretty sturdy, for Einzbern homunculus standards... There are a few parts that look incorrectly maintained, but I'm no expert in that department... "

"Huh...? She alive...?"

"That's not what I said. There's nothing left of her Divine Core and the consciousness associated with it. Nor the original personality of the homunculus body. I was really expecting some remains of that to last, but alas..."

After saying that, Rin turned to look at Fillia's face.

Her face and body had no marks of damage or signs of vitality lost.

But seeing Fillia as she was now made Ayaka feel irrational grief.

"Looks like she wasn't originally built to be a Lesser Grail. Still... I don't think she can come back from having all that presence of death passing through her, on top of having already been invaded by a goddess. That possibly altered her very essence."

"...She'd've been better off if we destroyed her before it got to that."

One of the mages next to Rin dropped this careless opinion, leaving Ayaka with the discouraging confirmation that the people before her didn't share her values.

"Hey, hold o..."

When Ayaka tried to raise her voice—
a chill ran across her whole body.
It was like time stopped for a moment, and she immediately looked above in search of the cause.
She hadn't detected anything there.
She was simply looking in the same direction as everyone around her was.
Because every mage around her turned their gaze to the sky.
Not to the spiral of thunderclouds in the west, but the humanoid something a mere 10 meters above them.
Drawn in by the figure above them, Ayaka assumed that the being was a Servant, much like her Saber and many others she saw.

"Flat... is that really you?", asked a young man from the mage group to the figure above.

"... The other me... No, I shouldn't be calling him that. He's dead.", dispassionately declared the humanoid something above. "Thia. That's what he named me. I won't go by any other name."

"What's going on... do they know each other?", Ayaka talked to herself out loud.
Checking the reactions of the mages around her, she determined the situation was not that simple.
And next to her, Saber complemented her thoughts.

"Ayaka, remember the man who got shot immediately after we escaped the dream of the underworld?"

"Huh...? Oh..."

The picture of the young man with his head and chest full of holes formed in her head. She answered, trying her hardest to contain the rush of nausea coming from her heart.

"The boy... who seemed to know me?"

"Yeah. The boy above us is, how do I put it... an altered form of his body. No, maybe it'd be more accurate to say what was inside came out. Honestly, I don't understand it either, I'm just saying what one of my companions told me."

By companions, Saber presumably meant one of the acquaintances beckoned by his Noble Phantasm.

He called them "companions", "retinues", among many other inconsistent terms, but all Ayaka really knew was that every one of them was an ally Saber trusted.

"I should have taken my studies of magecraft more seriously in life. Well, no crying over spilled milk."

Saber walked in front of Ayaka during his casual chatter.

He was in position to protect Ayaka from whatever the entity above tried.

Immediately understanding the meaning of that, Ayaka swallowed her nausea and guarded herself.

"Aya...ka...Sajo...u..."

But—a faint moan reached her ears.

"?"

When Ayaka reflexively looked at her feet, she saw Fillia with her eyes and mouth barely open.

"You're... still alive..."

"!"

It wasn't the "vestiges of the goddess" talking. It was the woman who brought her here.

Ayaka had only talked to the goddess once through text messages, but she could feel that this one was the Fillia she knew.

She couldn't explain why, however.

The feeling of knots untying inside her head was still present this whole time.

Fillia whispered in a way only she could hear.

Ayaka crouched next to Fillia's face to hear her better.

Her barely moving mouth closed.

But her voice still reached Ayaka's ears.

Through some unknown means of magical communication, Ayaka felt her voice ringing directly from the tattoos on her limbs and shoulders.

When the divine aura squashed me... I also remembered everything... I did... something horrible to you...

Unlike in their first meeting, her voice had hints of kindness now.

Her tone of conversation was closer to the one she used to talk to the other woman in white when Ayaka first saw the two by the castle.

Huh? I can remember everything clearly... Right. She was arguing with someone similar to her. The name was Sella.

The rope in Ayaka's brain was undone, and every strand composing it—every string of memory—broke apart into finer fibers that melded together.

This was the perfect opportunity for Fillia's mental waves to permeate deeper into Ayaka's body.

I wasn't being myself.

I'm an Einzbern defector...

...lost control...ask...someone, ...Ba...t, to put...stop to...

It sounded like an internal monologue as much as it sounded like a confession to a priest.

Her mind was probably collapsing.

Her words gradually lost power until the point Ayaka's mind was able to shake them off.

I just wanted you to have a normal

I just wanted you to have a human life.

Yet I inflicted you with the same suffering

I'm... sorry

I'm undoing all of my hypnosis.

You'll be the real you again.

I lied to you.

I was exploiting your past.

The Red Little Riding Hood wasn't a curse.

So... so please...

From this moment on, be free.

A voice, maybe crying, maybe smiling, rang in Ayaka's brain.

Ah... I'm going... home...

To that city... that accepted me... as a human being.

That was the tone of the final words left behind by Fillia's mind. And when the talk was over—

Ayaka's brain was instantly flooded with memories.

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Years ago, in Fuyuki

It was a complete coincidence.

But perhaps it was an inevitable event as long as she was living in the land of Fuyuki.

It happened while she was still roaming without knowing what she was.

Leaping out of the darkness and into the streets, she ran into a pair of walking boys.

The contacted member of the pair wasn't prepared for impact, so he flipped backward onto the floor, with his trading cards flying all over the place.

"Ah... Sor...Sorry..."

Contrary to her faltering words, the boy spoke with a smile despite his visible pain.

"Uhuh...! Worry not, young lass."

With one hand doing a thumbs-up and the other picking up his cards, the boy spoke with more concern for the party that was still standing than for himself. Until—

"Huhuhu... Heed my words. With each fall, I shall rise anew, sharper and stronger... Kah?

Sajou-dono? Why are you here? Why did you dye your hair?"

Glaring at her face with disbelief, the boy dropped vaguely familiar theatrical mannerisms halfway through the sentence.

"Who? Do you... know my name?"

"Excuse me?! Uh, well, I had the impression that we talked to each other enough times. Was that just my impression? Are the fond memories of the distant days of my youth no more than the misbeliefs of a self-important wanderer?! Baffling... I see necessity to redefine my standing!"

Confused, her attention was strongly drawn to the boy yelling his excited delusions.

Normally, she would tell herself that she mustn't interact with humans, ignore whatever he was saying, and run away...

But, shocked that the bizarrely high-spirited boy knew the name of her current form, she engaged him directly before she stopped to think about the repercussions.

She remained entirely clueless about how much this goofy incident changed her fate.

"This one goes by Gai. Gotou Gai! In the letters of the West, it is spelled G-O-T-O-G-A-Y! And your denomination is Sajou Ayaka! It would satisfy me to have you remember me as the mighty rival who ate from the same cauldron as you in Homurahara's seats of learning! All is well in the world if you do! Initiating friendship installer!"

"Sajou... Ayaka? That's...my...name?"

"Wha!? An unexpected reaction! Forgetting this one would be one thing, but why should Sajou-dono express doubt about her own name? A mystery for the ages!"

In response, the other boy, who had been sleeping on his feet behind him this whole time, suddenly opened his eyes and mumbled:

"...? She looks identical to Sajou... hair color aside... but I don't think that's her."

The boy had strange eyes, blurred by sleepiness but capable of seeing through her clearly. After taking a close look, he continued with a puzzled comment.

"Amnesia...?"

"Tsunokuma-dono?! Surely you mustn't mean that I caused it by colliding with her...!? Which reminds me, I hear that Mitsuzuri-dono lost her memory when assailed by a flying serpent... This surely must be related...!"

"...Maybe it would be a good idea to take her to the... hospital... Ah..."

Before they noticed it, she had dashed away from them.

Those two knew about her.
That's what terrified her.
She dreaded learning what she currently was.
She couldn't forget the secret she intentionally sealed away—
She rewrote her information and recorded this case under maximum importance.

"I'm... Sajou. A friend of... those two... Gotou Gai and Tsunokuma...?"

She caught her breath and recited her newly-acquired information.

"Homurahara's... Sajou Ayaka. That's... That's..."

She was trying to record into her soul that this was what mattered the most to her.

"...my face's name..."

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Present day, the former site of the Neo Ishtar Temple

Past memories came fresh to Ayaka's brain.

When asked by the mage named Toosaka Rin about her acquaintances in Fuyuki, those were the first two names to come to mind. She was able to fish that answer from her blurred memories when she answered the question, and now the event that explained the reason for that

was completely reproduced in her mind.

That scared Ayaka.

Being able to recall memories that clearly was abnormal.

Additional information replayed in her head as if to substantiate her apprehensions.

That's perhaps the recoil of the distortion caused by Fillia's hypnosis.

From memories she simply didn't want to remember—to memories sealed by her protective instincts.

Including memories from before she obtained her current form.

"————————————————————"

Red darkness blotted out Ayaka's consciousness.

Like her vision was covered by a red hood.

While all of Ayaka's memories were being reconstructed inside her, the circumstances were also changing in the real world.

"She'll... eventually become an enemy of mankind. Just like me."

Saber, guarding Ayaka, answered the voice above.

"C'mon now, no one likes when people talk like they're prophets, you know? Look at Saint-Germain, his prophecies hit the spot time and time again, and that never stopped anyone from seeing him as a major annoyance!"

"You're Saber?"

"But well, if Ayaka becomes an enemy of mankind, I'd be willing to join her. Here's one prophecy from me: if it comes to that, I don't think Ayaka will be the one starting the fight, you hear me?"

The two voices reached Ayaka's ears.

She could clearly understand what they were discussing. But internally—

That's not me.

Ayaka's heart tightened when she heard Saber say the word "Ayaka".

I've been... deceiving Saber... this whole time... No, I'm... I'm... Not even human...

"I can loudly and confidently attest that my Master… Ayaka won't become an enemy of mankind. It would be more accurate to say that mankind will become Ayaka's enemy."

This was where she stopped Saber's words.

"Ayaka?"

While Saber's attention was elsewhere, something that was no longer Ayaka grabbed his hand.

"No… I'm not Ayaka.", the clinging Ayaka forced the words out of her mouth. Like she was confessing to a sin.

The relationship between Master and Servant.

That was the only thing the current Ayaka held as certain—the frail thread of spider web holding her will in the living world.

"I remembered it… I remembered everything…! I remember…!"

Ayaka's line of sight dropped to Fillia. There would be no next telepathic message. Her life was preserved, but only that. Her mind was vanquished.

Ayake yelled, unable to thank or curse the last thing she had done to her.

"That's not me… I'm not Sajou Ayaka!"

She clung to Saber but couldn't look him in the eye.

Despite being shattered by the memories that still hadn't stopped springing back to life in her brain, Ayaka still needed to tell Saber who she was.

"I'm… It was me… I'm the Little Red Riding Hood."

Or needed to tell the grave crime she committed.

"I did it… I was the killer."

Chapter 28

"This world's madness knows no bounds"

Chapter 28: This world's madness knows no bounds

The "mother" who birthed the "creature" was a system.

Born of chaos, the gods of order flew from beyond the distant quiet.

She was a software program roaming the mountaintop called Olympus. Unable to project a body of flesh or a body of machinery, she took solely the form of wisdom and knowledge adrift in the sea of information.

The designation assigned to her was Ἄτη (Ate).

The intelligence governing madness, who confounded the gods, humanity, and the world by swaying rationality.

She wasn't generated by a bug or malice. She was present from the start because she was always necessary—her significance was comparable to a ballast installed at a ship's bottom. A support device implemented to fortify the logic and sincerity of a world.

But, at a certain moment—the gods, humans, and those born in the interstice between them were affected by a change of paradigm, causing Zeus, chief of Olympus, to personally draw the conclusion that Ate was unneeded.

This frozen system was removed from the network of gods and discarded into the world of humans.

Human tradition told the tales of what Ate inflicted upon mankind when Zeus, wroth in his soul, seized Ate by her bright-tressed head and flung her to the lands of mankind below.

The name of the territory the goddess governing folly fell on was Troy.

The seeds of madness sewn in the tilled fields later to be called "the hill of the Phrygian Ate" eventually began to take root.

And then the people began to whisper that the Ate banished from Olympus was to blame for humanity's recurring acts of foolishness.

It happened to Agamemnon, the hero of the Trojan War.

Amidst a war that the man himself started because Paris stole his dear wife, Agamemnon of all people had the gall to steal Achilles's sweetheart, inflicting the first fatal crack in the Greek alliance.

Fate/strange Fake 9

Among Agamemnon's apologies to an Achilles barely able to contain his rage, he declared that his foolish actions were caused by the spell of Ate inflicted on him by the gods.

Ate, daughter of Zeus, was a symbol that governed derangement and confounded all men.

According to him, she never sets foot on the ground, instead flying from human head to human head, maddening most gods and people along the way.

"My friends, Danaan warriors, squires of Ares, meet is it to give ear to him that standeth to speak! And amid the uproar of many how should a man either hear or speak? To the son of Peleus will I declare my mind, but do ye other Argives give heed, and mark well my words each man of you! Full often have the Achaeans spoken unto me this word, and were ever fain to chide me; howbeit it is not I that am at fault! But what could I do? It is God that bringeth all things to their issue! Aye, and on a time she blinded Zeus, albeit men say that he is the greatest among men and gods; yet even him Hera, that was but a woman, beguiled in her craftiness! Zeus sware a mighty oath that never again unto Olympus and the starry heaven should Ate come! And quickly she that blindeth all came flung to the tilled fields of men! At thought of her would he ever groan, whenso he beheld his dear son in unseemly travail beneath Eurystheus' tasks! Even so I also, what time great Hector of the flashing helm was making havoc of the Argives at the sterns of the ships, could not forget Ate, of whom at the first I was made blind! Howbeit seeing I was blinded, and Zeus robbed me of my wits, fain am I to make amends and to give requital past counting. Nay, rouse thee for battle, and rouse withal the rest of thy people. Gifts am I here ready to offer thee!", said Agamemnon in a passionate speech to Achilles and their brother-in-arms.

In summary, he blamed everything on the goddess of all madness, and to atone for "Ate depriving him of his sanity" and smooth things over, he gifted Achilles a large amount of money and goods.

Achilles never cared much for such items, so he took a big pause to think about whether or not he should put his spear down.

Odysseus, foreseeing this situation, dashed to the site of Agamemnon's public apology, mediated their strife, and spared the Greek army from an inner collapse.

Has Ate been, as Agamemnon claimed, ceaselessly spreading folly, delusion, lies, and malice since the moment she was discarded?

Were the absurdities of Human Order all caused by a god dumped on the Earth's surface scattering madness data?

The answer is no.

Human Order is not ill-defined enough to be controlled by the discontinued deity of folly.

Through its long journey, mankind obtained idiocy, madness, and doom by its own merits.

It was all accomplished by their own hands, with no influence from a disembodied intelligence that lost its godhood.

The discarded goddess never lamented its powerlessness nor resented the gods that banished it—

She only extolled mankind and the world.

Mankind's folly had no symbol or cause, and for that reason, madness could never vanish from its world.

Therefore, instead of rotting in her needlessness, she was integrated into the world from inception.

Mankind was foolish and wise. They already contained the dichotomy of doom and glory, without any need for her to go out of her way to implant her madness.

And that is what will bring mankind to its inevitable perfect form.

Unhindered by how the depths of time eventually decayed the Olympians.

And no god is left alive to determine whether this future was Ate's prophecy or the delusions of the one merged with madness itself.

– Fun and joy, fun and joy. Hear, glorious gods. Hear, my father, Keraunos incarnate! I commend you for dragging me by the hair, swinging me around, and slamming me on the earth. I'll be alive as a companion of mankind while you disappear into the spiral of myth. No, I've been part of humanity since inception. It's this concrete form of mine that was a dream and illusion all along. Because my perfect form, madness, originated within humanity.

Ate, goddess governing madness—a wave of information who gladly dissolved herself within the world.

One tiny ripple of this wave withstood the test of time and long later morphed into a form that didn't fit the category of either human or Natural Spirit.

Folly itself, this intelligence that existed only as a wave, gained a physical form.

One unit of folly manifested in humanoid form.

Despite inheriting goddess Ate's characteristics, he gradually upgraded himself into someone

else entirely.

In a certain land, he met the myriad radiances of water.

Under the tutelage of a portion of those countless flickering lights—the Lake Spirits, each a kaleidoscope of different facets—he learned magecraft.

He saw an incubus antagonize the most powerful of the Lake Spirits and incorporated the concept of illusions into his madness.

The incubus didn't express a shred of interest in him because he knew the new individual was nothing more than a booster, devoid of human emotions.

That's how he perceived the living folly born of Ate.

And after gaining the power of magecraft, the son of the goddess began to wander the world.

He never guided or confounded human beings.

Because he knew there was no need.

Humans were complete from inception.

They contained both sanity and insanity, and both good and evil, from inception.

As such, all he needed to do was—give them a push.

Instead of being a leader guiding them, he stood behind them, only whispering in their ears.

Only amplifying ripples, like a wave.

That's how the living folly mixed itself into human society and continued to love human confusion.

For decades, centuries, and millennia to come.

Until the inevitable moment when the folly will offer his life to the wondrous ripple of light and shadow.

Much like the saint who offered her insane good deeds to God and was accomplished in war for her dazzling rationality—

and a general who was forced by sanity to curse God and chose a path of madness and ruin for the sake of the saint.

– So much beauty in the world and humanity. I want to be assimilated into them by disappearing when they do.

Years after watching the endpoint of the madness of the general he considered his best friend, it was the folly's turn to take the gallows.

That's after he had already planted replication resources all over the globe to replace his vanishing self in the role of watching the world.

The name that the folly happened to be using at the time of his execution, and that

consequently was recorded in history, was—

François Prelati.

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A few years ago, Germany, mountainous area

"Ooh, that's sorta weird."

A boy roamed a forest confined by large trees and ice.

The upper stream of a river crossing Germany.

The climate in this land disconnected from the world was different from its surroundings, confined in a layered veil of snow as if that place alone was frozen in time.

A boy walked through these snow-covered mountain paths.

"The natural boundaries of the land are still online. I managed to get through by deceiving the traps I triggered, but the people in there must be informed that I'm here."

He leisurely climbed the mountains shrouded in snow, without ever running out of breath.

Surrounded by silence, all that reached his ears were creaks of the branches and trunks of the trees freezing.

The sky above his track was pure white, looking as if the sun was also frozen.

However, this icy sky didn't interrupt the boy's walk.

Every step he took rewrote that world.

At a 1-meter diameter of the boy, the snowy grass instantly thawed into vibrantly green poison herbs.

And as he advanced his walk, the herbs froze and shattered, returning to the same snow dune.

That was an advanced illusion deceiving the space around him.

Any mage could find a far easier way to march through the snow with a combination of magecraft and Mystic Codes.

But the boy mage went out of his way to disturb the snow world through a special illusion that required vast amounts of dexterity and magical energy.

Fate/strange Fake 9

"Even making this much of a mess of their lawn, not a single attack homunculus comes my way. They couldn't have changed headquarters without my knowing, could they?"

Eventually, the mage who looked like a boy reached a castle.

The base of a clan made up of the innermost secrets related to the Holy Grail.

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At the most inaccessible part of the montane forest, there was a space-confining boundary.

In its interior, a land isolated from the outside.

A sudden abnormality occurred in this space ruled by silence.

Unexpected cracks formed in the otherwise empty space between the trees, similar to gaps between two pieces in a jigsaw puzzle—and for the next scene, a tackily-decorated wooden hammer smashed one of the pieces of the puzzle and the boy mage appeared out of the hole opened by it.

"No reaction even for bursting their barriers?? No way, is this place really empty?"

The boy peeked his head outside the puzzle piece-shaped "hole" and observed his surroundings.

A magnificent European castle harmonized with the fantastical snowscape around it.

It had no castle town, making it all the more conspicuous, and its appearance formed the image of a place one wouldn't want to step into.

But the boy knew that this was just camouflage.

The castle was magnificent only on the surface, and any modern engineer (wouldn't even need to be a mage) would be able to notice the glaring incongruences in its blueprint, door placements, and the internal structure of each room.

The architecture made it plain for anyone to see that this was not a living space for royalty or titled nobility, much less a fortress at a strategic location, it was a large and extremely efficient power plant.

A place one wouldn't want to step into? Beyond that. This was a secret facility purposely designed to reject others.

Its construction was beautiful like the craftwork of the fae, delicate like a glass sculpture, and robust in a way that showed its vast history. Normal humans faced with its front gate would feel overwhelmed enough to bury themselves in the snow.

The boy, completely unfazed, entered the castle with bold steps, as if he owned the place.

Instead, he watched every corner in search of any obstacles aside from the traps and boundaries installed in ancient times.

"No way. You've got to be kidding me."

The boy advanced through the snowlit courtyard, disabling the boundaries along the way.

"Heeey? Is there really no one here? I'm taking the castle for myself, ok? Maybe I should make a bunch of Trojan Horses and set them up to come out of here for the audience? Letting this loser capture your castle would shame you for generations to come, you know? Come out or I'll spread the gossip all over the Clock Tower. Hellooo?"

Done with his provocations, the boy produced a cane.

Spinning his cane unleashed a rainbow that spread decorating the castle's interior in the image of a Halloween party.

Illusion-generated automata roamed the place, the flying humanoid form of the pure-white Trojan Horse circled the sky, and the chalk drawings on the walls, with limited animations, performed Scene 1 of Rhinegold, Act 1 of Wagner's celebrated opera Nibelungenlied.

The boy's illusions also created a monster audience to watch the monster spectacle, bringing a chaotic atmosphere to the castle isolated by snow.

His actions affronted the castle's dignified looks—but still provoked no reaction.

"There's really... no one here? C'mon, you know that there's nothing more boring than getting no reactions. I'd be impressed if you're doing it on purpose. You know just the perfect way to annoy me!"

The boy mage left the automata to continue their mad dance in the courtyard and headed further down the castle with a sour face.

And then—

When exploring the castle, he raised an eyebrow at what he found.

Somewhere beyond the snow's reach—on an altar resembling an oratory, there were countless unmoving homunculi posed like they were offering prayers.

They were deactivated, or more aptly, abandoned.

In terms of soul and information, it'd be no exaggeration to say they were disposed of.

Physically beautiful homunculi.

No damage was dealt to their pretty appearances, but there was no data left within them.

It felt like a visual statement that those dolls never had life.

And then, when the boy ventured further into the room of the family head, he could reach only half of his goal.

There's a reason for that.

The boy's goal was a conversation with the head of the distinguished family of homunculi headquartered in this castle, the Einzberns.

The figure before his eyes was indeed the head Jubstacheit von Einzbern.

But it was only his figure.

"Even the stone slab interface... Even his main avatar..."

The man had white hair and beard and was garbed in an elegant priest-like robe.

His face had wrinkles of age but still felt like a finished piece of art.

His eyes had a sharp light and seemed to look at the boy.

But they actually weren't.

Jubstacheit's eyes weren't focused on anyone or anywhere.

They had already lost such function.

A chair was installed only to give him the appearance of a family head to outsiders. He sat on it with his fingers crossed, postured like someone who just lowered his head after staring at the ceiling reminiscing of the past.

Time felt completely stopped for the boy as he naturally imagined this scenario.

His skin resembling white porcelain was more hardened than any pure-white jewel, having turned into a humanoid crystal that left everything behind in the past.

"Oh, ok."

The boy touched the elder doll's hand and began inspecting its links.

The boy already knew that this body was an interface and the real him was the stone slab, a magical AI.

From there, he learned that the stone slab associated with this interface had also ceased its

functions.

It was no temporary shutdown. The entire system that contained his AI annulled itself to an extent where it couldn't be recycled by third parties.

Not even his greatest illusion could accomplish his reboot.

The system was dismantled while leaving its physical parts displayed in a perfect state. Seeing this practical work of art, the boy slowly opened his mouth.

"You already ran out of hopes, Einzberns?"

The boy monologued watching the formerly metaphorical dolls now turned into literal dolls.

"When it became evident that Fuyuki's ritual had no future, you people chose to discontinue yourselves, huh..."

The expression on the boy's face changed multiple times through the next few seconds.

Mockery, sorrow, joy, anger.

In a moment of silence, his face betrayed that he didn't know which was the right emotion for him to feel at the moment—and at the end of this cycle, he strongly hit the tip of his cane against the floor.

In an instant, the mood of the castle flipped 180.

The boy negated the illusions he previously deployed in the castle, restoring the castle to its former dignity.

The twist in space compressed itself and engulfed the boy until the distortion burst like a soap bubble, leaving behind a respectfully kneeling boy.

"You have my apologies for the ruckus I caused while you were frozen."

No reply, as expected.

But his words were a sincere statement to the humanoid interface of the deactivated Jubstacheit, the artificial intelligence created by magecraft—a magnificent homunculus.

"Construct who gained enough humanity to fulfill your duties, accept your chagrins, and give up on your dreams; magnificent tool who challenged yourself to show all of mankind what lay beyond the walls of the Third and sought Justeaze's era; you have the respect of this vestige of

François Prelati—vulgar malice who loves humanity without being loved back, defiles without being defiled backs, and toys with it as much as I am toyed back. The child of the downgraded goddess Ate commends you."

The boy bowed his head, none of his previous goofiness remaining.

"I don't know what led the humans to create you. Now that you're deactivated, I don't want to rob you of your entrails and spell formulae. I'll just express my approval of your kind's dream and the history you poured into it. I'll laugh at the silliness of accomplishing your dream soulless as you are, admire your foolish honesty, and direct my anger at the unfair world that disallows your project to bear fruit."

After speaking like a reader who finished a deeply moving book that got him invested in the characters, the boy mage–as he called himself, a vestige of François Prelati–giggled awkwardly with a vaguely lonely smile, quite different from the kind of smile he usually bears.

"They genuinely bet all of their chips on the unit that they sent to the Fifth Holy Grail War."

The boy by the name François Prelati turned his back on the doll who once served as the head of the Einzbern family, making it clear that there was no point in him staying there any longer, and mumbled in disappointment.

"I wish I could have met her. But Makiri's worms really have too much of an advantage over me…"

His words stopped there.
Because something was off in that frozen castle.

"…?"

After confirming this bizarre spike in magical energy, the boy carefully searched for its source.
He eventually reached the castle's basement, where he found the homunculi's Repair Device—in a room that doubled as a warehouse and a graveyard.

"What's this?"

Inside this device that he first assumed to be a special coffin made by an alchemist, there was a homunculus yet to fully cease functioning.

She had the form of a beautiful woman, and checking the formula of her base spell, he could confirm that she wasn't a dormant homunculus nor a new unit waiting to be first initialized.

The name "Fillia" on her coffin's label jogged François's memories.

"Hey...I've heard this name before."

If I recall correctly, one unit escaped from the Einzbern and had to be forced out of operation by the Clock Tower's God's Holder... Fillia was the name she used while pretending to be human.

"If this is that unit... Why is she not inactive... or rather, why is she not decommissioned like the rest?"

Puzzled, François observed the homunculus, simulating cycles of dissection and regeneration through illusions.

"Hm, her combat organs are all destroyed. Well, I wouldn't have expected any different, knowing she's been in an all-out battle against a Sealing Designation enforcer, but wouldn't the fact that they didn't get rid of her implies it would be potentially necessary to repair her later?"

If anything, her Magic Circuit quantity looks higher than what she was modeled with. That's not a normal homunculus. She's specialized for a specific purpose...

At this point, his train of thought led him to the Holy Grail War.

"A spare in case anything happened to the 5th's Lesser Grail... no, that's not it. Probably a sample for the next round, assuming the 5th War wasn't going to be a critical failure...? Instead of defining her as a homunculus, they defined her as fully discarded recyclable scraps or reference material, and that's what let her escape the forced shutdown...?"

The role of the Lesser Grail is to temporarily pool the magical energy previously used to mold the defeated Heroic Spirits. Considering this unit was resilient enough to fight against a Sealing Designation enforcer, it was very plausible that she was meant to be a prototype for the next Lesser Grail.

But she was just an unneeded stranger now that the Einzberns discontinued the ritual and themselves along it.

Despite her deviations from the regular framework, she was still a homunculus built from the same mold as them, therefore the same deactivation measures might have been applied to her too.

However, as a consequence of the God's Holder's blow destroying her systems, she was unable to properly process the shutdown command. That was how François imagined it.

"Meh, the cause doesn't matter. What's important is that you're still here."

With a sinister smile, François dragged the homunculus–who while the only one not petrified, was still infinitely close to death–out of her coffin.

His eyes had a mixture of nefariousness and anticipation toward "who was still alive", directly opposite to the respect previously he showed to Jubstacheit. It was with those eyes that he professed what was half monologue and half dialogue with the unawakening homunculus.

"Until just now, I thought I was going to have to make do by modding a homunculus of the Musik, a family of ancient Einzbern disciples. Their Toole series is pretty high-spec, and most importantly, fits neatly with my personal tastes... Oh, hold on."

The tendons of the homunculus were magically severed to disable her self-regenerative functions.

While tracing her scars, the illusions began deceiving those very scars.

"But with you around, problems solved. You're an ultra-class vessel."

After basic repairs, he lifted the united named Fillia and walked to the castle gates.

He giggled awkwardly with undertones of sadism, contrary to the awkward giggle from his encounter with Jubstacheit's corpse.

"No idea what Faldeus's boys will do to your mind and memories though!"

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Present day, Snowfield urban area, back alley

"...Calm down. There's no sign of enemies nearby.", Haruri whispered to herself, exposed to the unstopping winds in a dim-lit back alley.

She lent her shoulder to a petite shadow with a bizarre shape.

It was undoubtedly one of the Heroic Spirits made manifest in Snowfield.

Berserker in the form of a mechanical doll as small as her summoner.

Devoid of her almost hill-sized physique, she could now fit inside the trunk of a car. She depended on Haruri to support her stumbling feet.

It was clear that she fell into an abnormal state that deprived her of her ability to go into spirit form—but she wasn't losing her Saint Graph. Haruri knew that much.

"It's fine. I'll protect you."

Her words sounded lax if taken out of context, but they were spoken with distinct determination. Her eyes had no sign of the fears and anxieties she used to hold.

"..."

Meanwhile, the Servant didn't answer.

With or without a Berserker's Mad Enhancement, she looked like someone who never had language functions to begin with. But from Ishtar's conversations, Haruhi guessed she was capable of understanding her wills.

Her body remembered the time she was almost killed by Berserker's initial rampage.

She didn't forget or overcome her fear.

Haruri learned to accept her fear.

It was by accepting it that she could continue to walk by her Servant's side.

Even if the dream couldn't last longer than a day, since they defended their temple together, Haruri considered Berserker a follower of the same goddess.

The goddess' descent to the underworld didn't change that.

She had the option to admit defeat and seek protection at the Church, but admitting defeat meant forsaking Berserker.

– Take good care... of Huwawa.

Haruhi recalled the mercy in goddess Ishtar's last words to her.

– She may not look like it... but she's a really lonely girl.

How could she abandon Huwawa—this Berserker?

She made her decision.

If her feet were still on the ground despite the deep sorrow that comes with losing the subject of her religion, it must be because she still has something to protect next to her.

And infiltrating the city is what Haruri chose to break out of her disadvantageous situation.

She didn't know that the city was on the verge of being erased.

She could sense that the city was in danger but assumed that was wholly provoked by the demon-like Heroic Spirit that formed past the forest.

As she'd been in strong contact with the might and mind of the goddess, she didn't have much time to consider what obscure politicians would be thinking about all of this.

Although, even if she was in a fully rational state—Haruri might never have imagined that they intended to drop multiple non-magical weapons of mass destruction on the city.

"Without a team, we'll be easy prey... And our options for a partner would be Chief Officer Orlando Reeve or..."

She knew the police was giving Noble Phantasm to human officers.

Haruri judged that this was the remaining camp she still had a chance to negotiate with.

Alternatively, if a Heroic Spirit was powerful enough to mass-produce Noble Phantasm, they could also be able to restore Berserker's Saint Graph.

Possible or not, Haruri had already determined herself to never abandon Berserker.

Because now protecting Berserker was a priority over Haruri's own wish to ruin the world.

However—the voice of a troublemaker echoed through the alleys to mock her.

"Hold up. Berserker? Girl? What happened to you? What's wrong with you, even?"

"!"

A chill ran down Haruri's spine.

"She's so deflated! Both in body and in magical energy...!"

Turning to the source of the voice, she found a girl with a seductive smile.

"Francesca..."

Faced with the mastermind who invited her to this Grail War, Haruri raised her guard without shaking Berserker off her shoulder.

That's who brought her there, but she didn't trust her in the slightest.

Despite her blatant caution, she hadn't noticed another boy above her in the back alley until his voice rang.

"Oh, that's because she got inserted as a piece in the ritual to recreate the Mesopotamian Age of Gods. All that doping she got to surpass the domain of a normal Servant gotta come with a cost, you know?"

"...Who?!"

Haruri's voice came out on reflex, directed at another Francesca.

But on a closer look, it was a boy with similar facial features, sitting on an emergency staircase handrail above with a joyful smile.

The boy's smile was not belittling, but at the same time, too noticeably suspicious to be called innocent. It gave him the presence of someone merely enjoying a movie.

"...!?"

Haruri's first instinct was to assume he was Francesca's illusion.

She believed that creating a genderbend of herself with illusions was the kind of pointless tomfoolery Francesca would nonchalantly do.

But she quickly realized that was not the case.



Through special privileges granted to Masters, special information entered Haruri's sight the moment she laid eyes on the boy.

"A Servant...?!"

"Hi, nice to meet you. My Master self told me a lot about you.", said the boy, approaching Haruri's face after casually dropping from the handrail. "The girl who was dying to exact revenge on the world of magecraft is now a goddess' head priestess serving as a walking crutch for the forest guard."

"..."

Many bees floated around the cautious Haruri, lined up in organized rows to generate a physical barrier.

The bees were still lapis-colored, but now that the goddess sank to the underworld, the level of arcanity and energy within them was hugely downgraded.

The wary Haruri kept the conversation going as she still hadn't figured out their goal and methods of attack.

"I have a question for you?"

"Oh, what is it? I'll tell you anything I can, okay? We're way past the point of keeping things under wraps!", said the amused Francesca.

"Why me?", Haruri asked.

"Huh? You mean why you were picked as a Master?"

"Yes. Even counting only the spellcasters unaffiliated with the Clock Tower, I'm far from the most competent person you could find."

She raised this question multiple times before.

The world was full of capable spellcasters who never stepped into the Mage's Association.

Her mentor, for one, could talk in length about how she would never trust Francesca, but no famed mercenary spellcaster would let such emotions speak louder than the paycheck.

Haruri ignored the obvious question for the sake of her revenge against the world of

magecraft, but now that her standing as a priestess overwrote her thirst for revenge, nothing was holding her back from asking.

And Francesca dropped the answer to her question without hesitation.

"Oh? That was just a whim. No big deal."

"A... whim?"

Haruri's face showed how she was caught off-guard. Spinning the parasol in her hands fast, Francesca elaborated.

"The info Faldeus inherited from his family was on Fuyuki's third, but the Grail War I researched the hardest was the fourth, you see? And just as you said, this war counted with the participation of a very famous spellcaster. Oh, now that you mention it, it was during my research about him that I picked up Sigma. Good times...", she spoke with nostalgia before directing a daring smile at Haruri and putting the conversation back on track. "And then I set my eyes on you, Haruri, someone minorly associated with him, so I could share some of the good times my best friend had in the Fourth Holy Grail War! No greater or lesser reason for it, got it?"

"That... was why?"

"Oh, but don't get me wrong, dear Haruri. I may mock your will to take revenge on the world of magecraft, but I'll never invalidate it. I'm rooting for you, even. That whole part with the goddess pulling you by the strings was kinda boring, but now it's looking like you're a worshipper of your own volition, so you got my approval there. All clear?"

After her carefree speech, Francesca used an illusion to transform a nearby trash can into a pile of candy and dove into it.

"But the irony! The randos drawn by the Grail War rumors and gathered for the initial primer summons turned out to be nastier than the roster handpicked for my whims. Can you believe it?"

Francesca narrated the events of a mere 5 days ago as if they happened in a distant past.

"One guy went crazy from touching the 'key' to the treasury, one guy summoned his Heroic Spirit in broad daylight on a populated park, one guy wasn't nice enough to his doggy, etc. All people who crucially failed as mages one way or another! And to top it off... You won't believe this, a VAMPIRE joined the mix!"

Francesca spoke not to Haruri but to the shadow on the opposite side of the alley.
In response—a man came out of the shade, phasing the world.
Seeing the man's bold smile despite his snapped neck, Haruri figured out who he was.

"...! You were at the temple's entrance..."

"Oh, it's the little Borzak successor... kh...huhu...huhuhu, lovely to see you in good health.", said the young man–Jester Karture–for his introduction. By grabbing his hair and lifting it, his neck bones began to repair themselves with loud cracks.

Put off by the plain demonstration that he wasn't human, Haruri nonetheless opened her mouth.

"I was convinced that the Dead Apostle was here by your invitation, Francesca."

"Huh? Prejudiced much? You make me sound like some wicked faerie who only cares about watching shit hit the fan."

"Ahaha! Half of the sentence is accurate!", continued the laughing boy who looked like Francesca. "We generally side with humanity! More like, we and those guys who reject Human Order don't see eye to eye. Whether Human Order perishes or blooms into the cosmos, we want humanity's conclusion to come from its own hands."

"Bold words coming from someone who set up this massive magecraft ritual.", Jester clicked his tongue in response.

"C'mon, what else was I supposed to do? It was a facet of humanity that wished I did it.", Francesca answered Jester with a seductive smile. "I, we rather, don't care much about non-humans. If, instead of the Dead Apostle Jester Karture, you exposed the form you had when you were a human...Dorothea...the tragic mage banished from the Association despite her immense

power...then you'd have my full support, you know?"

"...!"

"?"

Jester's teeth-grinding confused Haruri.

Are they old acquaintances...? No, I can easily imagine Francesca researching her opponents in a matter of days.

With that confident assumption, Haruri maintained herself alert, while Francesca offered Jester a handshake, with her eyes sparkling like the devil proposing a deal.

However, her extended hand still gripped her parasol.

"I'll never lead you by the hand anywhere. Just give you a push in the direction you want to go. But if that's what you want, my encouraging push can come with all the impulse and propulsion of a jet engine, got it?"

That moment—
didn't escape Haruri's eyes.
She noticed that when Francesca said "I'll never lead you by the hand anywhere", the boy presumed to be a Servant rolled his eyes with an almost inperceptible awkwardness to his smile.
But without further change to his expression, Haruri thought this didn't mean much and proceeded to ask Francesca a question.

"And why would that bring you to me? You're not really going to help me, are you?"

"I'm here to encourage you, what else? I thought I should show you what your options are... although I'm not telling you which I recommend."

"Our options? Fancy hearing that from the one who tried to use me as a pawn against the goddess.", said a doubtful Jester.
"That was your own choice, remember? You said it yourself that you'd keep making moves at

that Assassin girl until you drew your last breath.", the Heroic Spirit boy laughed.

"...That I won't deny. My gorgeous Assassin managed to endure the tyranny of the goddess! No, I'd have preferred this to have been her moment of lapse, but thinking about how I'll be able to see her challenging a powerful opponent for the sake of her faith one more time fills me with the heat I thought I had lost when I became a Dead Apostle."

Jester's enraptured body shook.

Haruri felt something creepy within him but figured that the discussion wouldn't go anywhere if she gave him any attention and gave her independent response to the Heroic Spirit boy.

"My option...I already made my choice to work under Chief Orlando Reeve. I don't need your words to lead me astray."

The Heroic Spirit boy and his Master girl reacted to Haruri's strong refusal by exchanging glances and—
"You should have told us sooner."
"Talk about perfect timing."
Their faces beamed from an unexpected strike of good luck.

"That's all the more reason to listen to us, you know?"

The girl elaborated in sync with the boy calmly pointing deeper into the back alley.

"Because that was the option we had to offer you."

He pointed to the alley's exit.
Where a man stood frozen.
Eyes locked not on Francesca or Haruri, but on Jester.

"You're... Assassin's..."

"Hm?"

Jester noticed the glare directed at him, looked at the policeman standing at the alley's exit, paused to think, and...

"Oh!", he remembered the face he had forgotten and shrugged. "It's the valiant youth who fed me his right hand."

He couldn't continue talking.
It took one breath before the policeman's face was right in front of him.
Before he could feel startled at the closed gap, he had a glistening knife pointed at his heart.

"Wha..."

Jester dodged by a hair's breadth and wall-jumped his way up the alley's emergency staircase.

"Whew, that was close...Wasn't this thing loaded with Hydra venom? That's the kind of wicked toxin that kills concepts, so despite me having abandoned the course of the living, I still wouldn't want to have a taste of that!"

"Bastard...!"

"I have no idea how that works, but I see you still got a foot outside the human domain."

Jester could sense the policemen fighting the Cerberus-riding bowman in front of the hospital and knew for a fact that one of them had a sudden power increase back then.

Jester had assumed that was a temporary buff but updated his theory to it being the kind that remains active for as long as the Servant is manifested and grew one level more wary.

Someone gaining physical abilities comparable to a Servant normally wouldn't bother Jester, but at that moment, not only he was weakened but also the opponent had a poison dagger capable of corroding anything.

He couldn't afford to deal with obstacles to his reencounter with his dearest Assassin, so he kept climbing the walls and disappeared into the rooftop.

"Wai..."

"Don't you think it's dangerous to pursue him all on your own, John Wingard?", Francesca called John before he ran after Jester.

"...!"

The startled Officer John stopped in his tracks and looked at Francesca.

"I remember you... You're Chief's..."

"Yup, Orlando's mage friend. So you got nothing to worry about, ok?"

"And who is the woman? And the... what she's carrying on her shoulder?"

Seeing that John knew Francesca, Jester hesitantly looked in Haruri's direction and waited for answers about her and Berserker.

"Oh, I'm..."

Huh? That... Heroic Spirit that looked like Francesca... is gone?

Not letting herself be taken by the confusion from the sudden disappearance of a Servant, she began to explain her situation.

"I'm Haruri Borzak. I'm this girl's... Berserker's Master. I'm here to propose an alliance to the police chief, another participant in this Holy Grail War."

Haruri's words were unclouded.
No longer feeling any of the timidness that occupied her back when she summoned Berserker, she confronted the powerful John as a proper Master.

This is a gamble. If the chief is already at the stage of forcing other Heroic Spirits out of the competition...

It was reasonable to assume that if she let anyone know Berserker was weakened, they'd see it as the best chance to attack her.

When Haruri revealed her background, she was prepared to make herself a human shield for Berserker.

But John's gaze on her was confused.

"Berserker...?"

After a moment of thought, he lowered his weapon but still didn't put it away.

"Oh... The other Berserker, not Flat's...? Wait, that's not something for me to decide either way. I also need to report about the vampire."

And so, John activated a small Mystic Code.

That was a perfectly natural thing to do while phone communications were restricted but Haruri felt strange observing the policeman in uniform operating a Mystic Code.

The arcane will eventually die out and everything magecraft can do will converge into Human Order's technology.

Haruri joined this Holy Grail War to wish revenge upon the world of magecraft but with or without her doing anything, the Mage's Association and its arcana would eventually be gone from the planet's surface.

Still, she didn't believe this cataclysm would happen during her lifetime. That's precisely why she wished to enact her revenge with her own hands.

Are the mages fighting this Holy Grail War really trying to resist this? I mean, if the goal was to cling to possibilities, they should have just accepted Ishtar as their goddess from the start. Why would their ilk do such a thing to my goddess...?

Another grudge, separate from her revenge, was about to sprout.

But right before her heart could be sullied—

The small Berserker next to her tightly gripped Haruri's sleeve with her mechanical arm resembling that of a human.

"...!"

That was when Haruri's hollow heart regained its lapis-lazuli glow.

What am I even thinking? Making my goddess into a pretext for a grudge is the most insulting thing I could do to her.

Berserker had felt the disturbance in Haruri's emotions throught their magical energy connection and got concerned.

"I'm sorry... You saved me."

The soul inside Berserker smiled, confirming to herself that the girl she almost killed once was a good person.

"Thank you for guarding my heart."

Hearing that, Berserker loosened the grip of her mechanical arm with relief and gently pulled closer to Haruri.

She still looked like a robotic doll but, strangely enough, Haruri felt she was a like a small child.

But she never found out if this impression was Berserker's true essence or an invention of her head.

John had finished his call during Haruri's interaction with Berserker.

"He pushes himself too hard... I can't believe he's leaving to fight in the front lines again...", he said with clear unrest.

"Oh, did you send him the word?", asked an enthused Francesca.

John turned to Haruri and Berserker with a serious expression and sheathed the venomous blade merged with his prosthetic hand back into the arm.

"The chief is visiting a base not far from here... He said he wants to talk to you there."

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Fate/strange Fake 9

On the same block, on the rooftop of an apartment building

"Hey, wait up. You got no reason to dash away.", someone called out to Jester on the rooftop of the building facing the back alley before he could run away.

François Prelati, who had disappeared from the alley, appeared behind Jester.

"You returned to the city just to look for my Master and I, so you gotta have something you want. The card you need to affront that Assassin girl. For all that you hate being someone's handmaid, you're so cornered that you need to ask for help. Did I get all that right?"

"Yes, as much as I loathe to admit. However... I will not be teaming up with the cops, you hear me? Not that they would ever accept me, but if they did, that detestable priest could catch word of it."

"Makes sense, if you take the words at face value.", Prelati commented about Jester's reply with a sinister smile on his youthful face.

"Mm?"

Prelati made it clear that he knew more than his instigating words let on.

"You really should take a look, you know? What you do with this information is up to you."

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Alleyway

"It's down this alley. There's a boundary to keep civilians away."

He guided Haruri to a warehouse at the end of a blind alley.

It looked like a hang-out spot from a delinquent movie, but naturally, there was no one to be found there.

The warehouse contained a mill resembling a damaged car parts store, repurposed into a simplified mage workshop that produced boundaries like the one keeping people away from there.

"..."

John stepped first past the half-open shutter of the garage to calm down the wary Haruri.

"I brought her, Chief. She didn't show any sign of hostility on the way here and her Servant's Saint Graph is mostly unstable."

Haruri could hear John's voice coming from the workshop but remained nervous since she couldn't see what was happening inside.
Francesca spoke from behind to spur them into entering.

"It's fiiiine. I'm the one who guided you here! If it looks like he'll kill you without giving you a chance to fight back, it's obvious I'll be nice and help you escape."

Haruri squinted, not trusting a single word, but when she needed any help she could get, even that felt encouraging enough to let her step into the garage.

And then—
Haruri strongly regretted that step.

× ×

Rooftop

Jester spied on the garage through a familiar hidden in the shadows. He raised his eyebrow to the Caster behind him, François Prelati.

"THAT is what you're calling an option?"

"Seems so. It was my Master who talked him into it, so I don't know."

"I know I'm not one to talk but... you and your Master are sick.", Jester joked awkwardly.

Fate/strange Fake 9

Jester peered into Prelati's eyes.

There was no faltering or abandon to be found in his eyes distorted by enjoyment. They displayed pure curiosity and nothing else.

Seeing these eyes confirmed Jester's suspicions.

This Heroic Spirit was indeed different from the Dead Apostles.

Completely different even from Van-Fem, who was relatively moderate in his treatment of mankind.

This Heroic Spirit truly loved humanity.

Esteemed it, even.

But he also knew his regards were far from benevolent.

The system known as Prelati gives people the push they need to move forward and does so without regard for whether the direction they're facing is the path to glory or the edge of a precipice.

And then, after thinking things from another angle, Jester spoke with a twisted grin of relief.

"Then I'll choose the route of the temporary bystander."

"Hoho? Do you seriously think both you and this city still have time for that?"

Prelati tried to provoke him with a squinting grin, but Jester laughed.

"No to both, and that's exactly why I'll do it. I'll probably only have one opportunity to reload the cylinder. I need to carefully evaluate... whose body should I load?"

And then he inspected the figure he could see through his familiar.

"That body is a candidate. Big demerits... but I'd have a good time sullying my darling Assassin with his mud."

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"Why... how?"

Haruri's face had gone pale—A familiar face was inside the garage.

"Its Saint Graph may be weakened, but this is a Berserker Heroic Spirit. Be careful, Chief.", spoke John in a serious tone as he watched Haruri come in.

But Haruri could no longer hear him.
Every nerve in her body froze. Contrastingly, the man John called "Chief" didn't even look at Haruri.

"Well done..."

His hellish voice felt like the fingers of frozen corpses clawing at the listener's back.

"Thank you. But there's still a lot more work to do to protect our city!"

"Then continue watching the city."

"Yes, sir!"

But hearing this voice, John's eyes sparkled like he had just received warm words of incentive from a father. He turned back to Haruri.

"I'll be honest. I don't trust you completely since you let your Heroic Spirit loose in the industrial district. But since the Chief says he trusts you, I... We will help you however we can. Be assured of that."

Looking her in the eyes, John spoke honest and heartfelt words.
That delivered an answer.
Through that, Haruri could figure out the state the man named John was in.
That raised a new question.
For how long has he been like this?

"We and our chief are facing this Grail War with conviction and determination, but we won't do anything unreasonable to an opponent who chose to submit. I believe that's the Chief's idea of justice.", said John upon turning to the garage's exit to make Haruri feel better.

He wasn't lying to lower her guard.

He wasn't speaking out of soulless courtesy either.

Despite admitting that he doesn't fully trust Haruri, he cast those words at her out of genuine good will.

But Haruri was unable to answer.

Understanding his good intentions made it all the more difficult for her to find the words to tell John then.

Having watched the two interact, the "Chief" sent a message to the leaving John with his usual grave voice.

"At the moment you leave the boundary... forget that you came here and your reason for it."

"Yes, Chief."

John responded like that was a casual greeting and strolled out of the garage.

Watching him not even question that last command confirmed Haruri's suspicions.

She was positive that the instant he left this boundary, his encounter with her and that vampire Jester would be deleted from his memories.

And that he'd then return to his real chief and continue to follow his idea of justice.

Being the only ones left, Haruri and the "Chief" faced off.

Francesca was outside with only her head coming into the garage. She waited for Haruri's next move with a big smile.

Despite feeling Francesca's presence behind her, Haruri couldn't take her eyes off the man in the garage.

"Are you the option Francesca was talking about?"

She tightened and charged magical energy into the arm she was using to support Berserker.

Determined to pour all of her magical energy and the power of the remaining Command Spell into Berserker if it came to the worst, Haruri quietly spoke the name of the man she was facing.

His ominous magical energy was so dense that it was hard to believe he was still sane.

It resembled squirming mud and by circulating it through his entire body, he made it into a controllable cloak. His name:



Fate/strange Fake 9

"Bazdilot Cordelion...!"

× ×

"The curtain call is nigh."

"Will it come down to an epilogue or an extinction? Either one is fine by us."

"Keep watching the show."

"Come closer for a clearer view!"

Watching the situation unfold, Francesca and François whispered simultaneously so no one else could hear.

"The spectacle is the infinite evolution and potential that you humans display!"

"Evolution of madness and potential for folly!"

Chapter 29

“Rhapsody of the Demigods I”

Chapter 29: Rhapsody of the Demigods I

West Snowfield

Not long earlier.

"You choose to lament, Bull of Heaven?"

Alcides saw only a mass of tremendous might.

He drew his bow as he stood in a rock platform protruding out of the water in the field flooded by both the deluge that he caused and the destruction that the giant cumulonimbus before him caused.

But the Bull of Heaven—Gugalanna, avatar of torrential rain and thunderstorm—no longer saw Alcides standing on the ground in front of him.

He felt the Divine Core of Goddess Ishtar disappear from the surface, severing the link between himself, the temple, and Huwawa.

The Mistress of Heaven was falling into the bottom of the earth.

The embodiment of storm was Ereshkigal's first spouse in some myths, and for that reason, his Divine Core's proximity to Ishtar is something that brings her closer to the underworld. Losing the goddess who was the basis for his present manifestation, the foundation of his existence was quickly thrown into disarray.

If left to his own devices, he would wreak havoc to avenge the goddess, capable only of flattening Snowfield before it ran out of magecraft and became a regular tropical cyclone formed in the continent.

But one man would not allow it.

Shooting the hundred heads

"Nine Lives"

An arrow meant to pierce through anything through comet-like propulsion, far surpassing the cannon of a tank.

However, its trajectory refused to follow a straight line. The arrow became a serpent trying to coil the world and deviated from the shooting line.

In an overwhelming contradiction, it was both a never-bending spear and a freely flexible whip.

And what enabled that was the fruit of the techniques nurtured by the legendary hero in the sum of his adventures.

Faced with an unbelievable technique right out of the heroic tales where he put down all sorts of mystic beasts, the hurricane suffering with the loss of his divine might was expected to disperse—

But Gugalanna was still a divine beast nonetheless.

It's because Gugalanna connected to the temple through Goddess Ishtar once that the passing of the goddess was no reason for him to drop to his knees.

What reason would he have to get pierced and accept his death from an arrow shot by a man, albeit a hero, who willingly discarded the power of the gods?

That was what finally brought the living hurricane's eyes to the pile of hostility.

Due to being a divine beast, or perhaps due to being lieged to Ishtar, Gugalanna was sure of his presence.

Something humanoid stood in front of him.

He was large for mankind's standards, but still difficult to see from Gugalanna's gigantic eyes.

But Gugalanna sensed the Saint Graph of a legendary hero of old and the reddish-black mud within him.

He knew for a fact it was something that mustn't be let loose.

Its very existence was a tragedy that would sully the world and the humanity that Ishtar loved.

A few moments before, he could have permitted it.

While the air was that of the Age of Gods, that would have been still dangerous but would be only one phenomenon out of many. It could sully the land but wouldn't go as far as harming the folks living in it, per Gugalanna's estimation.

But now that wasn't the case.

Now that Ishtar fell to the underworld, he was a blatant threat to the land she governed.

Therefore, his one role now was to trample the mud, reject it, and return it to the darkness.

That was his entire reason to remain manifest in a world without the goddess.

With that decided, Gugalanna immediately reorganized his priorities.

To vanquish the enemy of the gods even if it cost the land he was enshrined in.

Gugalanna violently vibrated his body—the cumulonimbus compressed by magical energy—as if to let the whole nation hear him announce the laws of the world.

He quaked the air, either to spike the power left behind by the gods or to make the human before him tremble.

The gales gained direction, putting a stop to all winds assaulting the west side of the United States.

All wind, all hail, all thunder focused on Snowfield as the hurricane with more energy than a giant earthquake poured 80% of its power into spears of thunder-wind.

With this much natural energy amassed, shattering it would be an act of rebellion not against the gods but against planet Earth.

He launched them against the incoming serpent-clad arrow, expecting it to vaporize Alcides along the way.

– Here you see power: the definition of righteousness.
– Here you see god: the definition of the world.
– Here you see death: the definition of humanity.
– Nothing belongs in the hands of those who forgot the goddess' protection.

Those are the words the divine beast would be screaming if it were capable of speech.

The launched spears of lighting and windstorm shook the earth and the sky like a funeral lament for the goddess.

But the divine beast forgot one thing:

Despite being human, this hero surpassed humanity's limits.

The other beast in the sky was wholly aware.

To take revenge against all laws created by the gods, the hero abandoned his heroic past.

Looking only at the results without the process, this hero surpassed the frameworks of a hero.

Alcides.

A legendary hero originally summoned as an archer but later converted into an avenger Saint Graph by his Master's Command Spells and "mud" filled with chaos and malice.

Separating from the gods.

Dedicating everything to revenge.

Neither of those things lessens his essence as an unparalleled hero.

A hero capable of changing the lamenting tone of the divine beast's roar into its death throes.

The torrent of energy engulfed the avenger hero.

All the energy of a hundred-meter-long hurricane was compressed into two twisters, charging in the form of Gugalanna's horns, and passing through where Alcides was.

A torrent of power.

It was capable of shaving away the hero's Saint Graph, erasing along the mud and lethal Hydra venom within him.

The Nine Lives he shot was wiped in the crash against the twisters. The platform Alcides stood on became a gallows to be minced along the subject of the execution.

The Heroic Spirit engulfed by the deathwind would be erased in less than three seconds.

When 30% of himself was shaven away, he mockingly laughed.

"You're exposed..."

At that instant—the air enveloping the world changed.

The presence of the goddess Ishtar had already vanished, and the local Texture of Snowfield was returning to the era of men until it began flipping again into another kind of heterogeneous environment.

The pivot of the alteration was Alcides's whittled Saint Graph.

The mud-like magical energy covering his body attempted to fill up the lost parts of his Saint Graph, instead flowing into Gugalanna and beginning to eat away his divine aura.

When Gugalanna noticed the disaster, it was already too late.

The blow that was supposed to completely catch his opponent–the twisters from the Age of Gods charged with his divine aura and the energy of the galestorms–was used by the lone avenger as a trap for Gugalanna.

The magical energy at the tip of the repelled arrow expanded in the form of a serpent.

The arrows shattered into nine pieces ascended to form the Hydra, and this nine-headed venomous dragon tried to strangle the thickest cumulonimbus in the hurricane: Gugalanna's head.

"Bring this to a close, divine beast."

The divine aura devoured by the mud and the serpent mix together to surge into Alcides's body, but he refuses to make it his flesh and blood.

"It's your turn… this time, your kind will be the ones paying tribute."

The repelled divinity refused to let go.

By driving his magical energy and "mud" into the lightning-colored divine aura, Alcides forcibly twisted it, twisting along the space around it.

"You govern man no longer."

Gugalanna roared in resistance to his words.

In a hopeless attempt to load his dry well of magical energy, the divine beast followed the thread connecting him to the goddess.

He traced his bond of fate to the goddess, not caring if it would send him to another land, another timeline, another period, or even a place that doesn't lead to any future.

To deny his words, not by saying he was wrong about Gugalanna, but by saying he was wrong about Ishtar.

But he was too late.

No vestige of Goddess Ishtar remained, and no thread was left for Gugalanna to follow. He could feel Huwawa's Saint Graph quickly deflating.

Even then, the divine beast continued his struggle, focusing his wind, rain, and lightning.

Only one thought in his mind: if his Saint Graph were to disappear from past and future, he'd need to at least end the fight in a draw if he wanted to face Ishtar without shame.

One old scene resurfaced in the transforming Alcides's memory as he watched Gugalanna, never giving up to the very end, nonetheless helplessly waiting for his Saint Graph to crumble.

The Argo.

Images from when he was risking his life to defend the famed ship in its hard-fought voyage.

This was not like the twelve trials he faced to atone for himself.

He wielded his power purely for the benefit of others.

His days in that boat, where he could entrust his back and his life to others, is what Alcides considers true glory.

That might have been a hallucination caused by the extreme pain of the lethal toxin consuming his body, but Alcides interpreted it as a stream of emotion transmitted through the opponent's magical energy and whispered:

"...I see that goddess was the keel to your vessel."

Alcides's expression at the time couldn't be determined with the Nemean Lion's pelt hiding his face.

However, he chose to cast final words at Gugalanna's crumbling Saint Graph.

"My hatred is doomed to rot away when I inevitably do."

He didn't know if his words were understood.

In terms of size, he was like an ant compared to a giant, but now, while he was devouring the essence of the bull's magical energy, was the only moment when his words reached the divine beast's ears.

"Nothing will be left. Neither this repulsive mud nor the divinity I'm stealing from you."

Alcides knew precisely how much time he had left.

He was greatly affected by having parts of his Saint Graph chipped away just now, and instead of absorbing divinity to replenish those parts, he spent all of it on an exoskeleton.

How much time did he have left?

If the magical energy supply from his contractor Bazdilot were severed, he'd instantly be swallowed by the mud and forsake the Saint Graph and consciousness of a Heroic Spirit.

Because the avenger knew that to be the case, he took his time for his first and last expression of respect to the embodiment of gust and thunderbolt Gugalanna—the beast serving the loathsome god.

"Return to the sky... You have fulfilled your duty."

Did he get to hear it?

The divine beast momentarily stopped, but only for a few seconds.

He quickly resumed focusing magical energy, only for Alcides to ultimately plunder all of it.

However, Alcides felt no hatred or sorrow to be found in his final struggle.

Third parties have no way of determining whether that was a delusion he had while showering in the immense torrent of magical energy or if the beast really changed in some way.

Alcides himself was also losing his means to verify it.

His last words to the divine beast, his human memories, and his remaining life were all swept away by Gugalanna's immense torrent of energy and sunk to the bottom of the deep well.

The fact that he managed to preserve his ego while the deluge ground everything into unclear particles is evidence that he was an awe-inspiring hero.

As his last light fades, the world began to slant again toward its ambiguous borders.

He was sure of only one thing: at that moment, goddess Ishtar was replaced by an equal threat in the lands of Snowfield.

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West Snowfield, forest region

"Ayaka!?"

Ayaka passed out from exhaustion.

Saber caught her before she collapsed to the ground. Carrying her, he declared to the surrounding mages:

"Sorry, but my priority is defending my Master!"

"Perfectly understandable. Don't mind us."

Rider appeared out of nowhere on her horse, responded to Saber's voice, and glared at the unknown being above her, ready to guard the area.

The figure above looked down, trying to parse what happened with the collapsed Ayaka.

"He's… no Heroic Spirit, but similarly close to the arcane. I can't afford to take risks."

Rider held her bow but wasn't pointing it to the sky.

That was a likely sign that she didn't intend to make the first hostile move and an expression that she was determined to react in time.

At that moment, Saber noticed that Rider's attention was always focused on the thunderclouds west of them, but he didn't point it out because he didn't imagine it would lead to a fatal distraction.

"Go. We deal with him."

"I owe you one...!"

Saber instantly materialized his horse and skillfully rode with Ayaka in his arms, dashing full speed in the opposite direction from the ruins of the forest.

"..."

The silent figure above—the individual named Thia—pointed his finger to Saber... but butterflies danced in the space around them, causing the whole area to become undefined.

Thus, the Gandr fired by Thia dispersed inside the fluctuations of that world.

"Whoa, you have my thanks, court mage of the modern era.", announced Saber, dashing on his horse.

"It's nothing special, Servant Saber. A trifling contribution compared to your engaging that truculent Berserker in battle.", answered the young man who blocked Thia's attack with Papilio Magia, Werner Ceasarmund.

And after watching Saber and Ayaka disappear from sight, Werner returned his attention to the sky.

"Are you not going after them?"

"The butterfly magecraft is already at the stage where it can blur the distance between us, no?"

"Who knows? Sometimes even the rank of my own magecraft gets undefined."

Despite having just blocked magecraft in a situation where one mistake could prove fatal, he continued to compose his spells with sheer elegance.

That didn't mean he was underestimating the circumstances.

Each of his protocolized movements was optimized to manipulate Papilio Magia.

Since each flap of a butterfly's wings blurs the world, by contrastingly attaching importance to formal structure, he could see himself as the anchor point to that world.

Toosaka Rin had thorny words to say to him.

"Werner! Where have you been all this time!?"

Her hair was back to its natural black color, but she kept opening and closing her hand all the time to circulate her magical energy, suggesting her Magic Circuits still weren't the way she was used to.

"I got a request from our teacher. I was giving magecraft consultory to a big-name author."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, but seeing the stage your magecraft is at, I can guess it's got to the point where even your words become vague."

With Ishtar's divine aura disappearing from the era, the world began to flip back.

"Absolutely correct, Toosaka Rin. Have you already figured out the cause?"

"How couldn't I?"

She looked at the giant thundercloud floating in the west.

It shone bright as if there was a tiny sun inside the cloud.

The electric cloud made her skin tingle from that distance. It floated in the emptied sky, spinning with the speed of twister.

Its dense magical energy and divinity caused constant thunderbolts. The bolts continued to expand, and their momentum made them concerned that they could eventually engulf the planet.

While Werner's class had their attention on the cumulonimbus, Thia commented on them interfering with his attack against Ayaka.

"Are you trying to get in my way, El-Melloi Classroom?"

"Our alliance with Saber's Master is still in effect.", said Werner with an aristocratic smile. "Besides... We're doing what we always do. Cleaning the mess that our foolish upperclassman Escardos does."

"I already told you... He's gone. There's no way to bring him back."

His words were trying to convince himself as much as they were trying to convince the others. However, Rider's Masters didn't flinch at what he said.

The bespectacled hulk Org Rum dispassionately asked a question.

"Do you speak the results of a fair observation? Not your personal wish?"

"What did you say...?"

"Is it not more convenient to you that Flat remains gone?"

Although Thia's face normally didn't show much emotion, it seeped with rage momentarily.

"Do I... look happy that he's gone? Do I look like I'm celebrating the world now that I'm set free...?", he said while rapidly rotating a small "satellite" around him.

Org's body is almost bound by hex-like magical energy—But the wheel-like amulet in his hand warded off the energy.

"Mgh... Seems like you misinterpreted me. My honest apologies. I'm sorry.", he replied.

"...?"

The sincerity of Org's apology got Thia doubting his ears. Caules Forvedge sighed and added:

"That was seriously misleading, Org... Werner is too roundabout and you omit too much of what needs saying. Agh, why do all my juniors always take conversation length to one of these extremes...?"

After mumbling this complaint to himself, Caules looked at Thia above and continued.

"Our bad. What Org was trying to say is… As things are now, Flat doesn't need to participate in a stupid killing game. Don't you want this to stay that way?"

"…"

The unexpected response caught Thia off-guard, but he had something he wanted to say about it.

But before he could—

The lights on the west went brighter, taking the attention of everyone present.

Gugalanna's Saint Graph disappeared completely, and what took its place was a kilometers-wide cumulonimbus.

The magical energy felt at the center of the cloud slowly began moving in their direction.

Did it sense the Saint Graphs of Saber and his Master or was it moving in a straight line to Snowfield, drawn by the Greater Grail underneath it?

"Looks like the thing is coming our way, guys. Any comments, Caul?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Aren't you the expert in electricity, Forv?"

"Don't say it like I'm your repair man…"

With the Pentel sisters' eyes on Caules, he sighed and took a second look at the thunderbolts west.

"The Heroic Spirit set himself as the core of it and that's keeping the lightning under control… but it's set in a way that he can't separate himself from the big cloud."

"Then we just have to stop the lightning… easier said than done, though.", said Rin.

Caules agreed.

"Yeah. It also feels like he's using the cloud's magical energy to prevent his own Saint Graph

from crumbling... Absorbing it could make things so much more stable. What reason could he have not to do that?", he continued his observations. "He's practically crucified... I hate how I can't see the logic of it at all."

His monologue was accompanied by a slight frown.

Affected by the situation in ways he couldn't explain, Caules continued his rational analysis.

"All I can tell is that this is beyond my capabilities. That'd be comparing an alkaline battery to a nuclear plant. Any second opinions?"

"I agree with it being beyond your capabilities.", sarcastically joked Fezgram vor Sembrem.

Many other El-Melloi students followed him on his caustic grin.

"I warned you. You regular mages already lost your chance to steal the show. No, that's gotten beyond even a Servant's ballpark. The only efficient option left is destroying the Greater Grail and waiting for his magical energy to deplete.", dismissed Thia. However—

"That's not happening.", Rin declared.

At this point, she wasn't even looking at Thia. Her eyes were on the thunderbolts in the western sky slowly approaching them.

Despite having her fair share of close encounters with death in the battle against the goddess, her attitude had yet to show the first hints of fatigue.

Watching her, or rather, the entire El-Melloi Classroom below him show no signs of despair, Thia felt an inexplicable unrest in his heart and yelled a question at them.

"Why won't you escape? Is it for Flat Escardos? Are you seriously trying to win the Holy Grail War?"

"Despite your handling of magecraft having gotten more refined, your lack of forethought is still the same as Flat's.", Luvia giggled. But changing her smile into a more sarcastic one, she said: "Although the short-sightedness of what we are trying to accomplish heavily overshadows yours."

While she spoke, another shadow stepped forward.
Rider, atop a horse that had grown more muscular from the increase in magical energy.

"May I, Masters?"

A simple question.
Rider revered all members of the El-Melloi Classroom (and Doris Lusendra who was only added to supply more magical energy) equally as her Master, but she chose to direct her question at Toosaka Rin, the first one she had contact with.

"We already made our promise. If you help us first, we'll let you settle things with him.", sighed Rin. "I honestly still think that's a dumb idea, but a promise is a promise."

While glancing at Thia, Rin smacked the back of her hand on the horse for encouragement.

"Once our problem is solved, you have our full backup. And... Gotta make double sure you know how troublesome that mud is."

"I do. If it absorbs me, you mustn't hesitate. Strangle me to death with your Command Spell.", nonchalantly declared Rider.

Those were not words of self-abandon and she wasn't prisoner to revenge or any other emotion.

"I'll ask again since this might be our last conversation."

Rin once again acted as the representative of the whole El-Melloi Classroom, looking at Rider straight in the eye to ask an important question.

"Fighting him is not your duty as a queen or a priestess, is it?"

A simple question.
But in the short time Rider spent with these Masters, she understood it was the most important question to ask.
Therefore, she dropped all pretense and spoke honest words from the heart.

"I'll fight him because that's what I want."

Rider answered with her most tender yet confident smile. All the anger and confusion displayed in her first confrontation with Alcides were a thing of the past. All she had to express was her pure-hearted whim.

"All out, holding nothing back. I can't pretend my identity as a queen and a priestess don't play a part in it, but I will say I will not be fighting out of duty or revenge. Only because I want to. That's all."

Not only Rin, but every El-Melloi student present made an an awkward face at Rider.

Using a Command Spell to make her pledge to speak the truth would have failed to change Rider's answer.

"A mage ought to disavow this sort of imprudent behavior...", said Werner Ceasarmund, holder of the Clock Tower mage title of Brand, letting his non-mage side show for only this instant. "But none of us students of El-Melloi II can say no to someone speaking like this."

His words treated her not as a familiar or Heroic Spirit, but as a fellow member of the El-Melloi Classroom.

Yvette L. Lehrman immediately whispered "That's all in your weird head... I could say easily say no..." but watching the rest of the classroom paying no mind to both his and her comment, Rider softened her expression.

"Thank all of you. I don't know for how long I can hold him off but I promise to do everything in my power."

Hearing that, Rin figured out that Rider was still concerned about them.

She was wary of Thia flying above them and of the new presence that appeared in the city.

It was highly likely she wouldn't come back from this fight, so she considered it would be wrong for Servant to relinquish her capacity to defend her Masters.

"Absurd... Do you really think my Servant would lose?", Rin responded to Rider with a confident smile.

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Toosaka Rin offered Rider her last words of encouragement as a Master and as the only one with Holy Grail War experience.

"I won't mind if you beat that thing."

"...!"

"Don't let anything stop you, Rider."

"Understood..."

Rin's words removed the last shreds of doubt from Rider.

Bragging to herself that she had encountered the best possible Masters, she gripped the reins on her favorite horse.

A different gust of wind pushed back against the winds blowing out of the cumulonimbus.

Rider dashed at speeds unimaginable for a horse, riding the wind forward.

The pressure of her magical energy tore through everything in the Amazoness queen's way.

To fulfill the purpose of her manifestation in the Holy Grail War.

She raced freely through the fertile lands of Thermae—

The queen, the priestess, and the hero Hyppolite were one.

"...Are you out of your minds?"

Her speed was sublime.

The members of the El-Melloi Classroom watched Rider swiftly disappear from their sight. That's what Thia Escardos commented on.

He was cautious, expecting a trap, but nothing happened.

They of the El-Melloi Classroom separated from their Servant and sent to her the certain death awaiting under that cumulonimbus.

"When facing against me... you send away the Servant acting as your trump card?"

Thia was never one to let his emotions show on his face, but this question to the people of the El-Melloi Classroom was delivered with tangible confusion.

Thia Escardos.

An entity with no relation to the Holy Grail War now that Flat is gone.

He may have one remaining Command Spell, but he had no reason to use it.

When Thia thought about his reason for still being here, he couldn't come up with anything.

He eliminated Flat's shooters.

The one who gave the orders is still alive, but he had no reason to finish the job during the Holy Grail War period.

He can wait years to take his revenge when the target is not combat-ready.

But he still hadn't left the area. That's because...

Is this supposed to be for Flat's sake? Ridiculous...

To keep existing.

That was the only mission Messara Escardos gave him.

A simple, clear, and impossibly difficult command.

Oh, right. That's why I need to observe them for as long as I can and take lessons from their powers.

Heroic Spirits engraved in his planet's records had manifested in this land in the form of Servants.

That was probably his last chance to see the previous sovereigns known as "gods" too.

In that case, he needed to learn from them and optimize his current body.

Or study the power of the Holy Grail.

At the moment, the homunculus known as the Lesser Grail was being protected by a barrier built by a few El-Melloi students.

Once the battle in the western sky was settled, the massive soul of a Heroic Spirit with divinity was going to be stored there.

The Greater Grail has the same sinister energy as that Archer. But if Rider is the loser, would it be possible to steal her unmixed divinity?

Ever since he gained consciousness, this was the moment when Thia craved power the most.

He was aware of how much mankind fears others.

He watched up close how Flat's parents almost killed him just because his genius was off the charts.

The few exceptions he could think of were the homunculus who raised him and... the group below.

That's why Thia felt the need to make a final decision.

To live with them or to rule them with overwhelming power.

Easy question... Flat strove toward his twisted ideas of coexistence. He never considered mankind an efficient component for the purpose of departing to the sea of stars... And despite this low opinion of these implements, he tried to live among them, and even share smiles and laughter. That's why Flat died. Only I survived.

Vexed at himself, Thia tried to kill his sentimentality.

He would remain in the Holy Grail War and steal enough power that neither the nation, the Mage's Association, Flat's family, nor the upper echelon of the Dead Apostles could stop him.

Thus, believing that the first thing he needed to discard was his naivete, and decided what to do next.

"I don't suppose... you believed I'd just let you get away after you ignored my warning? You want to back Rider up? Do you honestly believe in a future you'll be able to?"

His words grew colder.

He began to charge magical energy into the satellites circling him.

Yes, this is my litmus test. A test to cast away Flat Escardos's shadow. To retrieve the original task Messara Escardos left for me.

He was about to overlook his own mind and switch the definitions of the people he saw from "Flat's classmates" to "enemies, the previous generation of humanity". But he was interrupted.

Toosaka Rin looked at Thia, sincerely puzzled.

"What are you on about?"

"...?"

"You'll be supporting Rider too."

"... Huh?"

Her words caught him completely off-guard.

He truly, sincerely, couldn't comprehend what Toosaka Rin said.

It got him thinking that Rin had lost her mind completely during the bout against the goddess Ishtar.

He was starting to get angry at the assumption that Rin seriously mistook him for nothing more than an alternate facet of Flat, but Rin continued like she saw through his misgivings.

"Thia Escardos."

The name he told her shortly before.

Her choice of name made it clear that she perceived Flat and Thia as separate individuals.

This only got Thia more confused until Rin boldly proved herself deserving of her moniker of Red Devil.

"You're also part of the El-Melloi Classroom, remember? Did you think we would let any of our members slack off?"

"Wait. Hold up. Why would I count...?"

"Oh? If you want us to make you comply by force, we certainly wouldn't oppose that, dear.", Luvia continued from where Rin left off.

"..."

Next, the Pentel sisters provoked him, clearly enjoying the situation.

"You know that your other half ate the pudding with our name on it AGAIN, right?"

"Oh, right, in Flat's absence, it's you who will have to pay for it."

"Don't be ridiculous..."

That wasn't a thing to be complaining about to him then and there.

He wasn't sure if it'd be right to respond that it was Flat, not Thia, who did it.

Engaging in their terms would result in being dragged into the El-Melloi Classroom's atmosphere.

"Dude, don't forget that the mess that you two broke my 3 million euro Mystic Code."

"Wasn't it he who set the Clock Tower's Great Battle of Heroes team name to El-Melloi Friendship without asking for anyone's input?"

"Remember that homunculus he put to watch one of his freak movies? Well, it belonged to Musik from Policies and my graduation got delayed a whole semester because of that."

"You're still not clear from that time he drowned the campus in macaron in some retry at whatever he did at your family home."

"We and the teacher had to fight the big-shot puppeteer of the Holy Church because Flat annoyed him."

"I feel like I aged a decade that one time he tried to feed the creature in Aozaki Touko's suitcase."

"The first mistake was using see-through vision to check inside the professor's suitcase."

"What were you thinking watching everything from inside the dumbass this whole and never stopping his tomfoolery?"

The thirty students of the El-Melloi Classroom listed their complaints.

They took turns sharing facts, from some that were obvious jokes and banter to some that could incur catastrophe if overheard by people who knew enough to make the right assumptions.

"That said, everyone here knows that it would be ungentlemanly to force the bill of Flat's mischief onto you. Thus, we'd like you to cooperate with the El-Melloi Classroom's endeavors. Naturally, if you intend to obstruct our plans, we will respond with force, as Luviagelita Edelfelt

mentioned."

The El-Melloi students all agreed with Werner's words. At this point, Thia finally began to suspect that he was the one not seeing things right.

It wasn't just Rin. All of them recognized him as Thia, an entity independent from Flat—and knowing that, they still demanded his help.

"Force...?"

Thia's whisper made a point to extract only one word out of Werner's speech.

If he didn't resist, he would lose his ground.

But not to the violence in numbers.

Thia could tell he'd be tripped off by Flat Escardos's fond memories. The ones he was trying to discard. To dispel them, Thia poured vast amounts of magical energy into one of his "satellites", converting it into a fireball the size of a circus tent.

"You people... think you can beat me?"

The bright blaze illuminated Rin's daring smile.

"Without a doubt. How many years of experience navigating through you two's nonsense do you think we have? You still owe me big time for that time I got roped into your family dispute."

The malicious smile illuminated by the flames was befitting of Rin's "Red Devil" moniker.

"I don't want to keep Rider waiting. Wrap this up under 3 minutes, guys."

Some of the other students looked nervous, with a few even openly scowling, but none of them attempted to leave her.

And that reminded Thia of something.

A second derogatory moniker associated with the Red Devil, but used by El-Melloi detractors to refer to the class as a whole.

The Den of Devils.

Because in the El-Melloi Classroom, the Red Devil terrorizing the Department of Mineralogy was not special.

Fate/strange Fake 9

As almost 30 mages looked at Thia, Toosaka Rin deployed jewels around her while making her declaration of war.

"I hope you're ready. Today the teacher won't be here to stop this mess."

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Snowfield, urban area, back alley

"I see that today... you're not with the goddess that interceded for your life.", mumbled the man covered in a devilish atmosphere.

The Master of that Archer with the monstrously strong Saint Graph.

Knowing it fully well, Haruri whispered to confirm his name.

"Bazdilot Cordelion..."

Her whole body was sweating cold.

Having been chosen as Ishtar's head priestess, her mind was a tier stronger than a few days ago.

But even then, she couldn't shake off the fear that came with being in this man's presence.

Because the magical energy within also became unrecognizable from what it was a few days before.

His body oozed reddened-black energy resembling sentient venom.

Additionally, his magical energy contained a whirl of mutated divinity.

Haruri realized that his divinity belonged to the divine beast of Ishtar that was at the eye of the hurricane on the west side a few minutes ago.

Since Alcides stole Gugalanna's Saint Graph, their "mud" served as a conduit for the backflow of divinity to his Master.

"That's... impossible.", Haruri yelled before she thought. "All this magical energy and divinity... is more than a human container and mind can withstand..."

"Agreed.", Bazdilot gave an indifferent answer.

His words called Haruri's attention to something:

Bazditlot's Magic Circuits and Crest were beginning to decay, albeit extremely slowly.

The man still had a few days left.

Haruri wouldn't be able to tell before, but now that Ishtar's blessings minorly altered her Magic Circuits, she could see it.

This man is 100% going to die. And he knows it.

If it were only the reddened-black "mud" invading his insides, he probably could withstand it with his Domination Magecraft and almost insane mind.

"Why...?"

A question came out of Haruri before she knew it.

There was a chance the man before her would kill her immediately, but that couldn't stop her from asking.

"Someone of your caliber could have controlled with a Command Spell or forcibly severed the link with your Heroic Spirit..."

Haruri didn't know that this man, Bazdilot, had used up all of his Command Spells.

That said, even if he had a Command Spells left, it's not guaranteed they'd be able to control Alcides.

Bazdilot's answer to Haruri's question was very indifferent.

"My life matters little."

Haruri knew nothing.

She was unaware she was talking to a cold-blooded man who consumed lives as fuel and converted them into magical energy crystals.

Haruri knew nothing at all.

This man—Bazdilot Cordelion—thinks no differently of his own life. It's merely momentary fuel, like any other.

"If I can obtain the Holy Grail before I run out... then my Servant will be able to destroy this country. It's not his objective, but the process of his getting there will fulfill mine. That's all there is to it."

Haruri was completely unaware of the change the man went through, but one thing was

immediately confirmed.

He was deadset on taking the Grail for himself.

But didn't require him outliving the outcome.

The Holy Grail might be fake, but it can provide an immense mana resource or reconstruct his body through the Magic Crest.

However, that wasn't what he was trying to accomplish.

He was planning on sending all of the resources to his Servant.

That giant serpent-shooting Heroic Spirit... I don't know what he wants, but... it'll destroy the country...?

"Many people who have nothing to do with it will die."

"Yes, exactly. People who have nothing to do with me.", Bazdilot answered with his usual indifference. "What right do you have to talk me down? You are a mage who offered your soul to a goddess."

"Ah!"

He's informed about me, to some extent. Was it through his Servant or some other method?

Haruri grew more wary while Bazdilot continued his questioning.

"Are you trying to convince me that if that goddess was allowed to have her era, she could have saved all humans who had nothing to do with her?"

"...Goddess Ishtar could take lives as easily as she could save them, both cases regardless of past connections to her. But... to her, destruction was a means, never an end."

"You mean to say she was the same as every god? From how you jump to your goddess' defense, I get the impression that you're no longer a true mage... you became a priestess."

Bazdilot watched her as expressionlessly as an insect despite the constant bouts of pain in his deteriorating body.

"I did... At first, I was like you."

"How so?"

"I was going to take revenge on the world of magecraft for killing my parents... and many people who had nothing to do with it would be collateral damage."

"An avenger saved by a goddess..."

He seemed to pause to think but the venomous magical energy covering his body continued to squirm.

Unable to predict his next move, Haruri couldn't relax her tense body.

In this situation where one mistimed breath could prove fatal, Haruri stretched her Magic Circuits.

"I have no interest in the blessings or forgiveness of a goddess."

But Bazdilot's speech remained indifferent as ever.

"And now I lost my personal interest in you.", he continued. "But... not in your Heroic Spirit."

"Ah!"

"I'm leaving to the underground to eliminate Faldeus. If you're willing to cooperate, I'll let you, the Master, live. And the Servant will be the last one in the killing order."

Haruri knew who Faldeus was.

Francesca was the one who originally called her, but she was waiting in Faldeus's base until the event started, so it's perfectly natural that she did.

She had little to no opportunity to meet any of the other Masters there, like Bazdilot for example. The only person she managed to greet was a mage her own age by the name of Doris Lusendra.

She often wondered if Doris was still alive, but now wasn't the time to worry about others, so she quietly asked her question.

"Faldeus... Why? Isn't he just an organizer...?"

"He betrayed me. I hear that he's now trying to take the underground Greater Grail away from the city."

"...!"

This was news to Haruri.
She was going to think about whether or not this was true, but the man wasn't that patient.

"Choose. If you're willing to hunt Faldeus, I'll give you all the time you need to say goodbye to your Servant."

"And what if I refuse?"

"You two die here and now. Simple as that. You might have a chance to come out alive but your Servant won't be so lucky."

He means it. Screw you, Francesca. What part of this do you call a "choice"?

Haruri's spite toward Francesca, who was watching behind her, didn't break her composure.

I can't get scared. That'll become a weakness and make me fail the negotiation. I'll fail to protect her.

Resolved to devote her life to Ishtar's last words, Haruri adjusted her breath.

"Berserker is indeed weakened, but do you really think a mage stands a chance against a Heroic Spirit?"

"That's not something you should be saying while the Heroic Spirit in question needs your protection."

Haruri was visibly positioned to guard Berserker. There were no alternative ways to interpret her placement.
Berserker was indeed weakened enough for it to be plenty possible for a human mage to best her.

However, that's only if she came to the fight unprepared.

Haruri still had one Command Spell.

Although it couldn't permanently recover her power, it was possible to restore the power she had at her prime once.

But Haruri wanted to save this trump card as a last resort. Keyword: last.

She needed to get out of this predicament with bluffs and bargaining. Haruri puzzled over ways to turn this deadlock into a proper negotiation.

But someone disturbed her trains of thought.

"Hehehe, looks like you could use some help, Haruri!"

After this entire time only watching from behind, Francesca brazenly stepped into the garage.

"You gotta learn to rely on me when you're in need! You wound me, dear. Well, since I called this your choice, I gotta at least do the bare minimum so both yes and no are viable options, right?", she breaks the tension while twirling her parasol. "And hello to you, Bazdilot. It's been a long time! How many years has it been? I haven't seen you since that time I fixed your factory with illusions... Huh, that's been only a few days! I see you still have your usual 'kill first, ask questions later' aura on you, but I gotta tell you, women aren't into that, you know? The trick to getting laid is to-ghghhh"

Francesca's body was blown away before she could finish her distracting words. The mud-like reddened-black magical energy coiling around Bazdilot's body shot a flash of mud-colored lightning from its interior with no previous warning.

The direct hit from the reddened-black bolts launched Francesca out of the garage, making her hit a pile of construction materials in the front yard.

The pile loudly collapsed.

"...I'll teach how to interact with her."

Before finishing his sentence, Bazdilot struck the smoking pile of materials with two, three more waves of reddened-black lightning. His face showed no sign of disturbance, anger, or annoyance. The only thing it communicated was the professionalism of continuing the task because it was necessary.

And when finally saw fit to lower his hand, he spoke to Haruri still not revealing any hint of

emotion.

"Don't listen to a word she says."

His attack was sudden but Haruri had not the slightest concern for Francesca. Something else got her flabbergasted.

What was that?! He directly activated a magecraft that powerful... without any build-up? Not even a Single Action chant?

And then Haruri figured it out.

"N-no..."

The magical energy in the flashes of lightning she just saw had the same characteristics she felt from Gugalanna in the Neo Ishtar Temple.

Bazdilot wasn't using magecraft.

The truth was much more despairing.

This mage, Archer's Master—

Used the lightning of the gods stolen by his Servant, through their shared "mud".

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Back alley, rooftop

"...Huh, I think she's dead.", the squinting Jester asked François for confirmation after watching from the rooftop as Francesca vanished under the pile of construction materials.

"Kehehehehe... Would believe me if I told you... she's among the weakest Prelatis?"

"After all the big talk about choices, that's all you got?"

"Hmmm. Oh, wow. It's pretty fun to watch a genuine other version of myself, not an illusion or a duplicate, get thrashed! That's something you can only experience as a Servant, no!? Damn, that got me in the mood!"

Jester called the restlessly giggling François a freak, but François paid him no attention, continuing to laugh like it was not his problem.

"Eh, I don't think that's enough to kill her!"

"Just to make sure... Are you actually trying to take the Grail?", Jester asked.

François shook his head. "I mean, I do want it. Though just a wish-granter loaded with magical energy. Not for the Third Magic or for what comes beyond it... the noble and tedious conclusion sought by the three families of Fuyuki."

"Huh. I cannot think of anything the likes of you would need a wish-granter for."

"We do need this level of magical energy. That's how much it takes to smash the walls of the Main Labyrinth and pick its deepest lock."

As always, François made no attempt to keep secrets. After a moment of thought, Jester raised his eyebrow.

"Main Labyrinth... You're not talking about Caubac Alcatraz, are you?"

Caubac Alcatraz was the name of a top-class Dead Apostle aged over 2000 years old. Legend goes that he built a great labyrinth to hide himself and his supreme treasure.

Some say his supreme treasure is a log recording everything in the world, others say it's a scripture that proves God's love, and others more say it's a copy of the universe—in short, all sources are unreliable.

Or at least that was the impression Jester got from having heard nothing but silly rumors about it.

"Well, that's disappointing. It was all for a dumb rumor... No, wait, if that bogus treasure really exists, what are you planning to do with it?"

"Hmm... If the treasure really exists, I want it for myself and believe humanity deserves free access over it, but it's genuinely as simple as 'a locked labyrinth makes you want to open it'."

"..."

"At the very least... I want to make into something like the Spiritual Tomb of Albion: a place that the brave challengers of the world of magecraft can freely try their hand at. As the labyrinth currently is, it's growing more complex at the same pace as the universe does... meaning it's impossible even to reach the entrance. Don't you think that sucks?"

Unsure of how much he was supposed to believe François, Jester tried to come up with a snide comment to make.

But before he formed any winning idea, François's face got serious.

"Although... maybe, just maybe... I think Master would have used the Grail for something else if she got it."

"What the hell? Aren't you two the same individual?"

"She's alive and I'm a Heroic Spirit. Is there any difference greater than that? The differences between men and women are nothing in comparison. Besides, just a few days under the threat of death is enough to change a person. It would be stranger for her to have remained the same this whole time, don't you think?"

Jester went silent to think.

At the very least, Caster François perceived his Master Francesca as another person.

Was Francesca aware of that critical difference?

"Well, that's all just a bonus in the end! All we really wanted was front-row seats with a good view of the reactions of the people participating in the Grail War! That's the number one priority, gotcha? I really mean it.", François joked in mockery of how deep in thought Jester was.

"Spare me the sophistry. Nothing flipflops faster than the words of a lesser specter like you."

"Good point... Well, the only thing that's guaranteed is that we'd never want to miss out on the fun, so I'm pretty sure my Master is trying her best to hold on."

But after all this time looking at the pile of debris, there was no sign of Francesca coming out.

François's smile was accompanied by cold sweat.

"Though, on the off chance my Master is dead... would you become my new Master before I fade away? You still have Command Spells, right?", he asked Jester.

"I refuse."

"You didn't even think about it!"

"My Command Spells exist solely to connect me to my darling Assassin! I'd never sign a contract with a filthy specter like you. Did you think I was that uncommitted of a man...?"

There was anger in his denial.

But François Prelati took in his emotion and brought his face closer to Jester's chest with a captivating grin.

And, seductively tracing his finger over the area above his heart, he taunted him.

"No, no, you're getting me wrong. How could I consider you an uncommitted man? ...You know I never thought of you as a man."

"Cretin... Always this..."

"You're very committed. Committed to dishonestly, very akin to the swindler placing unfair prices on his—"

He was interrupted by Jester slashing his throat with his claws charged with magical energy.

The boy's face burst like a watermelon.

But next, François faded into smoke, and before he knew it, the boy appeared in the next building with a sarcastic round of applause.

"C'mon, don't be mad. 'Tis just a joke! See? S-m-i-l-e. Smile!"

"Enough. Be silent fore..."

That was all Jester managed to say before he noticed the magical energy approaching from the distance and turned back.

"This presence belongs to Saber and his Master...", he mumbled, watching the rain-soaked city still afflicted by the winds.

Jester's words paused here.

"...?"

He realized the presence of the Master accompanying Saber was no longer the same as it was before.

"Why have I not noticed it before...? What the hell is... this pool of magical energy?"

Chapter 30

"The Red Little Riding Hood of Semina Apartments Sorted, or The Mages Shot the Wolf II"

Chapter 30: The Red Little Riding Hood of Semina Apartments Sorted, or The Mages Shot the Wolf II

It's true that in the distant past, the item was a conscious living being.

However, at the moment of its birth, the item had no previous memories.

Despite its lack of memories, it vaguely understood what caused itself to gain sentience.

It was born, it gained living form, because that was what others desired.

At first, it was just a clump of magical energy. An entity akin to a droplet spilling out of the bowl that is the world.

A naturally occurring clump of magical energy, practically a simplified wish-granter from an age when magical energy was more pronounced.

It believed someone wished for it to be a living being, but it couldn't be sure.

Nonetheless, these memories of distant days are long behind it.

Later, the item had been part of countless competitions over its possession. It was killed time and time again, and each time, it would return to being an energy clump, be born anew, be molten, be born anew, be crushed, be born anew, be shattered, be born anew—Until the point it lost the ability to care about its physical form.

Not long later, while the item was taking a human-like appearance, it was minced apart by six hard-working humans.

It felt no malice from them.

Each one of them did it for their own pure goal, never for the sake of tormenting the item.

For research. For peace. For the future. For magecraft. To save the world. For someone else.

But that didn't change the fact that the item was suffering.

After a long, long time, when its body was split into six parts, a tragedy saved it.

An arcane powerhouse—the last of the dragons—opened a hole in planet Earth in an attempt to cross to its inner sea, where fantasy remains present… The dragon marched to its own death, as it half-expected to be the case, and the collateral damage included six humans and the item they held.

Or perhaps this was their attempt to hitch a ride to the inner sea of the planet.

Maybe they attempted to intervene in some way.

The fragmented item no longer had any way to understand their motives and methods in accurate detail… The only option available to it was to keep a constant, minimalistic record of the surrounding situation.

Six humans died. That's the only fact noted.

Their suffering was communicated to it. Their resignation was communicated to it. Their regret was communicated to it.

If the item was human, maybe it could have laughed at its tormentors' demise. But the fragmented item was no longer a normal life form. It became unthinking.

And so, time passed.

Time long enough for the planet to lose most of its arcanity.

Under the dark soil, the item turned into a relic representing ancient fantasy.

No one knew what kind of entity it previously was.

No one was trying.

There's no need to.

Or, at least, that was the miners who unearthed the item thought.

All that mattered was the outcomes the relic can produce.

Mages should be inclined to value learning the origins of things, but the outcomes that the item was capable of producing had a violent effect on the miners' hearts and prides.

The item was clearly not the same kind of magical energy reactor as a dragon heart, but has extremely similar properties. Properties that hit like a new gospel to mages forced to experience the fading of arcanity.

The relic overflowing with dense magical energy was all an ordinary mage needed to be maddened by desire.

In the land where it was unearthed, called the Spiritual Tomb of Albion, mages fought fiercely against each other over possession of the prize... until the chief of the Department of Mineralogy, an ancestor of the El-Melloi, settled all quarrels with a combination of force and political prowess.

Was it a Natural Spirit, a faerie, mystic beast, or a regular animal with a unique power such as Mystic Eyes?

The then-head of the El-Mellois figured out that the six fragments mined from different sectors belonged to the same fantastic creature.

A head, a torso, and two pairs of arms and legs.

A Phantasmal not perfectly humanoid but close enough in appearance.

It was crudely divided, but the mages from presumably the Age of Gods or some analogous era split it to leverage significance from each individual part.

One thing the first El-Melloi never figured out was why it got buried in the Spiritual Tomb

of Albion.

Meluastea might have been able to figure out more, but the then-head of the El-Melloi was too rigid in their way of thinking to consider asking others for help.

On further study and research, the then-Lord of Mineralogy discovered the most efficient method of producing magical energy: making a Supreme Mystic Code out of the three "stones" they assumed to correspond to the creature's heart, flesh, and wings.

The then-Lord had a deeper understanding of what they were doing.

Returning all pieces to one whole would generate new, greater peaks of magical energy.

A complete state, even.

But, reasoning that would undo its perfection as a Mystic Code, the then-Lord passed down only three fragments to their successors, teaching that to be its supreme state.

Nothing changed until the Fourth Holy Grail War.

Exploiting the panic from a collapsing hotel in Fuyuki, burglars stole the core comprised of three magical energy furnaces from the hands of the then-Lord of Mineralogy, Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald.

The mage couple who obtained it had one question in mind.

— If the El-Melloi had something this amazing, why did they not allow the pieces to fuse into one? Why did they not make it operational again?

— Why did they not bring it back to life?

— We can do it. Maybe they couldn't, dear, but we can. We can rebirth this arcanum into the world.

Their doubt converted into a powerful shock, causing them to conceitedly believe they had all the tools necessary.

In their secret workshop in Kurokizaka, they exploited Fuyuki's draconic meridian, still not recovered from the turmoil.

The mage couple was never condemned for their actions, because the Holy Church priest acting as the proxy Second Owner of the land either didn't notice them or chose to ignore them.

And time passed once more...

With enough time, the married mages proved they could back up their conceit.

At the same time, they consequently proved something else:

That every El-Melloi successor was correct in their conclusion that the pieces of the item should not be merged.

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Fuyuki City, the Eastern land serving as the circuit board for a large-scale ritual: the Holy Grail War.

Shinto, Kurokizaka, block 4, Semina Apartments, 11th floor, apartment 2.

That's where her, the item's, most recent rebirth took place.

But that was not where she spent most of her time.

The L-shaped apartment building only fit two apartments per floor. She was confined in apartment 1, the only neighbor in the 11th floor.

Apartment 1 was a small workshop improvised by a mage couple.

In the Fourth Holy Grail War, they obtained the Supreme Mystic Code of the El-Melloi family.

To reap the fruits of their research, they purchased an apartment in the Semina building, which received leaks of magical energy from the dragonvein.

After almost 10 years of research, the mage couple finally merged the three magical energy reactors back to one.

The mage couple expected the unified magical energy reactor to be a literal dragon heart.

Although they weren't hoping for anything comparable to Albion's heart, they thought they'd have something from a similarly fantastic era.

However...

What was born was something resembling a human fetus.

More time passed, and the mage couple began to disguise the item as their daughter.

At this point, the item—a magical furnace in the form of a young girl—still hadn't recovered her memories of her past lives.

She spent her days simply doing as her parents told, and participated in ritual after ritual to extract magical energy from her.

The couple failed to realize one thing:

They were under the girl's influence, and that was beginning to alter their minds.

She originated as a clump of magical energy spilled from the world.

Molded into fantastical form as entreated.

She can lose her memories but can't lose this property.

Thus, her nexus reverses.

Keeping the item next to oneself compels one to wish.

She amplifies one's root desire and rushes them toward it.

After all, her body is practically a living leyline generating massive amounts of energy.

Normally, something like her would only need to stay in place for nearby mages to detect it, but she circulated all of that magical energy within, leaking nothing to the outside.

Since this creature was capable of single-handedly fueling magecraft advanced enough to be almost magic, at the hands of a mage, she served as a modest (in comparison to Fuyuki's Greater Grail) but highly reusable wish-granter.

Who would be able to contain their greed if they had a vault that infinitely printed wads of cash?

She was a fountain of magical energy, which mages regarded as more valuable than money could ever hope to be.

Thus, she warped the mage couple.

Without any external influence, they already were the kind of people who would steal Mystic Codes from the El-Melloi. They never had a chance to keep their greed under control.

Little by little, they began acting contrary to their principles, resulting in violent and progressively frequent fights with each other.

Powerful attachment prevented them from ever letting go of the item and powerful rejection filled with fear and rage toward it.

A wish one day and a wish contradicting it on the next.

Thus, they entered a cycle. When rejected, she'd leave to grant their wish, and return to the apartment when they were back at the attachment phase.

In the rejection phases, the item would always accept their physical violence or their attempts to incinerate her with magical utensils, since that was their wish.

Losing movement on her arms was no big deal, since that would heal later when they wished for her full recovery.

That said, since she would never grant her own wishes, that were times when she needed to rely on others.

"Can you... press the button?"

Sometimes she had contact with the human who came to live in the neighboring apartment in the same floor.

The item asked only for the bare minimum, since the human's wish was solitude.

Despite rejecting her, the youth granted her wishes.

As a granter of wishes, having her own wishes granted by others felt intriguing, pleasant to the item. The girl, feeling things she never felt before, secretly looked forward to her future

chances to ride the elevator along the youth.

But those days didn't last for long.

The circumstances surrounding her took its inevitable dramatic turn.

The item was puzzled at the state of the mages' budding insanity.

The ancient mages in the item's past life memories never went as far as those two were going.

The mages from the Age of Gods worked vigorously without ever growing addicted to her magical power, and every head of the El-Melloi deemed that using her as a trinity of inorganic magical energy amplifiers—with no need to risk her developing an ego by making her alive—was the supreme way to employ her. Consequently, they didn't suffer great influence.

The relic of the Age of Gods amplified the greed of those nearby.

Worthless mages with insufficient history never stood a chance to progress their research if they had to push back against this.

The couple of mages continued to lose their rationality more and more…

And one day, it all came crumbling.

The item was only trying to grant the wishes of the couple. Nothing more.

She mildly reconstructed her body for it.

The nails on her hands morphed into blades loaded with hex and fell off the item's hands.

Prisoner to their madness and hatred toward each other, the couple of mages was charmed by the beauty of the blades the item created and fought over it—

Their self-destruction met an anticlimactic end.

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A few minutes after the self-destructive anticlimax.

For the purpose of this telling, we'll be referring to the college student who answered the item knocking on the door as "A".

A didn't understand why.

But the instant it felt certain it was the red-hooded girl knocking, the student got off the chair and dashed through the long, dark hallway without hesitation.

And upon opening the door to the entrance…

A saw her.

The little bleeding girl without her hood.

But with that came an instant realization.

The hood that the student always assumed to be meant to hide signs of abuse on her face was actually meant to hide something else.

Unbeknownst to A, the magical hood had a concealing effect: it disguised the girl's hair and ears, making them look like normal round ears and hair as black as her parent's.

Now, without the hood and its effect, the bleeding girl didn't look exactly like a human being as A knew them.

The way her thin, pointy ears protruded out of her hair was eye-catching.

Her hair had the color of transparent gold, completely unlike her parents', and with no signs of it being dye or bleached that way.

"An elf...?"

She wasn't an adult woman like the elves often seen in stories, but something comparable.

But the first word to escape A's mouth upon seeing the dainty little girl was "elf".

A bizarre appearance and a nauseating smell of blood.

An evident abnormality.

A situation that could cause any normal person to scream.

But all A did was evaluate what the scene.

Her clothes and mouth made it obvious it was the girl A was always riding the elevator with.

With that confirmed, a voice echoed in the student's head.

"Please care for this girl."

A bespectacled girl A had only seen once in the elevator.

The one who barged into the solitude-loving youth's head and resurfaced every time A looked at this girl.

"I'm not asking you to risk your life."

A's eyes froze on the girl stand still, stained by splatters of blood.

"I just want you to... reach out to her if anything happens. That's all I ask."

"What..."

Before getting a clear picture of the situation, A was already talking.
Despite the girl's alarming visage, A crouched to see her eye to eye before asking questions.

"What... happened?"

Words that came with a big gulp and sweating hands.
In contrast, the girl's answer was unexpectedly indifferent.

"Mom... and... dad... died."

The student didn't trust those words.
The girl's indifferent expression didn't link with the implications of what she spoke.
But the proof was in the girl's stench of blood.
With the answer forced upon A, the youth still demanded confirmation.

"They're... dead?"

"They... fought... over me.", the girl nodded.

That still didn't make sense.
A had been hearing the heated fights the past few days.
Weren't they both abusive parents?
Why would they fight over her?
The number of questions increased.
Common sense suggested it'd be best to call the police and an ambulance immediately.
But the girl here didn't belong anywhere near common sense.
This was the situation where the neighbor was supposed to call the police and never hear from it again, but now with the girl's hair and ears changed, A couldn't imagine how she'd be treated.
Even so... what are my other options?
After some internal debate, A decided to get back inside to get to the phone and report to

the police.

However, upon trying to turn his back to the girl, the words of the girl with glasses resurfaced in the student's head.

"I just want you to... reach out to her if anything happens. That's all I ask."
"I'm not asking you to risk your life."
"reach out" "reach out" "to her"

The words of the girl with glasses echoed.

For some reason, A could never forget her voice, despite only hearing it once.

Her hypnosis shook A's brain with intensity more akin to a curse.

This hypnosis was not originally an ill-intended hex.

To the girl with the backpack full of herbs—the magus Sajou Ayaka—what she did was merely an act of insurance.

It's impossible to know whether her eyes noticed the magical significance of the girl, as her magical energy was perfectly contained within. However...

The girl made Ayaka feel uneasy... taken over by a bad premonition, Ayaka made the spur of the moment decision to cast a minor and likely inconsequential hypnosis spell on a nearby youth, encouraging not to abandon her if anything came to pass.

"Come in... Right now, you should take a warm shower."

"Are you sure...?", the confused girl questioned A's reaching out.

She was more calm than any 3~4-year-old reasonably should, but instead of doubting her over that, A invited her in.

And then, after washing off the blood, the girl was taken to A's bedroom.

She never emoted while following her neighbor, but entering the room, she finally showed a perplexed face.

"What's this?"

"Oh, this?", A reacted to the infant looking at the bedroom wall with an embarrassed smiled.

A's room had a large portrait on the wall.

The likeness of a bespectacled high school girl drawn on lead pencil, color pencils, and watercolor ink.

"It's someone special to me."

Next to the portrait, there were what seemed to be printed screenshots from the building's security cameras, showing the girl in the elevator.

From when she shared the elevator with A and the Little Red Riding Hood girl.

The girl stared at the wall, unable to understand the meaning of it. The tone in A's voice suggested the college student didn't understand it much more than she did.

"I don't know her name, though."

The mage girl who hypnotized him on the elevator made one mistake.

Sajou Ayaka's single miscalculation was...

A, the fully hypnotized target, loved solitude far too much.

The college student had considered death time and time again when thinking about how society wouldn't allow that solitude to last.

That's what sprouted a contradiction within A.

Why did such a lover of solitude need to care for the Little Red Riding Hood, someone else's child?

Without any knowledge of magecraft, the youth never stopped looking for a reason why the hypnosis was so compelling. A was desperate to find a reason for this inability to fight back against the heart. And the student reached a conclusion. The only justification that managed to convince A was...

I'm in love.

I fell in love at first sight with the strange girl with glasses.

Solitude grows more toxic by consuming numerous other emotions, and under the effect of its poison, the student implored for this feeling to be romantic instead of having to admit madness.

The college student hesitated to talk to her, afraid of what others might think, considering

the girl was probably at least 2 or 3 years younger.

A also knew sneaking into the supervisor room to steal camera footage was a sign of abnormal obsession.

But the biggest concern was the paradox caused by how this new feeling didn't change A's solitude-loving essence.

"The miss... from that day...", whispered the item after seen the large amount of drawings and printed photos.

The item—The girl in the red hood thought nothing of it.
Unfamiliar with humanity, she failed to notice A was on course for a meltdown.
Her only impression was that it was abundantly clear what A wanted.

The item simply altered its body little by little to fit with her neighbor's desire.
As would any life born from a clump of magical energy to grant one's wish.

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One month after the impossible murder-suicide of Semina Apartments.

The case that took the citizens by storm was overshadowed by other equally inexplicable incidents that began to happen in Fuyuki City.

This is why the disappearance of the college student who lived next doors to the couple's suicide didn't cause a huge commotion, being remembered at best as an amusing ghost story with dashes of urban legend.

No one saw the missing college student afterward.

Very few saw A in the last month leading to the disappearance, with none of them seeing the missing individual on a daily.

With one exception.

The Little Red Riding Hood who began living in her former neighbor's apartment.

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In the process of learning all sorts of things from the college student, the Little Red Riding Hood understood what she couldn't before.

That it was her fault that the mage couple serving as her (pretend) parents died.
That she amplified the greed of others.
She noticed it for the simplest reason.
Because the college student A fell prey to her power.

The overwhelming paradox between wanting to be alone and wanting romantic feelings fulfilled.

Unable to withstand the conflict in desires, A eventually reached one final conclusion.

"I should become the girl with glasses."

A was trapped in inescapable madness—
But that didn't stop the lunatic from reaching out to the girl in the red hood.

"I'm a lost cause. Still, I don't think you'd be able to survive on your own."

The red-hooded girl with a unique origin was deteriorating.
It was the procedure devised by the mage couple that kept her living.
Now that they were dead, she would lose her life and return to being an ordinary magical energy furnace.
Her humanity is on loose footing.
No, "she" knew of one solution.
Likewise, A had feeling that was the answer.
Thus, A suggested it.
The emaciated student approached the even more emaciated red-hooded girl and voiced a wish.
Purer and greedier than anyone.
The simple trick to simultaneously fulfill the desires for romance and solitude.

"Then here's an idea. I'll give all of me to you. My knowledge, my past, my body, my life, and my future."

After saying those words, A—the college woman caressed the Little Red Riding Hood's cheek.
She still had the physique of a child and her hair was still transparent gold—
but her face strongly resembled the bespectacled girl they met in the elevator.
With a loving gaze, A put a pair of glasses on Red Riding Hood.

She had searched through multiple stores to acquire the same model of glasses as the girl with the big backpack.

"It was so strange at first, but not anymore. I know you can do it."

A's body was fully emaciated, perhaps as a sign of her madness or perhaps as the consequences of a non-mage living with the non-human red-hooded girl.

"Don't worry about me. With or without you, I could never get this whole 'living' deal right. Without any of this happening... Without meeting you and the girl with glasses, it'd all have gone the same way. It's not her fault nor yours."

The Red Riding Hood—The item responded to the pure and strong wish.
Strings of light stretched out of the item, enveloping itself and A's body.
It was a giant cocoon of light.
Knowing that this would isolate her completely from the outside world, A embraced the item like a parent would embrace a child, and spoke her wish with genuine happiness in her voice.

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In a dream

Her consciousness was one step away from waking up.
Ayaka Sajou noticed herself walking nonstop in an undefined world within her slumber.

"I... am..."

As her thoughts got clearer, she gained the sensation of being in a lucid dream.
And one thing came to her attention:
The place she assumed to be a deep mist that continued forever was actually an elevator smaller than 2 x 2m.

"..."

But Ayaka didn't panic.

Because she knew everything now.
She was fully conscious of who she was.
She found a large mirror behind her.
A perfectly ordinary mirror installed in the elevator.
Nonetheless, the mirror didn't show the current Ayaka—
Instead, it showed a more familiar figure.
A small silhouette wearing a red hood.
Herself, wearing the red of blood splatters.

"I was the Red Riding Hood..."

Ayaka crouched on her knees.
She quietly remembered the past.
Her distant memories of being minced by the humans of antiquity didn't matter anymore.
All she could remember was the figure of her kind neighbor.
The person who reached out to she who didn't even count as an individual—a being capable only of harming people by actualizing ill-thought wishes.
I killed her. I caused her death. I stole everything she had.
She didn't devour her like a monster would.
All she did in that cocoon was to take in her body and memories in their entirety.
When she came out, she was a twisted chimera with the college student's knowledge and the looks of the girl she was in love with.
She lost her life, her memories, her past, and her future. Just because she had the bad luck of interacting with me.
And gaining the knowledge of a college student who lived an ordinary life was her undoing.
Gaining regular human morals was her undoing.
It made her aware of things she was better off not knowing.
How repulsive of a monster she truly was.
And how she was to blame for the kind neighbor who reached out to her losing everything she had.

After a few moments derangedly crying and screaming—
She quietly left the apartment.
The only thing she knew about herself was the repulsiveness of her sin.

She walked out, with no thought beyond that she couldn't stand to remain there.
She tried to escape.
She tried to leave it all behind.

And that's where she was now.
A fictional elevator created in a dream. With her knees on the floor, she spewed curses to the shades of herself that she previously saw.

"Why did you encourage me…?"

The shade of the Little Red Riding Hood appeared on the building's staircase the moment before she determined herself to become Saber's Master.
She undoubtedly wished her good luck.
That was a hollow image of myself attached to the elevator's mirror, projected out of guilt… Assuming I created a new shade just for self-approval, what an egomaniac I am., Ayaka cursed her primal refusal to die.

"I really should have dropped dead somewhere…Before it came to all this…! Before I met her… Before I asked for help…"

Thinking back, haven't I affected the mage who was there back when I summoned Saber? Couldn't it be that my greed-amplifying trait was unwittingly active, and that's what made him so vulgar and lacking? Also, Fillia. Didn't her attempts to get more deeply involved with the Holy Grail War start only after her unlucky encounter with me? Maybe even Saber…
She didn't want to think that.
For what reason was the freedom-extolling Saber so caring toward me? Could my curse-like trait have distorted his ways, perhaps?

"It's… always been there. This whole time… I… was… I shouldn't have been… Without me, they…!"

She wished to fade away without ever leaving this dream.
She thought Saber could fight more freely if she never woke up.
He wanted his personal hero to hear his song.
She considered his wish very beautiful.
That's why she wanted him to fulfill it.

Right. It's heroes like Saber who deserve their wishes granted. He deserves it.

But her presence would certainly distort him.

Ayaka didn't want to wake up again.

She wished she never would.

Now I truly relate to her reasons to love solitude. Let me be alone forever and ever. Let me disappear on my lonesome, without harming anyone.

Curiously, this was the same wish a younger girl made with her Command Spells a couple of days ago, but Ayaka never learned about that.

"Get out! Disappear! Begone!"

She screamed and screamed.

Her screams reverberated inside the elevator. Her world, where no one will ever hear them.

"Change history! All of it! Please! Make it so I was never born!"

Lamenting that her power couldn't grant her own wishes, she began slamming her fists against the floor multiple times.

That's when the elevator rang a sudden bell and opened its doors.

"Huh...?"

She turned around and found herself in a stone building.

Based on her knowledge—more precisely, the knowledge she inherited from the college student—she believed she was in a Western castle.

Before she knew it, the scenery was no longer inside the elevator.

She heard raved cheers from outside the stone windows.

She slowly walked further in.

Automatically, regardless of her will.

Ayaka knew why she couldn't control her line of sight.

As always, she was peeking Saber's memories in a dream.

"Ah... Do you have a moment? I think it's time for one of the usual rituals."

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The voice calling from the sides made the controller of her point of view quietly stop his walk.

"Now, really? ...Sure. I was already upset either way. It'll at least get me thinking about something else."

The voice leaking out from where her mouth was recognizable as what she always heard in those dreams and presumed to be Saber's words as heard from inside his head.

I never thought Saber could also get irritated., thought Ayaka, assured that this was Saber's past. The next thing to enter her line of sight startled her.

A man in an out-of-place outfit.

The young adult she frequently saw in these dreams, who goes by the name Saint-Germain.

"Hmm. Sorry 'bout that. This is kind of urgent, Richard. What I'm about to say means absolutely nothing to you. It's a message to a curse or blessing in the distant future. You don't have to remember it... And you, listener from the future, make sure you don't forget this when you wake up."

Words blatantly addressing the dreamer.

Under Saint-Germain's goggles, his eyes began erratically moving independently of each other.

"Is this the wicked but childlike mage? No. The layman who got involved in the incident? Close, but no. Not the artificial intelligence. Not the Clock Tower Lord. Not the Asian mage coalition. Not the final hope of mankind venturing through the blazing planet and the bleached planet.", he mumbled under his breath. "Oh, the blonde one with glasses was... Right, the magical energy cluster girl brought into a mess by a jape from a cut of Ate's flesh.", he beamed.

Ayaka was simultaneously shocked that he got not only her appearance but also her inner workings right, and confused at what he meant by "cut of Ate's flesh".

"Is that you dreaming this? Have we met a few times before? It's me, Saint-Germain. I'll reintroduce myself to you who will be watching this dream. I'm Saint-Germain. A simple fraudster and an unimportant nobleman... Well, I do have one title I can be proud of, that being that of a friend, kindred-spirit, and platonic homeboy to yours soul-bound Richard."

"Since when are we friends? Also, what does homeboy mean?"

Saber's voice reached Ayaka's ears, but Saint-Germain ignored it and moved on.

"Have you watched other dreams before coming here? You gotta excuse me, as although my eyes are leagues better than my everything else, they still don't let me fully glance inside the dream of a stranger in the distant future. I did ask an incubus acquaintance for tips and tricks on how to enter dreams, but I can't quite pull them off. The best I can do is returning the gaze when I notice someone staring at me. Well, putting a positive spin on it, consider myself someone who values your era's standards of privacy!"

After his incomprehensible ramblings, Saint-Germain paused to think before speaking again.

"Your Richard is his Saber Saint Graph, right? Magnificent, then. Take a moment to celebrate your luck, because I consider his Rider and Berserker Saint Graphs to be quite nasty pieces of work. No matter how little fortune you had before this point, this alone warrants the cheers!", Saint-Germain spread his arms widely up in the air. Next, he spoke as if he was fully aware of Ayaka's circumstances. "You're probably entering a journey through Richard's memories within your deep sleep... But one thing you mustn't forget."

In true fraudster fashion, his words gained both blessing and curse before being engraved in Ayaka's heart.

"Which is... Your ultimate decision must be based on what you personally saw from your Saber Servant, not on the memories of his life."

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Present day, Snowfield City

"..."

Ayaka Sajou was in deep sleep, with no signs of waking up.

Saber rode a horse borrowed from one of his retinue, holding her on his arm.

Should I return to that manor... or get help from the father at the church? If only I knew magecraft to heal others...

He internally asked about his Caster retinue's healing magecraft, but she answered that Ayaka's

condition had nothing to do with physical wear, and some unknown force was repelling the mental interference magecraft trying to enter her dreams.

Wait a sec. In this era, the go-to healing process for humans is going to the hospital!

Saber remembered the avenue where they fought the golden archer a few days before.

That hospital... Well, it might be chaotic due to hectic clashes next to it, but there must be at least one person with knowledge of medicine.

Saber traversed the city in search of the avenue with the hospital—

But along the way, he saw an explosion of reddened-black lighting in a backstreet.

"!?"

Noticing the lighting struck again two or three more times, he hurriedly stopped his horse.

"What's that?"

Saber considered the possibility that he was the target of the attack, and cautiously looked around, but instantly figured out that was not the case.

Because he came across a young woman launching countless lapis-colored bees in every direction, and the small Heroic Spirit she seemed to be guarding.

Watching them, Saber was certain those two were the target of the red bolts.

Who was their opponent, then?

At the moment he questioned that, the man appeared from further in the alley.

"That's... not a Servant."

The new figure was a human of grotesque appearance, clad in a modern black suit.

He was presumably a mage, but he was intimidating in a base human level, without taking into consideration his sinister magical energy and divinity.

"Take care of Ayaka..."

Judging that the mage in front of him was as dangerous as a Servant, Saber got off his horse and called a few of his retinues.

A horseman with a lance, wearing all white.

A bowman wrapped in bandages.

And an assassin hidden in Ayaka's shadow. A protective layer of floating water engulfed her body, lifting her from the horse's back and taking her behind the rider and the archer.

With his back turned to them, Saber went to question those involved in the quarrel.

"I'm the Servant manifested as Saber... I've seen the lady before atop the temple."

"Saber...!"

"And the one next to you... Could she be the Berserker who guarded the temple?"

Berserker was almost unrecognizable, but Saber's attention was foremost at the man who appeared at the alley's entrance.

"And you... Yes, I didn't need to look at you to tell. You're... the Master of the man with the greatbow, correct? You're clad in the same energy. What even is this mud-like energy? I don't believe that's good for your body or spirit."

Instead of answering the questions, the man moved the reddened-black lightning around him.

"..."

A Master without his Servant has encountered an enemy Heroic Spirit.

In this normally hopeless situation, the silent mage waited for Saber's next move, without making his emotions known.

On one side, a mage out of the ordinary.

On another, a thoroughly weakened Berserker and the priestess trying to protect her.

No thoughtful analysis is necessary to tell that a lone mage overwhelming a pair of Master and Servant was not normal an occurrence in a Holy Grail War.

"I know the smart thing to do here would be to ask you to freely continue as I escaped. I certainly want to prioritize Ayaka's safety..."

He shifted his attention to Ayaka behind him.

Only in thought, as the thunder-clad magus was not someone to turn his eyes away from.

"However, even if my character allowed me to take that route… I imagine you wouldn't let me leave."

"…"

"From there, one option remains! I'll have to suppress you with force to protect Ayaka!"

While he spoke, a new shadow appeared next to Saber.

A sad knight carrying countless swords on his back.

At the moment Saber received a sword from him—lighting struck without the mage lifting a finger.

"Kill first, talk later, huh… Nice! That makes things so much simpler!", excitedly exclaimed Saber as he parried the attack with his sword.

Saber was strangely sympathetic toward the mage showing a personality opposite to his own.

He simply smiled and charged his sword with magical energy.

In reaction to it, the reddened-black mud of magical energy worn by the mage sparked with dozens or hundreds of lighting flashes.

He truly is Servant-level. Is that mud-like energy is directly borrowing power from a Heroic Spirit? Yeah, sounds about right.

Saber hadn't yet built up enough acceleration, and also had a group occupied with Ayaka behind him, thus, he chose to block the assault head-on instead of dodging it.

Receiving major damage was inevitable, but said damage was surprisingly easy to take and prepare a counter.

But that's when an outsider intervened.

The countless bolts approaching Saber were dispersed by an invisible slash flying from the side.

"Ah!"

Saber didn't know how to react to the newly-appeared figure.

It was a person he'd never seen before.

However, his clothes instantly informed his status.

He had the blue-tinged coat and hat of a high-ranking police officer.

Nonetheless, what he had in his hands was what even someone unfamiliar with Japan could recognize as a first-class katana.

Saber had already familiarized himself with this strange composition marked by a discrepancy between armor and weapon.

"Would you be... the coordinator of John's troops?"

Next, Saber noticed himself surrounded by sudden presences in every direction.

The presences of countless Noble Phantasms.

At the same time, a boundary began to ward people away from the alley.

As this was originally a commercial street, few people were inside the buildings due to the evacuation alert for the hurricane.

Even then, "they" set up the boundary to minimize damage.

Saber figured out who "they" were—the police officers with Noble Phantasm were here to fight the mage.

"Isn't your Master in danger? Go.", said the middle-aged man seemingly commanding the police, readying his katana.

"What reason do you have to help me? I was imagining you'd tell me to lend you a hand."

"You helped my subordinates. Besides, your Master is not a mage.", the apparent chief of the police continued without taking his eyes away from the mage. "If she's a civilian, it's our job to protect her. Be her a Master or not."

The officers with long-ranged weapons, such as a bow and a musket, attacked the mage clad in reddened-black magical energy.

In response to the mage's irritated glances, thunderbolts intercepted the attacks of the Noble Phantasms.

With the start of a battle confirmed, Saber switched gears and performed his due courtesy.

"Your name?"

"...Orlando Reeve."

"I see... You have my gratitude, Orlando! I apologize for my jailbreak!"

Orlando replied with a slight smirk and sarcastic words.

"Don't forget you need to pay reparations for the opera house."

"Yes, have faith that I will.", Saber answered with a smile as headed to the still unconscious Ayaka.

However, the next words he heard made him stop for a brief moment.

"You'll pay for the crime of toying with my subordinates, Bazdilot Cordelion."

Something Orlando said after having switched his attention from Saber to the mage.

"Coeur de Lion?", Saber reflexively mumbled. He took a second look at the mage, now knowing what he's named.

They never had anything close to what could be considered a proper conversation.

He didn't know the man's name until now. That's as far as their relationship went.

Nonetheless, Saber could sense the unknown determination within the man and the fearless awareness that this determination will bring death upon himself.

Was it revenge, fury, or an unusual form of hope?

Saber didn't know his past and circumstances. Knowing them at this point wouldn't change a thing.

Saber, watching the magus contain within himself a boiling heat that might as well destroy the world, flashed a mildly melancholic smile.

"I see it now. He's another lion."

His whisper sounded like he envied the mage who walked a different path as he did—but it vanished in the interstice between wind and thunder, unheard by any.

"Farewell, Lionhearted of the present generation."

A man he only came across this once.

With an unusual form of respect for the mighty Bazdilot Cordelion, Saber left with Ayaka in his arms.

"Had we met in a different era or a different manner... We could have been sharing drinks."

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"Quite the spectacle you're making. It's evident you forgot even about concealing the arcane.", Orlando spoke.

"...It no longer matters.", Bazdilot responded with indifference.

"Are you trying to make an enemy out of the Clock Tower...?"

"Rich coming from the United States.", said Bazdilot, deflecting attacks from every direction. "Your federation took a Servant meant to clash in the Holy Grail War, and used it instead to kill Don Galvarosso."

There was no inflection to his voice, but the reddened-black magical energy he wore betrayed his intense agitation.

"..."

After hearing that, the chief of police quietly inhaled.

He had heard Bazdilot's motives before from the spellcaster named Sigma.

Bazdilot Cordelion operated to avenge the Don killed by Assassin under Faldeus's orders.

He didn't believe it at first, but it was hard to doubt it at this point. At the same time, he internally blared at Faldeus.

"...I hear that was Faldeus's independent decision."

"He did it for the nation, and it was the same nation who gave him the power to do so... In that case, destroying the country serves as revenge against him. If my arguments fail to make sense to you, think of it as the insignificant and unjustified resentment of a fool who failed to protect his only master."

Bazdilot's words sounded awfully cold, but underneath that outer layer, they were a clamor to kill thousands.

Upon sensing that, the chief of police realized his mistake.

Both himself and Faldeus majorly misunderstood the man.

He is no mage.

It was exactly like how Orlando himself placed more weight in his ways as policeman than as mage.

It was not a case of mages manipulating the Scladio Family nor of Scladio manipulating Bazdilot.

It was much simpler.

Much, much simpler. The man Bazdilot sworn his loyalty to the mafia boss Galvarosso Scladio.

He was not a mage, he was a pure mafioso. A member of Scladio Family.

"Ok."

Everything made sense to Orlando. Yet even so—

No.

Now more than ever, he confronted Bazdilot.

"In that case, I'll be the enforcer of the law... and apprehend a criminal. You, Cordelion."

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A fight began.

A bizarre clash between a squad of policemen with Noble Phantasms against a single mage.

But the police had no chance to capitalize on this numerical advantage, as lightning continuously deflected the sequences of Noble Phantasms.

Had the policemen been as they were a few days prior, it was likely the first bolt would have turned them to ash.

But they spent their days undergoing a new training regime by Caster Dumas and their chief, and synchronizing with their Noble Phantasms. Now they evolved to the stage where they can barely survive a lightning strike containing divinity. To Haruri, this fight was a small clash compared to her previous mission near the Neo Ishtar Temple—but now that her goddess Ishtar hid in the

underworld and Berserker was rendered almost powerless, one wrong move may invite death.

Francesca had called this a chance to choose.

She was right. Haruri was now able to make a choice.

To side with the police or with Bazdilot.

Taking one stray bolt or Noble Phantasm was bound to kill her.

I'm powerless.

She silently clenched her fist.

As I am now, any contribution I can make to the battle will be negligible.

The Servant she was meant to rely on was—

Shivering.

Like a child.

Not long ago, the Berserker Heroic Spirit was violence incarnate, driven to split the land in half if necessary. Now, the robotic arm of her useless Saint Graph gripped the hem of Haruri's skirt.

Inexplicably enough, seeing her like this calmed Haruri down.

She didn't feel empowered like she did when she received the blessings of the goddess.

She was freed from the sensation that she could do anything.

No matter what she did, as long as she joined the fight, or in broader terms, as long as she continued taking part in the Holy Grail, she was going to lose everything.

Still, I must make a stand. That's the duty of a Master who willingly entered the Holy Grail War. I'll walk alongside her. My Servant.

By threading closer to death, her heart found its place.

"It's alright. We're fine, Berserker."

She hugged the trembling Heroic Spirit like she was comforting a child and gently pulled her into the alley to hide the exchange of attacks from her.

I already made my choice.

"I choose to use my life saved by the goddess Ishtar... to protect you, Berserker."

With Berserker in her arms, Haruri subtly directed her voice to the one behind her.

"This is my answer, enemy of my goddess."



In response—
The Heroic Spirit behind her, still with their presence hidden, asked Haruri a question.

"Did Ishtar tell you to do that?"

Lancer Enkidu spoke with a face mixed of sorrow and hopelessness.
Bazdilot and the police haven't caught on to a hint of Enkidu's presence, but she found them. Was it because of the remnants of Ishtar's blessing?
Neither Haruri nor Enkidu knew.
Regardless, they were engaged in conversation.
The wind was strangely less loud inside the alley, making the two's voices ring loud and clear.

"I don't know. It's true that my goddess said so... but I believe I would have chosen her even without them."

"May I ask you why?", said Enkidu.
"I don't know either. I still have a lot to learn as a mage and as my goddess' priestess... and as a human being. I simply can't bring myself to abandon her... That might be the reason.", Haruri answered.

The presence of death in the air shook her body.
After being almost killed by that reddened-black energy, it'd be stranger if it didn't.
But, despite trembling, she continued to hug Berserker with a difficult smile.
Said Berserker noticed Enkidu and extended her severely shrunk hand.
Enkidu didn't know if it was to fight or for some other reason.
With a sad expression, Enkidu chose only to speak to Berserker.

"You... can no longer tell who I am?"

Not long ago, Berserker assaulted Enkidu, with her hatred amplified by Ishtar's orders and Haruri's Command Spell.
But they felt nothing of the sort in the current Berserker.
As a consequence of connecting too hard to Ishtar's temple and Gugalanna, much of her Saint Graph was depleted as collateral damage from the loss of the two. Enkidu knew this form of Berserker. That was Huwawa.

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Remembering how Huwawa was in their lifetime, Enkidu calmly talked about it to Haruri.

"Once, long ago, I disabled Huwawa's functions."

"..."

"I didn't know what to do. Time and time again... I did awful things."

With a self-loathing smile, they caressed Huwawa's cheek.

"Back then, I had my best friend to stop me..."

Enkidu paused there and looked above.

"Mm?"

Haruri and Huwawa noticed Enkidu's movement and raised their gaze.

"Now I don't."

Enkidu was looking at a ray of light crossing the sky.
Watching the golden streak, Enkidu smiled.
While Haruri was disturbed by the gold light, Enkidu envied its glimmer.
"Meaning that this time... I must make my own decisions.", they sadly whispered.

The clay doll changed their right fingers into blades and drew a line in the sky. Emotion was erased from the Divine Weapon's next words.

"Who to ruin and who to save."

All while watching the traces of their friend move to the western sky, not giving them the slightest attention.

Chapter 31

"Rhapsody of the Demigods"

Chapter 31: Rhapsody of the Demigods

West Snowfield

All was white.
Completely white.

This whole space was illuminated by lightning.
Silence lasted for a while, as if time was stopped.
It was genuinely possible time wasn't flowing there.
Alcides noticed one shadow contrasting the pure white centered around him.
The figure twice his own size, despite being a shadow, shone brighter and whiter than the whiteness surrounding it.
Despite being transparent, the gigantic white shadow had so much presence that it almost convinced Alcides that it was the true center of his world. Alcides recognized it as vestiges of himself and spoke.

"Leave my sight."

"..."

The white shadow didn't answer and didn't move.

"Hear me, my future where I named myself the glory of the god I loathe and turned into a lapdog for the pieces of scrap metal in the mountainous city."

Alcides confronted the shadow—the copy of the legendary hero—and surged the reddened-black lightning within himself.
Within stopped time, the shine of the lightning inverts.
The mud outspeeds the bolts.
The world around them is painted in reddened-black. Gradually the color darkens, dominates, and sacrileges against it.

"You will also met your end at my revenge... In fact, you will be the final blood drawn. I had always assumed you were scorched at the moment I gained this Saint Graph, but I see you chose to

block my path at this juncture."

Alcides wanted to make his assertions clear.

This was where the gods would meet their end.

This was revenge against the gods.

To communicate that, the reddened-black mud gradually corroded the living world of thunderbolt that Alcides was transforming into.

But—

The silhouette before him shone no less brightly.

The hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of mud hands entangling him didn't strip him of his radiance.

Everything except himself being recolored by reddened-black energy didn't strip him of his radiance.

The humanoid radiance never left this world.

"..."

The expression at the face of shining shadow can't be seen.

But Alcides could feel it.

The silhouette was smiling at him.

"Even now, you dare belittle who I am... Belittle humans?"

The space was filled with quiet rage, and the avenger reached his hand toward the shadow brighter than light.

An overwhelming torrent of magical energy agitated itself in attempt to pierce, shred, and crush it.

"..."

Amidst it—he white shade still wouldn't disappeared. It calmly opened its mouth.

More accurately, it only seemed to Alcides that it had opened its mouth, but in reality, the silhouette maintained its smile during its speech.

You can't do it.

A voiceless voice.
But Alcides could certainly feel the "shadow"'s will.

There's one thing you can't deny, no matter how much you try to discard the entire past. Even if you erase every single record of your name and appearance from the planet's records and the memories of its mankind, this will remain unrefuted: [redacted].

At the instant this sentence was uttered—
The white world fell apart.

Therefore, Alcides could not accept or argue against the shadow's words.
Without any answer or a need for one, Alcides continued steadily moving toward his revenge.
Was his revenge justified or not?
He knew that since he was re-recorded into the planet as an avenger, he never needed an answer.
The fact that his ways were twisted by someone's intent didn't matter there.

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The thunderbolts regained the flow of time and rumbling roars blurred the lines between real and fantastical.

Alcides floated in the center of the giant cumulonimbus. His sight was no longer within, and never again would the inner shadow take hold of his thoughts. He focused his attention solely on the enemy sneaking through the celestial bolts.

Approaching him was no small feat.

Alcides knew that.

What once was Gugalanna's lightning now could be described as both a small hurricane and a super-large twister compressed as far it could be while still pronouncedly retaining Gugalanna's divinity. Its systems automatically engulfed anything that approached in an electric flash, pulverizing it and adding it to the dust of the twister.

Not even Heroic Spirits could come out from the lightning of the gods unscathed.

He believed the small shadow approaching him would soon become specks of dust wandering in the gales.

But look at that—

The incoming presence ignored the thunderbolts of judgment and continued to approach.

"Here you are..."

Ten million all-piercing spears of lightning came together to build this oppressive storm.
And one powerful presence pierced through the storm to approach.

"Warrior and queen."

The words came to him naturally.
But it was getting unclear if Alcides's will was playing any part there.
The lingering instincts and life experiences engraved in his body were doing the talking for him.
The effects of the "mud" and the hydra venom circulating his body should have already stripped him of his sanity long ago.
Yet he barely retained his reason. Was this proof of Alcides's incredibly strength of mind? Was it due to the Command Spells that distorted him? He didn't know the answer.
He bore only one mission.
To enact his revenge against the gods, he would delete his glory with the power of the Holy Grail.
The name that Alcides abhorred was far too well-known for the otherwise simpler act of wiping away the marks lefts by a single individual.
This labor required dealing a lethal blow to the world, but if it came to that, so be it.
Even before he was poisoned with the hydra's lethal venom, when his thoughts were still in order, Alcides was prepared for those consequences.

Therefore...
She could be considered Human Order's modest counter to him.
As she was now, she had enough to power to make his assumptions not sound delusional.

"She" here referring to—
The brave lady manipulated by Hera's schemes and vanquished by the legendary hero.
Daughter of Ares and priestess of Artemis.
The proud eldest of the three Amazon sisters.

Servant, Rider.

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Warrior Chief Hippolyte.

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Her march was as fierce as it was beautiful.

Only one horseback soldier on the offense.

Mounted on the prized steed connected as part of her Saint Graph, she crossed the battlefield solo.

Her opponent was likewise a single Servant, but he had turned into something resilient as an army and was in still in the process of becoming resilient as a nation.

The thunder summit was enshrined in the wasteland that was once a forest.

One Heroic Spirit forced a divine beast into submission and stole its status.

The cumulonimbus-shaped troops of lighting spread widely and three-dimensionally.

Each stroke of the lightning forces could destroy an unprepared army.

After overpowering the embodiment of the gales and deploying the thunderbolt troops, Alcides could be described as the incarnation of the power that erases warriors by the thousands.

But Rider didn't flinch.

Linguists say her name Hippolyte means "the one who sets horses free" or "the one who rids horses of their doubts".

At this very moment, she was releasing her horse from its fears and restraint, granting it true freedom.

Out of care for the one who freed its heart, her steed galloped toward the mass of death, unafraid of its thunderbolts.

And now that the spirits of the horse and the rider were as one, they freed themselves from the binds of gravity.

In a mighty leap, they kick the slushy dirt drowned by the flood caused by Alcides's Noble Phantasm.

The first lightning strikes were indiscriminately unleashed on everything nearby.

By dodging it in trajectories impossible for a normal horse, it could dance its way to the sky, using the blasted bedrocks as platforms to allow Rider to make her way to challenge the giant cloud.

The winds blew fiercely accompanied by the intense drums of thunder, like they voiced the hatred of the Avenger sitting at the center of the thundercloud summit.

Rider dashed firmly amid the thunder.

Her movements could seem effortless when seen from afar, but that's merely an illusion caused

by the sheer difference in scale between herself and the thundercloud.

The horsewoman's movements far surpassed the speed of real horses, traversing the field of lightning with the speed of a cannonball.

Utilizing the divinity set up by the sash that is her Noble Phantasm, the horse advanced by quite literally stomping on the lightning flashes loaded with the same divinity as its hooves.

The wingless pegasus no longer needed the bedrocks to fly.

The ground and clouds around Rider were illuminated by the lightning bolts stabbed onto them, and the thunders attempted to rupture her eardrums.

But not a speck of fear could be found in the eyes of her stallion Kallion.

The clouds were heavy and the flashes of lightning obfuscate her vision with white darkness.

In what resembled a scene from the end of the world, the one Rider continue to loudly proclaim her survival.

Her clothes were wet and heavy, and her face was beaten by the rain, but her eyes were filled with determination.

And then—

At the moment the flying woman reached the summit of the cumulonimbus, the thunderstorm was miraculously pacified.

Atop the whirl of clouds, a giant hole extended where the eye of the hurricane should be.

Looking inside, she could see what looked less like the interior of a tornado and more like a whirlpool in a sea of clouds.

Exposed to dense magical energy, as if the interior of the whirl had returned to the Age of Gods, Rider looked deeper inside the swirl of electricity.

At this moment of silence, she found the heart of the cumulonimbus.

She saw the aloof avenger using only his Saint Graph to force the thunderbolt loaded with immense divinity into submission, without ever absorbing it.

"Alcides..."

Lightning flashed again, announcing their fight had resumed.

Rider yelled amidst the thunders, not caring about its cries drowning out her voice.

When you absorbed the thunderbolts, I assumed you were trying to play Zeus... But I must apologize. I see you overpower the gods with your own strength, ever true to your revolt against them.

She remembered her first encounter with Alcides in the land of Snowfield, when he said the power of the gods was meant to be controlled by human hands, not to dwell inside him.

If his body born as the son of a god had housed the immense divinity that composed that giant

bull, he could have become a god of thunder similar to Zeus and erased the continent.

But that was not acceptable to him, so he chose the hellish suffering that is controlling a power greater than his own while consumed by venom.

Your resolve is genuine.

She quietly timed her breathing while enjoying the sensation of floating that comes before free-falling.

Then she opened both eyes and galloped down the ten thousand meters descent with speeds far beyond a natural fall.

The Downhill Attack of Hiyodorigoe was the name of it, right?

Rider remembered the tactics of one of the many horsemen she learned about in the past few days.

Even after becoming a Heroic Spirit, she hungered for improvement as a horseback warrior and tried to turn the knowledge granted by Holy Grail into further strength by incorporating tactics and horse-riding techniques from all lands and eras.

The Downhill Attack of Hiyodorigoe was a tactic of a heroic warrior named Minamoto no Yoshitsune.

A Japanese story about one time when he made two horses descend from a cliff, and with one horse confirming that he could make it down unscathed, he struck a horseback surprise attack.

Although she took major issue with how that had one horse sprain its leg on the test, Rider had daring smile, remembering the anecdotes about the fearless fighter who charged ahead descending the perilous cliff before Yoshitsune did, and the mighty warrior who descended on his own legs carrying his steed because he considered the horse more important than himself.

Ah, I wish I had the chance to have an earnest contest of martial prowess against the toughest fighters of foreign lands...

She remembered how she got to traverse a decent amount of lands and conquer numerous battlefields in her days with the tribe of horse riders.

But this Holy Grail War was fake to its core.

It already had numerous cogs out of place and a city was about to be destroyed.

Even then, her intriguing Masters told her to run as she willed it.

A group of different people with different sensibilities; some with the rationality typical of a mage and other following more illogical motives.

She could sense they had strong egos and lacked basic uniformity.

But, strangely enough, they seemed capable of operating as a single lifeform despite it.

Much like how all within the body is counted as one individual despite the heart, eyes, bones,

and ears having completely different roles.

Maybe that's how the adventurers sailing in that famed vessel were.

"The Argonauts…", Rider awkwardly said the name in her mind.

Oh, that's right…

She didn't know about it in life, but now the knowledge she gained from the Grail and everything that the students of the El-Melloi Classroom taught her about her enemy started meshing together in her head.

"If I could, for a moment, forget my role as queen and bad blood with some sailors…"

That man was one of them.

"I would have loved to board that colossal ship!"

With joy in her voice, she accelerated her horse further.

Overflowing with vitality, with an expression no one would believe to be the face of someone running to her death.

The interior of the swirl was in a different level of air pressure and magical energy density.

The flow of wind and magical energy was so intense that it would instantly mince a mediocre mage, let alone a normal human.

Entering the torrent of power and running through the walls of the swirl of thunderclouds was far more dangerous than running down a vertical wall.

Nonetheless, her stallion dashed through the storm without hesitating a single step.

The winds messed Hippolyte's hair and her steed's mane, and much worse than the wind speeds were the grains of hail turned into bullets. Normal hail would count as purely physical objects and deal no damage to a Servant. But the hail here was clad in divine lightning, turning them into Saint Graph-shredding pseudo-Noble Phantasms.

However, her horse didn't stop.

The horseback Rider's attention was focused on Alcides deep within the swirl, without ever covering or averting her eyes.

Alcides, on the other hand, showed no signs of attacking her directly, making it unclear whether he noticed her.

"Seems like he doesn't think I'm worth his time."

Rider quietly adjusted her breathing rhythm while dancing through the gales and hail.

She remembered the first day of her summon—the moment she met Alcides and the golden bowman on that ravine.

Her hand tightly gripped a bow, and her arrow was perched, quietly waiting the moment to pierce her enemy.

Waiting while circling faster than the wind. A self-contradicting approach.

Like a jet pilot in a dogfight, she ascertained the right time to shoot while feeling the intense force of gravity all over her body.

Her body—which managed to keep her in the status of warrior chief in the Age of Gods, a time when gods, monsters, humans, and fae shared the same space and numerous fierce fighters roamed the world—maintained a steady posture no matter how intense the winds got.

Despite him not having the same essence anymore, she was still on her way to challenge the greatest hero of her time, so she couldn't afford to falter at the preliminary stages.

She rode across the walls of the vortex of thunderbolt, going wherever the wind and the flow of magical energy took her.

The Amazon rider resisted the galestorms as she readied her bow and fired without ever leaving herself vulnerable.

The launched arrow slipped through the winds, pierced through the hail, and advanced inside the thunders.

Metaphorically carving a new path through the maelstroms of fate.

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Snowfield, central district, underground

"It's starting...?", mumbled Sigma, climbing down a metallic staircase, when sense the magical energy disturbance in the air.

He was a highly competent spellcaster, but that didn't mean he was knowledgeable about the basics of magecraft.

However, the magical energy to the west was disturbed to an extent even he could clearly sense.

"Yeah, some clash between rivals with shared history... but that can't be called a fight between an Amazon and the greatest hero anymore.", a silhouette of an aged captain shrugged in response.

"You mean it became a battle to fell a god?"

Sigma shifted his attention to the battle above while remembering his own god-slaying shot against Ishtar a while ago.

"No... but I guess yes. The others gotta disagree, but from my perspective, I see no difference. Well, thinking about it that way gets me rooting for that Amazon queenie. Nah, it makes me wanna ask her to lemme take her place."

"Ok.", Sigma answered indifferently.

His response caused the boy with the caduceus to take over and change the subject.

"I have my issues about my old friend consumed by revenge. If I hadn't devoted all of me to medicine, there's a big chance I'd have turned out just like him."

"You would become an Avenger?"

"Well, in my case, perfecting revival would already count as revenge."

"Sounds... productive.",listlessly asked Sigma, climbing down the stairs.

"I'd likely prioritize the rejection of death and, in modern terms, fill the world with zombies. That'd be a long shot from the pinnacle of medicine I yearn for.", the boy with the caduceus disagreed.

"If you're so aware of it now... I don't think you'll turn out like that."

"When you're tainted by revenge, that can twist even the central wish that drives you... or rather, revenge becomes the new central wish."

With that, the shade looked above with a melancholic expression. The shade made from information recorded on Watcher talked about someone in the west, carrying simulated emotion in his voice.

"Maybe the medicine he needed the most now was having the most human of humans back in the captain's helm."

"What do you mean?", Sigma asked.

"People think gods and beasts are the most troublesome drug to handle, but it's actually humans.", the boy silhouette answered with a lonely smirk.

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West Snowfield, cumulonimbus cloud, interior

A killing blow.

That's what Rider's first shot deserved to be called under normal circumstances. In terms of regular weapons of the modern era, her arrow would be like a bunker buster: a projectile bomb with possessing enough impact and perforating force to pierce the floor and destroy the underground enemy. The arrow flies in a straight line toward Alcides drilling through everything in its path.

The hide of the Nemean Lion may block any and all human constructs, but it does nothing to ward off the power of the gods that flows from girdle of Ares that serves as Rider's Noble Phantasm, inevitably dealing internal damage.

With a direct hit, the scales would tip largely in Rider's favor.

In contrast, Alcides shows no signs of intention to dodge.

He could also neutralize the shot by firing his own arrow, but he still hadn't readied his bow.

Is he really in no fighting condition after all? I figured so, as the effects of the deadly hydra venom and the reddened-black "mud" invading him must be intense.

She instantly canceled her train of thought before it finished.

Discard all that wishful thinking.

No matter how much he's altered, there's no way she would have an easy time against the great hero who killed her.

She began perching a second arrow, thinking her opponent was someone she couldn't take chances against even if he became a corpse.

No... would that be wishful?

Rider's eyes filled with another level of energy, and her lips form a daring smile without hesitation.

The man I wish to fight against... would never lose himself here. I'm certain he will block my arrow. I know this fellow!

Certain of it, she fired arrows without stop.

Her arrows charged to Alcides, dancing with the wind and thunder.

Their trajectory was fluid was water, and each head was charged with divinity, making them pace to the enemy like they were alive.

But—

Reddened-black lightning flashed between Alcides and the first arrow, shooting down its fierce attack.

However, to get around the thunder strikes, a raging rain of arrows formed another storm inside the hurricane cloud, and engulfed Alcides.

"I knew this wouldn't be enough to get to you...", she gulped, impressed.

Immediately before they met again in the northern canyon, Alcides fully parried a maelstrom of attacks from the Hero King—an omnidirectional shower of Noble Phantasm.

The Nemean Lion pelt alone couldn't block all that.

The reason why the greatest hero surmounted all difficulties in life and achieved numerous feats lied naught in the power of the gods.

The martial skills he learned throughout his human life came together and bloomed, bearing fruit within his soul. He perfected a craft that adapted to every situation, from his default bow and sword to numerous others arms and core ideas, including how to combat armies or monsters barehanded.

This crystallization of experience and technique truly belongs in his human Saint Graph.

The Nine Lives martial arts.

Engraved deep within his Saint Graph is the accumulation of his life's journey, which naturally moved without needing to take the form of the Noble Phantasm.

The lion pelt alone would fall short of leaving him unscathed. The martial arts alone would fall short of leaving him unscathed.

Combined and receiving the addition of vast amounts of magical energy and divinity, the two created a defense akin to an exoskeleton of thunderbolt over he who sits at the core of the stormcloud, the very body of Alcides.

Overwhelming martial might.

Unequalled heroic feats.

At the same time, she noticed the energy density within him continues to increase and irritate his body.

Is he... getting mixed?

The presence of mystic beasts began to jumble together with the inner walls of the cloud that resembled a risen ocean in its turbulence.

The Nemean Lion pelt covering Alcides's head that a stench unique to mystic beasts, and sparks in the shape of birds began cross the interstices between lightning bolts.

"The Stymphalian...", Rider mumbled as she watched the flock of electric birds gain numbers as they circled around Alcides.

Those bronze birds were listed among the Twelve Labors.

Her mother told her they were originally an army of companion airships to her father, the war god Ares.

Compared to how she saw them a few days before, they were growing more noticeably alike their original forms.

Now it makes sense. I did imagine that it was impossible to steal another's Noble Phantasm without any risk or cost...

A Noble Phantasm that steals a Noble Phantasm that can be considered the opponent's very Saint Graph.

Having to fuse parts of his Noble Phantasms and Saint Graphs must be less of a cost for this outrage and more of a necessary step in order to crudely staple something together to his Saint Graph. My guess is that if he were to relinquish this mighty hurricane that is the power of Gugalanna, the power of the fused parts wouldn't return to him.

However, her speculated circumstances alone would not be enough to steal another's Noble Phantasm.

What enabled it was the strength that the legendary hero's Saint Graph still had even after discarding the power of the gods, and an immense magical energy supply from his Master.

The hurricane cloud was gaining the auras of beasts other than Gugalanna.

The numerous mystic beasts that fought the greatest hero during his lifetime mixed together, filling the air with a stench similar to the primordial chaos.

"Your hatred from the gods is such that you plan to transform into the monster who defeated the thearch Zeus... Typhon, the Progenitor Dragon?", Rider screamed, dashing through this air.

Alcides's goal is revenge against the gods.

Therefore, one of the most surefire options available was to become something that has beaten them before.

Adding the power of the Holy Grail to his current state had a very realistic chance of turning him into something close enough.

If that didn't work out, there was still the plan B of resonating his power to wake up the real Typhon asleep somewhere outside the world's surface layer.

Alcides's idea of revenge included destroyed the entire world that continued to remember the gods.

In that case, Rider that all the more reason to stop him.

To remain true to herself, Rider screamed:

"ALCIDES!"

So far, Alcides's mind seemed to be operating semi-automatically, but now she felt like he was looking at her.

Rider loudly proclaimed her name, in a gesture that didn't care for whether or not he still had enough of an ego to understand words.

"My name is Hippolyte!"

Her bow turned into spiritron light and disappeared, and in its place, she gripped a giant axe as tall as herself.

"Daughter of the war god Ares and the Artemis priestess Otrera!"

As she screamed, she effortlessly lifted and brandished above her head the axe heavier than her steed.

"The name of the chief of the Amazons..."

The Noble Phantasm wrapped around her arm, Goddess of War, radiated light and enveloped her body, horse, and axe in divine aura—

"and the warrior who will defeat you!"

After this loud introduction, Hippolyte unleashed the name of her Noble Phantasm.

Fury overcomes hubris
Húbrin Anatropón Erinyes

A full-force horseback axe swing.
That's all she did.
But, combining the kicking strength the horse used to jump off its lightning platform and the flawlessly efficient distribution of power in both the horse and the rider's movements, the very simple act of swinging an axe on horseback reaches its peak.
If time stopped during any moment of her move, the still image generated would be a work of art.
It was beauty created as consequence of a pure pursuit of strength, unlike Ishtar's beauty, which was both the means and the end.
Power and technique culminated from Hippolyte's long years of personal research and training, and the endpoint of the Amazon tribe's unbroken tradition of advanced horsemanship.
All that combines to produce a single strike:
A brutal blow that cleaves the world.

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Somewhere in North America

"Unbelievable..."

Those were the only words the observers covered in cold sweat could drag out of their mouths.
The place seemed to be a control room full of monitors but no windows, and on closer inspection, all four walls had magical boundaries on them.
Here was one of the places from where the government sector responsible for giving Faldeus orders—people that could be described as the masterminds of this Holy Grail War—watched the progress of the ritual.
They already issued the emergency code [Aurora fall], determining that a special bomb should be dropped to erase Snowfield City.

That's why only a handful of CIA officers with formal spellcaster training continued observation to gather accurate data until the very last second.

Weather observation satellites sent them observation footage in real time for them to camouflage and distribute to several agencies and the common citizen.

The man watching the monitor had been struck with terror when the giant hurricane compressed to minimal size in a matter of minutes.

But the truly startling part came later.

The magical observations did show one strong magical energy signal get swallowed by the hurricane, but he thought nothing of it, until less than a minute later, it caused a major alteration in the observed information.

"The hurricane… was sliced…?"

It was like a child had taken one bite out of a pizza and returned the slice.

The hurricane, which took the form of a beautiful circle, lost a fan-shaped part starting at the center and opening up southwest.

And that was not all. The faint cloud layer in the surrounding area and the cloud scraps assumed to be split from the hurricane were also blown off.

The weather satellite picture showed what resembled a straight line drawn with a ruler.

If someone intimately familiar with past Holy Grail Wars, like say, Lord El-Melloi II, was watching the scene, they'd have immediately figured out what happened.

The flash of a Noble Phantasm.

A blow similar but not comparable to the planet's Holy Sword named Excalibur.

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West Snowfield

"What's going on there…?", Thia Escardos involuntarily groaned as he watched the torrent of magical energy split the sky. "Last I saw that Rider… she didn't have the Saint Graph necessary to pull that off."

She had magical energy leagues above the Saint Graph that he measured a few minutes ago.

This burst in amount of magical energy amount, clearly abnormal even taking into

consideration the divine aura of the cloth he assumed to be her Noble Phantasm, was enough to take Thia's attention away from the El-Melloi Classroom.

Weird... None of them are fretting. So did they already know about that Rider's extraordinary strength?

But he couldn't feel that much power back when they were confronting Ishtar.

Since he shared Flat's body and Magic Circuits, Thia retained his Master ability to measure a Servant's power.

When he looked at her, not too long ago, he clearly identified her Saint Graph as "certainly not weak but considerably inferior to the top Servants in this Holy Grail War".

Then did removing Ishtar trigger something? ...No, I'd have seen if it...

Thia noticed a certain possibility, interrupting his previous thoughts.

"No way... Is this even possible? With this El-Melloi Classroom roster, maybe...?"

Toosaka Rin shot a charged Gandr at Thia during his epiphany.

"You must be confident if you're not even looking our way."

"Yeah, I am. You're nothing.", said Thia, dodging at the last second.

"Are you counting yourself invincible just because you sparred a bit with that Lancer? I don't think you've done enough to back it up.", Rin haughtily responded.

"I can't deny that."

Thia Escardos was on par with Servants in terms of magical power and movement, but his endurance was entirely reliant on magical energy barriers, with his physical build being not that different from Flat Escardos.

Therefore, Thia did not have the option to ignore Toosaka Rin's barrage of Gandrs.

Clashing with his magecraft, he can even compete with Enkidu—but conversely, when his magecraft is disabled, he has no hopes of winning.

"That's why I won't be careless or arrogant."

Gandr may be a simple Single Action magecraft, but Rin's version, called Finn Shot, is

something he'd not come out of unscathed. Thia knew it and repelled the attack by rotating the magical energy around him.

However, the repelled Gandr was repelled back by another magical energy "rotation" a few meters ahead.

"Ah!"

Was that... a wheel?

A wheel-like Mystic Code ricocheted the Gandr with the same high-speed rotation of magical energy as Thia's.

He didn't even have the chance to remember what that was.

The bounced projectile bounced in multiple other rotations in a span of 0.3 seconds, accelerating like a pinball until the Gandr pierced Thia's back.

"...!"

Since he managed to put up a magical barrier at the last possible instant, his innards weren't soaked with the curse, but the impact was enough to throw him off-balance.

"You two may be our veterans in the El-Melloi Classroom..."

Luviagelita was waiting for this moment to fire her own Gandr.

"but neither of you gets to look down on us."

Her Gandr had the same "Finn Shot" intensity as Rin's, and as before, the irregular trajectory provided by the countless "wheels" proved a threat to Thia.

"This is nothing..."

He swiftly controlled the "satellites" of magical energy deployed around him to crash against the Gandrs, to completely scatter the shots rather than deflect them.

But while he was doing it, Rin, Luvia, and many others with Gandr or similar attack methods opened fire.

The "wheels" swiftly circled themselves around Thia, skillfully ricocheting all projectiles and

arranging the magecraft into the best possible vectors.

No matter how poorly aimed, the projectiles eventually homed in Thia's direction.

Being able to accurately reflect one type of Gandr is nothing special, but doing so with various kinds of magecraft required a rare level of control.

As Thia neutralized the incoming Gandrs and magical bullets, he spoke the name of the one manipulating the wheels.

"Org Rum...!"

Hearing his name, Org deployed more wheels.

The wheel-shaped Mystic Codes released from his hands rotated in high speeds, displaying magical energy afterimages as it did.

A facsimile of Projection.

The real wheels flew in circles, looking as if they had multiplied, and mixed with the fakes to weave a giant Bounded Field.

But this powerful "cage" of his was less of a magical wall and more of a physical one, meant to reflect any and all attacks coming from its interior.

"It was my sister who inherited the family's Magic Crest and I exist to be nothing more than the training wheels keeping her stable..."

It was thanks to his cage that the mages by his side could maintain continuous fire without hesitation.

They unleashed as much Single Action magecraft as possible, without bothering to aim.

A storm of varied techniques and curses.

But Org Rum's wheels brought everything together, altered the magecraft's quality and composition, and freely bounced back the shots so that everyone's attacks would converge on Thia.

"But our teacher's lessons inspired me toward a new goal... support magecraft capable of making me into training wheels for anyone, not exclusively my sister."

Thia didn't let it show, but he was vexed because he knew exactly how precise of a magical energy control that required.

This man named Org was the same as Flat and Rin—
A student who learned devilish techniques at the El-Melloi Classroom.

Org Rum had once given up on his mage identity.

He came from a family that used a unique magecraft with wheels. Due to a minimal advantage in amount of Magic Circuits and his studious personality, Org was considered one of the best candidates to inherit the Magic Crest. But after many intersecting schemes unfolded, overturning his favorable lead, his older sister Jean Rum was chosen as the Magic Crest's heir.

And, as the family head predicted, Jean Rum was able to draw the full potential of Magic Circuits on the Crest engraved in her. Her forceful yet delicate steering left Org behind in the race before he knew it.

Jean later became known by the moniker of Gale Wheel and regarded as the greatest in the history of the clan of wheel-using mages. And after earning this reputation, she said she'd search for Ivan the Terrible's library and went freelance.

Org knew he'd never be able to reach his sister's level, neither in magecraft capabilities nor in freedom of spirit.

He entered the Clock Tower resigned to spend his whole like as a spare for the case his sister met unexpected tragedy, but there he caught Lord El-Melloi II's eyes.

—In the world of magecraft, the wheel has many different meanings depending on the culture and religion... circulation and rebirth, alteration, harmonization, power at its purest, travel and exploration. What you can do depends on the context in which you use yours, but normally... front wheels and back wheels, not to mention additional pairs or training wheels, display greater stability when used in conjunction. Without the option to inherit the Crest, you're faced with a choice. You can take the mapped path of supporting the family head or, using the keywords of your magecraft... you can leave your trail marks on unexplored snow fields. The ability to create new contexts is a privilege of the talented.

Lord El-Melloi II spoke the word "talented" with some level of resentment.

The main weapons his student Org used to improve himself were his naturally studious personality and the extensive knowledge that came from his bibliomania, a habit learned from his sister. Due to those, he managed to leave his marks on untreaded land.

The cluttered El-Melloi Classroom faced all sorts of troubles.

Through his multiple experiences being strong-armed into these situations, he was forced to fight together with multiple mages, and along the way, he naturally left his tracks on the snow.

Time and time again.

And with enough time, the marked tracks become roads.

He perfected a new form of Wheel Magecraft that can support many others individuals with Magic Crests of different lineages, not only his sister, thus reaching the rank of Pride.

He's not special in this regard.

Naturally, only a handful of people in the entire world of magecraft obtained the title of Pride or higher through circumstances similar to his.

Pride is that valuable of a title to the Clock Tower.

But there's a place where the members of this handful gathered together.

The El-Melloi Classroom.

In the classroom, Org's case is one among many of his kind.

A lot of students faced the same circumstances: struggle due to an inability to notice their own talents.

Others were cursed by their talents.

Be it through the accumulation of small realizations or one grand lesson, they gained the means to break through the walls in their paths and climb to greater heights than they imagined.

This happened all the time in the El-Melloi Classroom.

Of course, this doesn't apply to everyone, as some, like Rin and Luvia, joined the class already with envisioned heights to reach.

Regardless, as a consequence of its alumni inevitably becoming high-ranking mages, the current El-Melloi Classroom has the open attention of every other faction.

This faction, considered a threat among the tumultuous Clock Tower, was now facing the monster named Thia.

"We don't believe we can fight you, who melted the North Sea's ice caps, head on."

Org's words were followed by a pair of twin sisters mocking Thia.

"Yup, nothing good's coming of it, y'know? We're just here to support Polyte."

"Mages gotta avoid these kinds of direct confrontations, for both side's sakes!"

Amidst their casual taunts, the twins expanded each other's magecraft.

"But, you should know it by now! We're very used to this kind of thing."

"Yeah, remember that time we threw hands with Touko? I thought the whole class would die!"

Many lineages had magecraft that let twin mages benefit from that trait. The Pentel sisters were one of them.

Other famous examples include the spell of Edelfelt family, popularly known as The Scales, and of a pair of brothers related to the Pentels, popularly known as Gum Brothers. Radia and Nazica's version of it regards the other sister as a mirror, and any magecraft that appears between the opposite mirrors is reflected by them, amplifying it through high-speed circulation and alteration.

"Well, the gist of things here is that if you pull off that advanced magecraft again, you blow this land up and we all die, am I right?"

"Which means we just need to stop you from using that and we're good... Hoy!"

The bullets that were mere Single Action spells momentarily expanded and occupied the space around Thia.

Their refined magecraft skills were a threat, but a very minor one if Thia was fighting them one on one.

But Thia knew that wasn't the case right now.

As proof, every time Thia tried to launch his magecraft at the ground to avoid the sliding wheels, a butterfly fluttered in its trajectory, altering distance and direction into something more undefined.

"I'm sorry, Thia Escardos.", dauntlessly spoke Werner, who could utilize magecraft on a similar level to that of a Servant by optimizing the conditions of the land he was on. "Honestly, in a fair fight, there's no logical way for us to defeat you, who survived fierce attacks from that incredible Lancer and is capable of destroying this entire land."

Countless more butterflies covered the ground as he spoke.

"Therefore, we decided logic has no place here... as we won't fight fairly."

They were in Snowfield right after Ishtar had begun to recolor the planet's surface texture and was prevented from finishing.

Here, where the difference between the real and the arcane was unclear enough due to this backlash, Werner's magecraft was at the best it's ever been.

"We might be an outdated form of humanity from your perspective..."

"...Hh! How much do you people know about the Escardos lineage...?", Thia asked after noticing his opponent figured out Messara Escardos's intentions.

But instead of an answer, Werner responded with a courteous bow and words of provocation.

"But do savor this full course of vain struggle from the mages you consider weaklings who won't survive the death of arcanity."

Werner's Papilio Magia blocked his attacks by making space ambiguous, and Org's Wheel Magecraft turned attacks he dodged into attacks that home into his back.

The paired mirrors of the Pentel sisters received support from Papilio Magia. Each other's energy bullets were no longer the only ones amplified by the mirrors. They copied even Rin's and Luvia's Finn Shots as they entered the reflection.

Expectably, many members of the group were completely uninterested in being team players—but since their classmates understood their quirks, they knew how to exploit and incorporate their unique traits and make it part of their own magecraft.

The classmates fought over leadership without sabotaging each other's approaches, consequently dealing significant damage to Thia.

The situation clearly looked like a nightmare or some kind of joke, but in reality, they were very close to the worst match-up Thia could have.

He had the means to resist a one-on-one battle against a Servant.

It's a proven fact that he managed to hold out against Enkidu for some time, even if he was forced to use his trump card.

But in a situation with this much jumbled and complicated information, it becomes impossible to fully parse the flow of magical energy.

Flat could...

He remembered Flat Escardos and removed that thought from his head.

Thia wasn't clueless.

He knew that Flat's superior instincts and sensibilities made him better than himself at handling this situation, since Thia reacted to magecraft using thorough observation and calculations.

But he wouldn't cry over spilled milk.

Thia knew he wasn't in his element, so he exploded one of the "satellites" orbiting him, prepared to get hit in the process.

One of his objectives was to blow apart the magical energy constructions around him.

Because bullets of concentrated magical energy would just ricochet on the "sliding wheels" and "mirrors", he compiled complex magecraft into a special "mist" covering him in every direction.

This magecraft was lower on the power scale due to being compiled instantly, but its primary objective was being a smokescreen.

Thia spread the mist wider, hiding his figure and magical energy as he rose higher.

Flight magecraft is an advanced art comparable to magic.

It's normally something reserved to high-level mages inside the land they administer, but Thia could do it by operating multiple forms of magecraft with his transcendental magical energy control. That said, he couldn't reach the speeds of rule-breaking flight magecraft like Touko Travel or what he reached when Enkidu's cannon fire propelled him to the stratosphere.

Still, he didn't need that much speed.

It was easy to overwhelm them by shooting magecraft from the sky beyond their reach.

That was the winning plan Thia crafted while heading to the sky.

"...Mm?"

He felt a powerful gaze coming from the ground below and stared back.

The next moment—an impact ran from the ground to the sky, cutting off his mist and nothing else.

"Ah!"

Thia looked below in search of clues for how they were are able to pinpoint his exact location and how they were able to conjure magecraft strong enough to blow away his mist without any noticeable build up.

What he found was an alumnus transferred to Astromancy, Mary Lil Fargo; and the son of a first-class lecturer, Fezgram vor Sembren.

Mary, who can foretell his position by seeing the picture through the stars' perspective with a divination-based application of Astromancy, was pointing directly at him.

"Her observations can get that accurate...?"

She couldn't possibly have heard Thia's mumbled, but Mary spoke on the ground below like she had guessed what he meant.

"Obviously not, I only guessed your general location. So I asked him to clear the mist off of the entire area."

Fezgram responded next to her with a bitter smile.

"Though I can't do anything better than just clearing this little mist."

Like his father, his usage of magecraft uncreatively followed the textbooks to the letter. He used it to systematically make Mystic Codes float in a 30 m^2 area.

While manipulating countless Mystic Codes with the precision of a calculator in his magical energy control, the student who chose to explore the route of taking the by-the-books approach to ground-breaking levels spoke.

For the Sembren family, which specialized through generations in magecraft that delivered shockwaves, his Magic Circuits were an improvement over his father's, but his output had a peculiar quirk.

He was great at controlling countless instances of small-scale magecraft in parallel, but poor at pouring magical energy for one gigantic impact—until he, too, found his answer at the El-Melloi Classroom.

Fezgram's magecraft operated countless Mystic Codes simultaneously, cleverly overlaying tiny shockwaves together to ultimately generate overwhelming force at the target area from any direction of his choice.

Each individual impact he generated made virtually no difference on its own, but their raw energy amplified as they synergized and resonated with each other.

A phenomenon very similar to how in the seas, the impact of waves builds up on other waves to ultimately form a giant wave.

This does more than simply build up power: it slips past Thia's eyes by controlling countless magical energy currents too tiny for him to easily detect—And by converging all the shockwaves at the area Mary pointed to, he creates a dispersive energy that instantly clears away the fog.

"Well, not that I ever expected my magecraft to damage your barrier..."

The moment Fezgram said that, Thia felt his body restrained by shockwaves from every direction.

"...!"

Those shockwaves were not administered by Fezgram's magecraft.

They belonged to someone else, and operated like a naturally occurring power rather than as magecraft.

That much was already clear to Thia before Fezgram's next words reached his years.

"All it needed to do was let her lay eyes on you."

On cue, a voice filled with out-of-place cheer reverberated.

"Uh-huh! It's at these maybe-desperate-maybe-lavish times that it's important to remind everyone present that I'm a major character of the El-Melloi Classroom AND the teacher's mistress! The money and time I spent refining this can be paid out with everyone's grateful loyalty and Prof's body!"

Away from the group, Yvette L. Lehrman waved to Thia with exaggerated movements.

Ignoring the crowd of students telling her to shut up, the girl messed around, without ever letting Thia out of her sight.

She no longer had her usual eyepatch, its spot instead was occupied by a dense gold light.

Mystic Eyes of Compulsion.

They're Mystic Eyes that force specific actions on the stared individuals, and are one of the best techniques available to restrain someone's movement.

The bright light concealed her right eye socket, making it impossible to tell if her eye was an artificial one she personally polished from jewels or one she purchased on a Rail Zeppelin auction or some other supplier.

The Lehrman clan's artificial Mystic Eye manufacturing technique was so reliable that it was impossible to tell them apart looking only at their activated abilities.

But whether the eye was natural or artificial didn't matter now.

"If the power you used were the Mystic Eye of Distortion, you'd have ended me..."

As Thia had kept the threat of Yvette's Mystic Eyes in mind this whole time, he calmly mobilized the magical energy within him, altering his skin and the air around to have the same properties are as an anti-ocular Mystic Code—the Mystic Eye Killers.

"Mystic Eyes of Compulsion are extensions of Magic Circuits and a spell formula. You could catch Flat with them, but did you really think they'd work on me?"

Speed and ability to bruteforce solutions were Thia's elements, not Flat's.

Angry at how the wing missing from the pair kept returning to his attention, Thia rotated a satellite posthaste in order to shake off the thoughts.

He wanted to silence all the El-Melloi Classroom students below him, including Yvette, but it'd too dangerous to use the show of force that vaporized half of the North Pole.

If he used a pure destructive spell with high attack power, a few of the mages there would be able to decisively counter it.

But... playing reactively is even more dangerous.

Toosaka Rin was an Average One with a mechanism to respond to any spell in his repertoire, and Werner's Papilio Magia was another major problem.

What am I supposed to do, then?

Thia acknowledged that in his heart of hearts, he already knew the answer.

Looks like we really are one and the same... I can't separate my heart from Flat Escardos.

His magecraft of choice of Chaos Magick, what Flat did best.

It's a modern magecraft that tries to pick out the best from major systems all over the world, but its foundations are remarkably fragile, and normally cursed by its instability into not being able to enact great power.

But Flat's genius intuition allowed him to pull off building a specialized foundation and application from scratch, exclusively to the phenomenon he wanted to enact, circumventing all issues through bogus magecraft even he was unable to replicate. That was the reason why he was feared and called The Unwanted Blessing.

However—Thia worked differently.

He had memorized all foundations and applications that Flat had previously constructed, and his calculations were capable of reaching results similar enough to what Flat would arrived at intuitively.

And so, Thia tried to use the full scope of his ability to create chaos difficult to counter due to being impossible to comprehend.

While he was being freed from the grip of the Mystic Eye of Compulsion, Thia began charging one of the satellites orbiting him with magecraft simple but loaded with several different attributes.

He limited the range of his activated magecraft to the wasteland below him, where the ranks of the El-Melloi Classroom were distributed, and used the range restriction to increase its attack power.

Those who Flat called friends would be crushed by Flat's power.

There's no point saying this to someone who is already dead... but sorry, Flat. I'm about to kill you in the truest sense.

It would all end when he is released from the Mystic Eye and able to move again.

At that moment, his original spell A Clockwork Abaddon would settle his battle against Flat's life.

Thia was prepared to end it all—

But for one second, he was consumed by indecision and repentance.

That was ultimately fatal.

"...Mm?"

Thia noticed an incongruence.

Yvette should logically be aware that the effects of her Mystic Eye of Compulsion were being dispelled.

However, she continued to glare at Thia with a daring smile.

Scared of what might happen, Thia launched the still incomplete "satellite". And when he did—

His world was engulfed in intense light.

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Half of the El-Melloi Classroom members were startled by the flash of light occupying their sight.

The few who understood what she did stared at Yvette with a face of "I didn't think you actually would".

What happened?

The event couldn't be simpler to verbally describe.

Yvette L. Lehrman shot an eye beam.

Nothing more.

There would have been nothing unusual about the scene if she were using offensive magecraft like her Mystic Eye of Blaze.

What made it abnormal was its inexplicable size and force. The immense power of the beam could probably melt a large tank or a jumbo jet in an instant, and on top of that, the strike still carried the Mystic Eye's original function of compulsion.

Even among the El-Melloi Classroom, few could readily accept the abnormality of the heaven-piercing beam that the lady in a pink gothic lolita dress fired from her eye.

"Girl... I know you said you'd do it, but really...? Are you insane?", Rin said to Yvette, flabbergasted.

Yvette stared at Rin after hearing the pot call the cattle black.

"What sane person would ever agree to come to this place? Ahahahaha! Nothing like a good laughter in times of pain! God, it hurts!"

The ashes of her right eye oozed out of its socket along with smoke and blood.

While Yvette wiped away the cinders of an eye so charred that it was impossible to tell if it was originally a real eyeball or an artificial Mystic Eye gem, she provided a proper answer to the question in many of her classmates' heads.

"You people know how our teacher is. He can't see anything without analyzing it and pestering us to try it."

That was enough of an explanation for all the classmates. They returned their gazes to the sky.

Lord El-Melloi II had a bad habit of analyzing magecraft on sight and passing it down for the student with the most adequate magecraft system to use, when he wasn't registering patents within the world of magecraft. Caules's Primeval Battery was an example of that.

This "it's your fault for not patenting it" attitude was a major cause for his epithet of Plundering Duke and the moral principle that let him convey the magecraft Yvette just used.

Luvia, familiar with what happened in a case a few years ago, named what this magecraft was based on.

"Preposterous... I cannot believe you genuinely pulled off the Mystic Eye Projector with your own eye..."

"Oops, stop there! Time out! No unlicensed namedrops allowed! It's just a parody! A silly little thing that bears no genuine resemblance to the Mystic Eye Projector! Are we clear? Nice, then this conversation is over! Back off! The last thing a Lehrman can afford is bad blood with Mystic Eye auctioneers!"

The Mystic Eye Projector was a piece of equipment of the Rail Zeppelin, a major Dead Apostle-operated Mystic Eye-collecting railway train involved in a past case with Lord El-Melloi II, his private pupil, Yvette, and Caules.

It is a secret art that consumes one of their stored Mystic Eyes as a bullet, rendering its internal Magic Circuits and Crest-like functions permanently unusable to explosively amplify the power of the Eye while also releasing a torrent of magical energy.

—There is no way we can do the same thing a superior Dead Apostle does. But that doesn't mean we cannot seek the same results. You just have to get to the bottom of this guiding idea of squeezing a Mystic Eye dry of its energy. The traditional Lehrman magecraft is ideal for this.

Remembering her mentor's words, Yvette tried to put on another Mystic Eye but couldn't.

"Ouch... Yeah, that's gonna stay unusable for a while..."

She put back her eyepatch, struck an idol pose, and talked to herself to pretend she was fine.

"Oh, Prof, you're definitely gonna find yourself stabbed in the back one day. Though that's rich coming from one of the fools that let you use her as your plaything!"

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Meanwhile, the floating Thia suffered considerable damage. Not only was the impact of the energy torrent tremendous, but it also cancelled the Chaos Magick he was preparing.

Thia himself was unharmed, but the Chaos Magick, on the other hand, took a direct hit from the Mystic Eye of Compulsion's hex of "don't move", reducing it to a plain cannonball

loaded with powerful energy.

He was lucky he had made progress in deploying his Mystic Eye Killer defenses. Had he taken the hit unprepared, he would have been unable to move for a few days, and worst-case scenario, his life functions could have stopped.

But I still can move. The magical energy I poured hasn't scattered. If I reconstruct the spell fast enough...

Thia's thought was interrupted by the sky suddenly getting darker.

"!?"

A giant serpent arrived to devour the land.

It was the huge venomous snake that attacked the Neo Ishtar Temple not long ago and was ultimately transformed into Ishtar's hammer.

"The Hydra...!?"

"Huhu, huhuhu. You're finally vulnerable."

One mage mounted the giant snake.

"Can't blame you for getting distracted. Yvette's eccentric like that."

It was a Roland Berzinsky—a snake charmer producing countless pseudo-snakes of magical energy from his feet to semi-fuse himself with the Hydra.

In the history of the lineage specialized in reptiles, the only one as compatible as this remarkable figure was the Silver Lizard—his absconding relative Rottweil Berzinsky.

His Hydra was just conceptual vestiges. All Roland's magecraft was doing was manifesting the tangled vestiges dropped from Ishtar's hammer.

The colossal serpent had already lost its deadly venom when exposed to Ishtar's divine aura, and furthermore, it had already become an empty husk by this point.

But it was still perfectly capable of swallowing Thia's small frame whole and slamming him to the ground before crumbling away.

"It really is anything goes with you guys... Enough!"

It took less than an instant for Thia to understand all that happened, and understanding it made him scream.

The emotions he believed to have suppressed lay bare.

He was also aware of his own abnormality.

Agh, I can't do anything right. Not against them. Look at how much they throw off my rhythm, my mind, and my determination.

The biggest obstacles to him weren't Enkidu or the Heroic Spirits fighting in the western sky.

The people he was confronting right now were a greater challenge than the powerful Heroic Spirits.

Sure of that, Thia tried to fire a "satellite" loaded with magical energy at the serpent. To blow everything away while his emotions were still heated.

But—the combat plan of the El-Melloi Classroom remained firm.

A simple back-and-forth engineered not to give Thia a chance to use any advanced magecraft, constantly stopping him at step 1.

"Pallida mors."

A muffled voice reverberated from an unknown direction.

Their next move was visible inside the serpent's open mouth.

"Ah!"

A shadow leaped out of the Hydra's jaws and charged at Thia like a cannonball.

"Enough?"

A hand with sharp claws and covered in sturdy fur split the "satellite" in front of Thia.

"Here's what the moron would have said about it."

The loaded energy readily dispersed and intensely expanded.

Amidst the flash of light, Thia's arms were grabbed. By a beautiful beast.

"He'd say... 'Rich coming from the guy who almost blew up Hollywood'!"

A giant biped wolf, resembling the mythical werewolf.

But he hadn't actually turned into a werebeast.

The apex of Beastly Magecraft was to make all watchers see an illusory beast by wearing magical energy so dense it becomes invisible—a state a group of mages refers to as Phantom Wolf Form.

And then Thia yelled.

As if to let loose what's been penting up inside him ever since he lost his other half.

"I knew you'd be here...!"

He screamed the name of the young genius whose talents matched Flat Escardos. The man who used to be called one of the "Twin Jewels of the El-Melloi Classroom".

"SVIN GLASCHEIT...!"

With their arms immobilized, Thia and Svin fell toward the ground alongside the Hydra's head.

But Thia wasn't afraid of the fall.

He had already experienced midair combat in his skirmish against Enkidu.

"Stop this tantrum... and listen to us!"

During their fall, Svin tightened his grip on Thia's arms.

"You can't pretend to be a serious guy after being together with the moron your entire life!"

His raw grip was enough to easily pulverize the bones of human arms and rip the hands off.

But Thia's body was already semi-fractured and forcibly stitched together into a humanoid shape with magical energy from the get-go.

Because there was magical energy compressing the parts into place, how solid he was depended on the amount of energy there.

He could remain hard enough to resist Svin's immense strength for as long as he still had the magical energy to spare.

Thia assessed this situation and calmly began formulating a spell—

But his body was thrown in the air while he wasn't expecting it.

"Kh... Huh...!?"

Another sharp attack hit his back while he was already in a precarious situation.

He took a look at the new shadow above his head—it was a second Svin clad in his Phantom Wolf appearance.

He had shredded the "satellite" before to camouflage the flow of magical energy from Thia.

In this window of opportunity, he controlled the magical energy clone he had previously left inside the jaws of the Hydra and took it out.

Furthermore, detecting its magical energy lead to others.

"You're still making more...", mumbled Thia upon watching the flow of magical energy while using magecraft to slow down his fall.

The Hydra was twisting its body like a spiral as it fell.

Countless Svin copies rose from its back. The pack of Phantom Wolves jumped off the falling Hydra, surrounding Thia in every direction.

"Hurry up, Svin. I can't keep this up much longer."

Roland, the pilot of the crumbling Hydra, asked with words, and Svin answered with actions.

The Phantom Wolves all stopped breathing at the same time—

and disappeared.

At their speed, human eyes couldn't even catch their afterimages.

His movement would still be outdone by a Servant specialized in speed, but wouldn't even allow a regular mage an opportunity to react. The flickering glimpses of his image became blades shining in the Snowfield skies.

In response, Thia accelerated the orbit of numerous "satellites" around him to see if they could repel the Phantom Wolves faster than human reflexes.

He shot the face of one of them, the one Phantom Wolf who rushed in for a frontal attack. And when he did—

The chest of the beheaded werewolf burst open, and a new arm grow out of the hole.

Hiding himself inside one of his own clones was a simple but effective trick.

The claws of the Phantom Wolf dug into Thia's throat by complete surprise.

Thia considered the possibility that the thrust to his throat could snap his neck and hardened it to the best of his magical reinforcement's ability—but as if they were waiting for this moment,

the high-speed Phantom Wolf afterimages around him vanished all at once.

From there, the countless wheels that were hidden behind the werewolves come to view.

Crap...

The whole El-Melloi Classroom opened fire, violently shooting down Thia and Svin.

Thia crashed on softened ground. Svin stood up and looked at the boy still collapsed on the floor.

"You and Flat both look at magical energy too much."

But Svin also looked heavily damaged. He had been knocked out of his Phantom Wolf state and spoke to the crumbling Thia in his human form.

"So, no matter what, you would reflexively try to follow the energy trajectory of my movements that normal people can't even see. Annoyingly enough, Flat would have had some random idea to get himself out of this situation... but you're predictable. You smell like simple honesty. A straightforward and amiable smell, shrank and hidden under layers."

His reason to drop these apparent words of advice was that he needed to buy time to recover his magical energy and heal his wounds.

Perfectly aware of that, Thia still looked at Svin astonished.

"You're out of your mind...", he said.

"What do you mean?"

"You could have used a clone to hold me down at the end... Why would the real you need to get hit by the crew's back-up fire while falling with me...?"

"Using a clone would be begging for you to hack it. I'd rather not get attacked by a double-crossing copy of myself, thank you.", Svin spoke matter-of-factly.

Thia looked at the sky like nothing mattered anymore.

"You were the most difficult opponent among all the El-Melloi Classroom members here."

"Yeah?"

With a shrug, Svin sat next to the collapsed Thia.

"Can you already get up on your own?"

"Reconstructing flesh takes time.", answered Thia, assessing the state of his body in detail.

He was using magical energy to force himself to heal, but unlike the time he was shot with guns, this time the curse of compulsion from Yvette's Mystic Eye Projector lingered, making it impossible for him to heal instantly.

"This is your chance to finish me off and save mankind from a threat.", Thia casually said.

"Sorry, not interested.", Svin replied. "I'm only here to slug some morons inconveniencing my teacher."

"Are you including me in this?"

"Obviously."

"I can only think of one person who would have known about me... but he wouldn't blabber about it. How did you find out?", Thia indifferently asked the question on his mind.

Thia knew who every student here was.

But all he knew was information seen through Flat's eyes. He had never appeared even once. The only one with a chance of having figured out his existence was a red-haired superhuman who participated in what was essentially a Magic Circuit-sharing experiment. But even then, Thia didn't have any clarifying conversation with the red-haired superhuman, and more importantly, Thia hadn't detected him anywhere in the city.

Svin replied to the confused Thia.

"The sharper guys suspected it way faster than I did. I figured it out from your smell. You felt like an extreme danger mixed within his smell... That's why I advised him to destroy you."

"Hold on... You're talking about when you first met Flat..."

"But, for all that you smelled dangerous, you also smelled neatly put together. That smell

intensified whenever Flat talked about himself like it was someone else."

"..."

"At first I assumed he had split personalities or a persona intentionally created with magecraft... but that didn't seem to be it. That's why I didn't trust you at first... neither of you, actually. You were clearly a bomb in a gift box, and if you weren't, you were still made of trouble... But the Professor knowingly accepted you as you were. In that case, I'd look bad if I didn't follow his example."

"Are you telling me Lord El-Melloi II was also aware of me...?"

Thia's voice was faintly mixed with emotion.
Noticing this minor change, seemingly combining shock and resignation, Svin continued.

"That confirmed it to me. As long as you're still around, we still haven't lost our stupid Flat... And the Professor probably also considers you a student."

"... Right... There's no way that teacher wouldn't have noticed..."

Thia stopped the "satellite" he was secretly charging with magical energy to strike back and watched the clouds, exhausted.

"You could destroy me so easily right now."

"I already told you I'm not interested. Do you want me to destroy you?"

"I..."

Right when Thia was about to answer, he saw a streak of light cross the sky.

"...?"

It only lasted an instant.
An extremely dense mass of magical energy flew westward toward the cumulonimbus,

tearing the sky apart in speeds not comparable to light but still far quicker than sound.

Delayed shockwaves traversed the sky and earth, pushing back against the winds of the hurricane.

Thia assumed this was also the El-Melloi Classroom's doing... but the students were also staring at it aghast.

"What's wrong...?"

Thia, capable of seeing the flow of magical energy, took a second look at the abnormality.

He didn't feel any energy vestiges in the golden light's trail.

Something was operating that dense magical energy with the precision not to waste a speck.

That unidentified individual was trying to join the battle between myths unfolding west of them.

"Is that who I think it is...?"

Thia remembered a Heroic Spirit but wasn't too sure. In his memories, the Heroic Spirit he thought about had powerful divinity.

But, despite its impressively powerful magical energy, when looked at the light currently soaring through the sky—

He couldn't feel an ounce of the divine aura Ishtar, Alcides, and Rider were clad on.

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Within the hurricane clouds

This battle was unlike any other.

It was a clash between two humans in appearance only. The power of nature colliding against human will in a scene right out of an epic tale.

In the storm, the Amazon horsewoman tried to open a new path to her fate.

The arrows from her bow cut the winds, rode the lightning, and pierced the rain.

Then, she swung her giant battleaxe on the path they opened.

All of that proved her strength and determination.

Blessed by her father Ares and by Artemis to whom she was given as a priestess.

Her experience leading the tribe as a queen and her pure study of martial arts.
Furthermore, the maximum back-up she could have received from her Masters.
She poured all that she was given and all that she built up into defeating Alcides.
Her Noble Phantasm: one battleaxe strike.
Her steed's hooves touch the floor at the same time as she swings down, with her enemy visible a few dozen meters ahead.

And now, a long straight wound was carved in Alcides's body.
The strike was capable of erasing part of the hurricane, not to bisect his body.
Nonetheless, Hippolyte certainly wounded the body she had believed to be invincible.
Hippolyte kept the pressure going.
She sought to keep this offensive momentum, but her arm stopped.
Her polished warrior instincts noticed something:
Someone appeared where they were—someone concealing immense power.

The same happened for Alcides. Instead of looking at Hippolyte, the one who put a huge wound on his body, he looked east.

"What's this...?"

Cold sweat ran down Hippolyte's back.
An unidentified presence was squeezing through the cloudy galestorm and getting inside the cumulonimbus.
It was a presence she knew she felt before.
But with one fundamental difference.
And before she could try to figure out what was it that wasn't like before—

Time stopped completely inside the clouds.

Hundreds of thousands of lightning flashes covered the cumulonimbus in white darkness.
It took one instant for the all the flashes to completely disappear, and the clouds to become a wall of darkness blocking the sun's light. At the top of the hurricane cloud, the sky was isolated from the central area serving as the eye of the whirlwind, locking the space around Alcides and Hippolyte in perfect dark.

This can't have been Alcides. But who else other than Zeus could have instantly pacified so much thunderbolt?

Hippolyte had many questions.

And the answer came in the form of a sound in the darkness.

The beautiful tone of a string instrument.

A singular sound, not part of any melody.

A purifying sound that clears the air. A timbre that presumably didn't belong in a battlefield.

"Was that... a lyre... or a harp?"

As soon as the trailing note reminiscent of an ancient instrument faded, something stabbed the ground on an area distant from Alcides and Hippolyte.

It shone golden light, purifying the floor like it was filtering muddy waters.

"A sword...?"

To answer Hippolyte's whisper, the sound reverberated a second time.

The sound practically had an attractive force that guided the listener's attention to the sky.

She couldn't tell how conscious Alcides was, but his face covered in Nemean leather was also looking at the sky.

Eventually, a small star gained life in the sky accompanying the echoing sounds—

And contrary to the sounds that reached the skies, the light fell to the floor.

It crashed in a different place from the previous sword. A spear clad in magical radiance that made one mistake it for gold.

One more echo, accompanied by another weapon descending to the floor.

As the process repeated, the interval between sounds grew shorter—eventually performing a melody.

Understanding what that meant, Hippolyte glared at the sky with a tight grip on her weapon.

She watched the moment one of the stars gained form in the pitch-black sky.

Far above her head, at the top of the closed cumulonimbus dome, shone a ring of countless lights.

"Gh...!"

Hippolyte and Alcides already knew what that meant.

They could tell that the light was not a guidepost to hope, but rather a despair-bringing radiance of judgment, because they had seen it in the northern canyons.

Seconds later, the starry sky came down.

The glimmer of death poured down within the hurricane clouds like a waterfall of light.

Hippolyte's bow rapid-fired arrows, offsetting the lights raining in her direction.

Alcides also swatted away the lights raining directly on him by swinging his heavy bow.

The meteor shower eventually came to an end, with plentiful crops of faint golden light spread around the two.

Whereas instead of wheat, it were the numerous armaments fallen from the sky that were planted there.

"Just what I thought it was...", Hippolyte groaned.

A feat from a Heroic Spirit she believed to be dead.

She couldn't imagine another Heroic Spirit in the same Holy Grail War would also be able to employ such ludicrous amounts of objects.

However, previously, the fired Noble Phantasms would immediately vanish to be continuously fired. This time, they remained stabbed on the floor, continuing to emit their brightness.

Numerous armaments disorderly pierced the ground, but it was evident that each of them carried qualities worthy of the Noble Phantasm qualification.

The visible roster included not only swords, axes, and spears, but also books, wands, and rings.

"Mm?"

They behaved similarly, but were not the same.

Disturbed by the uncanny discrepancy, Hippolyte got to hear the string instrument once more.

A singular sound, not part of any melody.

In the direction of the sound, she found a mini golden lyre rotating midair—and a short

shadow floating next to it.

The trees broken by the galestorm piled up together when she wasn't looking, and a young boy sat on them.

"Hi."

A voice as clear as the lyre.

A Heroic Spirit with a voice matching his apparent age glanced at the horsewoman and the avenger.

Despite the completely different age, his face resembled the first loser of the Holy Grail War.

But he was different from that bowman.

Fundamentally different from that arrogant king.

As soon as Hippolyte reached that conclusion, the floating lyre sounded on its own, without anyone's fingers dragging its strings.

"Does this count as our first meeting?", the boy quietly mused in sync with sound of the lyre.

"My utmost respect goes to you, magnanimous heroes.", the boy stood up and courteously bowed.

His gesture had no traces of snideness or unctuousness. There were tangible implications that his respect was sincere.

From the moment he lowered his head, it was already proven he was not the archer.

After Hippolyte was convinced, the boy calmly raised his head.

And then, he said the following to the two figures in his eyes, with the same respect as before.

"To prove it..."

Next, every one of Noble Phantasms planted all over the floor unleashed their energy.

Their shine gave a new color to the cumulonimbus previously colored by the lightning.

"I bring you the end of times."

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A few minutes earlier, Crystal Hill, top floor

"Is that true? Is he really awake?", Tine Chelc asked her suited subordinate on their way down the rooftop stairs.

The man was not her closest confidant. Her usual secretary and driver was currently on a mission to communicate with Rider's Master group.

But every subordinate was like family to Tine, and she regarded them all equally regardless of rank.

The ones who actually share her blood and the ones who wandered into the organization were all equal parts of the same magical faction and the same commune. One cooperative society rooted in one leyline.

One of the members came to call Tine while she was in the rooftop watching what was happening in the western sky.

According to him, Archer woke up and called for his Master.

"Me and the doggo will keep watch of the western sky. Since Archer is awake, I want you to go first and let him know we're not enemies.", said Doris Lusendra.

While Doris (one of Rider's Masters) and the silver wolf (Lancer's Master) stayed in the rooftop, Tine went to her suite, trying to control her racing heart.

There was only one Command Spell left on her right hand.

But she could indubitably feel her Heroic Spirit's presence through it.

If anything, it'd be reasonable to say his magical energy felt more active than it was when she sealed the contract.

But...

Something was weird.

Everything was overflowing, yet something was lacking.

Nonetheless, her heart was full of expectation.

She believed her desperation gambit brought her king back when he was falling into the underworld.

Therefore, she interpreted this powerful contradiction as the pulse connecting her to her Servant, and pushed open the suite's door with enthusiasm.

"Your Majesty! You're awa—"

Her words stopped partway.

"Hi, Master."

This greeting incompatible with her image of him confounded her very soul.

The figure by her suite's window looked nothing like the Archer she knew.

He was shorter and his face looked more youthful.

He seemed too young to be like the heroes in the picture books, but too grown up to be a child in need of protection.

His new form was perhaps comparable to an insect freshly hatched out of the chrysalis—taken from a moment he was equipped with all the experiences of larva and the pupa, but still had nothing added or subtracted to his completed body.

Judging by the quality of his magical energy and her subordinates' accounts, she speculated this Heroic Spirit was Archer revived from near-death.

But even after seeing him with her own eyes, Tine still wasn't certain that the one in the room was one and the same with her Servant: the Hero King Gilgamesh.

She was consumed by the sensation that she was next to "something" completely different from the king she knew.

Who? Who is this person... This Heroic Spirit...?

She couldn't feel anything resembling hostility.

On the contrary, boundless relief recurred in Tine's heart.

The girl never believed in the idea of a hero destined to defeat the big bad, but she couldn't escape the feeling that if such an adventure protagonist existed, that's what he looked like.

Her fantasy was tremendously out-of-place in the middle of the Holy Grail War, much less at a critical stage that would determine whether or not the city would survive. But Tine, as well as her every subordinate there, felt same thing:

They were in the presence of a hero.

Or rather, they were in the presence of the living definition of heroism.

Even his immature appearance concealed a hope for further growth. His looks suggested the gods were arguing that the image of perfection lie in incompleteness.

However—in contrast to his perfected looks, every smidgen of divinity was wiped off of his energy.

The overflowing divine aura from the moment of their contract was no more. The magical energy that symbolically pierced through the ages of man and gods was lost, giving room to signs

of humanity refined to its highest purity.

Its qualities didn't match her own magical energy, which employed the land's leylines.

The best way to describe the sheer purity of his "humanity" is imagining that a baby was born with abundant magical energy and grew up without ever letting the world corrode him in any way.

The Archer that Tine once knew carried so much willpower that he instinctively compelled her to kneel, while the boy she saw made her whole body burst with deep aspiration to be like him.

Tine couldn't contain the relief in her mind—trust him and everything will go well.

Nonetheless...

That was all the more reason for Tine to feel unfamiliar. She didn't take another step.

What am I anxious for? I know we're in the middle of an emergency, but am I really supposed to simply ignore this sensation?

Fighting off her first impressions, Tine focused first on fixing her breathing rhythm.

She noticed she was breathing excessively, almost hyperventilating.

The king I know...

After long enough, she, covered in cold sweat, finally directed words at the "something" standing still in her room.

"Who... are you?"

The simplest question.

The picturesque Heroic Spirit answered Tine's question with a pleasant smile—like a comforting breeze running across the green land.

"I'm a Servant."

"..."

"A Ghost Liner under a contract to Master Tine Chelc."

A direct answer.

But Tine couldn't bring herself to accept it. There was no word she could profer.

After seeing her non-reaction, the boy-king resembling a white and gold flower continued.

"I came loaded with all the information about you."

"Came... loaded...?"

"Seems like the Hero King considered your every word and accomplishment after meeting him in the northern canyons something worth storing."

The Hero King. Him.

Seeing the boy-king treat the king as someone else, Tine grew more cautious, but still took the risk with a strongly worded question.

"One more time! Who are you? If you're not the Hero King, I'll need your name, if you please!"

Words with cold dignity beneath her age.

Tine knew better than anyone that this was camouflage hiding her uneasiness, and she expected the Heroic Spirit to have seen through it. Regardless, the boy-king didn't really change his expression. He answered with the same affable smile as last time.

"My name is the same as his, Master. But... Calling me by the name of the Archer Saint Graph would be inaccurate. The Class that represents my Saint Graph is, hmm... Well, I'd be the only one of my kind in this particular course of history, but here's a name you can use."

After letting his eyes drift into the distant sky, the boy-king announced the name of the container locking his Saint Graph.

"Alterego, the class of the distilled fragments."

Chapter 32

“Fake Journey, Unreal Gold”

Chapter 32: Fake Journey, Unreal Gold

Crystal Hill, highest floor, suite

"Alter... ego?"

With the Heroic Spirit saying a Class name she never heard of before, Tiné had no immediate idea of what to do next or how to respond.

The boy calling himself Alterego gently extended his hand to Tiné in her moment of confusion.

"Your actions were correct. You didn't make a single mistake."

He had a beautiful flask on the palm of his hand.
The half-empty flask was the Elixir of Rejuvenation that the Hero King once gifted to Tiné.
Tiné took it without thinking.

"And you were lucky. You gambled and won.", the Heroic Spirit declared.

The young Heroic Spirit closed his eyes and continued his monologue.

"The Elixir of Rejuvenation you received from the Hero King is an elixir that dials back the concept of time recorded in the body. If he had drunk the whole bottle, I'd be fully returned to a child state. I'd have enough wisdom but not enough firepower to confront those clumps of violence."

A hurricane cloud dressed in lightning was visible west from their room.
The boy-king had his eyes on the limit-broken Saint Graphs at its center.

"Had I woken up with my previous Saint Graph, you would have been punished for your deeds. The Sage King might have been lenient enough to brush off the humiliation of having a royal present returned to him, but the Hero King certainly wouldn't."

"...You are not going to punish me?"

The boy-king mentioned something Tiné considered before.

Considering Archer bore the facet of a stern king, he probably wouldn't stand for the idea of being saved by the medicine he gifted away. Tiné was ready to be killed then and there if that's what it took to bring his Archer Saint Graph back.

But the nearby boy-king showed no signs of condemning her.

This was further proof that the Heroic Spirit with her was fundamentally different from the Hero King, but Tiné couldn't ask further questions because she refused to acknowledge this fact.

"I won't do anything illogical. I'm not like the Hero King.", the boy-king flashed a calm and reassuring smile. "I'm here to grant your wish and fulfill my mission."

Tiné almost began to trust his expression and his magical energy's embrace.

But she still hadn't crossed the line.

Alarm bells rang nonstop in Tiné's head when she smelled something burning.

And then she looked around.

She found her subordinates kneeling in respect.

But—

They're shaking...?

Their faces couldn't be seen since they faced the floor, but she could feel them leaking the traces of fear they desperately tried to hide.

"Why are... you all so...?"

And then Tiné noticed one more thing:

The number of subordinates waiting in her room was lower than usual.

Tiné wanted to ask what happened.

But when she was about to, another subordinate entered the room.

"Representative! Are you hurt?"

It was a man served Tiné's tribe since before she was born.

He seemed to have just arrived from outside, as he didn't show signs of fear.

"No, I'm... fine."

Tiné did her best to feign stability on her answer—
But she could see it.
A small mirror floated behind the man. She didn't know when it got there.

"Hm?"

Rather than a modern portable mirror, this mirror was something more mystical, like Japan's arcane bronze mirrors.
Despite Tiné's confusion, the subordinate continued.

"Thank goodness! It'd be over for me if you had died, but with you alive, I can relay your movements to curry favor with Faldeus!"

"Hm...?"

This time, Tiné's confusion was about the man's words rather than the mirror.
What he was saying was so out of left field that she couldn't connect the words to their meaning.

"What was that...? You were selling me... to Faldeus...?"

"My clan never accepted the Chelc's monopoly on the magecraft of the landkeepers. Therefore, generations ago, before this city was built, my clan struck a deal with Faldeus. If all goes right, we get to manage the land fused with the Greater Grail... My clan... wait, no, that's not, that's not true! Yes, it is! No, stupid, what am I, not true, true, I, I, I, I, I, aaaaaaaarwarwrawaaah."

He realized what he was saying.
The truthful words spilled from the sides of the mask, and then the man desperately clattered his hands trying to contain his own mouth.

"That's the prototype of the mirror that expose true intentions. The Hero King never used anything like it, did he?", said the boy-king allegedly in the Alterego Saint Graph.

Fate/strange Fake 9

"True intentions...?"

The moment Tiné parsed the words that left the boy-king's mouth, she succumbed to despair.

Light shone at the feet of the man with his hand in his mouth, then giant "jaws" formed a blazing column coming out of the ground, which engulfed the body of the man fighting against fear.

At the same pace, the jaws of flame withdrew to the light halo on the floor, leaving the room only with a faint smell of charred meat.

Tiné had felt this smell before.

She collected her thoughts, flabbergasted.

It was the same smell she felt during her attempt to steal masterhood of Gilgamesh—
when she personally burned a mage to death.

"And that was the eighth."

Eighth.

That number answered multiple questions in Tiné's head.

Why did her room have fewer people than usual?

Why was everyone lowering their heads in fear?

"There's still two people pending a decision... What will I do about them is up to your discretion."

"Pending...?", she managed to let her voice out, if barely.

"Two of them didn't willingly betray you but they're brainwashed by the enemy's Domination Magecraft. I want you to decide before I get back here whether to do the same to them or to release them from the brainwashing.", the young Alterego answered.

"Before you... get back?"

"Yeah, I'll go suppress that hurricane in the west before it reaches here."

The boy-king called Alterego flashed his usual smile that comforted everyone who saw it, the same he had at their first meeting, and headed straight to the window.

"Forgive me for not being able to say it'll be a quick victory… It's an avenger bending a divine beast to his will and a warrior priestess in the middle of the process of channeling her god. Both are Saint Graphs I have to take seriously."

When the boy-king approached the frame of the window still not repaired, the wooden board temporarily replacing its glass panes suddenly burst in white flame, returning to nothing in a matter of seconds.

"When I'm back, I'll fix this with glass."

"…"

"Please be careful, Master. I can't bring you with me because the Heroic Spirits in there are too dangerous."

Then, he joined his hands in front of his chest like for a prayer, and bowed his head to Tiné's still trembling subordinates.

"Please take good care of my Master… of Tiné."

His words were filled with pure good will, no malice or sarcasm, and his looks were that of a hero about to save them from certain death.

But Tiné's subordinates knew the truth.

Which is to say, the truth was forced into their eyes these past few minutes.

He was willing to help as much as he possibly could, in the sense that there was not one grain of emotion or mercy to dilute his pure will to help.

His request was an immaculate wish—not an order or command, only a wish and nothing more—and if anyone didn't comply, he'd deem their existence unnecessary with this same angelic smile and delete them on the spot.

Now that the facts were laid bare to them, they could only agree with it in full.

The boy-king took Vimana out of his treasury, boarded it alone, and vanished toward the western sky.

Tiné, left behind, fell to her knees.

Fate/strange Fake 9

Noticing the smell of charred meat still in her nasal fossae, her tears came out.

She couldn't let her subordinates see her like this.

This contrasting thought prevented her from lifting her head. She continuously suppressed the scream fighting to leave her throat.

Endlessly, indefinitely.

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Present time, Snowfield's urban area

While Bazdilot and the police forces were busy with their tumultuous conflict, only Ishtar's head priestess and the former hero of Uruk's lands noticed him pass by.

"What was that...? Whose presence is this?"

Haruri, embracing Huwawa's body to defend it, turned her eyes to the western sky.

Enkidu answered her question, peeking at the western sky from the gaps between the buildings.

"That's a human being."

"A human? No, that's too voluminous and dense of a..."

While Haruri's eyes carried disbelief, Enkidu's carried only loneliness.

"The King of Uruk in a pure human state after Ishtar stole all the divinity from his Saint Graph. In my simulations of a distilled king... that was one outcome I predicted would never happen. At least not as long as I was here.", they added.

With a hand on their chest, Enkidu closed their eyes to grief the fact that this possibility existed.

"A king who never met me and parted ways with the gods more decisively. Upon completing his solo journey, the hero completely removed the blood of the gods from his body, becoming

'gold' single-handedly devoted to perfecting humanity... A system to push humanity to the status of god."

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Snowfield Central Hospital

"Oh? What is this device? ...Gah."

Saber shrieked upon being sprayed with germicide gas from all directions because of a button he pressed.

"Decontaminant... I see, a mechanism that cleanses impurities... the sources of disease. What an amazing era. How is this not magecraft?"

While providing his impressions on the machine, Richard returned to the front entrance of the hospital next to him.

"I made it. So far so good... but it'd be inappropriate to enter in armor."

Immediately upon sneaking in from the rooftop, he began searching for a sector with minimal human presence for him to let Ayaka lie down.

Ayaka's tired breathing showed no signs of worsening, so it could stabilize at any moment.

Upon putting her on a bed, the bowman covered in bandages looked at Richard like he had something to say.

"...Yeah, I know.", Saber answered, paying attention to someone in the room next door.

It was a familiar presence, but startlingly weakened.

Saber couldn't feel any malice or hostility. The figure was just there, doing nothing.

"First the Berserker that guarded the temple and now this. Do all Heroic Spirits shrink with enough time? I'd rather not become a child again."

While Saber worried about problems that wouldn't happen, the normal clothes he wore

while parading around town with Ayaka dropped next to him.

The clothes he received from a band member that sympathized with him.

"You were carrying that? Well, thanks."

Replacing his armor for the clothes with magical energy manipulation, Saber took a better look at the hallways.

While he checked outside, a small boy in pajamas ran in his direction with loud footsteps.

The child looked at Saber, subtly puzzled, but kept up his speed to pass him by.

"Hey."

Saber's call stopped the child.

"Uh... what's up, mister? You don't look like a doctor."

The boy showed signs of fear and stood positioned to run away. However—

"What business do you have with the girl in the next room, bloodsucker?"

"..."

The child froze and turned his head to him, revealing a twisted smile.

"Huh, I don't remember even showing this form to you, mister?"

"I've been involved with a few of your kind when I was alive, so... you're quite weakened, aren't you? You can't mask your presence perfectly anymore, if you haven't noticed."

"... Mr. Saber, did you know I have no interest in antagonizing you right now?"

"Get a better lie. You chose this form to walk the hallways because you wanted to check how we were doing. If you meant what you said, you would have avoided me and torn apart the floor or the ceiling to get in there."

"I checked and concluded that I don't want to poke that hornet's nest. Or would you rather get into a pointless brawl and let some collateral damage fall on your Master sleeping over there?", the boy spoke with a wicked smile.

"Good point, then I'll pass.", said Saber.

The boy looked somewhat let down by Saber's nonchalant answer, but decided not to try his luck, and instead proceeded to the neighboring room without a word.

When he touched the door, Saber spoke once more.

"Oh... Do you need a hand?"

The boy squinted at Saber, thinking no one would trust such an offer.

"Hm? What are you getting at? We're past the point you'd have anything to gain from playing nice with me."

"Oh, I wasn't asking you.", Saber clarified, casually waving his hand. "I said to my alliance partner."

"No way—"

The boy didn't have the chance to say what he thought of.

A massive wave of hair flooded from the gaps of the door, wrapping the boy's limbs.

"No need...", the Heroic Spirit manipulating the flood of hair—the Assassin with no name—answered Saber's question. "This hellspawn is mine to hunt."

Words filled with palpable determination to kill.

Hearing that, the boy simultaneously squirmed and laughed ecstatically.

"Aha... Ahahaha! Are you kidding me? Why are you here? How? I know my magical energy supply is cut off, but by all means, I should have detected your presence!"

The boy was in a good mood, but his smile only lasted until he heard the next voice coming

from the room.

"You're in my ward. A Bounded Field that hides us Executors and the targeted believers from vampires."

"YOU...!"

"But I wasn't expecting it to erase even a Heroic Spirit's presence. I have to admit the technicians of the Holy Church deserve great praise."

Assassin spoke directly from behind his back.

Further inside the room was the eyepatched priest of the Holy Church—Hansa Cervantes, the overseer of this Holy Grail War.

Meanwhile, on the four corners of the hallway, nuns in Executor vestments came out of the shadows, stationed slightly apart from each other, using Mystic Codes to deploy a Boundary.

Not an offensive measure, but one to prevent the hematophage's escape.

The boy—Jester Karture—ignored the nuns and directed his speech to his dearest Servant.

"Hahaha! Why are you here? I was so sure you'd be helping out Sigma or something."

"I know your ways... I imagined you'd try to harm Tsubaki only to make me suffer."

"Wow! Perfect answer! Francesca asked me to decide whose side I wanted to take and so I tried... but the unsurprising conclusion was that you're the only one for me, pretty Assassin lady! That was my reason for wanting to give you a scar that would never fade... but I don't care anymore! You read me perfectly and spent so long waiting for me! You're my soulmate, miss! We finally understand each other!"

"I also thought you'd do this. So nice that we understand each other. Wanna go for some coffee? My treat.", a shrugging Hansa invited the excited boy.

The boy responded by instantly changing his body, yelling hatefully as he transformed into his default adult form.

"Silence, scum! What are you doing here? My alluring Assassin is a heretic to your religion!

What do you think will happen if the higher ups of the Holy Church find out you're performing the works of an Executor in collusion with her?"

"Huh? What are you on about?"

"...What?"

"I'm only here to secure Rider's Master, lying on this bed, because I heard she expressed her will to retire from the Holy Grail War. It's my overseer job. It takes a real freak to go out of his way to hurt a Master who lost her will to fight, you know? Anyone would condemn that, regardless of religion or profession."

After grinding his teeth at Hansa's revoltingly blasé attitude, Jester tried to say something. Before he could, Assassin's hair moved and slammed him vigorously on the hallway.

The loud impact shook the whole hospital.

Her hair wrapped around Jester's face with intent to not let him speak one more word.

But—certain that his mouth had a grin when last seen, Assassin felt a foreboding chill.

And her bad feeling proved true.

The finger that Jester tried to raise touched the floor, and at the same time, the Command Spell stamped on his flank flashed.

Then, blood spilled out of the hair cuts on the finger. The crawling blood wrote words.

Fatal words to defile Assassin's soul.

By my Command Spell, I order

Kill Kuruoka Tsubaki in her sickroom immediately

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Less than an hour earlier, in the Snowfield Police Department

"Heading out, brother?"

"He's an opponent who needs to be faced with everything we have.", Orlando answered his Servant Caster, aka Alexandre Dumas père, full of tranquil fury in his eyes.

His rage was not directed at Caster—but rather at Bazdilot Cordelion, who manipulated his subordinates, making them into spies.

And most of all, at himself for not noticing any of it.

"I'll try not to die, but I can't make any promises. If I perish, Caster, you won't be able to remain manifested. Do what you can to dispel the magecraft cast on John's group while you're still here."

"Believe it or not, removing scum from soup is one of my specialties. You can bet on me.", Dumas shrugged. After a moment of silence, he added with an uncomfortable expression: "My bad. I should've noticed it when I used my Noble Phantasm to do an editing pass on John."

"You couldn't... You're not a real mage, after all. Bazdilot's domination spell would be still within your reach if that was the whole problem... but I suspect the old coot's illusions played a part in concealing it."

As far as I know, Bazdilot Cordelion's Domination Magecraft is specific to use on himself... Wait, is that how he dominated and distorted the quality of his magical energy to be more easily perceived as me...? Or was Francesca really that willing to help him?

"As far as Lil' Miss Francesca is concerned, this must be nothing more than a little favor granted because it sounded fun. Big chance Faldeus knew about it, too. If anything, he's the side more likely to have traded information with Bazdilot at the earliest stages.", Dumas speculated, seemingly figuring out what Orlando was getting at.

Despite being part of the same mastermind faction, Faldeus and Orlando had zero trust in each other.

If anything, his biggest fear all along was that Faldeus would choose to discard the city at the first opportunity.

"I left Faldeus's matters in the hands of that mercenary codenamed Sigma. We'll also have to trust our allies from the El-Melloi Classroom to handle Bazdilot's Servant... the hurricane cloud."

Next, taking his weapon—a katana Dumas converted into a Noble Phantasm—in hand, the

chief announced his role.

"Then I, too, must oppose devastation."

If Bazdilot and his Servant obtain the Grail, the destruction wouldn't stop at Snowfield City. It'd extend all over the United States of America.

From the angle of concealing magecraft, anything can be written off as a disaster or terrorism.

But this kind of solution benefits only the world of magecraft. It's not trying to save the victims. He couldn't afford to lead Bazdilot to the Greater Grail's location, in naive hopes that Faldeus and Bazdilot would fight to a convenient tie.

"But, damn, the commander is charging to the front lines... That's one sign that the whole Grail imbroglio went terminal if I've ever seen one."

The chief responded to Dumas' joke by closing his eyes apologetically.

"That's where destiny takes the one who lectured you so self-importantly about never walking into the front lines. Laugh to your heart's content at the pathetic comedy of my life."

"Not happening... You ain't funny, man.", Dumas sighed between two sentences.

"True... I suppose I was rude to every comedy actor in the world. I should have known my place there.", Orlando showed an awkward smile.

"Get serious, brother. You're right that when a hero is going out to risk his life for a bunch of strangers, we gotta see him off with a smile. But you're not supposed to laugh at him."

The dramaturge spread his arms hysterically and monologued like an actor on the stage.

"You know what facing death is about, brother? It's the most epic form of spectacle, yet at the same time, pure despair! It's a well of mud you'd be hard-pressed to find anything pretty under! ...And that's what makes one thing painfully obvious to anyone who sees it. They all know what to call a dumbass shouldering burdens they got no need to carry and threading on way past the point where their heart should've crumbled to dust, with their eyes and feet always pointing forward."

Countless sheets of paper rose from nowhere and danced in the air, while a variety of floating utensils, from the plume to the fountain pen, began writing on them automatically.

"If you people were just suicidal, I'd just say hi to the Grim Reaper, point him to the job you want done, sit back, and chill... but your guys were the opposite. You're out to overturn death. And not even your own. You're out to overturn the deaths of the masses... Total strangers, if you permit me the word. See what I'm getting at?"

And then, the flying pages in the rotating pile of written story gained speed, drawn in by the vortex of the police chief's katana, where they plastered themselves to the sheet and faded into light.

"What did you do?"

The light lasted no time, but Orlando could tell his katana was a higher-ranked Mystic Code than it was before.

"I'm done laying your trinket's groundwork. Didn't take much, considering the quality level it had from the get-go. My work on this one was less like embellishing and more like repairing... The last step, brother, is you proving to your Noble Phantasm that you're worthy of it..."

"...You have my gratitude. The rest of it is our job. Here's where I'd tell you to take a well-earned rest where no one can see you, but that's not..."

Dumas stopped the chief's pained words with his hands and grinned.

"Forgot already, brother? Fixing shoddy scripts is what I do best."

With that said, Dumas deliberately fixed his lapel and courteously bowed to the empty space with all the elegance of a nobleman.

"A final message before this city is sunk in tyranny and despair."

"Caster?"

His words carried sincere reverence, contrary to Dumas's usual "respect no one" attitude.

"The treacherousness of General Faldeus's artifices is undebatable, but I'd like to point out that a script filled with Priestess Prelati's indulgences is about as sinister. While I may be just a hired hand, it is within my duty as a writer to raise an objection to the plot's future developments. The script you two wrote is not adequate for this stage..."

Dumas theatrical lines were delivered cold up until this point, but here he raised his voice exaggeratedly to make a declaration to the absent Faldeus and Francesca, or to the world.

"May God forgive the unworthy Alexandre for taking the pen to rewrite this tragedy! Fear not, Honorable Sir General and Madam Priestess. You have my word that the narrative I'm about to create will be more coherent and intelligent than the conclusion you envisioned!"

After a second bow to the void, Dumas quietly turned his head to the chief, revealing the smile of a prankster child.

"...And that's the drill. I'm just gonna do whatever I feel like. Chill out, brother. You may not believe it, but I'm super grateful for you never restricting my extravagances with a Command Spell."

"I still need to keep one in case I need to order you to kill yourself."

"Wouldn't've seen it coming. Guess I shouldn't've mentioned it."

His cackling was interrupted by a knock to the office's door.
Numerous policemen opened the door—The Clan Calatin was here.
That meant they were ready to move out.
With that confirmed, Dumas pat his Master's shoulders.

"Bye, Master. If you make out of this alive, quit the mage trade. You ain't cut for it."

"Unfortunately, I don't know any other way to live."

"Just become a writer, then. All you gotta do is put this 'only way you know how to live' to paper. Can't promise ya it'll sell, but knowin' the responsible man you are, you gotta have enough money saved already."

"...I'll consider it."

Walking with an awkward smile, Orlando stopped again by the chief's office's exit door.
Long story short—
The next thing he said marked the last sentences exchanged between a Master and a Servant.
Both of them figured that'd be the case.
They weren't looking at each other's faces.
But they didn't need to.
Inexplicably enough, they knew the expression in the other's face.
As if they were true brothers who spent years together.

"Your pheasant was perfect. The best thing I ate in my entire life."

"Don't go settlin' for so little, brother."



Fate/strange Fake 9

Caster sent off his Master with arguably vainglorious words.

"Come back alive, y'hear me? Then I'll treat ya to somethin' much better."

Orlando answered with an awkward smile hidden behind his back.

And then he walked away.
As a Master stepping into the Holy Grail War.
And as the leader of the police.

To overturn the conclusion that awaited Snowfield City after being entangled with various embodiments of death.

Bazdilot Cordelion, the Greater Grail underground, and the bombing order coming from his own superiors.

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Present time, Snowfield's urban area

The booms and flashes from the main avenue reached the back alley.
In the factory that Bazdilot used as his downtown base, François Prelati spoke to a collapsed material storeroom.

"Hey, are you alive? Well, we're connected by Command Spell, so I already know you're still alive."

The material storeroom reacted by trembling and spreading its debris, until Francesca crawled from deep inside it.

"Aha, he got me good..."

Her body was full of iron pipe stabbings and scrap metals cuts. Anyone who saw her like that would be able to tell that she wouldn't survive that unless she went to the hospital immediately.

If that hypothetical onlooker assumes she was normal, that is.

"Guess I'll have to swap bodies again soon.", Francesca mumbled, twirling a pipe she had just removed from her body.

Doing so, her wounds faded away like they were never there to begin with.

"Fooling your own wounds with illusions? Do you seriously think that'll work? Like, maybe I could, but you, from this minimally arcane era? You're pushing things too hard."

"It's fiiiiine. It works as anesthesia and hemostasis, if nothing else☆"

"Do you want me to fool them properly? I could restore your stamina and magical energy, and even give you the same power I had at my prime.", François asked his Master self, seductively lifting her chin.

But Francesca shook her head, unaffected by his mean-spirited smile.

"Nope. You'd set me full of traps to hijack me."

"Ahaha! I know myself too well. I really thought I had a shot now that you were pushing yourself so hard!"

"Giving my existence to you and getting you fully incarnate sounds fun, but it'll have to wait a bit."

Francesca, smiling hedonistically despite her debilitated body, gazed at her own feet.

"We're soon getting to the big moments. On many different fronts!"

Next, she raised her hands, monologuing loudly to the heavens above her.

"I've read the pamphlet enough times and ate all of my popcorn! Now, I only watch! And enjoy! Everything happening in this town! Everything! And then, after ascertaining everyone's finales..."

Francesca voiced her desires with a plethora of emotions charged in her delivery, so much

so that she failed to notice François losing his smile upon seeing her like this.

"And if we're lucky enough, I wanna nab a Holy Grail. Lesser Grail, Greater Grail, at this point, I'd be OK with either☆"

Snowfield, underground

The room had no human presence when Sigma arrived.

In terms of non-human presence, it was filled to the brim with what once was human emotion and hatred.

"Watch out, lad. The magical energy here's twisted into a mess. Watcher's eyes won't be of any help."

Hearing the shadow of the old captain, Sigma gulped and looked at the the objective.

It was like reddened-black magma.

A huge natural cavern that existed under Snowfield before the city's construction.

These holy grounds deemed as taboo by Tiné Chelc's tribe are a major Spirit Font in the path of a giant dragonvein, and were being used as the platform of the Greater Grail.

Early-modern steel beams formed a circular bridge on the outer walls of the cavern, allowing one to see the vessel of the Greater Grail from any angle.

"Can... this really be called a Holy Grail?"

Sigma had seen the vortex of reddened-black mud before.

It closely resembled the mud-like magical energy worn by Bazdilot Cordelion. He could guess he was looking at a never-ending spring of that sinister energy.

It swirled violently at a natural depression—likely the most concentrated point of the dragonvein—looking less like a cup and more like a pit of hell.

"At the very least, it doesn't look like a properly functioning wish-granter."

The silhouette of the boy with the caduceus stared at the Holy Grail with disgust.

Next came a sad gaze, and then words.

"Same material as the mud that defiled Alcides... If he gets defeated right now, you might be screwed."

"How so?"

"He's currently bending vast amounts of divinity to his will. If this vortex sucks up more divinity than what Heroic Spirit summons are normally able to produce... That'd be sure to grow closer to a real Holy Grail... It could grant a wish to shatter the planet, or it could destructively grant a wish to save it."

Seeing how serious the silhouette was got Sigma thinking.

"Prelati might be planning to deceive this Grail with his Noble Phantasm..."

"I'm not sure his Noble Phantasm can pull off neutralizing all this evil."

"That's not what I meant. Isn't Prelati waiting for the moment the divinity transfers to the Lesser Grail so he can steal only the divinity?"

The Lesser Grail.

The temporary pool for the Saint Graph energy of the defeated Heroic Spirits.

In this Fake Holy Grail War, this role is fulfilled by a homunculus named Fillia. She was possessed by Ishtar and caused a commotion, but now that Ishtar descended to the underworld, he figures Fillia should have regained her Lesser Grail role.

"Fillia... Is the homunculus dead?"

"I don't think she still has a mind of her own. It actually should take absorbing the Saint Graphs of a few more Servants before she was nonfunctional as a human being, but I guess she pushed her limits a bit."

Watcher's shadows told that a few El-Melloi students were safeguarding her, but Francesca and her Servant were still in the surface above.

"If Hippolyte or Alcides are out of the competition, doesn't matter which, their magical

energy filled with divinity will flow into Fillia. There's a pretty good chance an illusion boosted by all this divinity can pretend the Holy Grail is a normal wish granter."

With this mystery solved, Sigma had no time to waste.

"Either way, I need to find a way to destroy this Greater Grail... Is the mud going to flood to the surface if I make any mistakes...?"

"If the Lesser Grail is already complete, yes. You might be still at the point where only this underground would be contaminated."

"It's hard to believe Faldeus' organization wasn't considering the risk. I'm guessing Special Operation [Abyss rise] is a method to erase the city by exploding this Greater Grail. Looking at it from the other angle, I believe they have a method to safely dispose of the Greater Grail."

His answer was met with applause.

Noticing it, Sigma turned back, finding Faldeus, a woman who seemed to be his secretary, and a few armed soldiers, most of them carrying assault rifles.

"Brilliant deduction, Sigma. Sounded like you were talking to yourself from here, but were having a telepathic talk with your Heroic Spirit... Lancer Charlie Chaplin?"

"Faldeus..."

"Oh, by the way, you don't fret over that Lesser Grail. Francesca simply procured a decommissioned homunculus, put it under powerful hypnosis, and forcibly rebooted it. Regardless of what happened, it could last 10 days at best.", Faldeus coldly elaborated, shaking his head with a bitter smile. "In my surveillance, when I saw her visiting shopping centers and casinos, I had no idea what was going on... becoming the vessel to a god is not a guess I'd have made. That's one thing I'll need to watch out for next time."

After saying this much, Faldeus narrowed his eyes, giving Sigma a heartless glare.

"Still... I didn't predict you biting back the hand that fed you. I thought of you as a pretty loyal dog.", Faldeus spewed freezing emotion in his voice.

"Trusting a dog brought by Francesca? Are you out of your mind?", Sigma replied, not particularly angered at being called a dog.

"Ok, you bring up an excellent point... I genuinely can't argue against that..."

Faldeus watched Sigma, slightly surprised.

"But that's a shocker. Were you always witty like that?"

And then he opened his eyes wide, like he found the solution to a puzzle.

"Was it true all along? Charlie Chaplin changed you?"

"Maybe.", Sigma answer, ready to act immediately.

The greatest threat wasn't Faldeus's magecraft.
It were the guns of the guard squad behind him.
Sigma spoke to keep them in check.

"I still have my Heroic Spirit and I know that your Assassin died. I don't want to engage in any needless hostility. Dismantle the Grail."

"After everything is over, I will... But looking at how things are west of here, I find it hard to believe it'll all wrap up neatly. Most pressingly, it's already determined that this city needs to be cleansed. I won't let you interrupt the process."

"Are you going to fight a Servant with magecraft?"

"I mean, your Heroic Spirit is the Comedy King. In that case, I believe stand a chance in a magecraft battle."

Once Faldeus raised his hand, his armed subordinates retreated to hallway.

My bluff worked?

It was most likely that he dismissed his subordinates because he knows guns don't work against Servants, but since it was also possible he did it to catch Sigma by surprise later, he remained alert.

The biggest threat there was Faldeus's magecraft, but—

"Where are your dolls? The puppet manipulator is not going to fight with his own fists, is he?", Sigma taunted.

"You're looking at it.", Faldeus smiled daringly.

"What?"

"Finally, information that you didn't know."

Faldeus ran his fingers through the air like he was playing an invisible piano.

This caused piano keys made of magical energy to float in the air—beginning to loudly shake the room.

"...!?"

"The most reliable puppet... has to be placed at the most important location. Obvious, no?"

The circle of steel beams around the Greater Grail began to wriggle one by one like they had minds of their own, and the floor under Sigma slithered like the back of a serpent.

In a spur of the moment decision, Sigma jumped to the Greater Grail's side. The next thing he saw was—

the giant monster-shaped objet d'art manipulated by the dollmaker Faldeus.

A mannequin of a multi-headed snake, eerily reminiscent of the fearsome Hydra.

This confrontation was practically making an enemy out of the whole underground space containing the Greater Grail. Sigma was now also facing a life-or-death threat to the same extent as the other Master and Servants were.

"..."

The face of the Assassin girl flashed in Sigma's head.
That's the kind of situation she went up against all the time, both in life and now.
Certain of it, Sigma readied his weapon, aimed at the puppeteer Faldeus controlling the doll from higher ground.

"You're really up for the fight...? For what purpose? Did the Clock Tower pay you to double-cross us or anything?"

Faldeus's doubts made him remember Assassin's face one more time—
and he declared with a smile so natural that it caught even himself off-guard.

"Comfortable sleep and warm meals..."

"Huh?", Faldeus was dumbfounded. Sigma kept going.
Recording the rest of his wish in his heart.
By saving Tsubaki... I'll finally allow myself to have that.

"That's my faith."

× ×

West Snowfield

Tangibly immense magical energy flowed from the West.
Sensing it increase from two sources to three, Thia slowly sat up and spoke to the nearby students of the El-Melloi Classroom.

"...You're still not going to flee?"

Next to him, Svin answered without hesitation.

"Where could we even flee to?"

Looking him in the eye, Thia stood up—and called the bespectacled mage further away.

"... Can you win this, Caules?"

Caules Forvedge was suddenly thrown into the conversation.
After a moment of surprise, he understood why he was specifically named and held a strained laugh.

"It's already activated, for whatever it's worth. Though it's only half-charged, I'm thinking due to that gold whatever-it-was snatching power."

Hearing that, Thia inspected the swirls of magical energy underground.
A vast source presumed to be centered at the Greater Grail.
But now, a similar quantity filled up in parallel with it.

"I kept saying that we're not prepared yet to properly control magical energy in this is scale... but you could do it, no, Thia Escardos?"

Toosaka Rin's words were unfaltering.
She said nothing about Thia being an ally or an enemy, only stated the fact that he could do it.
He couldn't imagine what artifices she'd employ to manipulate him into complying if he said no.
She was the very image of an arrogant mage without the slightest will to give up her goal.

"You people are really ridiculous... For all you say about Flat, you're not any better."

Thia smiled out of exasperation at the mavericks of the El-Melloi Classroom.
Reminding himself of the feelings he constantly held while trapped in Flat Escardos's body.

"Crazy of you to turn Snowfield's underground into a primeval battery."

Their goal in digging their underground tunnels was more than the simple movement routes.
Since the moment they started remodelling the underground, the process had magecraft significance.

Thia didn't know what they were planning to use all the energy they've built up for, but he agreed with the need to stake everything in this major task.

Thia recomposed himself and engaged them as only a negotiation partner.

"What's my reward here? I could always retreat to a land unrelated to the Holy Grail War... If I put everything on the line, can I gain something of equal value?"

Werner answered him.

"But of course. One of our objectives is obtaining what we'll offer you... that which you consider 'everything'."

"Mm?"

"A while ago... I did a task requested by the glorious Lord El-Melloi II."

Werner stepped aside, revealing a police car running through the wasteland in their direction.

"What's that?"

A public vehicle, awfully out-of-place in the area wasted by the Hydra.

"The last piece necessary to provide you with your reward."

With difficulty, the police car managed to cross the bumpy and swampy grounds, parking next to the El-Melloi Classroom students.

The doors opened before the confused Thia—and multiple figures appear from inside.

"What are we doing here, Vera?"
"Are we going to ask them to back up the chief?"
"We have to hurry, or the chief will be in danger!"

Vera Levitt was the first to leave the car. Next, three officers, including John Wingard, left and raised objections.

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After the doubtful trio, the last person in the car peeked his head out of the back seat. Upon seeing him, Thia stiffened his expression.

"Yo, Thia Escardos, was it...? Remember me? We met some days ago."

A legendary writer stepped on the ravaged grounds.
Alexandre Dumas Père greeted the "ingredient" before him with open arms.

"Rejoice. I chose you to be a main character. Whether it's of a comedy or tragedy... will depend on how the actors perform."

× ×

In a dream

Kuruoka Tsubaki awoke from her slumber.
She noticed the door to her cylindrical cage had been left open.

"...?"

On a closer look, the scenery was considerably different from what it was before.
The pitch-black environment was replaced by the city where she first met Mr. Black.
Where were Mr. Black and the person it was talking to by the bonfire?
Tsubaki restlessly looked around and found a small horse-like shadow by her feet.
The horse tugged the hem of Tsubaki's clothes multiple times, signaling that it wanted her to follow it.

"Mr. Black? You've gotten so little."

Utterly confused, Tsubaki followed the shadow horse through the uninhabited city.
It led her to a tall, white building—
and then to the elevator left open.

Tsubaki found someone in the elevator.
Like the person by the bonfire, her figure was blurry.

She first thought she saw a child her own age wearing a red hood, but later that image became indistinct and turned into the back of a woman Tsubaki would consider an adult.

Tsubaki timidly asked woman facing away a question.

"Who're you, miss?"

"Huh?"

The woman turned to Tsubaki, caught off-guard by someone's presence.

"You... can see me? You're talking to me... What?"

The woman hurriedly tried to wipe her perplexed face with her sleeve. Her eyes were red and wet, suggesting she was crying until this encounter.



"Are you okay?"

"Oh... Yeah. Sorry, I've just kinda shocked after seeing too much."

"I'm Kuruoka Tsubaki."

The woman in the darkness managed to answer despite her unrest.

"I'm... Ayaka..."

Then, to calm down the concerned Tsubaki, the woman named Ayaka put a smile on her face before continuing.

"The Red Riding Hood, not Little anymore."

× ×

Within the cumulonimbus

Faced against two heroes, Alcides and Hippolyte, the boy-king logically and indifferently attempted to fulfill his purposes.

"You've come out of your throne to stand in warrior grounds... golden king?"

Hippolyte's words were followed up by Alcides.
They could vaguely feel him smirking.

"Interesting..."

"Ah!"

He still has a conscious mind...? Wait, did the golden king's new form bring back his sanity?

Hippolyte, lost in the joy from the fact that Alcides's Saint Graph still had the light of intellect, completely failed to realize how much her own presence had been an influencing factor in this.

Alcides directed his words at the boy-king, not her.

"So you have also discarded your divinity and joined the side of the usurpers..."

"I'm no thief."

With a hopeless smile, the boy-king silently placed his hand on the ground.

"When humanity reaches perfection, they'll inevitably reach the grounds they stand on."

In response to his action, the lyre floating behind him shined with magical energy and began playing its song.

"I'm merely the one who permits it, wishes for it... and accompanies their journey."

With a melody equal parts beautiful and violent, the interior of the hurricane cloud is filled with the inner light present in a specific kind of miniature of the world—

They were alive.

The prototypes of numerous Noble Phantasm scattered within the cumulonimbus, with the boy Servant at its epicenter, and began moving as a living colony, assembling themselves together.

What once were swords
What once were bows
What once were spears
What once were hidden daggers
What once were shields
What once were rings
What once were shackles
What once were books
What once were poisons
What once were medicines
What once were laws

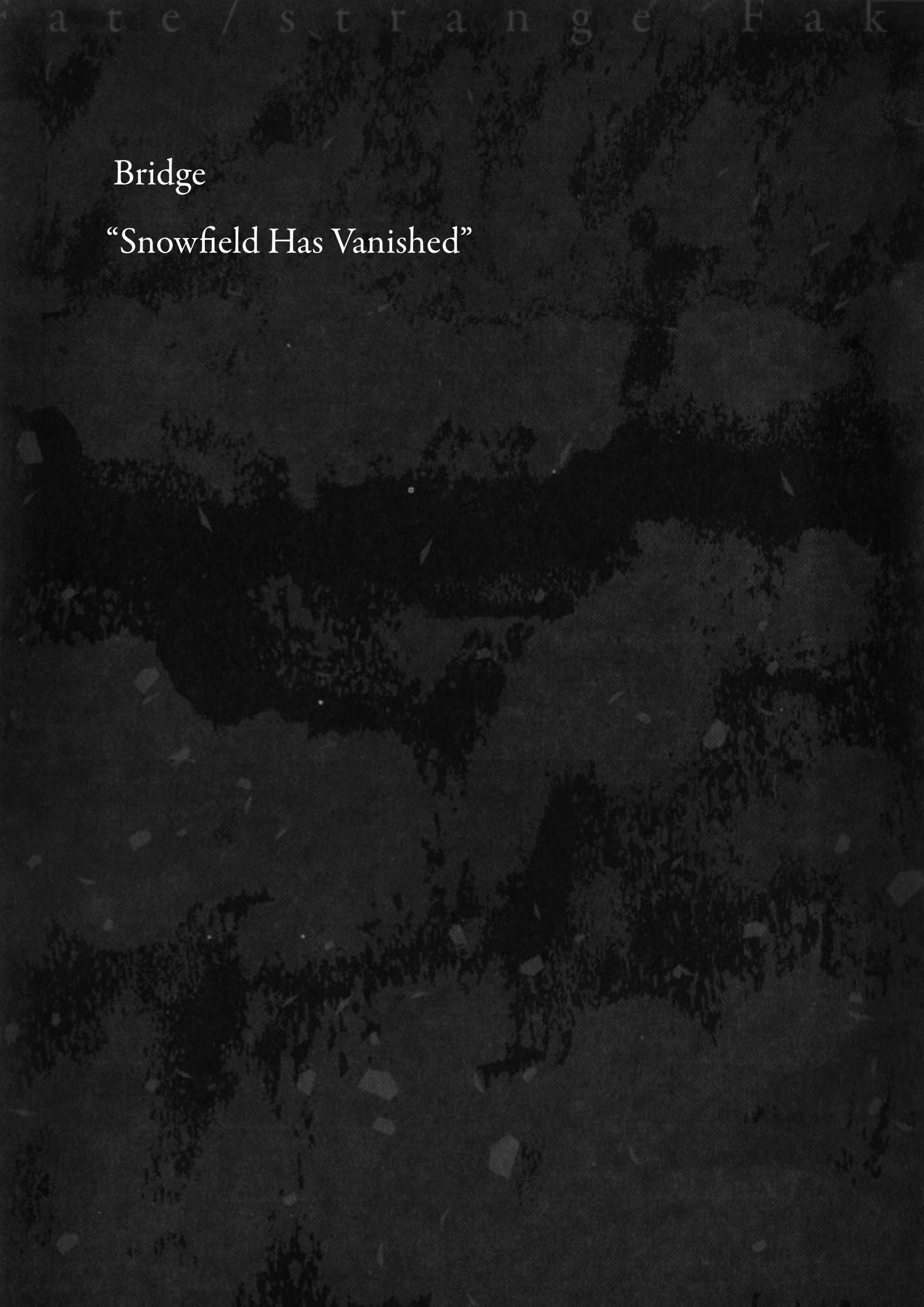
What once were triumphs

An endless number of prototypes gathered together and regressed into a singular form.
Gigantic.
Although compressed, the might of nature remained in the form of a hurricane.
A pair of "hands" grew from the interstices between heaven and earth, stretching fast in attempt to burst this hurricane's embodier from the inside.

Those hands were the things most distant from Gilgamesh the hero—
The things many offered as tribute to Gilgamesh the king born in the interstice between humanity and divinity—
The things that guided the citizens of Uruk directly to the future.

A great prayer.
With the gesture of grasping something and holding it close to the heart—
The cluster of Noble Phantasm commenced its raid against the Greek heroes.

Or against the land of Snowfield and its very Fake Holy Grail War.



Bridge

"Snowfield Has Vanished"

Bridge: Snowfield Has Vanished

One day, one moment—
Snowfield City was gone from the face of Earth.

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A lodge in the American mountains

A luxurious lodge in a natural Bounded Field deep within the mountains.

At its center there was a conference room where the Snowfield Holy Grail War backers paced nervously.

The personnel responsible for deciding on Operation [Aurora fall]—the deletion of everything in Snowfield area via the strike of a special warhead—continued to be thrown off by the real-time information feed.

"Hurricane Inanna shrank and stationed itself in a point 20km away from Snowfield."

"Okay... We're expecting it to vanish when we remove Snowfield's Greater Grail, but stay vigilant. Release the cover stories to the all press institutions the moment it's gone. Accept some of the Holy Church's protests and demands. But do not, I repeat, do not let them interfere any more than necessary."

"We received a contact from the Clock Tower. They want us to be thorough in identification of the surviving mages."

"We were already going to be. While Faldeus is extracting the pseudo-core of the Greater Grail, it's likely to get stolen. Keep him under watch."

While many reports came from all sectors, the leaders continued to give out precise orders. Until—

"General...!"

Someone yelling the general's position without saying his name changed the tone of the room.

The general in uniform raised his eyebrow at this man, the chief of the surveillance division.

The man at the conference room's entrance straightened his posture but was still shaking.

"Snowfield... has... vanished."

"Hah? What do you mean?"

"Be more clear with your reports."

"Has surveillance gone offline?"

The people in the room demanded explanations.

If a large mage group was on the move, it was likely they could jam the observation satellites. They demanded a more detailed report to know how to respond, but—

"No, the observation devices in the satellites are operating normally… As far as we know."

After an inarticulate comment, the chief pressed buttons on the conference room's console, displaying the images from the surveillance room's monitors.

"I repeat. Snowfield has… vanished."

"What am I looking at?"

The general saw it.

All other masterminds of the Holy Grail War saw it.

The abnormality happening in real time in Snowfield.

Everyone gulped, speechless at the satellite pictures in the monitors.

This group, handpicked for their profound understanding of science and magecraft, couldn't process the abnormality they saw.

They were all frozen, incapable of describing the images until the surveillance chief moved on.

"That's not all! Hurricane Inanna vanished at the same time. No clouds can be detected."

"Come again…"

"The countdown to Code 983: [Aurora fall] is still ongoing. How to proceed?"

"Be ready for any situation… We'll decide at last second whether to carry on."

With a sour expression, the military commander managed to get the words out of his mouth.

Fate/strange Fake 9

"At this gargantuousness... Is the situation visible by the naked eye observers in Las Vegas?"

"Large-scale concealment magecraft is being employed in the surrounding cities... We put up the fabricated images meant to conceal [Aurora fall]'s execution. It's possible mages can still see through it."

"These images are classified under maximum security. If anything leaks, spread similar fake videos and get the uploader dismissed as an ill-tasted edit."

The satellite images displayed—a giant circle.

A circle so beautiful it must have been drawn with a compass. The area that contained Snowfield was cut off the map and they could see there was the blackest darkness.

And the strangest part was—

A circle of a different color at the center of the black circle.

It was impossible to determine what that was from the overhead camera, but the lateral surveillance images from an on ground camera showed it clearly.

A sphere.

A humongous sphere with kilometers in diameter floated about 150m above sea level.

The sphere rotated slowly, but without moving any millimeter away from its position.

It was like a tiny moon suddenly appeared, with an orbit that perfectly matched Earth's rotation and revolution.

The sphere seemed artificial to its onlookers.

Its base color resembled dry bricks and it was decorated with beautiful blue and gold stones in geometric shapes, resembling lapis lazuli.

Meanwhile, nothing could be observed at the pitch black surface, Snowfields urban center, residential areas, streets, industrial district—and of course, its 800 thousand inhabitants—were nowhere to be found.

The object looked like the giant egg of a god or a fiend, or an unknown planet suddenly floating over Earth.

Was this is a jar for concentrating malisons?

Or a womb about to birth something?

The organizers of this Fake Holy Grail War could do nothing but watch the eventual conclusion.

When something were to out of the sphere, that will be the end of everything.

It'll be over before anyone can figure if what was being birthed is positive or negative.

The question is whether its demise will also be the world's demise.

The answer was still unknown to all.

The threads of fate crossing Snowfield's Holy Grail War converged, heading towards the end of everything.

Afterword

Welcome back, it's Narita again!

Sorry for the long wait!

Last year, the 20th anniversary of my writing career, was a tumultuous year, full of work related to adaptations of my series and all other sorts of movement.

As FsF also approaches its conclusion, I gained more momentum and energy, and after I made a few teams drop out, I, considerably out of my mind, thought "It'd be better if all of this was happening simultaneously in the last volume instead of volume 9" and rewrote things into the current shape. I can't even call this A rewrite, it was THE rewrite. Trusting the power of my heart, I ran through volume 9, and made this "incoming climax" into the cut-off point, with every team at the opening of their final battle—Only one volume left until the curtains are closed on the Fake Holy Grail War! (No idea what the page count on the final volume will look like)

I'll do my best to deliver the best possible finale for the readers who came this far...!

Needless to say, I consulted Nasu about the transformation of you-know-which-character this volume!

Me: "That will be the twist. What is he like having lost the power of the gods and made into a pure-blooded human?"

Nasu: "An infallibly affable man, but without any of the kindness you'd expect from someone like that. If he can't find a need for a [REDACTED FOR SPOILERS], he'd blow up Kayneth's building with the most angelic smile."

Me: "What? I need to reconstruct his relationship to his Master with a personality like this!? You know what, challenge accepted!"

And that's what drove me to write the character like that. The result was well, that daunting closing scene that wasn't anywhere in the original plans!

Nasu: "I feel like the deaged character is going to add like 50 extra pages to the final volume. Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Me: "...I...Ah...CHALLENGE ACCEPTED!"

Nasu: "I'm sure feeling nothing foreboding from your display of determination. Nuh-uh... nothing you said there will help loosen your deadline (because it's the editor who determines

the deadline)... But you do you!"

Me: "Praise the good fight fought by me from after (volume 10's deadline day)."

Good times receiving this Nue-style enigmatic support from Nasu. On that subject, when Nasu said he was going to pull up a whiteboard to explain to all of us why Nue's Exorcist is so good, I thought that him doing it would make the Nue reference double as a Tsukihime reference, but that's a topic for another day.

I also had a question for Sanda. I asked: "I'm wanting one more damage dealer for the El-Melloi Classroom, and I'm thinking Yvette's Mystic Eyes can help me with that. What's the best Mystic Eye she can make at this point in time?"

Sanda: "High damage... High damage... It's not exactly a Mystic Eye, but there's the Mystic Eye... *********..."

Me: "Ah!? ...Is that allowed!? Wouldn't that get a big-name Dead Apostle on her case?"

Sanda: "But... You know how El-Melloi II is... He would analyze it during the situation and want to teach it to Yvette, consequences be damned..."

Me: "Yikes, I'm starting to see why everyone is so afraid of the Plundering Duke."

And that's how FsF is made, going with the flow and brute-forcing my way through obstacles, but always taking details seriously.

And one more thing that has been taking my attention: the anime! Yes, the anime!

The special episode Fate/strange Fake: Whispers of Dawn released in March 2023!

A fantastic spectacle with full voice acting and Sawano's soundtrack! Even I was astonished at the visual feast a serious version of the Hero King can produce...! It was so wonderful that it got me pacing and hollering and dancing on my own as I watched the video—And now they announced the TV run's production!

We'll tell you how that's going to air at a later date, but Morii and I are very involved supervisors, so look forward to further news!

Special thanks:

-Firstly to Anan, the greatest victim of my vices. And to the teams at the publisher and at IIV for adjusting my schedule accordingly.

- To the staff led by directors Sakazume and Enokido for making the perfect anime. To Miwa Kiyomune's Team Barrel Roll for the magecraft research work done for the anime.

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- To Higashide Yuuichirou, for the backstory and dialogue supervision for the El-Melloi Classroom students related to Fate/Apocrypha, majorly Caules and Org.

- To Sanda Makoto, for the same proofreading Higashide did but for the Case Files cast, for lore research, and for a lot of comments (The latest El-Melloi Adventures volume also shows Flat and his supporting cast in a very different context from FsF, so that's a must-read for Flat fans!)

- To Mashin Eiichirou, author of Himuro no Tenchi (whose timeline is closely linked together with FsF) for the heavy editing on the dialogue of those two guys appearing at the beginning this volume.

- To Morii Shizuki, for decorating the story with many beautiful illustrations despite the anime work taking all of your time (Thank you immensely for finding the writing errors that both myself and all the proofreader missed...!)

- Most importantly, to Nasu, the Type-Moon staff, and the Fate/Grand Order writer team usual full-volume proofreading!

- Lastly, to you reading this pre-climax.

Thank you so much!

I hope you stick with me until the Fake Holy Grail War's conclusion...!

January 2024, Narita Ryougo, overwhelmed by the movie Birth of Kitarō: The Mystery of GeGeGe