

◆◆ ロード・エルメロイⅡ世の冒険 ◆◆

The adventures of Lord El-Melloi Ⅱ

三田 誠

イラスト 坂本みねち

1

「神を喰らつた男」



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…1…

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Characters

The adventures of Lord El-Melloi II



From left to right:

Tohsaka Rin ~ Ergo ~ Tangere ~ Latio Crudelis Hiram ~ Gray, and Lord El-Melloi II



空中で、破片がとどまっていた。

半透明の幻手が、危険な破片をすべて阻んでいたのだ。脂汗を流しながら、砂にまみれた若者が、Ⅱ世をかばっていたのだった。

「エルゴ……！」

——第二章より

◆◆◆ The Adventures of Lord El-Melloi Ⅲ ◆◆◆

The adventures of Lord El-Melloi Ⅲ

... ↓ ...

“The God Devourer”



The adventures of
Lord El-Melloi Ⅲ





“The God Devourer”

目次 Contents

『序 章』	006
『第一 章』	022
『第二 章』	061
『幕 間』	110
『第三 章』	118
『第四 章』	164
『終 章』	216
『あとがき』	224

◆序章◆
-Prologue-



The ocean's surface glittered in the light of the sun like something precious.

It was far from the clear water you'd see at something like a resort. Even at noon, it was a blue-black color, waves swelling and bursting, writhing like snakes. Hundreds and thousands of ships came and went every day, so this was no surprise. Even though the locals had built an advanced water treatment system, sludge still snuck its way in from the old factories nearby.

To me, it felt like it was bustling with life. The area continued to thrive, not as a tourist destination, but rather as a commercial area full of various people competing with each other.

The sea had a strong smell to it, probably because of the flourishing nutrients and seaweed.

It reminded me of a delicate balance, where the two sides of the scale swung about precariously. In this context, the scales could be a metaphor for the ecosystem. The scales themselves would not be affected if the balance was disrupted, but the tiny creatures that rested on its plates could easily go extinct.

...But that was enough about the future from a pirate who didn't have one. "Oi, kid!" Came a rough voice.

Oil drums covered with grime littered the shallows behind me. The writing printed on their sides had been carefully stripped. On top of one of them sat a well-tanned young man.

As was typical of the region around the Strait of Malacca, his face was rather racially ambiguous. That was to be expected in a hub of exchange between various countries. Though its history was often tragic, the expressions on the faces of the average passerby were that of great resilience.

Indeed, as with this young man, he held a great sense of purpose and had a toned body.

His dirty polyester shirt probably used to be white, but it was now beige, and the stench of sweat came off in a pungent wave. There was a belt at his waist with a pistol and a small bottle of liquor tucked into it.

"Is something the matter?"

"Is something the matter my ass. We're about to head off. You gotta be ready to ride."

I looked to the mangrove trees swaying in the shallows beside us. Those trees were unique to the area, and could grow well even in salt water. Its lush green leaves stretched up into the sky, while its roots expanded into the sand like tentacles below them. Three motorboats had been moored to the interweaving branches.

Around a dozen people were already sitting there, and they handed me some coffee in a misshapen metal mug as I made my way over. All of them looked like the sort you would cross the street to avoid, and they carried assault rifles and submachine guns across their shoulders.

The regular person probably associated the word "pirate" with billowing sails and the Age of Discovery, but the pirates in the Strait of Malacca today were no more majestic than a ragtag band of young men with a few highly maneuverable motorboats.

One of them walked up to me and spat at my feet before grabbing me by the shoulders. My hat nearly slipped off in the process, so I rushed to put it back on before he spoke.
"You said your name's Yarg, right?"

"...Y-yes." I said, nodding as the young man narrowed his eyes.

"Are you from the Cafe?"

In this context, "Cafe" did not mean "coffee shop".

It was the codename of an underground casino on Batam Island. Gambling used to be legal here, but the laws were repealed due to security concerns a year or two ago. As a result, those who had managed to escape from the authorities opened an underground casino, which was commonly referred to as the Cafe.

The criminals gathered here all came from there.

Of course, there were pirate groups out there with fixed members. But this form of loose organization that would recruit new members whenever they needed it was very common in the modern day. They might even start hiring online soon. Or, perhaps they were already doing so, and I just was unaware.

The tanned young man before me sized me up, as if I was on sale and he was estimating my price.

In his eyes, I was a mere child, frail, less than 160cm tall, and with a dirty rag tucked in my collar. Though, he probably didn't care about my age, as the pirates here all seemed to be teenagers.

“You’re a spellcaster, right? D’you know how to do ‘enhancement’?”

“...Is that why you hired me?”

A sour blast of the smell of alcohol hit me as the young man walked even closer.
“Answer me!”

“Yes, I can do that. I inherited some of my family’s magecraft... but not a lot of it.”

“Hmph, that’s good enough. You’re some third child of the family that no one cares about anyway, aren’t you?”

“.....”

“Not answering? Eh, whatever, I’m not asking for your life story anyway.”

“Are the others all mages?”

“Don’t be stupid. I didn’t know mages can be this dumb. Of course they aren’t. We’re the only ones. I’ll be glad if we meet another one, though.” The young man said with a shrug.

Mages.

Even I knew that those fantastical people actually existed.

As they say, like attracts like. The shadowy parts of the world are often connected. Pirates were closer to mages that hid behind the veil of reality than one may think. Of course, most people involved were unaware of the existence of mages, but as the young man said, mages could find each other if they were lucky.

“...There’s someone I want to kidnap. I must get my hands on them, dead or alive.
...Hahaha, you’re not officially part of us yet, so I can’t tell you their name.”

“Huh, how important is this guy if you’re hiring a spellcaster for the job?”

“Well...”

The young man paused for a moment, as if for dramatic effect.

“They’re known as the Consultant.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. This guy appeared around here around a year ago and gathered all the local pirate gangs into a giant empire with themself as the leader. They clearly used magecraft to do it, though,” the young man said, gritting his teeth in frustration.

“They’ve located a sunken ship, and are manipulating fishermen and local kids to fish up treasure. Some of the treasure has probably been used to bribe government officials. They never show their face, but they’re famous around here. For obvious reasons, no one’s been able to catch the guy.”

I see, so this consultant person was a force to be reckoned with.

Places with an abundance of sunken ships inevitably drew in pirates, and it didn’t take much skill to dredge treasure from the ocean floor. The hard part was locating the ships and selling them for a good price.

The nickname “the Consultant” fits the situation well. I got the impression that this was not just a petty crime, but a business model embedded into the community.

“But now, opportunity strikes...an infamous Clock Tower mage just came to Singapore.” The young man said, his face suddenly twisting with disgust.

“The Clock Tower? You mean, the one in England?”

“Exactly, the Mages’ Association of damn limeys,” he spat.

The areas around Malaysia and Singapore were former British colonies. Though they had gained independence long ago and experienced significant economic growth, most of the residents still had lingering resentments.

This was true for the World of Magecraft as well.

The Clock Tower, based in London, was the most prominent branch of the Mages’ Association.

“Isn’t the Clock Tower the biggest magecraft organization in the world?”

“In terms of sheer size... sure, maybe. But in terms of the number of members, the Manor’s probably larger.”

“The Manor?”

“It’s a bit like the Clock Tower of the East, in the sense that they’re both magecraft organizations. But other than the fact that they both use Magic Circuits as a basis, they couldn’t be more different.”

I had heard that many different types of magecraft existed because of the unique history and culture of different regions of the world. For example, I knew that Curse Magecraft was a popular technique in the Middle East. Considering the population of Asia, it also made sense that there would be more people in the East than the West.

“All kinds of magecraft coexist here near the Strait of Malacca. Thought Magecraft, curses, western magecraft... you name it. But this Consultant person is clearly a western mage. In the West, the Clock Tower’s biggest principle has never changed. They think mystery should never be revealed.”

“.....”

I was silent.

I understood this to be true.

“So, basically, this guy’s being so noticeable with their magecraft that even the Clock Tower’s stepped in,” the young man said, laughing. “Probably because they’re so anxious, the Clock Tower’s network of information’s a mess. They haven’t even found the Consultant’s location yet. All the work and trouble we’ve gone through will finally pay off. We might get the chance to sell the Consultant’s whereabouts to the Clock Tower and kill two birds with one stone. What do you think? Sounds like a good deal, huh?”

The young man had an amused sneer on his face, perfectly fitting into the stereotype of a pirate.

“So, we’re gonna ambush them?”

I glanced to the side to see the rest of the pirates yawning and lazing about, probably because they had run out of coffee. Some were even napping on the rocks. It appeared that they had completely adopted this place as their home.

“What we need to do now is to find strength in numbers. If the Consultant’s not a particularly skilled mage, a surprise attack should do the trick, but I’m glad to have extra men just in case.”

“...I see.”

I understood, probably because I had nothing to do with this Consultant person. The young man was fully aware that a spy could ruin the operation before it even started, so he was quite careful.

“Oh, but. Before that, I have to ask. What’s the Clock Tower mage you mentioned earlier like?”

“.....”

This time, it was the young man’s turn to be at a loss for words.

“It’ll do you no good to ask! That man’s a devil, and he has nothing to do with our operation. Knowing too much is bad for you.”

His words were not an empty threat.

Unintentionally “sharing” too many things was like asking to be set on fire. The young man had recruited a nobody from the Cafe for this exact reason. Nothing bad would come of a one-time relationship. Even if I did well in this operation, going forward, we would still be no more than strangers.

“I’m still curious, though. This has something to do with my job, right? If you don’t want to talk about it, I’ll leave right now.”

“You...!”

For an instant, hostility flashed in his eyes. Then, he sighed and relented. “That mage is known as the Plunderer.”

“The plunderer? So, a pirate?”

“Don’t compare us to him! We pirates plunder money, treasure, maybe lives sometimes. But that guy plunders things worth more to mages than their own souls!”

He spoke as if he was describing something that truly terrified him.

Something more important to mages than their own souls... In other words, something that was destined from birth. It was what differentiated mages from spellcasters, and what mages dedicated their lives to.

“...That bastard destroys other people’s magecraft, and then takes it for himself.”

Just as he told me this, the sound of an explosion rattled my eardrums. Two of the three motorboats had been engulfed in balls of orange fire.

That wasn’t even the strangest thing. Even after such a giant explosion, the pirates around us remained asleep.

“...What?!”

The dumbfounded young man exclaimed, springing up in alarm. He reached for the gun at his belt and observed the surroundings.

“—There!”

He pulled out his pistol and fired, bullets striking sparks as they came into contact with the rocks on the beach.

Then, a tall silhouette appeared silently from the shadows of the mangroves. How was this possible!?

“What magecraft did you use to do that!”

“...Sadly, nothing impressive.” Said the silhouette.

It was a long-haired man who might have been some kind of European. He was around thirty years old, his face remarkable if only for his intense expression of distaste. His outfit, which consisted of a linen blazer over a shirt, appeared casual, but his expensive-looking leather shoes kept a subtle balance so that it wasn't too casual.

“I only cast a simple ignition spell on the engines. I've done something similar before. But because my power alone is insufficient, the part of the spell that's meant to delay the fire didn't function. I planned on having the explosions happen later. ...Oh, and as for your friends, it's just the effect of sleeping pills. I've enhanced them with magecraft, of course. It's one of the only things I can do well.”

Perhaps because of the fire, the man seemed to wince in pain. It was as if he had encountered a truth that he did not want to face once again.

“...The Plunderer...!” The young man said, staring up at him as his lips trembled. The mage of the Clock Tower slowly lowered his gaze.

“I see, so you've already discovered the Consultant's location.” He said, pointing at the leather bag hanging at the young man's waist. “Penang, right?”

“How—?!”

Though the young man looked as if he was about to collapse, the mage continued to point things out mercilessly.

“You always carry that bag with you, so I figured that it’s your Mystic Code. You used the same kind of magecraft when you gathered reconnaissance about me, right? It’s probably a type of local magecraft. You also pretended to ask me something, but you wouldn’t need to if you’re possessed, like a Tongji or a Dukun. In that case, your bag contains...”

“Shut up!” The young man shouted, pulling out his bag.

“Bite and curse!”

That was an incantation. A recited phrase to activate the user’s Magic Circuits and manifest mystery.

Immediately, something leaped out from inside it.

“...!”

I froze, forgetting to breathe for a moment.

Because the thing that had flown out—

—Was the head of a woman, compressed to the size of a fist and enveloped in resentment and animosity.

“A severed head...!”

“...A shrunken head, to be more precise. Human heads are surprisingly small once you remove their skulls!”

I didn’t know it then, but “Penanggalan” was the word people used in the Malaysian Peninsula to describe a monster or those who controlled them.

The monster in this scenario was the flying head of a woman, which landed and bit down on the mage’s shoulder.

He dodged so that it didn’t get his artery, but blood still seeped into the fabric of his shirt.

Despite this, the Clock Tower mage’s did not falter. Or, at least he only winced a little bit.

“Your magecraft is a type of necromancy centered around this shrunken head. It’s closer to Western magecraft than Thought Magecraft. Is this because of the cultural mixing of the Strait of Malacca?”

His reasoning made the young pirate’s face grow steadily paler.

“According to the legend, there are also internal organs attached to this head. Have you scaled down the entire spell, including the process of drying it? In that case, the excess resentment of the corpse will gradually fade as it sheds weight. On top of that, your incantation was in English, so it was probably changed three or four generations ago as a result of colonization. Your spell has roots in tradition and aims to honor the dead while reckoning with their sins. But what you use now is nothing but a cruel shadow of what it used to be.”

I could see exactly how those words struck their mark.

In an instant, the pirate’s face turned dark red.

He must have been humiliated.

At a single glance, the hard work of generations of people had just been brutally labeled as worthless. It must have hit the mark, as the young man could not deny any of these accusations.

“Is this... what the Clock Tower Lord who's made countless Prides and Brands is capable of?”

“There’s no need to flatter me.”

I couldn’t see clearly against the light, but there seemed to be a hint of sorrow on the mage’s face.

“Most of my students are from prestigious families anyway, and only one of them has achieved the rank of Brand.”

“What do you mean ‘only one’? Isn’t one plenty...?!” He complained in a muffled voice. It was indeed an astounding achievement.

Brand was functionally the highest rank a mage could achieve in the Clock Tower, and Pride was the one beneath it. Normally, these were only achievable with years of hard work and incredible talent.

However, this mage who was known as the Plunderer taught young people in such a way that his students had overtaken the top rungs of the ladder.

The young man grabbed a rifle that was resting on an oil drum nearby.

“But I've heard you yourself aren't that impressive! Your students may be great, but my shrunken head still managed to bite you!”

“...Unfortunately for me, you're right.”

“Then you shoot too, Yarg!”

As he shouted that, something was launched from the gun in his hand. It was not just a regular bullet.

As the Clock Tower mage had so eloquently put, the young pirate was a necromancer. The bullet had been coated with the lingering resentment of the dead. Even if the Clock Tower mage used defensive magecraft to defend against bullets, the resentment would still make it through.

I had to step in.

“Wha— What!?”

At first, it was impossible for the young pirate to know what he saw.

“What the...?”

The young man's eyes were wide with shock.

That was because his bullets had been blocked by a laughing box with eyes inside a birdcage.

“Yarg! You betrayed me!?”

“I haven’t betrayed you.”

The young man raised his bag again. Hidden inside it was another shrunken head, this time with its eyes blindfolded.

“Bite and curse!”

As he spoke the incantation, the binding around the shrunken head dissolved into innumerable scraps of fabric, revealing the void inside it. Spirits of the dead spewed forth from the rift.

I heard once that blocking the eyes and mouth was a way to prevent Magical Energy from leaking out in certain types of magecraft. It felt typical of a cautious pirate to have tricks up his sleeve.

However, in the moment, I was overwhelmed by fear as I faced the swarm of spirits.

A wave of terror gushed from my stomach to my heart. It was something that I couldn't overcome no matter how many times I faced the dead. Even so, I gritted my teeth and looked up.

Underneath the rag around my neck, a pendant glowed as it ceased to function as a Mystic Code.

Of course, it was not my mentor who made it, but a student of the El-Melloi Classroom, Flat Escardos.

“You’re...just some girl with a hood on?!” The young man shouted in disbelief. At the same time, the box in my hands also changed.

“First stage restraint, rescinded!”

The birdcage contorted and transformed into something that didn't belong in the daylight. It had a blade longer than my arm, curved like the crescent moon. Strange eye-like patterns adorned its handle.

It was a scythe (*Grim Reaper*).

The edge of the blade clashed with the spirits as the boats continued to burn around us. It not only cleaved the spirits it came into contact with cleanly, but also eliminated any behind them with the aftershock of the blow.

It was as if the scythe removed their ties to the world of the living.

“W-what is that!?”

I walked slowly toward the dumbfounded young man, unsteady on his feet from what he had witnessed.

There was no need for me to conceal my identity anymore.

“...I haven’t betrayed you. I was my mentor’s disciple from the very beginning.”

Bullets kept on being fired from the rifle, but my enhanced body was capable of matching their speed.

Out of the twenty-eight total bullets shot, I dealt only with the seven that were close enough to hit my mentor and I.

I leapt forward, converting the force of the bursts of gunpowder and blasts of flame into my thrust. The young man fell backwards as his rifle was cut in half.

After confirming his incapacitation, I put my hat back on. Flat's Mystic Code had transformed it into a sunhat, and it'd be preferable not to lose it. This was a dangerous place, after all.

“So you used large amounts of Magical Energy to reverse the force of energy and knock him unconscious? It’s a bit like the Eastern technique of attacking someone from afar by triggering their vagal reflex.”

“Please don’t be so reckless again, Sir.”

“I put some spirit-repelling incense on my shirt, so it didn’t bite particularly hard.”

It was common knowledge that fights between mages were won or lost before they even began. However, I couldn't accept it. No matter how well-prepared my mentor was, he still could have died in the beginning of the fight.

In the first place, my mentor shouldn't have let the young man strike first, but this was a bad habit of his. By that, I meant that he couldn't stop himself from taking apart other people's magecraft.

“That’s why they call you the Plunderer, isn’t it?”

“I don’t like that nickname, but it does scare people.”

“...Sir, you look troubled again.”

“Oh.” My mentor muttered, slapping his cheeks. “I must say though, your codename is too lazy. You just used your name backwards.”

“...Sorry.” I said, awkwardly looking away.

His name was Lord El-Melloi II.

And I was not Yarg, but Gray.

Gray, not black or white.

For the past couple of years, I had been Lord El-Melloi II’s disciple, though I didn’t really live up to the role.

Of course, the disguise and fake backstory were to secretly approach them as a fellow pirate. Even though I didn’t look the same with my disguise, I felt like he would still sense something was off as we talked. For that reason, I had gone to great lengths trying to think like a pirate. I was also nervous when I put my mentor’s homemade sleeping pills into the coffee because I didn’t know if I’d been caught or not.

What had the purpose of all this been?

“Well then,” my mentor said, taking out a small vial and turning around.

The blistering fire had gradually calmed down, and the scent of the sea came back to wash over that of the gasoline. Dazzling sunlight continued to shine from the sky, and the foamy waves kept lapping at the shore. He had been right—the sea had nothing to do with a mages' dispute. It quickly returned to its usual state.

Compared to what had just happened, the calmness was almost ironic.

I could hear the sound of crashing waves. First it was distant, and then it was close by. After that, it was close, and then far again.

My mentor looked down at the young man, dazed from the homebrew of sleeping drugs.

“Could you please tell us where the Consultant is?”



—The story of our adventure began several days ago.

◆ 第一章 ◆
-Chapter 1-



~Part 1~

A warm gust of wind blew across my face.

It hit me again that this place certainly was different from the city I had grown used to.

The sun hung high in the sky, sending bursts of heat in waves. Even with my hood on, I felt as if my eyes would be burned by the light that reflected off of the streets. Perhaps because they were used to the light and heat, the other passersby were dressed lightly. Some even chatted as they walked.

In the distance, skyscrapers cut through the skyline beside a majestic mosque, the largest Ferris wheel in the world, and some avant-garde buildings that looked like giant worms.

In the shadow of these buildings, there was a food court made up of many small stalls, each sending a different aroma into the air.

I had been told that these places were called Hawker centers. They had once operated freely, but the government had recently put guidelines in place due to sanitation concerns. Either way, my usually-meager appetite was excited by it all.

The signs that lined the streets were written in a mixture of English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil, reflecting the diversity of the languages being spoken around us. The streets of this southern country were full of vitality and cheer, yet it also felt like a fight could break out at any moment.

We were in Singapore, a beautiful city-state near the equator.

It seemed to be in stark contrast to myself. I couldn't help but think that I oozed a melancholy shade of gray just by standing in such a lively place.

"Are you alright, Lady?", came a voice from behind me.

A man in sunglasses was walking in step with me. He looked distinctly British, and had waist-length black hair as dark as night. He wore an expensive-looking linen blazer, straw-colored pants, and Blucher shoes. He held a green Dulles bag in one hand.

“Yes, I’m alright. But it’s rare to see you dressed so lightly, Sir.”

“I can’t exactly wear Harris Tweed in this weather. I can’t wear just a shirt, either.”

My mentor took off his sunglasses and wiped the sweat from his face.

It appeared that his heat tolerance was terrible, regardless of the clothes he wore. His face was pale, and he looked as if he was about to fall over. Perhaps because he hadn’t gotten enough sleep recently, there were dark circles under his eyes.

“Ihihihi! This look suits you surprisingly well, useless mage!” Said a voice from near my right shoulder.

“Add!”

I called his name in warning, but my mentor had already heard his insult.

“You don’t have to call me useless. I already know that.” He spat, nursing his long-standing inferiority complex.

Rather than being an apology for his lack of talent, it was more like a complaint. That fact would not change, no matter how much deeper the frown between his eyebrows grew or how many mages feared him.

In fact, you could probably guess his skill level from how he kept wiping sweat from his face. Supposedly, a proper mage would have no problem adjusting tiny biological processes like this. I wasn’t a mage, so I didn’t really know even though I had some education on the subject.

“...Should I pull down my hood a bit?”

“I would be glad if you did. Try to cover your face as much as possible. I don’t want to see it.”

Even though we were in a foreign place, his cold response was as usual.

I tugged down on my hood, concealing my expression.

Out of consideration for the weather, I wasn't wearing my usual cotton hood. My clothes had all been selected by Reines. The sheer hood kept out the sun, and the looseness allowed the hot yet refreshing wind to blow in.

If only this wind could blow away the clump of gray clogging my heart.

My mentor gave a gentle cough as I straightened my posture. I took notice of the sunburn growing on his fist, impressed.

“It’s just about noon. Why don’t we have lunch?” My mentor said, a finger pointing toward the Hawker Center we had just passed.



The Hawker Center was bustling with people, as if it was a giant mess hall.

My mentor and I sat across from each other with two trays of food from the nearby stalls. The plastic chairs were simple but practical, supporting us comfortably. The speakers played music that seemed to be in Hindi, but I couldn’t be sure.

“How was the conference?”

“It was very interesting. I still have a lot left to learn about the magecraft here.” My mentor replied as he ate a steaming plate of stir-fried noodles with a plastic fork. It was a popular Singaporean dish whose name had been written on the signboard at the entrance of the Food Center.

I had ordered a bowl of bak kut teh. Translated literally, the name meant “meat bone tea”. It was a pork rib dish stewed in broth with both a striking appearance and a rich aroma. The smell of pepper and cloves tickled my nose and reminded me of the ancient spice trade route that once existed here. It made you appreciate why people of the past valued spices to be worth their weight in gold.

I didn’t usually have a large appetite, but the different scents wafting about the food court made it difficult to suppress the urge to order seconds.

“There are types of magecraft you don’t know about?”

“Of course there are,” my mentor said with a wry smile, rubbing his temples. “Singapore and the area around it historically have been a place where cultures mingled and fused.”

He used his fork to stir the noodles in his plate, combining it with the sauce.

“For example, the mie goreng that I’m eating now is a Malaysian dish, while your bak kut teh is a dish made by homesick dock workers from Fujian, China. It’s said that the dish was originally made because the poorly-paid laborers wanted to use meat stuck to the bone that had already been thrown away.”

My mentor’s words were cold and clinical in stark contrast to the lively music that was playing.

However, I felt that my mentor looked almost happy when he was teaching people. Or maybe I just wanted him to be.

“The same applies to magecraft. No matter where certain types of magecraft originated, they must have been affected by the culture around them over the course of their existence. History and cultural legacy are indispensable in order to create the confidence that enables us to cast magecraft,” he said, using his fork to form the noodles in his plate into a circle.

The chatter of the people in the food center seemed to harmonize with the music. The emotions of this group of people laughing and resonating with a familiar melody could probably be considered as some kind of magecraft.

“In terms of the results, the Mystery in Singapore was affected in the same way as the food here. It is a combination of the Western magecraft represented by the Clock Tower, the Thought Magecraft of Asia, and the Curse Magecraft of the Middle East. The influence of each organization is kept in a delicate balance, so the presence of a Lord is likely to cause disturbances.”

“I... hear some rumors about you from time to time as well.”

“Yes. I’m only here for a little visit, but my actions will naturally be under careful scrutiny and constraint.”

If I were to summarize my mentor's existence, I would probably call him a heretic in the World of Magecraft.

His magecraft skills were only mediocre, and his family was not worth mentioning. However, due to a remarkable combination of coincidences, he had not only become one of the twelve Lords of the Clock Tower, but also an extremely talented teacher whose students all went on to achieve great things. That was also why he had been invited across thousands of kilometers to teach at the Singaporean branch of the Clock Tower.

To the people around him, he was like a hurricane of unclear origin. He looked average in every way. Compared to other Lords, he was as inoffensive as the eye of a storm. And yet, he had the incredible ability of leveling the obstacles in his path. Sometimes, this destruction also ended up hurting himself.

“...So that's why you sent me first, right?”

“I think you'll be more useful to help the situation cool down.” My mentor admitted, somewhat embarrassed.

The act of constantly sending me, his only disciple, headfirst into danger could be considered extremely shameful. However, I knew that it wasn't a selfish act of self-preservation. I knew that he made every effort to be sincere in order to achieve the best outcome for everyone. Even people who could not understand his methods had to accept it.

That was how he chose to live— as someone who searched for the ideal solution, no matter how difficult or unpleasant the journey there was.

In my opinion, this was a noble ideal.

I had come to Singapore first to confirm my mentor's schedule and communicate with the people involved. More busywork probably meant they actually trusted us, so I couldn't help but feel a little proud of myself.

“All the trouble's over for now, right?”

“We can’t let down our guard completely until we get back. As fascinating as this country is, it has its fair share of problems.”

“Problems...?”

A strange image appeared in my mind. It was a bit like balancing plates on sticks, only more complicated. All kinds of items and weights were suspended on them in a delicate balance.

My mentor lent me a hand just as I wracked my brain in search of an example.

“Like pirates, for instance.”

“Pirates?”

“It’s not a word you would expect to hear in the modern day, is it? From an international perspective, the word comes up quite often. After all, this region of the ocean sees twenty percent of the world’s maritime traffic and thirty percent of the world’s oil trade. In contrast, the straits are quite narrow and connect to hundreds of rivers. As you may estimate, the ships here are easy to attack, while escape routes are numerous. This place is the perfect hunting ground for pirates. The earliest records of piracy here can be traced to the twelfth century.”

My mentor twirled his fork, gathering up his noodles like spaghetti.

“And anything that stretches into the past is bound to involve mages.”

“...!”

For a moment, I forgot how to breathe.

He suddenly changed the topic from one world to the next, almost revealing the existence of Mystery.

“Pirates have varying systems of belief. This is only natural when you consider that the prosperity of this place relies on shipping. People who spend their lives in a place as dangerous as the sea tend to live by their own rules. In any case, it isn’t strange that mages managed to find their way into these groups. For people who deal with Mystery,

it is incredibly convenient to associate with powerful entities that operate outside of the law.”

I felt my throat tighten at the thought of people who refused to bow down to authority.

“And so, the beliefs of pirates found their way into magecraft. Did mages become pirates, or did pirates become mages? The more time passes, the more ambiguous the answer becomes.”

I saw a whirlpool in the noodles that my mentor had twisted together. The sauce that sat in the cheap plastic plate was the vast blue sea. In its center, there was a giant swirling vortex, creating something tiny rooted amidst all the carnage.

“Everything in our world originates from the sea. It isn’t wrong to call the land ‘Mother Earth’. People just jump ahead of themselves. You could say the mother, or maybe father of the world is actually the ocean.” My mentor said, narrowing his eyes.

Maybe this was another figment of my imagination, but I heard an echoing noise. It was like the waves of the ocean crashing onto the shore, even though I was too far from the beach to actually hear it. It was almost as if I had found a point where the gravitational pulls of the moon and the earth were perfectly in balance.

“Just as we came to this world from the ocean, our beliefs and gods did as well.”

As my mentor put a forkful of noodles into his mouth, my illusion disappeared. The cheerful Indian music returned. I was still inside the food center.

I sighed.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, I just realized that it’s been a while since I heard you lecture, Sir.”

“It’s only been a week.”

Though my mentor said that, I could feel relief in his words, which was a little embarrassing.

A performance had begun on a nearby street that was separated from us with glass. A dolly for guests had been set up beside it with bicycles instead of taxis. Even though it had fallen out of fashion, it still provided a means of transportation for many tourists in Singapore.

“...It’s already time.” My mentor complained, glancing at the clock that hung in the center of the food center.

“Time for what?”

“Oh, an old friend of mine sent me an email this morning. We decided to meet up here, but...”

My mentor frowned as if he noticed something strange.

At this, the music suddenly changed. The Indian music was replaced by the tolling of a bell. Then, the high twang of string instruments sang out. Just as I was trying to process the sudden appearance of the fast-paced Chinese-style music, a silhouette appeared between the booths.

The young actor had makeup painted around his eyes and nose. The ribbons on his magnificent hat and his glittering costume fluttered elegantly through the air, combining with the scent of spices and creating the image of an ancient battlefield.

The actor stomped on the ground in beat with the ringing bells, swinging the spear in his powdered hands in an arc.

“...What’s this?”

“Wayang.” My mentor explained. “It’s a Singaporean variation of traditional Chinese opera. It’s often confused with the shadow puppets of the nearby island of Java and Wayang Kulit.”

My mentor couldn’t look away from the actor as he spoke.

The actor performed multiple backflips in quick succession, each without a single centimeter of error. Most well-trained gymnasts probably wouldn’t be able to pull off

something like this. Not only were the acrobatics stunning, but the actor also managed to survey the rest of the stage between each jump.

Though there was only one actor, it felt as if soldiers crowded the stage. The general on stage persisted although he was cornered many times, charging to the center of the battlefield despite being wounded.

The actor's flexible body moving to the music seemed to symbolize the entire city-state's culture. The essence of history that existed in people's hearts was constantly shifting, just like the dance itself.

At some point during the performance, the actor had put on a mask.

I gasped, covering my mouth with my hands to silence myself.

The mask depicted the face of a monkey.

“The Monkey King, Sun Wukong? So he's a popular folkloric figure in Singapore as well.”

Even I had heard that name.

It was the name of the stone monkey in the Journey to the West, known as the Great Sage Equal to Heaven for his many abilities, such as turning into seventy-two different forms and wielding the golden-adorned staff Jingu Bang.

“I didn't expect the same actor to play two roles. In that case, was the general just then Nezha?”

The actor in the monkey mask shouted something that was probably in Chinese. I didn't understand it, but it seemed as if he was shouting that he had finally met his sworn adversary. I also understood that the adversary in question was the unmasked character that had just been on stage, Nezha.

The two fought to the rousing melody of string instruments, crossing blades seven times. The lance flashed even more fiercely than before until it finally pierced its target. Shockingly, I could see a splash of blood.

Which side had won? I didn't know.

The performance ended with the actor performing a sword mudra, raising his index and middle fingers.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, the food center erupted into thunderous applause.

The actor bowed humbly and then moved with the musicians behind him to pass out peonies to the audience. I happened to receive one.

“Th-thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” The actor said, winking at me mischievously and sauntering away.

Though he disappeared from the stage, the food center had not returned to its normal state. The audience members, the chefs in the stalls, and even my mentor stayed still for a moment. Some of them only regained their senses after their food began to burn.

“That was captivating.” My mentor exclaimed.

“Yeah...” I said, nodding blankly. I couldn’t help but keep thinking back to the performance just then, but I drank another spoonful of soup and tried to organize my thoughts.

“I’m really glad I watched it with you, Sir.”

“Why?”

“I feel like you’ve been troubled by something for the past couple of months.” I said, finishing another bit of bak kut teh and confessing my thoughts as my mentor tilted his head.

My mentor’s response to this was quite strange. He blinked several times and reached toward his temples. Then, he paused to look down at the plate of nearly-finished noodles before him and cleared his throat.

“So you’ve noticed.” He said, looking bashful.

“I think it’s actually quite easy to guess what you’re feeling.”

“Well... In that case, you’re not wrong.”

My mentor smiled wryly and closed his eyes.

It was incredibly strange. I had seen my mentor look troubled in so many different ways, in agony at his own inadequacies and failings, but I had never seen him like this.

“...Actually, Lady,” he said after much hesitation. “I want to quit my job as a teacher.”

A few seconds passed as I struggled to process his words. While the performance had been impressive in many ways, the weight of what he had said painlessly crushed the core of my being.

“I’ll still be a Lord, of course, because of my deal with Reines. But both the Department of Modern Magecraft and the El-Melloi Classroom are sufficiently staffed. You could say that the significance of me standing up front during a lecture has dwindled. Hardly any of the Lords teach their respective departments anyway.”

My mentor spoke with a casual smile on his face. However, such hollow comforts went in one ear and out another. The first words he had said on the topic still weighed impossibly heavily upon me.

“Sir...” Finally, I found my voice. It was a rasping, terrible sound, but I managed regardless. “But—”

“I haven’t decided yet,” my mentor said gently. “But I’ve been considering this for quite a while. If the El-Melloi Classroom is already at the level where it can survive on its own, maybe I should consider working on my own magecraft... or something.”

“...I...”

I wanted to say something, but the words got stuck in my throat.

Naturally, I was silent again. Probably because of my reaction, my mentor did not continue to speak.

The bak kut teh in my trembling spoon lost its flavor.

I'm sure the food center was as crowded and full of the smells of spices as it had been, but I had my own secluded corner to be just as lonely as ever.

Suddenly, my mentor stood up.

“That performer just then—”

“Sir...?”

Looking around to no avail, my mentor sat down again with a frown.

“He left this note behind tied to the flower's stalk.”

“What does it say?”

I looked at the note in my mentor's palm. The paper was of a high quality, and something had been written on it in crowded handwriting.

“The email from your acquaintance is a fake. Allow me to give you a bit of advice.”

“—!”

What shocked me more was the content that followed.

“Lord El-Melloi II, one of your students has been kidnapped by pirates in the Strait of Malacca. Seek the one who is known as the Consultant.”

My mentor's fingers trembled as he held the note.

“...One of my students has been kidnapped by pirates?”

~Part 2~

—And now, back to the present.

It was midnight.

Waves the color of ink slammed into the rocks beside us.

We stood on a tiny, sandy island at the center of a waterway wound with lush mangrove trees. The island wasn't marked on any maps, lying to the southwest of Singapore. The currents often caused ships to crash into the rocks, so cargo ships and fishermen hardly approached it.

Tonight, however, a small boat floated in the water. It was so old that I was surprised the engine still functioned. The hull rattled every second the engine was on, threatening to come to pieces. Several people caught notice and came to take a look, but it was overlooked considering the abundance of abandoned boats and the sad state of this particular one.

After the guards left us, we hurriedly surfaced.

“...Ugh...hurrg...”

My mentor lay dripping wet on the ground, looking as if he was going to die. I myself was fine after a few gulps of air, and began to survey our surroundings.

“Are you alright, Sir?”

“F...Fine... but... Let me... rest a bit... first.” My mentor said, gasping for breath.

Just to clarify, my mentor had come up with this plan.

Even underwater, sufficient enhancement can keep a mage from running out of air. For this reason, we pretended that our boat had drifted over with the tides. Then, we hid near the motor underneath the boat so we could infiltrate the Consultant's headquarters.

It made for a good hiding place, thanks to the low clarity of the water. The problem was that my mentor was terrible at enhancement. Even though he had a sufficient supply of oxygen, maintaining a supply of Magical Energy in these circumstances drained a person's life force, Od. If my mentor spent too long in this state, he would eventually pass out and die.

Of course, my mentor was aware of these risks. His fatal weakness happened to be the most important thing for a mage-- Magic Circuits capable of generating Magical Energy.

—“I want to quit my job as a teacher.”

—“...maybe I should consider working on my own magecraft... or something.”

My mentor's words from earlier echoed in my mind before wedging into my heart. I knew that my mentor would still be the same person, no matter what job he had, so why was I so shaken?

I looked down, enduring the cold air on my wet skin.

At the same time, my mentor finally wiped the water from his face and gazed into the distance.

“...So this is the Consultant's headquarters.” He said in a soft voice.

We had found this place with help from the information we had beaten out of that pirate. However, the island looked more like a small fishing village than the fortified pirate base I had imagined.

With my enhanced vision, I could see a few shabby wooden buildings peeking out from behind the mangroves. It seemed that wooden bridges had been built so it was at least possible to walk between the waterways. Several old boats not unlike the one we just hid in had been lined up near the widest waterway, probably so the pirates could salvage items from the sea.

“It doesn't look much like a pirate base to me...”

“...So some thought clearly went into this place.” My mentor said, before I could finish my sentence.

“What makes you say that?”

“This base was converted from an abandoned fishing village. It probably took less than a day to set up. Since their main business is small-scale salvaging, they don’t need large equipment either. If they are ever discovered, only the people who live here will know the escape routes. Compared to a proper stronghold, which do you think is more effective?”

“Oh, I see...”

I thought I understood.

“This fortress is temporary anyway. They can abandon it whenever they want to. ...So that’s why the Consultant has never been caught.”

It had taken us a significant amount of time to find this place according to the pirate’s directions. That proved that stealth was more important than defense.

“I don’t know which student they kidnapped. There are quite a few in this general area who I’ve been unable to get in touch with,” my mentor said with a serious expression. “However, I can’t be sure about the authenticity of the note. Either way, a proper mage ought to solve any problem they’re involved in, right?”

Though his face was still pale, my mentor spoke as sensibly and calmly as usual. His attitude also proved his point that mages should protect themselves.

“But why would someone kidnap your student?”

“This time, Lady, I believe that I’m the target,” my mentor sighed. “In that case, I need to find out what I have done to warrant this. If a student were to be harmed because of my mistake, it becomes my own personal matter. Even if the note might be a trap—” said the person who sent his disciple into danger to test the water.

Typical of my mentor, his words contradicted his actions.

Cowardly and timid, yet sometimes surprisingly bold— that was my mentor.

“Be careful though, Sir. If you get shot, you’ll die.”

“...That’s where I’ll be counting on you.”

I couldn’t help but feel it was unfair that he got to say this with such an apologetic expression.

“Don’t get too far from me.” I said, exhaling with a smile.

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

My mentor nodded, taking out a test tube that was sealed with wax. He poured a few drops of a cold, sticky substance onto our hands. After he whispered an incantation, I felt his presence fade slightly.

It was invisibility magecraft.

Even though my mentor’s magecraft was useless against mages, it was probably enough to deal with regular people. It also didn’t hide things like the sound of our footsteps, so we could only shuffle forward carefully.

A long time ago, this kind of skillset was unknown to me, but I had grown used to it in my time with my mentor. At any rate, it was good not to make ourselves known to our enemies too quickly.

Even though the village gave the impression of being abandoned, I saw several misshapen crates that were full of fish. Possibly because they just had dinner, the scent of cheese and spices remained in the air.

As we snuck across the island, we carefully took note of the inhabitants. One thing they had in common made us both frown.

“They’re all so young... almost children.”

“...Yes. Considering the nature of their work, pirates tend to be quite young, but these are a little too young.”

Even my mentor sounded surprised.

Of course, child soldiers were not uncommon in this area. However, the children here all looked surprisingly cheerful. Most of them spoke Malay, which I could not understand, but they seemed to be happily chatting about everyday topics.

They were also dressed surprisingly lightly, with most of them only carrying knives and pistols. Some people had assault rifles, but they were older and dressed like mercenaries. Of course, it wasn't uncommon for pirates to be in possession of weapons like rocket launchers, but I found it hard to imagine in the hands of these children.

"The Consultant and the kidnapped student should be in the heart of the island, right?"

"...Probably."

We didn't have enough time to check every room. Instead, we crossed the mangrove forest on platforms made of wires and wood, and headed toward the beach.

As we passed a teenage boy who was suppressing a yawn, a spark of realization flashed up his body, and his eyes snapped open.

"A Bounded Field—?"

"Ihiihi! All that work and you've still been discovered!"

I sent a flying kick toward the young man as he tried to pull out a gun, knocking him to the ground. It wasn't the nicest thing to do to a kid, but I was able to induce confusion in him by sending out a wave of Magic Energy.

It would have been nice if that was all, but the Bounded Field had already sent out an alarm. A group of pirates approached and were now pointing their guns at us.

"Gray!"

"First stage restraint, rescinded!"

As I shouted my incantation, I took my birdcage from the hook at my right shoulder, in which the box inside began to coalesce into a scythe.

The Magical Energy released by the transformation sent out a blast of wind. I used it to leap ten meters into the air with my mentor in tow, blocking two bullets that approached us before we landed in the sand.

I hadn't been able to do this before.

In the past, I had only learnt enough to be a grave keeper. That profession required self-defense techniques, not the ability to fight against modern weaponry. How many specially-trained mages would need to know how to dodge bullets, anyway?

“Are you hurt, Gray?”

“No, I’m perfectly fine.”

Trying to suppress the burst of emotion in my heart, I raced toward the buildings ahead of me.

Suddenly, a person appeared from beside me. They had a rough linen cloth covering their head, like a headscarf worn to keep out the sand in a desert. It was probably so I couldn't see their face. Even though they were around my height and build, alarm bells rang in my head. My senses should have been enhanced, but I hadn't noticed them at all—!

The person who had suddenly appeared slid up to me so quickly that I did not have time to react. They planted one foot on the sandy ground and then hurled their elbow at my chest.

I was knocked into the air like a leaf in a strong breeze. I tumbled across the beach a few times before I could regain my balance.

My opponent probably realized that I had pushed my mentor into the shadow of a building at the first sign of trouble. After glancing over to see if he was safe, I turned to face my unidentified opponent once again.

“...Add.”

“Ihihihihi! This one’s tough!”

Suddenly, eyes appeared on my scythe.

It seemed to shock my opponent briefly. However, they quickly regained their composure and pointed a finger at me.

“—*Anfang!*”

Along with the incantation, a magic bullet was fired at me.

I blocked it without even really paying attention, but to my surprise, the spell remained.

It was a simple action that only needed a single word, but it had a significant amount of Magical Energy. While I wouldn’t have been bothered if my arm had been hit by a regular bullet, this strike left it numb. I hurriedly dodged to the side as another Magic Bullet struck the beach beside my feet.

“Ihihihi, Gray! This isn’t any old Magic Bullet! It’s a compressed curse with no physical form!”

“So, like Miss Luvia’s Gandr?”

That was the name of the most graceful mage I knew, who was also one of my mentor’s best students.

By now, I was sure that my enemy was none other than the Consultant. Not many mages could compete with Luvia’s skill. Just as I prepared for an attack, my mentor called out my name.

“Gray!”

“—!”

For some reason, this made the Consultant freeze. I took this opportunity to leap upwards, dashing between the mangroves to distract my opponent. Even so, the mage’s curses managed to follow me. I raised my scythe as quickly as I could, preparing to swing it with all I had. I could not show mercy in front of an opponent like this.

I saw the surprise on the Consultant’s face. But it was too late.

I didn't have time to back down. The scythe in my hands absorbed my Magical Energy and grew larger.

Right before it could hit its target, a young man rushed out from the group of shocked pirates and mercenaries.

“—Wait!”

Came a voice in somewhat awkward English.

In an instant, both me and my scythe froze in midair.

How? I wondered. There hadn't even been an incantation. If it was a form of modern magecraft, I should have been able to free myself by releasing a little Magic Energy. However, the binds around me did not budge.

Worry ran circles around my mind. Was it not magecraft? I frantically thought.

One second of being frozen was enough to cause my death. Two seconds, and my mentor's life would be gone as well.

However, the Consultant did not fire another curse.

Instead, they removed the cloth covering their face.

“...What are you doing here, *Professor*? Why did you sneak into my base?”

She growled like a volcano on the verge of eruption.

The first thing I saw under the linen cloth was glossy black hair, unfurling like the night over the sunset, not unlike the sky above us.

By her facial features I could assume she was Eastern. But despite that, she had vivid blue eyes and full, bright lips. She was probably around twenty years old. Like a stalk of a flower just about to bloom, she stood firm, and it was almost like the lovely scent of a flower wafted around her, her presence made tangible.

I was suddenly reminded of a painting by Delacroix which depicted the goddess of liberty leading people during the French Revolution.

However, this goddess might not need people to lead.

“...Rin?” Lying flat on his back in the sand, my mentor spoke, blinking in shock.



~Part 3~

The tide chose this moment to crash into the beach.

The situation had changed so rapidly that the pirates that surrounded us froze, stunned.

This silence lasted for about ten seconds before someone walked up.

My first impression of the young man was that he was kind of... fluffy, like a well-mannered dog. The sea breeze blew his long, red hair in strange angles. He looked like a teenager, but I couldn't be sure of his race or nationality. Rather than looking ethnically ambiguous, like many other people I had met around Singapore, he had an ethereal look about him that made me doubt his humanity.

“Um... Rin?” The young man said timidly to the dark-haired woman named Rin Tohsaka.

“Oh, don’t be scared, Ergo. This man is my teacher,” Rin said, gesturing in my mentor’s direction. “The one from the Clock Tower. Didn’t you say that you wanted to meet him?”

“Oh... yes, I remember.” The person named Ergo said, slightly more confidently.

“That’s the situation. Can you let the girl down first?”

“Sure.”

Ergo nodded, and I landed gently on the beach. I didn’t know how he achieved the feat, but it had been too incredible. Even though I had experienced all kinds of Mystery, this was still surprising.

Ergo and the young bandits gathered in a loose circle around me and conveyed their apology.

“Uh... Sorry?”

“...It’s alright...” I said, a little shaken by their responses. But now wasn’t the time for that.

Behind me, my mentor stood up and dusted the sand from his pants. He took several deep breaths and turned to the woman.

“Rin, does that mean...”

Before he could finish his sentence, he coughed a couple of times.

“Are you the Consultant?!”

“.....”

The woman’s eyes wandered for a moment before she raised her hands in surrender.

“Yes, that’s me, the pirate consultant. Do you have any questions for me?” She said as if nothing was strange about it.

“What!?”

“It’s none of your business! It’s kind of a long story, I don’t want to waste your time telling you about it.”

What kind of events needed to transpire for someone to become a pirate consultant? I wondered. Regardless, I now understood that this woman was my mentor’s student.

“Um... We heard that you were kidnapped by pirates...”

“What? Kidnapped by pirates? Who told you that?” Rin asked, tilting her head in confusion along with all the young pirates.

“Someone passed me a note that said you were kidnapped. Well, that was clearly fake.” My mentor said, clutching his head as if he had a headache. “No, no. Since your name came up, I had to do something about it! Also, I know you applied for summer vacation, but I never knew you were going to the Strait of Malacca!”

“I know. But Sir, isn’t independence one of the core principles of the El-Melloi Classroom?”

My mentor had no response to this.

Later, my mentor told me that no mage should aspire to have others clean up their messes. I still had no idea how she became a pirate consultant, but at least she took responsibility for her own actions.

In a certain sense, she had taken my mentor’s teachings to heart.

Rin turned to the young man I had felled, and gently picked him up.

“*Blut der Erde, Lebenskraft* (Stone heals(?).”

Along with the short incantation, I saw her hand glow as it touched the young man’s back.

Soon, he opened his eyes.

“...Rin?”

“Are you alright? I’ll have the doctor take a look later.”

Rin gave him a pat on the back as he stood up.

“Oh, also. Who is she, Sir?”

“Gray, put your hood on.”

Though I thought that I was already wearing my hood properly, I followed his instruction nonetheless.

“Gray? You called her that earlier. Is she your disciple?”

“Well, yes...”

“She’s been with you in all the classes I’ve been to. Everyone else in the class knows her already besides me. Are you trying to leave me out?”

Though she sounded polite on the surface, her perfect English was prickly. Each word was like a rose’s thorns, beautiful and pointed.

“...Uh, there are some reasons for that...”

With a sigh, my mentor gestured to me reluctantly.

“Well, I’ll introduce you properly, then. This is my disciple, Gray. Gray, this woman is my student, Rin Tohsaka, who is from Japan.”

“Nice to meet you.”

I looked down at my feet.

She stared at me incredulously, as if she had seen a ghost.

Another voice called out from beside my arm as if to divert her attention.

“Ihihijihi! Nice to meet you too!”

My scythe, Add, had reverted to his usual form. Like a robot in disguise, he had transformed into a box inside a birdcage.

I hesitated for a moment, but ultimately decided to introduce him to everyone present.

“And this is Add.”

“It’s rare to see a Mystic Code emulating such a strong personality.” Rin said, nodding.

As expected of a Clock Tower mage, she understood what it was immediately.

Then, she took a deep breath.

“Alright, can we go inside first? Get back to work!”

After issuing this command to the group of young pirates, she pointed to a building deep at the center of the base.

~Part 4~

The building was crudely furnished. The woodwork that made up the walls and furniture resembled a popsicle stick art project, yet even so, it was one of the better houses in the abandoned fishing village. Though I was inside, I could still feel the wind. I had expected more mosquitoes or pests, so maybe magecraft or spices had been used to ward them off.

We sat down on some chairs made from scrap wood.

My mentor sat across from Rin with a serious expression on his face. He took out a cigar from its waterproof case, cut off its tip, and lit it with a match. Soon, the unique scent of his cigar's smoke filled the room.

“So, were you here last year as well?”

“Salvaging isn't a job that requires me to stay here all the time. All I need to do is plan the work out beforehand and make regular calls.” Rin explained like an honors student giving a presentation. But what kind of honors student would become a pirate...?

“...Dr. Benoit did say that the internet is more efficient to use, though.” She added.

My mentor took a long drag on his cigar.

“I see. So you're here to salvage items from the sea floor. I have heard that some pirates in this area prefer to do that over robbing and pillaging.” He began. “But I've also heard rumors that the Consultant has been anxious ever since I came.”

“Well...” Rin said, averting her gaze.

“It seems like someone wants to hide something from the Clock Tower.”

“I mean... Fine! You're not wrong! But this doesn't violate the principle of the concealment of Mystery! The people here are pretty superstitious, so they don't question my magecraft much. The media only reports the salvaging. I just didn't know that the Clock Tower mage who came to Singapore was you, Sir...”

“You could've made a worse mistake. If your situation does end up reaching the Department of Law, I can help delay their investigations,” my mentor sighed. “So? What are you here to do?”

“Some of the things down in the ocean interest me, so I contacted the pirates here. You could say I made a little investment.”

“...Are you trying to scam the pirates?”

“No, of course not. This is a beneficial trade for both sides! I provide the pirates with useful information. In return, the pirates help me do the actual salvaging!” She spoke indignantly.

That was probably why she was known as the Consultant. It was a nickname that completely went against the Clock Tower’s most important principle.

Rin Tohsaka.

Even I was familiar with this name.

In the past few years, she and Luvia Edelfelt had been notorious for causing incredible property damage whenever they were in the same place. However, the money spent by the Clock Tower to fix the holes they had blasted into classrooms was made up for by the innovative ideas they came up with in the papers they published.

Not only that, she was an Average One, with elemental affinities for five elements instead of the usual one or two. This alone was enough to qualify her as a person of great talent.

However, for some reason, I had never met her until this day.

“I understand where you’re coming from now,” my mentor said, nodding. “I’m not sure if the note about my student’s kidnapping was a fake or a misunderstanding. Can you tell me what you’re trying to salvage from the sea floor?”

“...Actually, I want to hear your opinion on it, Sir.”

“Hm?”

My mentor frowned, holding his cigar between his fingertips. Across from him, Rin thought for a moment, indicating that she didn't yet have a concrete grasp of the situation.

“Originally, my plan was to look for Zheng He’s sunken ship.”

“Zheng He?” I tilted my head, confused.

“Zheng He was a Chinese explorer who led the world’s largest fleet and completed the furthest voyage at the time, when Europe was in the Middle Ages. His journeys left a great impact on history. It is said the ships under his command were as tall as one hundred and forty meters, with more than twenty-seven thousand crew of all sorts of professions, from actors to craftsmen. You can almost consider it to be a moving country.”

Hearing my mentor’s explanation, I found it difficult to imagine his ships’ scale. How had he managed to transport tens of thousands of people with the technology of the time? The great powers that Asia had historically were, indeed, as amazing as they had sounded in my mentor’s lectures.

“Did Chinese fleets reach Singapore, then?”

“They went far further than that. They even reached the eastern coast of Africa. The region around Malacca has always been a place where the East and West have blended together. For instance, the first king of the Malacca Sultanate was rumored to be a descendant of Alexander the Great.”

Hearing the ancient king’s name, I gasped.

My mentor smiled wryly.

“That’s because he’s a troublemaker that can be found in history books all around the world. To get back on topic, Zheng He’s landing here was properly documented. The ships were said to carry large amounts of treasures from the emperor of the Ming dynasty, which governed China at the time. If the records are correct, parts of that treasure lie beneath the ocean in the Strait of Malacca.”

“Yes! That’s exactly what I wanted to hear you say!” Rin exclaimed, clapping in joy.

It was too easy to guess her intentions. Her eyes sparkled with desire, like stars, or perhaps dollar signs.

“Last year, I got a strange map from an antique dealer I know. When I figured out that there was treasure here, I bought a plane ticket and rushed here straight away! Don’t you think dredging treasure from the bottom of the sea is a perfect plan?”

“You know, there’s a high likelihood that you’ll come across magecraft-related items. Since you are currently affiliated with the Clock Tower, digging those items up without permission can land you in trouble.”

“Yes, so I originally planned on doing it by myself, in secret.”

“That’s not the point!” My mentor snapped.

The scene reminded me of a regular day in the El-Melloi Classroom. However, contrary to the light-hearted impression the conversation could give off, its contents could not be laughed off. My mentor had always been considered a heretic in the Clock Tower. If the jackals that constantly hunted him managed to use the Clock Tower’s first principle as an excuse to corner him, his stomachaches would be the least of his struggles.

“It’s just that we’ve discovered something a little different to what I originally planned.”

What could it be? I wondered.

My mentor was probably about to ask a similar question when we were interrupted by a gentle knock of the door.

“Is something the matter, Rin?”

“Wait, you don’t mean—”

The person who opened the door was the young man named Ergo, whom we had just met.

I hadn't paid attention earlier when he locked me into place using magecraft or something else, but he was even taller than my mentor. His wild red hair covered his eyes, making him look like a stray animal. What caught my attention was not his hair, but the strange clothes he wore. It had a strange texture, completely different to the clothes that the other pirates wore. It also fit him perfectly, not even wrinkling when he raised his hand.

“What is he wearing...?”

“It's what he was wearing when we found him.”

“No way...”

I looked to Rin, who nodded in confirmation.

“He's what we salvaged from the sea. We found him floating atop a wooden board, with no memory of how he got there. While he was unconscious, he kept repeating the same word over and over again.”

“...The word was 'Ergo'.” Said the young man.

“Ergo? What do you mean by that?”

The young man stared intently at my mentor, who looked confused. The latter's frown was reflected in the former's mysterious gray eyes.

“I don't know. It's the only word I remember, so it became my name.” He said with a serious expression, as if that nature was the only thing he had managed to retain.

“...It's probably from the phrase 'cogito ergo sum'.” My mentor muttered.

“I think therefore I am'? It's a quote from Descartes, right?”

“Yes. It seems you don't need an explanation. It's practically the foundation of modern Western philosophy. What remains after one doubts everything that is visible to the naked eye.”

“...I don’t believe I understand, sir...” I said, raising my hand, embarrassed. My mentor seemed glad to explain.

“As Rin said, it’s a way of thinking proposed by a philosopher named Descartes, centered around anything and everything being plausibly deniable other than your own existence. He posed that everything we perceive with our senses could be false, and that the world might not actually exist, but that you yourself must exist to think and perceive so. One thing is certain— as long as ‘I’ am able to question existence, ‘I’ must exist.”

This I could understand better.

I constantly wondered if the world around me really existed. But if I didn’t exist, what was doing the wondering? That must be what “I think, therefore I am” (*cogito ergo sum*) meant.

“It isn’t necessarily a magecraft term, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s the name of a magecraft organization. It seems like something the Baldanders would do...”

The name that my mentor mentioned was one of the three organizations that made up the Mages’ Association.

One was the Clock Tower, which my mentor was a part of.

The second was the Atlas Institute.

The last one was the Baldanders.

I actually hadn’t heard the last name very often. It wasn’t just because I was ignorant about magecraft. The three organizations hardly communicated with each other.

“Ergo, show them.”

“Understood.”

The red-haired young man nodded. Something appeared on his back that almost made me cry out.

“Translucent... arms?!”

Now, I understood.

Several luminous limbs extended from his back. They looked as if they were made out of light blue glass, strange engravings on their surfaces. Were they the things that had held me in midair?

Considering that I was far better at enhancement than most mages, these arms must have at least had the strength of an armored vehicle, and the ability to extend more than ten meters.

“You only have six of them? Eight arms would be closer to the legendary three-headed, six-armed warriors... Excuse me, can I touch them?”

“Oh, sure.”

Ergo’s translucent arms sparkled with purple electricity at my mentor’s touch. However, they didn’t seem to shock him.

“Miss Tohsaka ran all kinds of tests on them, but she doesn’t recognize this kind of magecraft.” Ergo said as my mentor carefully examined the patterns.

“Do you not know either, Sir? Does that mean it’s the work of the Atlas Institute?”

“I’ve witnessed the magecraft of the Atlas Alchemists. Their magecraft is like a fusion of modern technology and magecraft. This is very different from what you and I are used to, but I believe it’s closer to Clock Tower magecraft.” My mentor explained.

He may not be good at magecraft, but his skill at analyzing other people’s magecraft was nothing you could scoff at. This skill had won him the nickname of the Plunderer. It seemed he always reserved his abilities for when his opponents deserved to be humiliated. And yet, even though it was my mentor’s specialty, he could not discern the nature of Ergo’s translucent arms. Actually, maybe “phantasmal limbs” would be a better phrase to describe them.

“How fast did these arms move when they captured Gray? How much Magical Energy does it take to use them? Why have they been designed to be translucent? No, rather than magecraft, this seems more like something from the Age of the Gods...”

After muttering things like that to himself for a while, my mentor turned to the young man.

“Can I ask you a few questions?”

“Go ahead.”

“You say you’ve lost your memory, but you seem to have no trouble speaking to me in English. Do you know what your native language is?”

“Oh, I only learned how to speak by talking to other people.”

“...You only learned how to speak by talking to other people?”

That reminded me— Back when we were fighting, his voice carried a foreign accent. That meant that he had grasped my mentor’s speaking habits and accent in the space of several minutes.

Hearing this, my mentor frowned.

“The other children here talk to each other in Tamil and Malay. Can you speak those languages as well?”

“Yes. I can also speak Chinese.”

“I can vouch for him. He learned to speak all of those languages instantly after I took him on a salvaging trip. His abilities put Schliemann to shame.” Rin added.

According to their conversation and what I had witnessed, this young man had extraordinary learning abilities. I couldn’t help but feel stunned at the irony of someone like him losing his memory.

“If you also forgot how to speak, it can’t be generalized amnesia. Rin, did he not know how to speak at all when you first discovered him?”

“Yes. It took him around half a day to start speaking Singaporean English.” Rin confirmed.

A brief silence settled in the small pirate hut before my mentor broke it with another question.

“In day to day life, does anything trouble you?”

“I get hungry sometimes.” Ergo said, rubbing his stomach embarrassedly.

“But I’ve given you plenty of food! Are you calling me stingy?!”

“No, not at all! I think the spiced fish dishes here are very tasty,” the young man laughed at Rin’s aggression, smiling in a fluffy way that reminded me of a puppy. “But I feel like nothing is enough to satisfy my appetite. My stomach is constantly rumbling.”

I caught a glimpse of his eyes from between his veil of red hair as he spoke.

“Oh, right. There’s something else I forgot to say!”

“Hm?”

The young man put his hand back on his stomach. His eyes began to wander. I was inexplicably reminded of an abyss. I saw Ergo creeping about in the darkness, holding something in his hands.

“I feel like I’ve eaten something. Something very sweet, bitter, but also sour. It was like meat, fish, and also fruit... It made me feel full.”

Simply bringing it up seemed to make him salivate.

“...Could it be connected to the underworld, like Persephone’s kidnapping?” My mentor muttered to himself.

Unlike Rin, I had no idea what he was talking about.

“How about you just bring him back to the Clock Tower and make him your student, Sir?”

She probably meant it light-heartedly, so she couldn’t have anticipated our reaction. Me and my mentor immediately froze and stared at her.

“What? What’s up with you two?”

“No, nothing’s wrong.”

I felt a lump of some kind growing inside my chest, but I didn’t know what it was.

“Miss Tohsaka,” My mentor said, changing the topic. “Could we stay here for a little while?”



There was darkness as far as the eye could see.

This was because it was a place no light could reach— the bottom of the ocean. Because they could not photosynthesize here, plant life was scarce. However, plenty of deep-sea fish thrived here in the mysterious depths.

Today, one thing diving down to the seabed was completely different to a deep-sea fish. Even in the absence of light, it was possible to discern its color, which was a pearly white.

Many people were quite familiar with this specific shade of white, as it was the color of bone.

The thing diving was covered by an exoskeleton with a texture similar to bone, too. It was over two meters tall and around two hundred kilograms. As it stepped across the ocean floor, sand swirled in little gusts around its feet.

One could call it a giant made of bone.

The giant raised its trunk-sized arms, and then smashed them onto the floor before him with a clang.

“...Good job, Tangere.” Came a voice.

Something that was even larger than the bone giant appeared in the darkness. It looked like an incubator that contained a giant egg.

The bone giant rubbed against the metallic surface of the incubator-like thing, revealing a decaying pattern.

“Ah... the coat of arms of the Door of Preservation (*Guénon*).”

The coat of arms resembled a long ribbon that twirled into a triple helix, making the ovoid object seem trapped in a coffin instead.

This way, it was a vessel for both arrival and passing, as if it wasn’t already strange enough.

The bone giant examined it for a while before it gave a low moan of despair.

“...Its contents are missing.” It said mournfully. However, it quickly issued itself another command, as if it wanted to get over its grief.

“Stay hidden, Tangere.”

“Yes, My Creator.”

With this, the giant’s figure faded into the ocean’s current.

—

[1] The founding ruler of the Malacca Sultanate was Parameswara, also known as Iskandar Shah. He founded the Malacca Sultanate after the place he originally ruled, Singapura/the island of Temasek was attacked by the Javanese. Parameswara was the last king of Singapura, which was founded by Sang Nila Utama (who may not have actually existed?). Sang Nila Utama was either the son or grandson of Raja Chulan, the ruler of the Chola kingdom in South Asia, who was supposedly descended from Alexander the Great.

I found this article interesting:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351038029_Sang_Nila_Utama_Separating_Myth_from_Reality_BiblioAsia_16_2_58_-64

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[2] Translated more literally, it should be “eight arms would be closer to the supposed three-headed, six-armed.” 三頭六臂 is a metaphor for magical abilities of Buddhist origin, but some legendary people actually had like three-headed six-armed war forms, such as Nezha, I think. I need to double-check this information.

◆ 第二章 ◆
-Chapter 2-



~Part 1~

“*Anfang!*”

The incantation echoed in the mangrove forest.

The Gandr bullet Rin released divided itself as it shot forward, drawing a spiral in the air.

“*Pseudo-Edelsteine. Seben, sechs, fünf, spiegel, blume, blühen und stolz sein!*
(Simulated Gemstone. Bloom, seventh, sixth, fifth mirror and flower!)"

Her magecraft blossomed into a kaleidoscope of colors made of curses powerful enough to knock someone into a coma with just a scratch.

However, all of it was deflected before my eyes by the translucent arms that grew from Ergo’s back. The phantasmal limbs knocked away Rin’s magic bullets with the ease of shattering glass.

Even though the young man was unhurt from an attack powerful enough to defeat several dozen mages, Rin did not give up.

This time, she used an unexpected technique that fit the pirate base that we were currently inside, the Bajiquan Tieshankao. Though she explained that she was still practicing this skill, her enhanced kicks were by no means inferior to those of a master martial artist. This way, Rin drove Ergo from the muddy mangroves and onto the rocks, where she would have an advantage.

Then, she planted her feet, using momentum to strike her opponent’s back with a practiced move. I couldn’t help but be reminded of a mountain of iron.

However, this strike was also blocked by Ergo’s translucent limbs, which wove into a shield. Before the rest of his arms could catch Rin, she leapt backwards while continuing to shoot Gandr bullets to keep Ergo busy. I caught sight of a few holes that were starting to form because of the bullets that had missed.

“*Der sechsfache Stern! Vogelkäfig der bindet—*
 (The sixfold star! The birdcage of binding)”

Something had begun to form in one of the caverns nearby which Rin’s Gandr had torn apart. I realized that, along with the way she had stomped her feet early, was also a part of her magecraft.

“—*Schließung, Kette der Finsternis!*
 (Lock, chains of darkness!)”

Several dark ropes burst from the earth and captured Ergo’s phantasmal limbs. It was a trap.

Rin’s strategy was such: if her Gandr was blocked, she would switch to martial arts. If her martial arts were blocked, she would switch back to using Gandr. If even this was blocked, she would begin to use more complicated magecraft to fight her enemy. It was a strategy designed in anticipation for anything that her enemy had in store. What battles must she have experienced to use a strategy like this?

Her real goal had probably been the chains of darkness she had just summoned, which were able to restrain him. It reminded me of an ancient giant being sealed by chains.

Suddenly, a voice sounded from behind me.

“...Your consciousness is inside you, but you should look beyond yourself. Ergo, your body doesn’t respond because you’re consciously willing it to. I can’t be sure what kind of magecraft constructed those arms, but they’re clearly closely connected with your true nature. Don’t think about what you’re doing. Feel it.”

Still restrained, Ergo collapsed to the ground, groaning.

The faint light of her Magic Circuits glowed from Rin’s left arm as she continued to feed her Od into her spell, strengthening the chains that bound Ergo.

The voice behind me continued to calmly give the young man suggestions.

“Remember that your phantasmal arms are made of Magical Energy. The only reason why Miss Tohsaka can capture you is because you don’t think of them that way. You can

think of those ropes as shadows. Can a shadow tie you up? Don't overthink it. It's an illusion."

"Don't...overthink" Ergo murmured, his words muffled by his mudstained arm.

Then, in the space of a few seconds, the phantasmal limbs on his right side escaped Rin's chains and disappeared. When the chains reached toward him again, the limbs reappeared and swept them away with the ease of blowing out a candle.

"You've got to be kidding me! How did you destroy my magecraft like that!?"

Ergo didn't reply. Instead, he charged toward Rin like a bullet, swinging his arms and knocking Rin's Gandr from the sky.

Though it looked like his arms had made contact with Rin, that was just an illusion.

Once those translucent fingers approached Rin, they began to spin furiously. The enormous limbs glided right past Rin even though the arms were large and bulky. I later learned that this was reminiscent of the Huajin technique, something often found in Chinese martial arts.

"Focus on your core. The arms themselves do not have a weight or shape."

Though Ergo seemed tired, he stood up again after hearing those words.

"Don't use your eyes to search for your target. Use your arms."

Ergo's phantasmal arms emerged once more and swung towards Rin. Rin tried to use her triple-enhanced fists to break them apart, but she was outnumbered. The efforts of her defensive magecraft were gradually crumbling.

Rin was approaching a breaking point. She parried one final attack before she took out a shining jewel.

"That's it!"

I wondered what terrifying things she was capable of with this type of magecraft, as they were her true area of expertise.

However, before she could do anything—

“—That’s enough!”

A silhouette slowly walked out from the shadow of the mangrove trees.

It was my mentor, who had just been behind a defensive Bounded Field for protection. I stood behind him as another way to protect him. In this regard, my mentor was so cautious he could be considered cowardly.

“It’s not bad,” my mentor commented, an eye squinting closed. “Miss Tohsaka, your combination of martial arts and magecraft does work well. However, you’re still too reliant on tricks. You should focus more on your magecraft.”

“Thanks for the advice, Sir.” Rin replied with a slight pout. “Don’t you think it’s unfair that you’re only helping Ergo?”

“That’s because I’m trying to bring out Ergo’s abilities through training. I could also hand the job to Gray, but your magecraft is more ideal because it’s more...forthright. ...If that’s just a result of your nature, what more can I say.”

“What a great way to put it, Professor.”

“If that wasn’t the case, why else would you reach for those jewels in a training match? Do you even realize how many classrooms you and Luvia blew up that way?”

My mentor turned away from the speechless Rin and toward the young man.

“Did you feel anything, Ergo?”

“I... don’t think I quite understand.”

“Hm. I thought practical training would align your mind and body and help bring back your memories, but I was wrong. It was not completely in vain, though.”

Though his phantasmal arms had disappeared, my mentor still put his hand on Ergo’s back.

“It appears that those six arms aren’t all the same.”

“They aren’t all the same...?”

“The first one that escaped from Miss Tohsaka’s restraints and dispelled her magecraft was the one on the upper right. It most likely has the ability to interfere with spiritual entities. It reminds me of something possessed by a spirit, or a spirit that has been summoned and contained... Even so, it seems strange that arms like these could be distinguishable in such a way. Is it the same for the other ones, too...?”

Once my mentor began to think about the technical details, I was basically clueless.

However, it made me happy to hear my mentor mutter to himself in such an annoyed yet strangely excited voice. It was a bit like what he would do if he was at an impasse while gaming by himself in his London flat, although it might not be quite right to compare this situation to a video game.

“So, about the mysterious thing that you ate...”

Just as my mentor began to speak, he was interrupted by a peculiar growl. Everyone’s eyes were immediately drawn to its source.

“...Sorry, I’m a little hungry.”

Seeing Ergo’s embarrassed admission, Rin and I laughed in unison.

“...Alright, let’s go back to your base and have lunch.” My mentor declared with a sigh.

[1] The ruby text isn’t a translation of the German, but a translation of the furigana.

[2] Bajiquan (lit. Eight-Extremities Fist) is a type of intense Chinese martial arts.

Tiemenkao (lit. Iron Gate Technique) is an especially intense branch. Kirei uses this type of martial arts.

[3] A martial arts technique that focuses on dealing with a flood (the enemy’s attacks) by “guiding the flow of the water” rather than “building a dam to stop it”.

~Part 2~

“You guys are so dusty!”

“The skinny fox is back!”

Upon our return to the island, the children surrounded us like a whirlwind. The sand they kicked up glittered in the dazzling sunlight.

“...Don’t you all think that’s enough...” My mentor said, trying to rid himself of the sand that got in his face.

“Oh, he got mad!” The children exclaimed, laughing. Some of them were barefoot, while others wore ratty sandals. The ones that had been guarding the base were probably the older ones here. Most of them spent their time playing in the shallows. Possibly because my mentor and I were new to the place, they pestered us with great enthusiasm. I had never experienced something like this before since I was basically the youngest one in my hometown, so I was at a loss as to what to do.

“Ihihihi! You say you’re not good at dealing with kids, but they seem to like you!”

“...It troubles me, though.” I sighed.

Maybe the atmosphere of this place had affected me. The warm wind that blew across my face was nothing like London or my hometown. Though I was right by the sea, it wasn’t as humid as I had expected. The air had a pleasing quality to it, as did the colorful scenery that surrounded us.

With the echoing waves and the clouds that floated by lazily, this place could make anyone relax. It had been many years since I felt this way.

“Since it’s a holiday, you should loosen up and enjoy yourselves! If you two stay the way you are, you’re going to miss out on all the fun!”

“To be honest, I think it’s a bit late for that.” I commented. “I just hope my mentor’s getting as much rest as he can.”

I turned to see my mentor sitting on a mangrove stump. Though this was possibly the best place in the world to relax, my mentor's expression was anything but content. Maybe it was because of the training session just then, but I figured he was thinking of something else. Although, I could see him holding a portable game console that had been waterproofed with magecraft. I could also tell that he was trying to hide it from the children who would doubtlessly steal it from him.

There was someone else that was on my mind.

“Ergo!”

It appeared that the red-haired young man was also being pestered by the children. He sat cross-legged in a circle of them, looking drowsy. Though he still reminded me of a puppy, he was now like a giant tree that gave the children shade.

With a yawn, Ergo reached out to a boy who was sitting on his legs and buried his face into the boy's messy hair.

“It smells nice.”

“Shouldn’t it stink?”

“No, I think it smells like the sun.”

His voice also reminded me of something warm and fluffy. I inadvertently walked over to him.

“Falling asleep?”

“...Yes. I usually take a nap after lunch,” he replied, yawning again.

Half of his face was obstructed by his red hair, reminding me of a fur seal. Even though I was usually scared of talking to people I didn’t know, he seemed very approachable.

“This place is so warm and comfortable. I really like it here.”

“...I agree.”

His attitude was not like a mage's at all. Maybe I had spent so much time around mages that I had forgotten how normal people acted.

"Normal". What a strange word to use to describe a modern pirate with amnesia.

A girl walked over brandishing a pair of scissors.

"Come here, Ergo! Let me help you cut your hair!"

"Thank you, Lana." He said, nodding. He followed the girl to a chair on the beach a few steps away.

The girl thrust her fingers into his hair and started cutting here and there. Ergo fell asleep almost immediately, completely unaffected by the haircut and the children noisily playing around him.

"Don't worry, he's usually like that." Rin, who had snuck up at some point, said with a shrug.

"Are you talking about Ergo?"

"Yeah. He falls asleep whenever I leave him be. I haven't spoken with him much because he always happens to be sleeping whenever I have time."

"Perhaps something about his nature causes him to require more sleep." My mentor commented from beside us, not looking up from his game console.

"Maybe. In any case, here's some dessert."

I gasped in wonder as Rin brought out a platter of colorful fruits. Though the platter itself was made of cheap plastic, many different types of fruit had been carefully laid atop it, garnished with a thin layer of what looked like chocolate.

"Thank you!"

I tasted a piece. I was first struck by a stunning sweetness, followed by a bitter tang that stung my mouth. The thing that looked like chocolate was actually spicy. It surprisingly helped bring out the original taste of the fruit.

“Sauce is the key to Chinese-style desserts, just like how you might add a bit of salt to make a watermelon taste better.”

“Wow, this is good!” My mentor exclaimed, turning off his game console. As if he hadn’t expected himself to say that, he coughed a few times and changed the topic. “Miss Tohsaka. Since this is a secret pirate base, where do you get these fruits from?”

“We planted them ourselves in the fields over there.”

“...!?”

My mentor stared at Rin in disbelief as she sipped her tea, unfazed.

“Fruit trees don’t grow well in mangrove swamps, so we use magecraft to alter the qualities of the dirt. With enough practice, it’s actually not hard. We can’t plant everything, of course, so we sell our extra stock. Selling fruit is amazingly profitable. It’s almost enough to make me reconsider my career.” Rin said, somewhat triumphantly.

It was exactly what I expected from someone like her, not only because she was a mage or because she was talented even among the other students of the El-Melloi Classroom.

As I pondered this, my mentor continued to stuff his face with fruit. For a moment, he didn’t look miserable.

“Wait, Miss Tohsaka.” He interjected, narrowing his eyes and looking past Rin to the children that frolicked around the sleeping Ergo. “Did you become a pirate consultant for the sake of these children?”

“What do you mean?”

“I heard them mention that most of the children here were abandoned or neglected. If your goal is only to salvage treasure, you don’t need their help. Even if they have the diving skills to help you with your operation, they lack proper equipment. Doesn’t providing that equipment make your plan more costly?”

“In exchange for the cost, I’ve formed a bond with them that doesn’t come easily. Isn’t that also crucial?” Rin answered with a smile, taking a bite of a delicious-looking

lychee. "I taught them how to grow fruits so they believe that my presence has improved their lives. Isn't that a form of equal exchange, one of the basic principles of magecraft?"

"That makes some sense, but you could have chosen any other group of people to form a bond with. Did you do this out of goodness?"

"Of course not," Rin said, toying with a few strands of her hair that fluttered in the sea breeze. "It was just a coincidence. I would feel bad if I let them be after talking to them. I happened across them, so they're a part of my world now. I can't just pretend I never saw them. Needless to say, I also understand that it's a hefty price to pay for feeling bad briefly."

She had a strange way of putting things, but I mostly understood her meaning. Though her words were not direct, they were powerful.

My mentor was silent for a moment as he stared at his student.

"Are you trying to say that you're responsible for the entire world?"

"Certainly! After all, the world has always belonged to me."

Though she sounded resolute, Rin frowned.

"...That would have been my answer if you asked me before. But what about now?"

She raised her hand and spread her fingers, as if she was trying to take hold of the sky. Though the sea around us was far from pristine, the sky was a remarkable shade of blue.

"There's nothing worth being troubled about. In your eyes, you are at the center of the world. As you are a mage, the things that you seek are your path to glory, though I feel like someone might object to it.", my mentor said. Then, he added something as if he just thought of something else. "On the other hand, the person who is currently acting as Luvia's butler would probably accept it without question. He did say that he wanted to become a superhero, after all."

"What!? Seriously!? Did he really say that!?"

(Who's 'he'?) I tilted my head at the mention of someone I couldn't recognize.

"I only had one proper chance to talk to him. Oh, I'm aware it's a silly dream, but don't laugh at him. ...I thought that you two were dating for sure."

"O-of course not! Give me a break! The way you cut to the point is precisely the reason why you have so many enemies!"

My mentor pursed his lips at the unexpected retaliation.

"However, I must say that your guidance during the training session was exactly as the rumors say. Ergo suddenly improved a lot. I'm beginning to understand why Flat gave you all those weird nicknames." Rin said, looking at my mentor as he ate more fruit in an attempt to cover up his speechlessness.

"Actually... I've said this to Gray as well. I'm thinking of quitting my job as a teacher."

I felt like my heart was pierced through once again.

While my first reaction had been to freeze, Rin stared at my mentor intently.

"...Are you serious, Sir?" She asked. "If you are, I have no reason to try and stop you. But it just doesn't seem right. It feels like you were born to teach at the Clock Tower."

"...Maybe that's the case from your perspective." My mentor said, frowning.

It wasn't a look of anger, nor of reproach for not understanding him, but of sadness. It was like the expression of someone who had reached out to the stars only to find out that they were beyond his reach.

"Thank you for the tea and fruit. I'm going for a walk."

"Can I borrow this girl for a while?"

I felt a hand grab me as I was about to follow my mentor. Her grip wasn't tight, but it was enough to hold me in place as my eyes darted around.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to do anything to her.”

“...Sure.”

My mentor turned and left.



“Hehehe.”

Tohsaka Rin giggled as if she had finally caught me, like a sniper peering into a scope or a cat cornering a mouse. It was an expression I had seen many times on Reines, my mentor’s little sister. Nothing good ever became of people who made her smile like that.

“...Um...”

“It’s alright, don’t be nervous. Take a seat! I’m just curious because they call you the secret student of the El-Melloi Classroom. I never thought you would be such a cute girl.”

Though her smile was cheerful, I found it hard to relax. I sat down stiffly, even more awkward than when Ergo held me in the air with his invisible hands.

“I have something else I want to ask before that.” She said, her irises reflecting my face.
“What does he want to do if he’s quitting his job as a teacher?”

“...He said that he wanted to focus on his research.”

“Hm. That’s troublesome.” She said, looking away.

“It’s... troublesome?”

“After all, both of those options are valid. It’s really in that person’s style to fuss over which one to choose.”

I could understand exactly what she was saying. This was exactly the type of problem that would vex my mentor. Both paths would be difficult, perfectly fitting someone who was constantly struggling.

“Is that really everything, though?” Rin continued. “I’m sure he wouldn’t tell you a lie right out, but I feel like he would’ve decided that sooner if that was it. Think about it. Would he have wasted all that time worrying? It doesn’t matter what horse you choose if you miss the betting window by worrying the entire time. I’m sure there’s some other reason.”

She continued ruthlessly in pursuit of the truth. Even so, I felt that she was being merciful because my mentor was the subject of her deductions.

“...I think I might know of another reason.”

“What might that be?”

“.....”

Rin spoke again before I could respond.

“I don’t know how to say this, but you remind me of someone I know.”

I jolted upright in surprise.

Those were words that I feared more than anything else. Actually, upon second thought, maybe not anymore. But either way, it still scared me. It was the reason why I didn’t take off my hood even though I was in the blazing heat of Singapore.

However, instead of following up her statement immediately, Rin switched the topic.

“A few years ago, I participated in a war.”

—

[1] by fur seal, I mean 海のくまさん (sea bear), which could also mean polar bear? I doubt it means either one.

[2] People actually eat fruit with chili powder! I didn’t know that

~Part 3~

Lord El-Melloi II sat down near the beach.

Due to the topography of the island, the mangrove trees covered most of the beach. However, this place was an exception. Here one could peer out into the horizon with a less obscured view. Though it was impossible to see the mainland, the other islands scattered around the Strait of Malacca were visible.

The azure waves ebbed and flowed in the sunlight.

Hearing the sound of footsteps behind him, Lord El-Melloi II turned to look back.

“...You look so different I hardly recognized you, Ergo.”

“Lana cut it a bit shorter than I expected.” The young man said, smiling and feeling the hair behind his neck. Though the haircut wasn’t perfect, it fit him well. Ergo’s intent gaze was full of a childlike innocence, almost enhanced by the pale color of his eyes. If he paid more attention to his appearance and behavior, it’s possible he could pass for an actor.

A look of surprise unexpectedly crossed Lord El-Melloi II’s face.

“Is...anything the matter?”

“No, I was just suddenly reminded of another red-head. Someone who was nothing like you.” He said with a shrug, avoiding his eyes as if to wish the memories away in the back of his mind.

“Can I sit here?” Ergo asked as he approached.

“If you want to.”

Neither spoke while the sunlight, wind, and waves continued to play the same endless, ancient tune.

Then, Ergo spoke up again as if he wanted to keep up with that melody.

“...Is it called the El-Melloi Classroom? The place where you teach, I mean.”

“Yes. It’s a bit like a college seminar. It’s always rowdy, and my students are always up to some impossible nonsense I can’t begin to fathom. Sometimes it feels more like a live music club than a classroom, if you ask me.”

“I think your teaching style is very easy to understand, Sir.” Ergo said with an incredibly serious expression. “I’ve enjoyed the training sessions as well as the meditation that you taught me over the past few days.”

“It’s nothing impressive. Anyone can teach you Gachirinkan.”

“I think imagining the moon is such a wonderful technique.”

Gachirinkan was also known as Kangetsuhou.

Ergo imagined a full moon that gradually increased in size. It started the same size as himself, but grew to be larger than a house, then larger than a street, a country, a continent, the earth, and eventually the entire universe.

“You can grasp anything inside your imagination. That’s the method of this kind of meditation. I think it suits you. Many Buddhist idols are depicted with many arms, such as the Bodhisattvas. They are believed to be able to reach everything. Perhaps your invisible arms are similar,” said Lord El-Melloi II. “If only that was the case...”

Ergo scratched his head, tousling his hair.

“Are you giving up teaching?”

“Oh, so you heard.”

“I was half-asleep when my hair was being cut, but Rin’s voice is always easy to hear.”

“I agree. It also appears that your senses are naturally enhanced then, considering you could hear them from that far away.”

The training session also made it clear that Ergo's physical capabilities were far beyond those of regular people. He was undoubtedly stronger than Lord El-Melloi II even if the latter used enhancement.

"Do you hate being a teacher?"

"...Of course not." Lord El-Melloi II replied, shaking his head slowly. "I've enjoyed it so much more than I could have imagined. The past ten or so years have been like a roller coaster ride, with my head spinning and my stomach aching all day long. Considering I started with five people, it's almost overcrowded now."

There was not a hint of sadness in the mage's words.

Lord El-Melloi II unfolded the sunglasses in his shirt pocket and put them on.

"But, I'm troubled sometimes," he said, looking through the lenses at the rays of sunlight that filtered through a thin layer of clouds. "I once aspired to be a great mage."

His voice was muffled and scattered quickly in the wind.

"...You talk about it in past tense, but you clearly haven't given up." Ergo said slowly.

"You say that as if you've seen through me."

"Sorry."

The young man bowed his head.

"Though, you're not wrong. I talked about it in past tense, but I still haven't given up. Now that I've had my successes as a lecturer, I ought to pass that onto the next generation. In fact, if any of my outstanding students, including Miss Tohsaka, became teachers, I would probably feel proud...But no matter what, my conscience tells me that it's not the path I should continue down."

He had probably put on his sunglasses because his eyes would give away too much of his thoughts.

"You really are a sincere person, just like Rin said."

“She hasn’t been saying terrible things about me, has she?” Lord El-Melloi II asked, making a face.

Ergo shook his head. “Not at all. It’s just that I feel like she shares a secret with you.”

“Well... We don’t share a secret, but we both have our own. Though we were involved in different ones, we both participated in a war.”

“A war?” Ergo asked, tilting his head.

He must have found this word hard to imagine, especially since it was a war that Lord El-Melloi II and Tohsaka Rin partook in.

Behind the lens of his sunglasses, Lord El-Melloi’s eyes closed as if he was reminiscing.



“A few years ago, I participated in a war.”

In response, I swallowed because I realized that I needed to reply.

“...You mean, the Holy Grail War, right? The war where seven mages summon Servants to fight over the Grail, which can grant their wishes.”

“Yep. It’s not a big deal in the Clock Tower, where most think of it as a pointless ritual whose importance is exaggerated because the people over there don’t know enough about the world.

I took part in the fifth one. Our teacher was in the fourth. You probably already know that.”

“...Yes.”

Indeed. I knew it very well.

Although the ritual that involved summoning legendary heroes as familiars sounded absurd, I knew that such a grand, unimaginable event had actually occurred in Japan.

“During that war, I met King Arthur. I was surprised that the legendary king of Britain was actually a young girl, but it must not be surprising to you. After all, you look just like her.”

“.....”

She was right.

It was why my mentor didn’t want Rin to meet me. Just then, he had given up on keeping us apart, probably because it was better to answer her questions since she had already seen my face.

I gave up as well, closing my eyes and bracing myself. After a few seconds of mental preparation, I removed my hood.

For a moment, I heard Rin hold her breath, proving that I looked exactly like the Servant she knew. My mentor had a similar reaction when he first saw me. The terrified expression that had arisen on my mentor’s face was what had persuaded me to escape from my village.

In terms of appearance, the only thing that made me different from King Arthur was the color of my hair. I had heard that she had golden hair, while only one strand of my dull gray hair was golden.

“How old do I look?” I asked her.

“About fifteen? ..Wait, you must be older than that, right?”

“Yes.” I answered, nodding. “My body has not grown since around three years ago.”

“So, you’re actually around my age?” Rin said, batting her eyes in disbelief.

She quickly covered her mouth with her hands and began to mutter.

“That would make sense... after all, she had the same situation.”

I couldn’t help but feel pained at how quickly she accepted it.

“I have a special relationship with King Arthur, so I don’t look like I’ve aged. My mentor always wanted to help me, so he’s been using his free time to research all kinds of things...”

“Is that why he wants to focus on research, because it’s hard to get anything done like that? Ugh, he could have just said that. ...I wouldn’t count on a guy like him to admit to that, though.”

She was right again. I couldn’t say that to my mentor either, because I didn’t want to tarnish his determination.

It was just that...

~Part 4~

“...The Holy Grail War.”

“Well, that's what it was, yes.” After explaining the gist of the war to Ergo, Lord El-Melloi II shrugged. “Thinking back, it really was incredible. I never could have imagined that I would one day teach another participant of the Holy Grail War. On second thought, though, my teacher did as well. Maybe that's just fate.”

“...Fate, is it?”

“It's quite important to mages.”

“I still don't understand what's painful to you, Professor.” said Ergo, switching the topic suddenly. So suddenly that the Lord couldn't help but raise his eyebrow. “Maybe there's a deeper reason why you want to quit teaching, but I only have a few months of memory. I don't have enough experience to understand it.”

After a pause, he continued in a quieter voice.

“...I'm scared.” He muttered. “Even though I lost my memory, everyone here is so nice to me. The weather is wonderful. So are the people and the food.”

“It sounds like food is very important to you.”

“Sorry.”

He bowed his head again.

“But, what if I killed someone?” Ergo said, one word at a time. “What if I was a terrible person before I lost my memory? What if I made a lot of people sad?”

“.....”

Lord El-Melloi II silently regarded the sincerity of the young man in front of him.

“I don’t understand anything. My memory, the invisible arms behind me, my enhanced senses... None of them make any sense to me.”

“Do you not want your memory back?”

In response to Lord El-Melloi II’s question, Ergo looked away. His gaze drifted to the tiny crabs that stumbled drunkenly around on the sand, and then to the sea foam that battered the shore.

“Since I met you, I’ve realized some things, such as the arms on my back, and how I’m always hungry.”

“Hunger, huh.” Lord El-Melloi II muttered.

“Yes. That’s all I can remember.”

The call of a bird rang through the air. It came from a great myna, a species of birds with black feathers and a stunningly yellow beak which was common in this region. Its cry was close to that of another similar species, the common hill myna.

“I don’t know if it will ever be fulfilled, but I must keep walking toward it... I guess that’s how it is when it comes to a dream. I don’t know if you feel the same way.” Lord El-Melloi II said, switching topics again.

“No, it’s the same for me.”

Both of them turned to look toward the horizon, where the ocean still churned and frothed.

“Maybe we’re more similar than I thought.”

“Can I join the El-Melloi Classroom?”

“You’re not a mage. I’m only teaching you because I’m traveling.”

“Thank you. That’s enough for me.” Ergo said with a smile, which caused Lord El-Melloi II to look away again.

“As for what you ate...”

Just as he was about to change the topic yet again, the young man suddenly froze. He clamped down on his temples with his trembling hands as his eyes widened.

“It’s...calling...to me?”

“Ergo?”

Realizing that something was wrong, Lord El-Melloi II scanned the surroundings and discovered something strange.

“What’s...this...?”

Something unusual was happening to the ocean— No, that was a severe understatement. Even the beach that surrounded Ergo and Lord El-Melloi II was starting to be affected. Countless white objects were floating up from the water and the sand.

“Bones...?!”

As he said, the mysterious objects were like bones.

Magecraft that allowed bones to be controlled existed, and fell under the category of Spiritual Evocation. However, this was on a completely different scale. The bones that continued to surge forth surrounded the two of them in similar forms of that like a giant spider, a wolf, and a bird, yet seemingly violated the laws of physics all at once.

“...!”

Lord El-Melloi II fired a magic bullet at the mass of bone. Though he was only a mediocre mage, even he should have made an impact. However, the spider deflected his bullet easily. It only left a burn mark on the smooth, gray surface of its limbs.

It didn’t take long for the controller of these creatures to appear from the depths. The strange familiars parted with each of their master’s steps, which sank deep into the sand as a result of its weight.

“A giant...made of bone...?”

“This is a warning from the Atlas Institute, Lord.” declared the giant as seawater dripped from its gleaming body, made of the same material as the familiars that surrounded it.

“The Atlas Institute?”

Ergo seemed to recall Lord El-Melloi II mentioning that name when he was talking to Rin. It was the name of one of the three Mages’ Associations.

“Please hand us that young man, Lord El-Melloi.”

“What does the Atlas Institute want with him? Why are you even here? This isn’t the Altas Institute’s domain. Is Ergo one of your alchemists?”

“This does not concern you.” Said the giant, not answering any of his questions. “Just give us the boy. Even though we are both from Mages’ Associations— No, especially because we are both from Mages’ Associations, we will not elaborate on our request.”

The army of familiars left no space for negotiation, with armor that could nullify magic bullets and power that probably rivaled modern militaries.

Lord El-Melloi II turned to the red-haired young man.

“...Sir...”

Ergo still clutched his temples. He didn’t understand the situation either. He probably didn’t know what meaning the words “Atlas Institute” held, either. Not even Lord El-Melloi II could make sense of the situation despite his standing in the Clock Tower.

Even so, Ergo smiled weakly.

“Don’t...worry about me...”

“.....”

Lord El-Melloi II bit his lip, taking off his sunglasses and removing a cigar from his jacket pocket. Its tip had already been cut off, so he lit it with a snap of his fingers.

“...How unfortunate.” Lord El-Melloi II said in disappointment, letting the smoke calm his trembling fingers.

“A wise choice, Lord.” The bone giant said in the same tone of voice as before.

In response, Lord El-Melloi spoke to the giant as if it was a student that failed the test by a point or two.

“If you had arrived ten minutes earlier, you could have taken him. If you spoke directly to him and not to me, there would have been no room for me to intervene. I always tell my students to take care of the messes they get themselves into.”

“...What do you mean, Lord El-Melloi?”

“Even though it’s only temporary, Ergo is now my student.” Lord El-Melloi II said, staring straight into the bone giant’s eyes as the sparks from his cigar melted into the sea breeze. “I refuse to sell out my students.”

“Lord El-Melloi!”

“You’ll have to excuse me, but I insist you add ‘the second’. That name alone is too heavy for my shoulders to bear.”

With that, he threw his cigar, releasing a cloud of smoke. It was no mere smokescreen. The smoke had been woven with magecraft and could block the bone giant’s senses. It was one of the few mystic Codes that the young Lord carried with him.

“Come on, we’re running!” Lord El-Melloi II whispered urgently, grabbing Ergo’s wrist.

“Professor...”

“That’s not an opponent I can beat! We need to think of a strategy...”

“Your assessment is correct.”

With that, an explosion sent the two of them flying. It didn't take long for Lord El-Melloi II to realize that a few of the familiars around them had self-destructed.

“Blocking my senses does not stop us from crushing you. It may make us less efficient, but we will still take him.“

More explosions happened one after the other. Naturally, Lord El-Melloi II's defensive magecraft was no match for them. Though, with that in mind, even though it could not stop the impact of the blasts, it prevented shards of the familiars from piercing their skin until the shards suddenly stopped in the air.

Lord El-Melloi II turned to see Ergo standing next to him with sweat beading on his face, blocking the shards with his translucent arms.

“Ergo...!”

“So that is how your arms can be used. It seems we are not too late.”

The giant parted the smokescreen with a wave of one hand and sent the other plunging toward Ergo and Lord El-Melloi II.

Ergo's arms moved to intercept them. Three translucent hands met one giant fist with a deafening clang, like the sound a truck would make if it slammed into a gong. It was probably a result of their clashing spiritual qualities. The sand around their feet split as if an asteroid had struck it.

“...Not bad.” The bone giant said, inspecting its hand. Its fingers had been reduced to a mangled mess. If the giant hadn't been many times larger than Ergo, it might have been swept away instead.

The giant began to move in closer to Ergo and Lord El-Melloi II. Suddenly, a black curse shot through the air, igniting the surface of its skull.

The giant turned to look at the source of the attack, which hadn't come from the land. It didn't seem surprised as a motorboat came into view, carrying the person who had fired the magic bullet.

“I’ve kept you waiting for long enough!” Rin Tohsaka shouted as she prepared for another shot like a gunslinger in a Western.



The engine of the motorboat whirred, churning the ocean surface into a white froth.

Rin shouted at the people on the shore as she steered the boat with one hand.

“So that’s why the alarm system was going off! That thing doesn’t look like it’s here to invite us to a party.”

“...How do you know how to drive that?”

“It’s much easier than driving a car! Although, I had to keep repairing and replacing them, so it cost me a fortune.”

Though she had only been around pirates for half a year, it seemed that she had mastered motorboat driving. It was probably also the result of magecraft, considering that reducing the friction between the boat and the water or adjusting the pressure of the wind was a piece of cake for her.

The bone giant’s familiars reacted to Rin’s presence and swooped toward her from behind.

“*Anfang!*”

In response to this attack, Rin fired a stream of Gandr bullets without even looking at them and chanted a three-count spell.

“*Identifizieren, bestägen und kontinuierlich feuern—!*
(Identify, confirm, and fire continuously—!)”

More Gandr shots appeared, battering the birds with power no less than that of a gatling gun. The curses, which were powerful enough to have a physical impact, shattered the swarm of familiars. Her first attack succeeded in regaining control of the air.

The giant turned to the motorboat that had wiped out its first wave of familiars and turned the tables brilliantly.

“Do you plan on interfering as well, Rin Tohsaka?”

“Oh? So you’ve already done research on us? I should have expected that from the Atlas Institute.” Rin said with a satisfied smile.

“It was easy to identify you using magecraft, an amateur who arrogantly calls herself the pirate consultant, as well as the Lord who came all the way from the Clock Tower.”

The giant glanced towards the familiars surrounding the two people on the beach. At this signal, they narrowed their circle further, as if they were signaling that they could kill their victims whenever they wanted.

“Well? What will you do now? Do you plan on destroying my familiars from over there?”

“There’s no need for that.” Rin’s smile widened. “Gray!”

Hearing her signal, I leapt out from the mangroves, slashing the familiars surrounding my mentor and Ergo into pieces. At her instruction, I had snuck into the forest when the giant was distracted. Bone spiders were parted from their legs, while wolves slid onto the sand, motionless.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, I grabbed my mentor and Ergo and jumped with my enhanced feet.

Before we landed, I swung my scythe again to clear away the bone familiars that had gathered, telling them with my eyes and my blade that I would not allow them to lay a finger on my mentor and Ergo.

“Thank you, but could you be a little gentler next time, Lady?”

“I will if I can.” I said, standing next to my mentor kneeling on the ground, coughing.

I frowned. Something about the familiars seemed strange.

“They’re not undead...!”

“Exactly,” my mentor said, nodding as if he had expected it. “The Atlas Institute doesn’t treat Mystery the same way we do. Though some work has been done on those familiars, they are only bones, constructions of calcium phosphate.”

—*“I’ve met an alchemist of the Atlas Institute before. They use a mixture of modern technology and magecraft.”*

I finally understood what my mentor had meant. This came as a relief to me. It might sound weird, considering that I was once a grave keeper, but I had a deadly fear of ghosts and spirits. Even now, simply sensing their presence was enough to send shivers down my spine and freeze my heart with fear.

Against these opponents, though, I was not scared at all.

“Ergo, can you protect my mentor?”

“...I think I should be able to.” The young man said with a slight nod.

It was at this point that I finally noticed a change in him.



“Have you cut your hair?”

“Does it look weird?”

“No. You look just as kind as I imagined.”

Though I considered myself to be shy, I found it easy to talk to him. Maybe it was the result of the same attributes that made the children like him.

However, for some inexplicable reason, I felt just as stiff as I did when I fought spirits.

“Strange,” Ergo said, feeling his stomach. “Every time I’m around you, I feel hungry.”

Though he had probably said it without thinking too much, his strange statement left a larger impression on me than it should have. Regardless, now was not the time to ask about it.

“If you can move, Ergo, you should go as well.” Said my mentor.

“But Sir—“

“That giant is too powerful to be defeated by one person. I know how to run away. I’ll be fine as long as you two can deal with him.”

My mentor had a point. It was worth the risk.

“—Let's go!”

With that, I leaped into the air again, cutting down more bone familiars every time I landed. If they were only structures made of bone, there was no use trying to get rid of all of them when they would just spring right back. All I needed to do was clear a path for myself.

I cut down one, two, and then a third. But before my scythe could reach a fourth, something else knocked it away.

It was Ergo's phantasmal limbs. He had caught up to my enhanced pace by simply running. I knew he had superhuman abilities, but I hadn't realized that he could be this fast. Though I didn't know how to use proper magecraft, I could enhance myself better than most mages. I hadn't thought that he would be able to keep up this easily.

“I'll deal with that one!” Ergo shouted. His translucent hands crushed the familiars in front of us.

The speed, strength, and reach of his attacks were also stunning, as if the fact that he had many translucent hands on his back was not surprising enough by itself. He was able to flatten the familiars from tens of meters away, leaving only debris behind on the sand.

With his help, I would be able to reach the bone giant controlling all the familiars, I thought.

“Add, release first stage restrictions!” I shouted as I made my decision.

“Ihihihi! Yes, that's how you should deal with a big guy like that!”

My scythe transformed into a hammer as big as a battering ram before Add could finish his sentence. As its form suggested, it had the destructive power to batter down the gates of a castle.

Magical Energy spewed from the back of Add, transforming acceleration into centrifugal force. At the same time, I felt the bone giant's fist pass by millimeters from my face. I endured the wind pressure, which nearly knocked me away, and smashed my hammer at the bone giant—!

The sound that the impact generated split the ocean's surface. It was not only a result of the hammer, but also because the giant had been blown into the water.

Even so, the giant was still intact. It had probably increased its defense moments before the impact. Though I hadn't expected my blow to be lethal, it should have been strong enough to shatter the armor of a tank. What kind of technique had it used to make its bones so strong?

Something didn't feel right.

It was as if the giant had known that I would attack with my battering ram from the very beginning.

Cradling its injured arm, the giant stood up to its waist in the water. However, before it could do that—

“—Rin!”

The motorboat had turned around, and was now charging toward the giant at full speed like an arrow. Atop it, Rin raised one hand.

“Ugh, so annoying! In that case, I'll use the attack I've been saving!”

The gemstone between her fingers began to shine with the colors of the rainbow.

“*Anfang!*”

With this, her Magic Crest was activated. I could see a complicated pattern that glowed with faint blue light appear on her left arm. Magical Energy was being drawn out from the engraved pattern and into the gemstone.

“You said I should believe in my magecraft and keep refining it, right, Sir?” Said Rin. Then, she began to incant.

“*Vierzehn, neun, acht. Drei Schwerter, Synergie, eine Mulde!*”

A spiral made of overlapping light appeared in her outstretched hand. It was the highest amount of power a modern mage could hope for. Though the power of the superimposed gemstones reached the realm of forbidden magecraft, Rin was able to fully master them.

Her attack made the giant shudder violently for the first time. However, it still did not fall.

“How sturdy are you!” Rin complained. “I don’t even think Heracles could defeat you without dying once!”

“So your attribute is conversion? Interesting.”

The giant had definitely been damaged this time. Its head had caved in, revealing nothing but the sky peeking out from the other side. Then, the hole disappeared like a video being played backwards.

“It’s not because it’s sturdy.” I heard Ergo mutter. “There’s nothing there.”

What seemed like a giant was only a shell. Its true body was somewhere else. If the giant was only a puppet, it made sense that it could regenerate itself indefinitely.

“Gray! Rin!”

My mentor’s warning came a second too late.

Suddenly, white chains erupted from the ground and captured Ergo and I. They somehow managed to keep us trapped despite my enhancement and Ergo’s translucent arms. From the corner of my eye, I could see that Rin had also been restrained.

This trap had probably been set up from the moment I sent the giant flying with my battering ram. Though Rin was usually cautious, she let down her guard at the sight of her opponent being blown away.

Thoughts raced through my head. It should have been the first time our opponent had seen my battering ram and Rin's magecraft. How had they prepared for it as if they knew that we were going to pull these tricks?

“Gah...!”

Some air managed to escape my compressed lungs. Though I had been able to avoid being completely crushed by jamming my hammer between myself and the chains, the alarm in my head was shrieking at maximum volume. The chains continued to tighten with enough force to crush iron.

“OwowowowImgoingtobreakimgoingtobreak!” Cried Add.

“Add...!”

I desperately tried to think of a way to prevent myself from being squashed. If the true body was indeed somewhere else like we had guessed, the giant did not have any vitals. Though it might have had something like a core, I didn't know how to identify it.

In that case, what if I just pulverized the entire giant?

Since the battering ram hadn't been able to turn the giant's bones into dust...

I clenched my teeth, letting my Magic Circuits run at full capacity and forcing myself to breathe to bring more fuel to power my heart. It wasn't for my lungs, or for my red blood cells. I was turning my heart into a Magical Energy Reactor through breathing.

If those chains of bone could crush iron, this could melt steel. “Power” surged through my Magic Circuits like a charging dragon, or a roller coaster through lava.

My existence was slowly being replaced from its core. This dazzling “power” was pushing against my sense of self. Even so, I grabbed onto the wick that was about to disappear as I resisted the pressure of the chains around me.

Gradually, the pressure eased. The battering ram in my hands also began to transform into something else.

“Sir, please give me permission to unseal the holy lance!”

White light gushed from my hands, bringing with it power that I could barely control. It was Add’s hidden true form. A hurricane of Magical Energy whirled around the rotating box. Before, I could only activate the second stage by consuming the Magic Power of the surrounding area. Now, I only needed myself and Add.

“*Gray...Rave...(Darken Celebrate)*” I chanted in a trancelike state.

I only needed one word from my mentor to unleash its final form.

“*Crave...Deprave...(Want Corrupt)*”

“That’s enough.” Said a calm voice.

It had come from a person with long blue hair who looked about twenty-five. Though the person’s features were androgynous, her slender body told me that she was a woman. Her unnaturally blue hair and purple eyes also fit the atmosphere she gave off. A navy blue tie fluttered in the wind from the collar of her uniform-like coat.

The constant swaying of her tie and hair made it feel as if she was floating in the sea breeze. Combined with her beautiful pursed lips, which were reminiscent of those of a Greek sculpture, I found it hard to believe that she was a living being like myself.

She almost looked... artificial.

However, these thoughts were quickly tossed to the back of my mind.

My trump card had been deactivated before it could be unleashed. That was because the sword made of bone in the woman’s hand was pressed against my mentor’s throat.



(I need to...save him...) thought Ergo despite the blinding pain.

Ergo had only known Lord El-Melloi II and Gray for a few days. Rin, no more than a month.

To Ergo, they were all there for most of his life. In the brief time which he had gotten to know them, they had become irreplaceable.

(I need to save him....!)

This thought was the only thing that drove his body to move. His phantasmal arms wrenched open the chains bit by bit.

However, that thought suddenly vanished from his mind.

His gaze was wrenched away along with his consciousness. He even forgot about the chains that restrained him.

He was looking toward the brilliant light that the gray girl had unleashed. It was hard to imagine something like that from someone who was always so shy and self-conscious.

An unknown urge appeared in Ergo as he beheld the light, which shone like lightning that could tear the sky apart.

That urge was like a disaster, like a disease, like hell.

(No!)

The young man let out a pained cry as he desperately tried to resist it. It was futile. The impulse tore through his body and electrified his brain. Reason was long gone, replaced by hellfire that burned through his bones and nerves. It ravaged his blood vessels like a meteor turning hotter and brighter as it sailed through the atmosphere.

It was the same as the power that had struggled out from within the girl's body just then.

(...It hu...)

Nebulously, it took form.

The voice he so desperately wanted to shut out.

And yet, he didn't even have the strength to cover his ears. All his phantasmal hands, all of them sealed, unable to even breathe. Even the flow of blood was blocked, his face going near-purple in an instant.

(...hurts... It hurts...!)

The more he trembled, the more intense the desire became.

A feeling he never wanted to feel towards that girl. And yet, in front of the light pouring from that girl, his ego melts into the void like a dusting of frost in the sun.

“Ah...!”

Inside Ergo, only one concept, one singular thought remained.

The desire to devour.

[1] Alternatively, weigh anchor? (拔錨)

~Part 5~

My body froze when I saw the sword at my mentor's throat.

The lance of light that pointed toward the bone giant could be unleashed if I as much as twitched my fingers. It was impossible for me to change my target to the new arrival. Even if I somehow managed to do so, unlike Rin, my mentor wouldn't be able to dodge it.

However, I couldn't just make the light disappear, either. I felt sweat trickle down my face.

This kind of stalemate could not last for long. The Magical Energy in my body kept flowing into the light in my hands. With every breath I took, Magical Energy equivalent to the reserves of an ordinary mage was being used up. If you told someone unaware of the situation about this, they may even be tempted to jump off a cliff because of the sheer amount of Magical Energy being wasted.

Just as I felt my body was being drained of the last drops of energy, and the realization of my mentor's imminent death dawned upon me, someone spoke up.

“Wait.”

I only knew one person who could have said such a thing.

“...Sir.”

“Since you have gone to the risk of exposing your true form to threaten me at sword point, you must have something you want to say.” Said my mentor as he scowled at his assailant.

Despite his seemingly confident attitude, I noticed that his fingers were trembling behind his back. I could not help but worry what problems would result from his stubbornness this time.

Thankfully, after a short silence, the blue-haired woman spoke.

“The name of this individual is Latio. Latio Crudelis Hiram.”

Her name brought about an unexpected reaction from my mentor.
“Crudelis...? Isn’t that one of the Six Sources of the Atlas Institute?”

“So, just like a Lord of the Clock Tower?” Rin exclaimed, still restrained.

I could hear her perfectly even though there was some distance between us. I was also shocked by those words.

The woman was from a family that rivaled the twelve Lord families of the Clock Tower? That would explain the alchemy she had used to overwhelm us. In the years that I had been at the Clock Tower, I had learnt of the terrifying magecraft that the other Lords could wield.

“Let us negotiate.” The alchemist from the Atlas Institute said, my mentor’s face reflected in her purple eyes. “Latio has not begun fighting in earnest yet, but neither have you. If we continue our confrontation here, we will only cause more damage to ourselves. We should first determine whether we can reach a compromise.”

“In other words, you showed yourself because you’re out of ideas.”

“I admit that I underestimated you.”

“...Huh, I thought people from the Atlas Institute like you would be more stubborn.” Rin muttered.

Though Latio heard her statement, her expression did not change. “Predictions are only calculations of known elements. If unknown factors are added, it is only natural that there will be discrepancies. From this, we can set up the situation to end in our favor.”

“The Atlas Institute’s Thought Acceleration and Memory Partition,” my mentor pointed out. “The mages of the Atlas Institute consider themselves as calculators, so those two techniques are essential. The former is as the name suggests. The latter involves partitioning the brain into multiple areas that can operate in parallel. Those are what enabled you to effectively predict the future, allowing you to restrain Miss Tohsaka and threaten me before we could reveal our trump card.”

I almost shouted out loud. Had they managed to stay one step ahead of us because they had gathered enough information to predict the future?

“Do you realize that resistance is futile now?”

“Of course. But you chose to threaten me instead of stopping Gray because you have no guarantee that you can protect yourself against our trump card, yes? At the very least, it’s too risky for you to ignore.”

Though his words were provocative, Latio remained composed. Her icy gaze scanned across our surroundings until it stopped at me, causing me to become more anxious.

“Put your weapon away, and Gray will do the same.”

“...Fine.”

At the same time she pulled her sword away from my mentor’s neck, the chains around us also loosened. I slowly began to shut off the light in my hand. I could finally relax a little now.

Rin had been released as well, and was driving the motorboat toward the shore. Ergo was the only one who was still restrained.

“Please let Ergo go as well.”

“Is that what he calls himself?” Latio said, eyeing the young man. “I ca—”

“—You can’t.”

It was not Latio who completed her sentence, but Ergo.

“You mustn’t let go of me. Not now, at least.”

In the next instant, the chains around him snapped. Latio had not loosened them. Instead, Ergo’s phantasmal arms had torn apart the chains which I had barely been able to push aside as if they were made of melted candy.

Two of his six arms extended toward Latio, crushing the bone familiars that rushed forward in an attempt to protect her.

“Stop! Stop it!” Ergo shouted.

It seemed that his phantasmal arms were completely out of control.

Just as it seemed that Ergo’s arms were going to reach her, Latio called out a name.

“Tangere!”

More bone chains descended from the sky, tying up the arms charging toward Latio as well as Ergo. The thing who had accomplished this landed on the beach, sending sand scattering into the air. Though I clearly knew that it was the bone giant, it still took me a few seconds to fully realize that the bone giant who was standing in the waves earlier had jumped onto the beach.

That was not all.

“They were able to analyze and deprogram our magecraft by simply touching it. An impressive feat that would have worked if not for the three layers of wards covering our bones and spongy matter. —This is what you wanted me to do, right, Lady Latio?” The bone giant said in a manly voice.

It was hard to believe that this was the same automaton that had fought us just then, which had been emotionless when it wasn’t delivering Latio’s words. I even saw him shrug like a human being.

“I thought that the alchemists from the Atlas Institute are not allowed to take weapons from the underground storehouse.” My mentor said, also shocked.

“Of course,” Latio replied with a very serious expression. “Tangere and this sword are not from there. They are all Latio’s bones.”

“What?”

“Just as the Eltnam family can control Ethelite as their own nerves, the Crudelis family can control Exoform as our bones. All of the bones you see now are from Latio. As long

as they are part of our bodies, they do not violate the regulations of the Atlas Institute. In fact, the Six Origins of Atlas are all entrusted with this ability so we can continue to expand the abilities of our bodies.”

My mentor’s eyes widened slightly at this.

So this was what the Atlas Institute’s mystery was like. Though they were technically part of the Mages’ Association along with the Clock Tower, they reminded me more of cyborgs from scifi movies or monks that strived to reach the peak of martial arts.

“Tangere’s personality comes from two of Latio’s Thought Partitions that were allowed to grow by themselves, which is why Tangere has such a terrible personality.”

“How heartless! I thought you treated me like a sibling! Your words are heartbreakingly, Lady Latio!”

“Shut up. Also, stop calling Latio that.”

“As you wish, Lady Latio.”

There was nothing inhuman about the attitude of the giant that currently had one hand raised. Add was pretty much the same thing, but it still felt uncanny to see an artificial personality in something capable of human gestures.

“Why do you want Ergo?”

“Because Latio and the others are heirs to an ancient inheritance. Ergo is the inheritance.” The woman said, as if it was obvious.

Ergo, still bound, did not move this time. The new bone chains from the giant named Tangere seemed to be more powerful than his arms.

Rin spoke in his stead.

“That’s...uh...a strange way of putting it. Do you mean that your father or something created Ergo?”

“All you need to know is that three mages—if you will allow Latio to call them that—from three organizations conducted an experiment long ago. Though everyone has long forgotten about it, Latio noticed that the result of that experiment has escaped into the outside world.”

“Three mages from three organizations...?” My mentor muttered. “Is that why he has six phantasmal arms?”

“Hm?” One of Latio’s thin eyebrows went up.

“I noticed that Ergo has been fused with some kind of spiritual factor. It isn’t that hard to find humans possessed by various spiritual entities. Legends of werewolves and fox possessions are quite common. One of my alumni even uses bestial magecraft.”

Possessions by evil spirits happened sometimes in the Christian world. That was why the profession of exorcism existed.

“The varying personalities and properties of each pair of arms confused me before I realized that he could be possessed by more than one spirit. That means that he has one pair of arms for each spirit, which corresponds to the three mages you mentioned. The magecraft they used probably originated from the stability of a triangle. Though the Atlas Institute might have a different practice, it should have also incorporated the Tria Prima of Alchemy, salt, mercury, and sulfur. So each mage brought their own mystery.”

I felt a sense of déjà vu hearing my mentor talk as if he had encountered a mystery where he needed to find the culprit.

My mentor’s theories were based on more than his knowledge of magecraft. He also took the mage behind it into account. I wondered if he could display his unusual ability here in front of the person who claimed to be the heir to Ergo.

Latio frowned slightly.

“...For someone who has not seen the ritual, you know a lot about it.”

“The magecraft I’ve been studying recently is similar, except I’ve been looking in the opposite direction. I want to know how those factors can be removed.”

“.....”

I felt a pain in my chest. My mentor was talking about my problem. He was trying to remove a part of an ancient hero to make my body age again, a goal which he was willing to give up his position as a lecturer for.

“I have also wondered whether these factors can be implanted into a person’s body to create what you could call a Pseudo-Servant, an artificial Heroic Spirit. Perhaps Ergo is something like that.”

“...If that is the case, do you wish to study the spirits that have possessed him?”

“I’m talking about Yomotsuhegui.” My mentor suddenly said.

Rin reacted to this phrase, possibly because it was a legend from her country.

“That’s the story about the dead not being able to return from the underworld, right?”

“Yes. Yomotsuhegui is a Japanese legend, but a similar example, the legend of Persephone, is more famous in the Western world.”

I recalled what my mentor had muttered to himself when he heard Ergo’s story. Perhaps he had already come up with a theory back then.

“The story goes like this. After Hades, the god of the underworld, kidnapped Persephone, the daughter of the goddess of the harvest, Demeter, he offered her the food of the underworld. As a result, Persephone had to remain in the underworld for a duration of time equal to the portion of the food that she ate, even after her enraged mother took her back. ...Other than his name, Ergo only remembers that he ate something that is indescribable in shape and taste.”

Yomotsuhegui.

“Some say that Persephone ate a pomegranate. In many myths and legends, pomegranates are symbolic of human flesh. In that case, what exactly were the pomegranates of the underworld? What does her inability to return to the surface world signify?”

“—Wait a minute!” Rin interjected. As a student who had gathered much more knowledge about magecraft than me, she must have predicted what my mentor was going to say next. She must have realized the true horror of his words.

“That means that Ergo ate...”

“It’s safe to assume that the ritual those mages used was born from this type of legend. Since Persephone and Yomotsuhogui are not from the same part of the world, the principle should be valid across different magecraft organizations. It’s also clear why Ergo was given these factors. Powder made from mummies were once used to prolong life, while people believed that they could become as strong and brave as warriors if they ate their hearts and brains. One subject keeps appearing in this kind of story. That is to say, the human flesh of the land of the dead, or something like it,” my mentor said as if he was giving a lecture. He spoke with such force that made even Latio flinch.

“The Gospel of John says this—‘Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.’ Though this is a sermon, it also shows the ubiquity of the idea that one can take in the divine by eating. In summary—”

After a beat, my mentor revealed the answer.

“—Ergo ate the flesh and blood of gods. Right?”

Everyone fell silent after hearing his great reveal. For a moment, all I heard was the waves.

I had expected my mentor to keep the truth hidden, at least for a little while.

“Not only that, it wasn’t just one god. Ergo’s six phantasmal arms are not his own. Since he has three pairs of arms and three mages worked together, it’s safe to assume that he ate three gods.”

“...As the rumors say, you are not to be underestimated, Lord El-Melloi II.” Latio commented. “You had hardly any clues, yet you were able to reach this point. Surprising, even for the notorious Plunderer.”

“I don’t mind the nickname, but this is hardly a formal hypothesis. Even if someone managed to eat the flesh of a god, it is impossible to use modern magecraft to utilize fragments of the god’s essence. ...No, would it even be possible with the magecraft of the Age of the Gods? Humans shouldn’t be able to contain one god, much less three. Those three mages from three organizations...what kind of sleight of hand did they use?”

“That is a secret,” the woman said with a smile. “But, at least you understand the danger he poses now. Please forgive our rudeness. Latio can provide you with as much compensation as you wish in exchange for Ergo.”

“I made up my mind a long time ago,” Rin said before my mentor could respond. “I can’t have you think that you can barge in out of the blue and kidnap someone I know.”

Rin’s eyes had a defiant glint as she looked fixedly at Latio. I could tell that there was no changing her mind.

“.....”

I simply stood there, stunned.

Ergo had devoured the flesh of gods.

I still couldn’t fully understand what that meant. I wasn’t a mage, so I had no way of knowing how serious and fatal it was.

Or, maybe I understood its meaning too well. I had been instilled with fragments of a hero of the past, so I knew what fate awaited Ergo.

“...Sir...” the young man uttered, still bound. “I think it’ll be better that way...”

“.....”

Latio faced my mentor, who was still silent.

“Do you not respect the will of your students, Lord El-Melloi II?”

“...I refuse.”

“Sir!” Ergo called out again.

“You didn’t say that you wanted to go with her. You said that it will be better that way. You are not following your own wishes, but trying to take the easy way out, and that’s the first thing I tell my students not to do. Keep that in mind. If you want to be one of my students, you must think about what you want to achieve and what you want to become, even if the consequences are against me.”

...Ah. That was how he always was, reaching out to the stars even though he knew that he would never reach them, and standing tall even if he was trembling with fear.

If I was to stand by him, I felt like I should try and stand up a little myself.

“I don’t understand any of this.” I said, shaking my head inside my hood. “I don’t understand anything about the gods that Ergo ate or the inheritance that is owed to you, Ms. Latio. But I know that the children on this island will be sad if Ergo disappears.”

“Ihihihi! You’re right, that would happen!” Add said, turning into a scythe again.

The giant of bone sighed with an “oh dear”. It wasn’t actually breathing, though, so it was only pretending to.

“The negotiations have fallen apart, just as I said, Lady Latio.”

“This is a necessary process.”

“I know, I know. The director won’t reprimand us, but I don’t know if the Crudelis representative will do the same.” Tangere, the bone giant said.

The tension on the beach began to rise again.

More than half of Latio’s bone familiars still remained. Ergo was still restrained. The situation had become less favorable for us, and more information was being calculated by Latio’s Thought Partitioning and Acceleration.

What were we meant to do against an enemy that held the future?

Latio retreated several steps, and then stopped.

From now on, any movement could signal the start of battle.

All of a sudden, something echoed in the sky. It sounded like an eagle's call, which was out of place by the sea.

"Found you."

At this moment, the same thought probably rang through all of our minds. The voice that had just spoken was playful yet deathly frightening.

"This...voice..." Ergo said, shuddering.

"Hahaha, so you remember me? Or perhaps I should say, have you not forgotten me?"

Latio jerked her head up at the sky.

"No way... Mushiki...!"

No one else reacted further.

We were all frozen in shock, unsure what magecraft the new arrival had used.

By the time we came to our senses, we found that the right side of Ergo's head had completely disappeared.

"...Ergo..."

I could hardly call out.

The young man's head had been shaved off from the upper-right side of his nose, leaving a fountain of blood in its place. Unlike the giant, I could see his destroyed skull and the contents that lay inside it. Wondering whether he was alive was pointless. No one could survive without that much of their head.

—In the next moment, a huge phantom hand gushed from Ergo's back like a wing made out of light.



I won't describe the rest in detail.

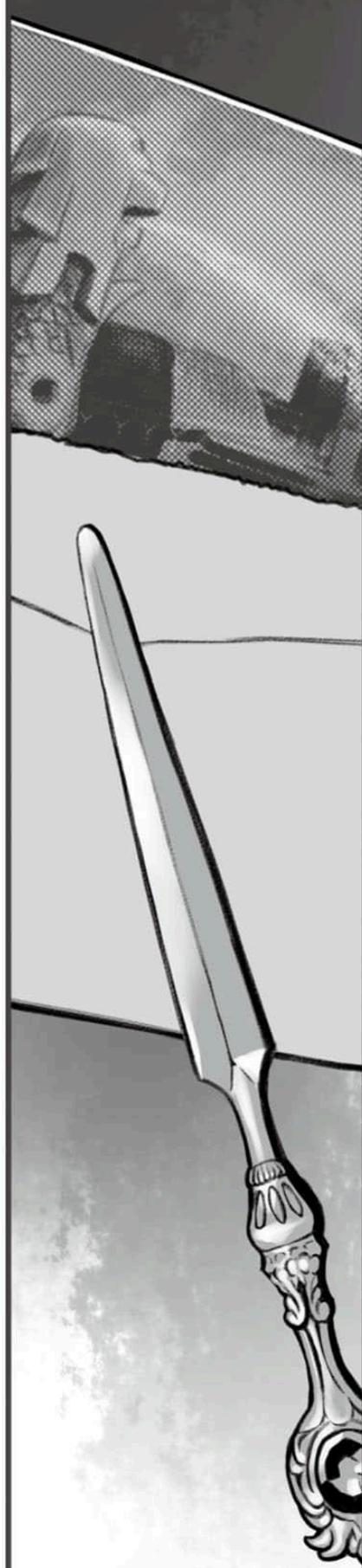
All you need to know is that a miracle that happened on a tiny island in the southeast of Singapore made the news. Most people hadn't taken it seriously because it was covered by a third-rate newspaper, but it was soon dubbed a modern-day Tunguska event.

This is what the news said: the shore of the island was destroyed, as if a meteorite had hit it.

Amazingly, the crater left behind was in the shape of a giant hand.

[1] By that, I mean 餡細工, which is like candy sculpture

◆ 幕間 ◆
-Interlude-



—London.

The capital of the great British Empire, and the world-famous city of fog.

There was a street called Slough Street a short drive away from the city center. Due to the intermittent waves of modernization the city had been through, it was lined haphazardly with an assortment of buildings old and new, giving the impression that it had been pieced together in a rush.

This seemingly quiet district was actually the base of a group of mages—the Department of Modern Magecraft (*Norwich*), a satellite city established by the Clock Tower. It was the smallest out of the twelve major departments, which goes to show how deeply rooted mages were in the city of London.

There was an elegant mansion in the center of the road.

“—What! What do you mean you’re not going to be back for a while, brother!?”

Inside the office of the mansion, a young lady was holding a letter. She looked about eighteen, with lustrous golden hair, blue eyes, the complexion of a bisque doll, and a sadistic expression that could leave a strong impression on anyone.

Her name was Reines El-Melloi Archisorte, the adoptive little sister by succession of Lord El-Melloi II and the true heir to his title.

She hadn’t entrusted the position to Lord El-Melloi II because she wasn’t interested in power. Quite the opposite, her greatest hobby was exercising her power to bring others to her knees. She had just felt that she was too young and inexperienced to take on the responsibility that came with the position of Lord.

Currently, she was glaring sternly at a piece of fine, watermarked paper.

“He even went to the effort of sending it through airmail. It’s postmarked three days ago. If he had called instead, I wouldn’t have let him get away with it. Does he know how much work I have to do to make up for this?! I hope he knows he’ll be stripped of his

title if he slips up! Wait, was that why he decided to send a letter? Ugh, he's really starting to pick up on the Clock Tower's style." She said, her face twisted with anger.

Another voice came from the sofa beside her.

"He probably wants to be rid of the title of Lord as soon as possible, does he not?" Said the woman sitting there in a quiet voice.

She was slightly older than Reines, having already bid goodbye to her childhood like a flower about to bloom. She wore a blue dress over her slender body, and had long eyelashes that seemed to accentuate the slim bridge of her nose. Even the traces of immaturity that had yet to leave her did not take away from her beauty. Together with her spiraling golden hair, she resembled a jewel cut by a talented craftsman.

Her name was Luviaigelita Edelfelt, a student of Lord El-Melloi II.

Behind her stood a strange-looking servant with a Mohawk and a muscular physique that could be seen through his suit, making one wonder if he also worked as a bodyguard.

"Whatever. It's not like he hasn't always been like this. My brother isn't interested in the joys of power. I don't think he can enjoy seventy percent of the pleasures in life. But there's nothing I can do about that. I'm sure he's looking forward to his retirement from being a Lord in a few years time."

There were several years left until Reines would be old enough to graduate from college. Even though she would still need a guardian, she would be able to succeed him as Lord.

However, based on his current performance, many people hoped that Lord El-Melloi II could continue.

"My brother has a bad habit of being good at useless things and getting all kinds of strange achievements. I heard he's being called the Plunderer now."

"I have also heard of his many nicknames, such as 'the rat king who steals valuable secrets'. As a student, I must say that those names are not unfounded."

“Isn’t your family called ‘the world’s most graceful hyenas’?”

“Exactly. We are of the same kind. That is why I think it is a fitting nickname.” Luvia said with an evil smile that she did not bother to conceal.

If Lord El-Melloi was here, he would probably be clutching his stomach. Maybe he would even shout “whose fault do you think that is?”

Reines shrugged.

“I agree. That’s why my brother’s life will be in danger if he quits.”

Though he was a Lord, countless people wanted him to pay for his constant dismantling of other people’s magecraft. It was as if he stole the hard work of researchers and published them without their permission. Not only that, he would critique the work of the people who originally came up with the idea and add his own comments. His position was the only reason why he hadn’t been assassinated yet.

(What came first, the chicken or the egg?) Reines wondered. (...*The desperate expression he makes every time I ask him something like that is quite cute, though.*)

A smile appeared on her face.

“Do you think he ran away?” This time, it was Luvia who had asked the question.

“Of course not. If he was capable of doing that, he wouldn’t have to suffer so much. I wonder how he’s doing over there in Southeast Asia.” The young lady said, looking at the letter in her hand.

Luvia frowned slightly. “Southeast Asia?”

“Thought of something?”

“Nothing important. I just remembered that Miss Tohsaka sent me a letter from Singapore.”

“Speaking of Rin, she said that she was going on holiday, right? But she left her attendant from Japan here because she said he should get used to life here.”

“Yes, you are correct. The real question is how I can lure Shero away from that vixen...”

“You guys live in the same building, don’t you?”

“Yes, we were fated to be together!” Luvia said, sparkles appearing in her eyes,

With an expression that could only be described as that of a dreaming damsel, she laced her delicate fingers together in front of her chest. Her beauty added to this feeling, making it seem like she came from some humorous fairy tale.

“I have been so busy at my mansion, and the servants are on break this week, so it has been a while since I have seen Shero’s face. But I believe that the red thread of fate will lead him to my side! No, I do not need to rely on fickle things like red threads. If necessary, I will bring him to me by myself.”

Luvia’s confidence made her look fierce but beautiful at the same time.

Across the desk from her, Reines propped up her face with her hands, somewhat irritated.

“I can’t tell whether the man is lucky or not to have both of you vying for his attention. I remember hearing that you and Rin once messed around and leaped off the Tower of London together. They called you the Mary of July, didn’t they?”

“I-I acted on a sudden whim then. But Miss Tohsaka and I are even, because she was called the Poppins of July.”

“Uh... How exactly does that make you two even?” Just as Reines finished asking her question, the door to her room burst open.

“—Professor!”

The person who entered this time was a young man with straw-colored hair. He was about the same age as Reines, but his face was full of innocent mischief as he glanced about the office.

“Huh? I thought he’s supposed to come back to London today.”

“Oh, it’s you, Flat. I just received a letter from him. He said that he’s coming back later.” Reines said, holding up the letter.

Though he looked disappointed, the young man named Flat piped back up.

“I was looking forward to sharing the premier Japanese retro game that I bought from Luvia-chan’s butler with him.”

“You mean, from Shero?!”

“This is the prototype version of the Great War of Heroes, the consumer version from the age of offline games! I’m sure the prof will be excited to see it! Luvia-chan’s butler said that he got it through a special route from someone called Tiger...Oh, but Rin-chan told me not to tell Luvia-chan...”

Flat covered his mouth with his hands. It seemed that he had not noticed the person sitting right beside him.

Luvia stood up slowly and smiled.

“Now, what were you saying about Miss Tohsaka?”

“N-n-n-nothing, I’m sure ‘Tiger’ is just some free-range pet or something, I don’t think Rin-chan thought it was important enough to tell you. She definitely wasn’t hiding information about your butler from you. I’m also worried about having my personal information sold to you by my friends, but right now, I’m more worried about being strangled by Miss Luvia’s Octopus Hold.”

“Oh? So you would rather be attacked with Gandr than catch-as-catch-can?”

With a whoosh, a burn mark appeared on the wall next to Flat.

It was the result of Gandr, a curse so compressed it took on a physical form.

Flat made a sign with his hands as Luvia approached him with graceful steps and an unchanged smile.

“Play Ball!”

A shadow formed on the scorched wall and became several human shapes the same size as Flat that gathered around Luvia.

“Hmph, another new, useless kind of magecraft!”

“Hehehe, I’ve hacked into your Gandr to turn it against you! You can’t catch me now!”

Each of the shadows had the exact same voice that echoed in the room as if each of them was actually speaking.

“...Are you trying to escape?”

“How did you guess? Now that you know I’m trying to escape, I have to stop you. Go, me number two, three, four, and five!”

It was hard to tell whether Luvia would be faster than Flat’s shadows until they were all abruptly destroyed by a lariat from Luvia.

“No way!” Flat exclaimed. “Is that the lariat move that the mayor used?!”

With a howl, Flat ran from the room. Luvia tore after him like a wild beast, leaving a trail of explosions and punches as they went down the hallway.

And so, the Department of Modern Magecraft’s daily routine began. Other students rushed to the scene and began cheering the brawlers on.

Reines sighed as she listened to the clamor.

The El-Melloi Classroom had grown and changed dramatically in the last couple of years. The student by the name of Rin Tohsaka, a jewel mage from the Far East, was one of the reasons behind this change. Along with the attendant she had brought, this corner of the Clock Tower became the scene of a slapstick comedy basically every month.

There was another person on Reines’ mind, the shy, gray girl who always stood next to Lord El-Melloi II.

Though they were the same age, Reines had grown, leaving her dearest friend behind.

“...I know you’ve been taking note of my height and the changes to my body.” Reines muttered to herself in a soft voice.

More and more students of the El-Melloi Classroom were beginning to notice something strange about her. Fortunately, most students graduated from the classroom in four years, meaning that they were gone before they could convey their suspicions to others.

Reines’ brother was worried for the same reason. Mages always cared for their family. In this sense, her brother was too much like a mage.

“I don’t care how much my brother suffers, because all I can do is pity him... I hope he hasn’t gotten himself involved in some strange incident again.” Reines thought out loud, holding the letter between her fingers and thinking of the place her brother was in.

That was when the office's phone rang.

[1] Note that this is a simile.

[2] https://typemoon.fandom.com/wiki/Great_War_of_Heroes. Linking this because I find the cards very interesting

◆ 第三章 ◆
-Chapter 3-



~Part 1~

The waves came and went, came and went, repeating endlessly in my fuzzy vision.

My hunger surpassed this tiny body, and I felt as if I would never be satisfied even if I drank up the entire ocean. I was sure there must be a demon living inside me, one that could only scream.

It told me to hunger, to crave, to suffer. Those cries reverberated in my immobile body. The more I raged, the harder I tried to hold myself together, even though I could no longer differentiate between myself and my hunger.

What was this boiling magma, bubbling with desire, if it was not myself?

Though I faced the endless ocean, my consciousness was directed inward, as if I could eat away at myself by thinking, until I became hunger itself and only my heart was left.

—No.

There was something else hidden beneath all of my hunger, shining faintly as if it could disappear at any moment—loneliness.

There was no one else here.

The only sounds were the wind and the waves.

It was too quiet for me to bear.

All of my feelings and notions of time had melted away in my advanced starvation. And yet, my loneliness hung on like a shipwreck left behind in a storm, bobbing among the waves after it had become nothing more than driftwood.

“...Ergo.”

Someone was calling my name. Was it the voice of my mother?

My heart shuddered at that gentle voice.

Before I knew it, three figures surrounded me.

“It seems that we have failed,” said the first, a dejected-looking man dressed in futuristic clothing. Rather than looking angry at me, he looked more disappointed at his own ineptitude.

“This is good enough,” said the second, a woman who looked like she came from the past. Her golden eyes were ringed with red, like a clump of gold floating in a sea of fire.

Even compared to the other two, this woman exuded overwhelming vitality. While she was in sight, I felt like I could forget about my hunger for just a moment.

“Don’t give the failure more information.”

“Shut it, Crudelis,” the second figure said, baring a set of snow-white fangs. “I have already decided to...”

She spoke as if she believed that she was the center of the world-- no, perhaps she believed that she *was* the world.

The third figure said nothing, resolving to stare at the other two without commenting anything positive or negative. That person didn’t just observe them. Their eyes were completely devoid of a concept of self.

Looking at the third person, I felt as if I was face-to-face with a nebula.

One of these three had called the name just then.

(I...)

Just as a thought began to take shape in my mind, I heard someone else call that name.

“Ergo.”

I thought I smelled the faint scent of cigar smoke.

Then, I saw a dark-haired man reach out to him. Beside the man, there stood a gray girl...

~Part 2~

“...Gray.”

My mentor’s voice brought me back from my daze.

I hurriedly rubbed my eyes as I examined my surroundings. I was in a simple concrete room. The analog clock on the wall told me that it was two o’clock in the afternoon. The room was sparsely furnished. Apart from the clock, there was only a bed, a sofa, a few cheap houseplants, and some Chinese-style scrolls.

“Are you tired?”

“No, I’m fine,” I said, shaking my head. “I think I was dreaming.”

“What did you dream about?”

“I don’t remember... I was next to the sea, I think, and I was hungry.”

Though I didn’t usually eat much, I had dreamed of a hunger that would not be sated even if I drank up an ocean.

“I see.” Said my mentor with a troubled expression, a wisp of white smoke curling from his cigar and floating out of the window.

I looked back to the bed beside me and wiped the sweat from Ergo, who lay there. He had been unconscious with a pained look on his face for three days already.

A strange thought appeared in my mind. Maybe this was how I would feel if I had a little brother.

Perhaps my mentor felt the same. He cared deeply for his students in a way that you could call naive, but this was the first time we had actually taken care of someone together.

...No.

It had happened once before, not long after I came to London.

One day, a cat that often snuck into my mentor’s room and pestered him was hit by a car. My mentor wasn’t skilled enough to heal it, but he held the cat until it breathed its last breath.

—“This is just a farce,” I remember him saying.

For some reason, those words felt special among all of my memories.

—“If I were a good mage, I would have easily been able to heal this kind of injury. I guess I’m always too late and too weak.”

Those words were like my mentor’s core. Even now, several years later, I clearly recalled his sadness, regret, and refusal to give up.

This felt just like that day, even though it was a little strange to compare a person to a cat.

“Sir, you said that Ergo is your student, right?”

“I made him that promise, yes.” My mentor said, holding his cigar between his fingers.

“Have you decided to continue being a teacher?” I asked after much hesitation.

“For the duration of this trip, yes.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. That question required the courage needed to jump off a cliff.

Why was I so obsessed with the fact that my mentor was going to quit his job? Why did it feel so... wrong?

I knew that my mentor would be my mentor, regardless of his job, just like I would always be myself, regardless of how I changed— even though that was impossible.

“Gray.” My mentor said suddenly.

I looked up, realizing what he called me for.

Ergo’s eyelids twitched a few times before they opened, revealing his eyes.

“Ergo!”

“...Gray? Professor?” Ergo said groggily, blinking.

Eventually, he sat up with a quiet grunt.

“Where are...” He started.

“Don’t worry, this room belongs to the Singapore Branch of the Clock Tower. It may not look nice, but it’s well-defended.”

With this, his situation finally dawned on him. A hint of relief flashed in his eyes, but it was quickly covered by concern.

“What about Rin and the kids?!”

“Calm down,” my mentor said gently, putting his cigar into the ashtray and walking over to the bed. “They are fine for the moment being. Miss Tohsaka sent them away before we came here. They were already prepared to escape if they were attacked by other pirates.”

After we were attacked by Latio, the Alchemist from the Atlas Institute, Rin acted with incredible efficiency. She immediately called for the children to evacuate and made sure that they were safe when she returned to Singapore.

My mentor looked down at the young man and continued.

“The question lies with your health.”

“...What do you mean?” Ergo said, tensing up even though he was still somewhat dazed. Though he didn’t understand my mentor’s words, he could feel their significance.

“I mean that you died.” My mentor said, pointing to Ergo’s forehead, where his skin was unscratched beneath his red hair. “You were attacked by Mushiki and lost about thirty percent of your head. Even if you were a Phantasmal Species, you shouldn’t have survived the injury. Perhaps some Dead Apostles might be able to, but you are not that, either.

“...Since you just woke up from a coma, maybe now isn’t the best time to talk about this.”

“I don’t care, please, tell me!” Ergo insisted, grabbing my mentor and wrinkling his well-tailored linen shirt. “What happened to me?”

My mentor hesitated for a moment as he regarded Ergo, who looked as if he was trying to meet the gaze of a horror he could not escape.

“You lost control of your phantasmal arms.”

The strange disaster on the island had been caused by a bright light from Ergo’s body. The light became a massive hand, like something out of a legend. The earth had crumbled where the hand touched it. Half of the island had been carved out by it.

Miraculously, we had escaped harm by hiding between the fingers... but was that really a miracle?

"I suppose they were protecting their dying host. I don't know what the eagle of that Mushiki did, but it must have known that this would happen if you were killed. Your body healed completely after the outburst."

"...My arms..." Ergo muttered, staring at his shoulder as if he finally realized that the thing that resided in him was a monster.

"That person must be related to the three mages that created you, much like how Latio Crudelis Hiram is probably a descendant of one of them."

I interjected, thinking back to the woman who controlled bone familiars and used a bone sword.

"Excuse me, Sir, what are the Six Origins of Atlas?"

"The Six Origins of Atlas are the oldest families in the Atlas Institute," my mentor said, frowning slightly. "The Atlas Institute has little contact with the rest of the world. I only know the Six Origins' names. This is the first time I have met one of them, apart from the director, who's a different story altogether."

My mentor turned and picked up his cigar again, silently exhaling smoke into the air in melancholy swirls. It reminded me of a sigh.

"Most of the time, the alchemists of the Atlas Institute only conduct research to prevent the end of the world. If you are related to Crudelis' research, the end of the world that she predicted might be related to your secret."

"The end of the world..."

The idea appeared so suddenly that it didn't seem right. It felt wrong to speak of something so important in a tiny room like this. However, it seemed to me that Clock Tower mages' quest for the root was somehow related to the Atlas Institute's motivation. Since nothing in the world lasts forever, the Clock Tower chose to search for the absolute, while the Atlas Institute chose to resist the world's destruction.

The thought that both of them were stupid flashed through my mind.

"Then..." Ergo started, choking up but forcing out the rest of his sentence anyway.
"...Who am I?"

The voice of the young man who not long ago had played leisurely with children on a tropical beach was now distraught.

“...I don’t know either,” answered my mentor somberly. He raised his finger, stirring the smoke in the air. “But I do have a theory about what is happening to you. I don’t think you have amnesia.”

“...What do you mean?”

“I suppose I should call it memory saturation. In other words, it’s a matter of volume.”

My mentor spoke as calmly as if he was delivering a lecture, as steadily as a doctor diagnosing a fatal disease.

“The amount of information a human being can hold cannot be compared to that of a god. If you compare gods to mountains, humans are but grains of sand. Not even all of the supercomputers in the world could contain that much information. To achieve a similar effect, you would have to solidify and compress the god’s divinity like a computer file.”

My mentor curled his outstretched hands into the shape of a vessel and pressed them together, miming the act of putting something large into a tiny space.

“This kind of magecraft isn’t rare. Humanity is quite good at containing things on the scale of planets into a globe.”

My mentor’s clasped hands also resembled planets. I was reminded that the planets were seen as gods in many mythologies.

“At the same time, tales of divine possession exist all around the world. There are many records of priestesses acting as mediums for divine spirits to speak to people. However, no such priestesses were able to be in constant contact with the gods. Simply receiving the god’s words is too much for humans to bear. But what does that mean for someone who ate a god?”

I thought back to Yomotsuhegui, which my mentor had brought up in front of Latio.

“There are rituals, for example, where the meat of a bear who is seen as a mountain god is shared and eaten. There are also customs of eating the hearts or drinking the blood of sacrifices to the gods. The Department of Spiritual Evocation (*Eulyphis*), or perhaps a mage well versed in the famous Tongji of Singapore might be able to replicate divine power to an extremely limited degree. But the hand that destroyed the island is more than that. Something with such power in the modern day must exist beyond the conceptual level,” continued my mentor. He then raised and clenched his right hand.

“Hands are symbols of evolution. It is because of them that we are who we are. One prominent theory of evolution posits that humans were only able to achieve so much because of the special shape of our hands, not only because our ancestors were able to create sophisticated tools, but also because those with less dexterous hands disappeared due to selection pressure. In other words, what we have gained from the pressure of having hands and the movements of our fingers affected our evolution in some way (*TN: Sorry, what?*).”

His impassioned speech made me look down at my own hands.

People probably thought of hands as things that could both create and destroy. Hands enabled humanity to create countless weapons and tools, hunt down creatures, and create earthenware and farming tools to improve our lives. In other words, hands were a symbol of human progress.

But my mentor was speaking of something else.

Hands are sensory organs, like eyes and noses, except even more important. Considering that hands also have a great concentration of nerves, my mentor’s idea was not unusual.

“In a sense, if gods are the creators of humanity, aren’t hands like gods? Humans should be able to accept parts of their power as oracles or divine vessels, but no one can wield their hands, because hands are not only symbols of power, but also an important sensory organ. Hands enable gods to take in information on a divine scale. A human with a god’s hands would inevitably have their own memories be superseded.”

“.....”

Ergo remained silent.

...Like the sea and a cup, I thought.

It was like trying to pour an ocean’s worth of water into a cup, when the cup couldn’t even fit a lake’s worth. That was how much information the hands of a god would amass, comparable to the evolution of an entire species.

“I don’t know how they managed to cram three gods inside you. If you are simply their container, you should not have been able to survive its unadulterated power. Considering that giant hand, you couldn’t have fused with them either. You are in the process of incubating gods in the modern age. Naturally, the more their divine properties are exposed, the less of their host will remain...That is what those hands are.”

My mentor ended his explanation of the giant hand that destroyed the island with a stern conclusion.

“Soon, your memories and identity will disappear. The gods inside you will tear you apart.”

A chill ran down my spine, not only from fear but also from something that was neither sympathy nor pity.

His situation was so much like mine.

“Sir...” I muttered indistinctly.

My mentor nodded slightly. I was not the only one that found our predicaments similar. The mystery that affected me and Ergo was truly similar in some unknown way.

For a while, Ergo did not move from his slumped position as if he was slowly digesting this information.

“You told me to think about what I want to do, and should do,” said Ergo in a quiet voice, gently laying his left hand on top of his right.

“I did. I’m a little ashamed to admit this, but most of what I said was to myself.”

“To yourself?”

“Yes,” my mentor said, smiling wryly and brushing the surface of his cigar. “I had my battlefield. I suppose that people who only know of me would say that my life has taken shape over the past ten or so years. But the illusion that I have finally achieved something is the very thing that makes me feel lost...I wonder if this is really what I should be doing.”

His words floated into the air, where they lingered for a moment amidst the smoke that had not drifted out of the window.

“...Do you know what I should do, since my memories and identity are about to disappear?”

“I don’t.” My mentor replied, shaking his head gravely. “I would love to be able to show you the right answer to that question, but I don’t have one. I might spend the rest of my life aimlessly wandering, trying to determine what I want and ought to do.”

My mentor looked down like a dog that had been caught in the rain. These questions were doubtlessly great challenges for him. He truly believed that he would question himself until his death.

My mentor raised his head and walked toward Ergo once more.

“Nevertheless, I promise to wander with you”, he said, extending a hand. Ergo froze, stunned, but my mentor continued without hesitation. “Together we will agonize over this question.”

“...But-” Ergo started. His voice caught in his throat, but he still slowly spluttered out a response. “...There’s nothing I can do.”

My mentor did not put his hand down. Though it looked a little comical, the conversation did not end.

“I was relieved to hear that those children are safe. I think they’re more important than I am because I have no place to return to. I would be fine with spending the rest of my life helping them on the island.”

The knots in his heart were slowly untwisting.

His statement that he had nothing to do resonated deeply with me.

How could someone who played with children without a care in the world harbor these thoughts?

No, perhaps it was the same for everyone. No matter how cheerful they acted, something darker and colder always hid beneath.

“I don’t want to keep doing the right thing anymore,” he said suddenly. “I was hunted down by someone...I was even killed once. Maybe spending time with those children was the right thing to do. But it isn’t anymore. I don’t want to disappear before I can make a mistake, just once. Is that okay with you?”

“Why make such a distinction between what is right and wrong?” My mentor asked gently. “I’m often wrong about the most important things. Even though we keep disappointing and angering others, we can only hold on to our answers. We may be right or wrong. What we achieve is probably all that matters in the end.”

It was very much in my mentor’s style to add a “probably” into an otherwise confident statement.

Ergo gazed at my mentor’s still-outstretched hand.

“So it’s okay if I make mistakes?”

“Who knows? My mistakes have angered many people, but I still want to go on. If I am to die, I should at least die knowing that I have taken even a single step forward. I don’t want to be so concerned with being right that I can only stay in one place. ...What do you think? Would you become a student of this kind of teacher?”

“Just for the duration of your trip?”

“Yes.”

My mentor’s slender fingers met Ergo’s firm hand.

“Agreement sealed.” My mentor said with a smile. Then, he abruptly turned to me. “Are you ready, Gray?”

“A-ah, yes!” I nodded hurriedly, wiping away the tears that had crept from my eyes. I had probably gotten too emotionally invested in my mentor’s conversation with my underclassman.

The young man on the bed blinked.

“So, what do we do now?”

“Come with us if you can move. It’s about time we went on the offensive instead of being chased around for no good reason.”

Ergo looked up again at my mentor, who had picked up his hat.

“Go on the offensive? Can you do that?”

“Of course,” said the dark-haired mage. “I am still a Lord of the Clock Tower, after all.”

~Part 3~

The sun over the south sea greeted us as we left the room.

My mentor held his hat down over his face and walked in the shade. He probably avoided the sun because of his weak constitution, but his actions reminded me a bit of a vampire.

We walked south down the bridge over the Singapore River, an area that could be called the city center. I looked to the other bank of the river and saw all sorts of boats pass by us like gathering fragments of light, forming the city's lifeblood. Together, these pedestrians and boats made up the only city-state in Asia.

As the bridge ended, my gaze fell on the skyscrapers that rose into the azure sky and the simple waterpark in front of them. The Merlion—the most recognizable symbol of Singapore—stood there.

In a way, a mixture of a mermaid and a lion seemed appropriate for a city with such a bustling, diverse community.

A woman waited for us beside the stone statue, her black hair fluttering in the wind.

Though most of the people strolling around the park were of Asian descent, she still managed to stand out like a gemstone with a long history. Her essence remained the same, regardless of whether she was on the pirate island or Singapore.

“You’re late, Professor,” Rin Tohsaka said, scowling and sounding irked.

“Sorry. I spent some time talking to Ergo.”

“Right, Ergo! Are you okay now?” She said immediately, as if she had only just realized that the young man was there.

“Yes, I’m fine now,” Ergo responded, scratching his head sheepishly. As I expected, the way his red hair wagged about reminded me of a dog.

“What about the favor I asked of you?” Asked my mentor.

“It was just passing on a message, I had it done in no time. Couldn’t you have just made a call?”

“I did, but some things require meeting face-to-face. It may seem petty, but the World of Magecraft is full of those kinds of hassles. I thought you would be better suited to the job, since you're also Asian.”

“Just so you know, I haven't had much contact with continental magecraft organizations.”

My mentor's eyebrows twitched. “Oh? I thought you were familiar with Thought Magecraft. Don't you also use Bajiquan in self-defense class?”

“That has nothing to do with the rest of the continent. I learned it from a priest I know.”

“I see. Priests and Bajiquan are a rare combination. I think I'd like to meet him if I ever have the chance.”

“You two wouldn't get along. Besides, he's dead now.”

With that, she turned around and started walking south with us again, to the skyscrapers that could be seen from the bridge.

Businessmen strode briskly through a landscape that didn't look completely real. Each building in the forest of glass reflected the sun's rays, flooding the streets with even more light.

For some reason, I wanted to describe it as a road of light.

“Shenton Way could be considered the most important street in Singapore. After government agencies and commercial buildings were built here in the 1970s, it essentially became the Wall Street of Asia. It seems like IT companies have also been settling here recently,” said my mentor, checking the time on his cell phone. “Right on time, just like everyone here.”

A muscular man I recognized stood in the shadow of a building. Despite the weather, he was dressed in a smart British suit. I had met with him when I was first sent to Singapore.

“...It's the branch manager...”

“I am the manager of the Singapore branch of the Clock Tower, Chris. I was very surprised to hear from you yesterday, Lord El-Melloi II.”

“My apologies. Your help is urgently needed.”

It seemed that my mentor had made many preparations on his own. I had also paid several visits to the building on Shenton Way that housed the Singapore branch of the Clock Tower.

The branch manager handed my mentor an attache case.

“Here is the key.”

“Thank you.”

My mentor nodded, accepting the case as the other man looked out into the street.

“The next station is that way, but did you bring a bell with you?”

“Oh, I have one,” Rin commented. Then, the man simply turned on his heel and left.

After walking some more along Shenton Way, my mentor turned to the west. All of a sudden, the buildings became shorter, revealing more of the shockingly blue sky. It feels a bit strange admitting to it, but I almost felt like it had blended with the ocean, and I was about to fall upward into it.

Though we had only walked onto a different street, I felt like we were in a completely different city.

A strange feeling snowballed inside me with each step I took.

“Something is strange about this place,” I said. “It feels hot, but also cold...like warm and cold water stuck together.”

“An excellent observation, as expected of my disciple.”

I felt my face grow warm at the rare compliment.

“Please don’t make fun of me.”

“No, I’m actually impressed. What do you think, Ergo?”

Hearing my mentor’s question, the young man hurriedly glanced around us.

“Um...There’s a kind of buzzing feeling, but not much more...”

“I see. So Gray is more sensitive to spirits,” he remarked, looking up to where the city around us had changed again. “Up until now, we have been in the territory of the Singapore branch of the Clock Tower. From now on—”

I followed my mentor's gaze toward a red and yellow billboard amidst a lane of historical buildings.

"Chinatown..."

"This is the most historic of Singapore's many Chinatowns. It used to feel like this all over the city, but in the short time since my first visit, a drastic change has taken place."

The street thinned as we walked, filling up with people. Sounds like the sizzle of chicken being fried and the rhythmical thumping of knives chopping up shrimp and radish cakes surrounded us along with the scent of crushed garlic on chicken rice and the faint fragrance of steamed buns and more, naturally awakening my appetite.

All sorts of masks, lanterns, bells, and fans were displayed along the bustling street, possibly as souvenirs for tourists.

My attention was drawn to one of them.

"Sir, isn't that...?"

"It's a Wayang mask."

I thought back to the Chinese opera performance and letter in a food center that had initially brought us to that island.

"I would also like to know who the performer was, but that can wait. There's a reason why this Chinatown has been preserved for so long. —Rin."

"Understood."

Rin nodded and shook her bell. Its crisp sound rang through the air, bringing a gust of wind.

I blinked. There was a building I had not noticed before on the other side of the road. I was sure it hadn't been there a few seconds ago.

There were many strange-looking buildings in Singapore, especially in this Chinatown, where everything was so elaborately designed that it seemed as if its main purpose was to surprise people. Even so, I wouldn't have failed to notice that kind of building.

It was a giant, spiraling tower colored red and black. Though it gave the impression of an old hotel that had been gradually added to, it also looked strangely unified, as if those changes had been planned from the very beginning. It was all quite paradoxical.

“This is the Singapore building of the Spiral Manor.”

The name my mentor brought up suited it well.

“It is one of two major Philosophy Magecraft organizations. All of its buildings, including those of its branches, are built with spirals of some kind within them. As implied by its name, it’s popular to use spirals in the physical architecture of the Spiral Manor.”

“There are two?”

“Yes. However, the other one rarely concerns itself with the mortal world, like the realm of Xianren, or hermits.”

The only image that came to my mind was a painting of an old man with a white beard that was several meters long, which I had seen in the British Museum a while ago.

There were no magecraft organizations in London except for the Clock Tower. Though it was only the Clock Tower’s headquarters, and each of the twelve departments had its own buildings, I was surprised to hear that there was another organization so close by.

“It seems like someone has come to greet us.”

A dignified-looking woman came and stood in front of the manor from the same way the branch manager had just been. She was around forty years old and wore an old-fashioned traditional dress embroidered with phoenixes in flight.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, Lord El-Melloi II.”

The woman cupped her hands together, which I recalled was a continental way of making an obeisance. Men wrapped their left hands around their right fists, while women did the opposite.

“I am Tao, from the Singapore branch of the Spiral Manor. Here is the key,” she said, after my mentor returned the gesture. Then, instead of an attache case, she handed us a small, intricately carved wooden box.

“I did not expect to meet a Lord of the Clock Tower for this kind of business.”

“My apologies.”

“There is no need for you to apologize. You submitted a formal application. Besides, it cannot be helped if it concerns the secrets of the Clock Tower. You may keep the bell that reveals this bounded field. You will always be welcome at the Spiral manor.”

After tucking the box away into the pocket of his suit, my mentor expressed his thanks and turned away. Rin rang the bell again, and the building disappeared as if it had vanished in the mist, except the mist was also invisible.

“As expected of the Spiral Manor, they have successfully used feng shui to alter perception on a large scale. You would have to be as sensitive as Gray to even notice an anomaly.”

“Is it like suggestion, Professor?” Asked Ergo.

“Each place has its own atmosphere. If you take an empty patch of the countryside and decorate it like a resort, people will see it that way, right? Kings and governments have always sought to alter people’s perceptions to create ideal countries, through methods not limited to feng shui. The Spiral Manor is exemplary of that idea.”

“...Is that like how people will think that every apple-shaped object is red if you brainwash them into thinking that apples must be red?”

“Good, you’re understanding this very quickly. Of course, this is more than suggestion alone can achieve, so they have also made use of land-based magecraft. They also seem to be manipulating mechanical data. The Spiral Manor is less evasive of the idea of modernity than the Clock Tower.”

A strange thought crossed my mind as I watched their exchange.

Ergo being my mentor’s temporary student reminded me of a fieldwork exercise.

I was already beginning to miss the rowdy everyday life of the El-Melloi Classroom. I wondered if Ergo could become one of its members after the trip was over.

“So what are those keys?”

“Before I explain that, let me give a lecture,” began my mentor, seeming to have hit his stride. “As Miss Tohsaka is already aware, a magecraft patent system exists in the Clock Tower. When registered formulas are used, the patentee and the Clock Tower have the right to collect a sum of money as compensation. It has always been one of the Clock Tower’s primary sources of income.”

I glanced at my mentor. My mentor’s nasty habit of improving on the magecraft that he dissected and registering them in his own name had earned him the nickname the

Plunderer. At first, it was in retaliation for an assassination attempt, but over time, it had become his trademark.

“However, mages hide their magecraft, and it’s impossible to ensure that they always report the use of patented magecraft. So, do you know how the patent system works?”

“...If a patented formula is used, will the Clock Tower will be notified in some way?”

“Exactly. There is an astronomical observatory underneath the Clock Tower, used to observe the surface above it. There, a Mystic Code that is connected to ley lines reports periodically on the activation of patented magecraft.”

An underground astronomical observatory didn’t sound like it would exist, but it was the truth. This degree of strangeness was normal in a city like London. Somewhere along the line, I had begun to think this way, too.

“As you may expect, a single Mystic Code under the Clock Tower in London cannot cover the entire world, even if the Mystic Code is comparable with, or even surpasses the finest Supreme Mystic Codes of the Twelve Lord Families. What do you think the Clock Tower does then, Gray?”

I was momentarily at a loss for words from the sudden question, but I was determined to not embarrass myself in front of my new fellow student.

“...Do they put similar things in other places?”

My mentor nodded again at the unconfident answer I gave.

“Correct. That is exactly what they did. This is also one of the reasons why there are branches of the Clock Tower all over the world. Of course, they are insignificant compared to the one in London. These limited Mystic Codes are connected to major ley lines in all sorts of places. They allow for the policing of magecraft in seventy to eighty percent of the world’s lands, including, of course, Singapore.”

(...Oh.)

I finally understood.

“By any chance, are we—”

Before I could finish asking my question, my mentor went down an escalator nearby and into a mostly vacant subway station. He walked into a passageway that was probably meant for the staff.

“Sir, that’s—”

“Here,” he said, raising his hand, though not to open the door marked “Staff Only”. He placed his hand onto an ordinary-looking patch of wall, muttered something indistinct, and was sucked into it.

“Huh?”

“I heard this place has been here ever since they started building Singapore’s famous Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) decades ago. As I said before, this country is closely tied to feng shui, so it was probably easy to create a contraption like this. Ley lines and subways interfere with each other in every country, just like Platform 9¾ in King’s Cross Station.”

Rin and Ergo walked up to be sucked into the wall without hesitation. I hung back for a moment before stepping in as well with my eyes closed.

I felt a cold, slimy sensation on my skin. When I opened my eyes again, I saw a long corridor with many doors, reminding me of a hospital or lab.

(There’s a place like this hidden in the Singapore subway system...?)

While I was still stunned, my mentor opened the attache case and the small box, taking out a pair of keys, one gold and one silver. He chose an ancient-looking door from the many that lined the corridor and inserted first the gold key and then the silver one. Unlike the regular keys they appeared to be, they were probably surrounded by strong magecraft.

The door opened to reveal a space covered from floor to ceiling with a metallic material. There was a massive sphere in its center.

To be more precise, it was an object that looked like part of a sphere hollowed out. Several cables hung down from the shape that sort of resembled a piece of modern art and linked to an analog meter that looked more like a steam engine than a monitor.

“This is the Limited Mystic Code Observational Sphere Luxcarta,” explained my mentor. “As you may have guessed, it is a Mystic Code that checks the wavelength and waveform of magecraft. With this, one can detect everything within a several-hundred-kilometer radius. It also covers areas under the jurisdiction of the Spiral Manor, so it requires the permission of both organizations to use.”

“Sir, then...”

“Not long ago, we witnessed the alchemy of Latio from the Atlas Institute,” my mentor said as he inserted the gold and silver keys into the instrument. It seemed that they were not only used to enter here but also to authenticate the use of the sphere.

“She said herself that her bone-based alchemy is part of her body. I have heard people discuss this type of magecraft in the Clock Tower. It is easier to operate mystery in one’s own body because there is no risk of interference from the rest of the world. It is also said that the alchemists of the Altas Institute have very few Magic Circuits and rarely use magecraft that interferes with nature. I see, so the Six Origins have indeed made use of that kind of twisted mystery. Ah, since all of the magecraft happens inside their bodies, are Magecraft Foundations irrelevant for them? Perhaps only the Magic Circuits of the Six Origins have mutated.”

His explanation gradually became more and more technical until I could not understand it anymore.

“Um... so what does that mean for us?”

“Since she uses her body for magecraft, she is easier to recognize than the mages of the Clock Tower. All of her magecraft likely emits the same wavelength.”

As my mentor said this, he took a white piece of something from his pocket.

“A piece of bone?”

I recalled that he had collected such a thing during the battle. I suppose it was his way of being shrewd. Had he already known back then that we would need it for a counterattack?

My mentor placed the bone on a nearby balance and started fiddling with the needles on the instrument.

“Rin, I need your assistance. I can make measurements on the Observational Sphere, but you are probably better at fine-tuning Mana...”

“Can I ask you something before that?” Rin asked, looking up at the Observational Sphere. She had suddenly donned a serious expression.

“What?”

“How did you apply for permission to use this?” She asked, after a few seconds of silence.

My mentor was briefly at a loss for words. He grimaced and fidgeted awkwardly with the collar of his jacket.

“...As expected of Miss Tohsaka. ...I have already told Reines that I protested to the Singapore branch in the name of the El-Melloi family that my patented magecraft was being used here. I sent this message at the same time I sent my letter, so I was roundly scolded.”

“Professor...!” Rin exclaimed, eyes widening. “T-that’s fraud! International even, at that! You used your authority as a Lord to manipulate a branch of the Clock Tower, and even managed to swindle the Spiral Manor?! If this gets out, there might be a war between the two organizations!”

“Yes, that is an excellent summary of the situation. For that reason, I need Gray and Ergo to stay quiet about this as well.”

“Sir—?!”

“Professor?”

Not even Ergo and I could stop ourselves from butting in.

“If I didn’t do that, they wouldn’t let me use this instrument. If I explained our issue with the Atlas Institute and Ergo, that would only cause an unnecessary stir. I simply picked the quickest, smoothest course of action, which just happened to coincide with committing fraud,” my mentor said as if it was obvious while proudly plunging into a moral gray area.

I had forgotten that he was at his scariest when he shamelessly stood his ground like this. After all, his luck was not the only thing that had earned him his place in the World of Magecraft despite his lack of skill as a mage. Of course, he had also been blessed by chance, but this was not a world where someone could rise to prominence based on that alone.

My mentor fought fiercely at every crossroads, outwitting the people who underestimated him because he is only a New Ager and managing to survive by making excessive use of the few skills he has.

He reminded me of a child reaching out to the stars, or perhaps like an ancient conquering king who trampled dozens of countries in his ridiculous urge to see the end of the world.

“I think I understand something now,” Rin said with a strange expression after a few deep breaths.

“What?”

“I honestly thought until now that Luvia, Flat, and I inconvenience you, Professor. That was a mistake, not because it’s not true, but because I got the order wrong. It’s because you’re the one that’s been instructing us that we’ve become so troublesome in the first place.”

“I would very much like to dispute that, but that can wait.”

As my mentor said that, he turned back to the instrument. Rin followed suit without any argument, holding up her hands at the bone fragment in the balance and closing her eyes.

“Should I tune Mana the same way as in class? We did Mana tuning with bones in classes in the Department of Zoology (*Chimara*), but there are different techniques in the Department of Mineralogy (*Kischur*) and Department of Spiritual Evocation (*Eulyphis*), aren’t they?”

“Let’s use the Department of Spiritual Evocation (*Eulyphis*)’s technique. You should think of it as magecraft that infects the person connected with the bone rather than the bone itself.”

“Should I connect the path using Qliphoth?”

“Just use the Sephirot. Rotate the symbol of Mars from Gevurah.”

Rin began to work efficiently under my mentor’s guidance as if she hadn’t meant the complaints from earlier. I wondered how many others in the El-Melloi classroom could assist my mentor in such a manner.

We didn’t have to wait long for the results.

Along with a faint vibration, spots of light appeared on the giant sphere.

“Are those...?”

“Those are the places where she— Latio used her alchemy,” my mentor replied as he stared intently at the light.

The spots quickly became larger until they overlapped in several places.

“If there is even the slightest hint of magecraft left in a place, Luxcarta will pick up on it regardless of how the Atlas Institute tries to hide it... but...”

I doubted that the others heard the last part of his sentence, which he said with a frown in a low, raspy voice.

I had probably unknowingly enhanced my eyes while I was paying attention to my mentor. What he said was probably insignificant for Rin and Ergo, but I could not miss it.

“...It will end up becoming a whodunit, won’t it?”



The light of dusk faded into a blur. As the reddish tropical sun sank below the horizon, scents crept into the crisp air as if they had been waiting for the veil of sunlight to be lifted. Some things, like the scent of sweet makeup and exotic cocktails, were better suited to the night.

In this case, it was the smell of rust.

It was an abandoned area where demolition work had been halted. Signs that read “No Trespassing” in four languages in accordance with Singaporean Law were posted all around. In its center, there was a structure made of steel bars that had been stuck into a pile of concrete. Normally, they would have been taken apart and then removed. Here, they remained, pieced together like a puzzle.

A woman was sleeping there.

She sat on the ground with her back to the steel frame. Her blue hair hung loose as if she did not mind getting it dirty.

“Lady Latio,” came a deep but playful voice that one would hardly expect from artificial intelligence. Though, since Latio’s minds could run in parallel, such a depth of personality was only natural.

“She is here, just as expected.”

“Her arrival deviated from the expected time by sixteen minutes and thirty-five seconds. It is within the acceptable range,” Latio replied, sounding more mechanical than the actual machine.

She opened her eyes and looked to her right, where a hawk was perched above another rusting steel frame.

There was no need to introduce this hawk. It was the same one that had blown Ergo's head open when he went out of control. Its eyes held an intelligence that no mere bird of prey could possess.

"Let us skip directly to the conclusion. Were you trying to kill Ergo and Latio?"

"If that much was enough to kill you, the Crudelis family would have died millennia ago," the hawk said with a cackling laugh. "The same goes for Ergo. If he could die from something like that, the three of us must have been utter idiots to create him. You should be thanking me for proving that we weren't."

The hawk deliberately flapped its wings.

"What? I'm not hearing any praise. I thought the Atlas Institute has a custom where you throw yourself at someone's feet to express admiration."

"Latio supposes it was a somewhat successful test of Ergo's abilities," Latio replied. "The last arm he used was different. It shows that the fruit of our labor resides inside him. Though it is only a drop squeezed out from its original form, there is much we can gain from that phenomenon. Tangere is currently verifying the results."

"Yep, I've calculated it with eighteen filters, including ether, gravitational waves, and electromagnetic waves 7,013 times already... I'm currently verifying it for the 7,014th time. I am also comparing it with various mythologies and types of magecraft," said Tangere from a skull at Latio's feet that moved and spoke on its own like a jack-in-the-box. It seemed that Latio's familiar usually assumed this form to conserve Magical Energy.

"Good girl," praised the hawk. "Since you're working so earnestly, let me let you in on a secret. You've been discovered."

"Latio already covered her tracks. The island of Sentosa is still being developed, so there is not much data available. Lord El-Melloi II should have no means to track Latio down."

Sentosa island was a long, thin island only 800 meters south of mainland Singapore. Once called "the island of death from behind" (Pulao Blakang Mati) for an epidemic, it was now an island of peace and tranquility (Sentosa).

It was currently being redeveloped on a large scale as a tourist destination. Many casinos and attractions were under construction, so there was no shortage of places to hide.

The hawk tilted its head at Latio's response.

“What kind of bubble must you live in to underestimate a Lord of the Clock Tower like that?”

“You have no right to criticize Latio for being isolated from reality.”

“Haha, true. I have been a recluse for orders of magnitude longer than you.”

“Do you mean that he used the Clock Tower’s authority?”

“While the Atlas Institute holes itself up and fights the never-ending battle of ensuring the survival of humanity, the Clock Tower more closely resembles modern society. So many of them have forgotten their original purpose and have come closer to the evils of humanity. Haha, while humanity’s strength may not be able to compare with that of gods, their malice is bottomless. Even gods cannot help themselves from scrambling away from it.”

Latio’s gaze shifted to the piles of concrete and steel that had been discarded in the name of development. How many resources had been poured into this island? Though the money would eventually be recouped, the resources that had been dug from this planet would not recover for centuries.

Pieces of the planet were now only to be consumed, even though planets had once been seen as gods.

“Humans are impressive, aren’t they? While we were busy dealing with gods that were the representation of stars, they’re directly eating away at them. Why else would they call themselves primates if not for their ability to devour the planet they live on?”

“Is that what the word means to you?”

“What do you think? Of course. What is the purpose of a child who doesn’t kill their parents? Burn your house to the ground and wander into the world on your own, that’s the right way to go about life.”

“The way (*),” repeated Latio. “That is the god you have chosen.”*

“Haven’t you done the same?”

“...Latio has no obligation to answer that question. Is that all you came for?”

“So you still haven’t realized, Crudelis of today? What happened to the Thought Acceleration you’re so proud of?”

The hawk spread its wings. Just as it seemed to have spread them completely, it suddenly changed shape.

A woman like white fire now sat on the steel frame. A blue mark or tattoo ran from her throat to her cheek like two tongues of fire. Though shapeshifting was possible with modern magecraft, most of it relied on illusions or techniques that transferred the user's senses to another medium, such as a doll. Magecraft that recombined the body could be considered an endangered type of greater magecraft.

Her eyes were golden. She also wore a golden bell on her right ear and metal chains around her wrists. Despite her alluring beauty, her ferociousness still prevailed. She was a woman of ill omen, like a mixture of the smells of flowers and blood.

“Give Ergo to me,” the silver woman said, her lips parting like the crescent moon as she spoke. “Since it’s an ancient contract, we must comply with the order. The Crudelis family comes first, I come second, and the Wandering Sea comes last. But no one will blame you if you give up your turn for me, would they?”

“Latio refuses,” replied the alchemist immediately.

“Hm? But you should know by now that our opponents have not played their trump card yet, either. That disciple or whatever has an interesting toy. Isn’t that why you offered to negotiate with him?”

The woman was referring to the battle on the pirate island, where Latio had stopped Gray before she could play her trump card, the mystery hidden inside Add.

The woman had watched since then and discovered its power.

“You must have some way to handle it, Mushiki.”

“Of course, because I am strong,” said the woman called Mushiki without hesitation.

Latio stayed quiet in response to the answer, which was no mere sign of arrogance.

Mushiki crossed her legs, resting her pale fingers against her delicate chin.

“Speaking of which, I recall that the Crudelis family was always good at hide-and-seek. Even back when the Six Origins were still the Six Sages, your family was happy to hide behind other people and scavenge from their remains.”

A strong emotion flashed across Latio’s face. Before she could act upon it—

“—Allow me to interrupt, Madam,” interrupted Tangere, the skull at Latio’s feet. “Lady Latio only just came out of the cave. Surface-style negotiation like this is a little too much for her. Don’t take her too seriously, Lady Latio. You two live on different scales of time, so half or even ninety percent of what she says won’t be useful to you. You can’t expect everything old people say to be worth listening to, can you?”

“Oh? What a smart artificial intelligence. You’re much better than your owner,” Mushiki said, smiling wryly in amazement. “I’ll be willing to help you if you could lend me this one. I’m sure I’ll manage if it takes up twenty percent of the resources of your Thought Partition.”

“Considering that you are one of the creators of the Foundation, your statement may not be entirely false, but Latio still refuses,” replied Latio, recovering her original coolness.

She picked up the skull beside her and stood up, blue hair blending into the dusk.

“It does not matter if the Clock Tower’s malice is greater than Latio’s disguise. Latio’s calculations about their future are complete, and Latio has her own tricks up her sleeve.”

“Oh?” The white woman said, raising an eyebrow. “Are you not going to brag about the details of your tricks?”

The alchemist narrowed her eyes coldly.

“Do not bother Latio again.”

“How direct of you. Fine, I won’t. But don’t forget that I, no, we only need Ergo for our own purposes. The order can change, but the rest cannot.”

“Latio will remember that.”

Latio nodded, and the woman turned to leave.

As dawn turned to night, the city to the north began to light up.

Latio noticed that Mushiki was humming a song. It was probably a song from ancient times. Sung in her refined voice, it gave the impression of faraway mountains and a steep, inaccessible valley with a limpid waterfall. It was somehow both fitting and unfit for this femme fatale.

“I have waited for so long already. This is only a slight delay, another turn of the hourglass.”

The woman disappeared as soon as her words left her throat, leaving only the sound of flapping wings behind.

[1] https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_247_2005-01-20.html

[2] “Primate” comes from Latin for “prime, first rank”, because Carl Linnaeus thought humans are the highest order of animals. 灵長 is a much older word that means something along the lines of “those who are noblest in spirit”, “those with spiritual powers”, or perhaps “the ruler of all”, which was coopted by taxonomists. I don’t trust the quality of my research, and you shouldn’t either.

~Part 4~

As night fell, I heard a faint humming. It wasn't a particularly pleasant melody. The tune was off in places, and the rhythm was sporadic, either too fast or too slow. It sounded like the warbles of a child singing whatever they wanted to.

To put it bluntly, the singer was tone deaf. Strangely enough, though, I was willing to listen to it.

“.....”

I put my hand on the ladder, rubbing my sleepy eyes.

After we had conducted searches with the Observational Sphere, we had returned to the apartment prepared by the Singapore branch of the Clock Tower. It was certainly well protected against magecraft, but that made it seem old-fashioned. The mechanism that allowed us to climb to the roof was probably also an ancient design.

A dry wind brushed my face.

A beautiful view of the city at night stretched out before me. The streets of Singapore were like the starry sky turned upside down. A sea of light shimmered in both the sky and the land. I could not stand the splendor, so I closed my eyes and then slowly opened them again.

The singer sat on the roof tiles, gazing up at the stars.

Don't be afraid of ghosts

Don't be afraid of ghosts

They'll go where the dark goes

They'll go where the waves go

Don't be afraid of ghosts

Don't be afraid of ghosts

They'll go where our song goes

They'll sing with us

The stars are coming this way

Coming this way, to us

Come on, we are singing

We will wait for you to come

“...Ergo?” I called out.

Surprised, the young man turned with an endearing yelp.

“G-Gray?!”

Before he could fully articulate his bewilderment, Ergo’s tall figure slid from the slanted rooftop and fell into the night. Before I could catch him, he had already dropped onto a place ten or so meters from the ground.

“Ergo!”

Peering down, I saw that he was lodged in midair. It seemed that the phantasmal arms from his back had stopped him from falling all the way. It was as if he was suspended by an invisible string.

“Please don’t sneak up on me like that,” he said, covering his face.

“But-”

“...I didn’t think anyone was listening.”

Even in the darkness, I could see that his ears were bright red. I felt like he would just let himself fall if I continued this conversation, but I wasn’t good at changing the topic. I could only continue, choosing my words as best as I could.

“...It’s a nice song.”

At least, I thought that way about the song itself. Though it was the first time I had heard these lyrics, they seemed to speak to the twinkling stars of Singapore.

I suppose I had succeeded in stopping this situation from becoming even more awkward.

“Lana wrote this song for me,” muttered Ergo quietly, burying his face in his hands. He looked like a piece of laundry swaying in the wind.

“Is Lana the girl who cut your hair?”

“Yes. I was scared when I first came to that island. She thought I was afraid of ghosts,” said Ergo with a slight nod.

I had a hard time holding in a laugh as I pictured the little girl comforting him as he cowered with a blanket over his head. Before long, though, a thought began to bother me.

“So, what are you scared of?”

“There are people I don’t know inside me.”

Ergo’s reply made me gasp.

Memory saturation.

“Are they gods?”

“I don’t know. Maybe,” said Ergo in a hushed voice, still covering his face as if he would become someone else’s mask if he revealed it. “Someone is always looking at me from the inside. I feel their gaze, their touch, even when people tell me there’s no one there. I was so scared I didn’t know what to do, so I started singing to pretend they’re a ghost and laugh it off.”

“...That must be terrifying.”

My response was natural because I understood exactly what he felt like. Just like I was trapped by an ancient hero, Ergo was trapped by ancient gods. It seemed that the fears I held were very close to his. Of course, while I had only stopped growing, Ergo was about to lose his memories and personality, so his were a lot more serious than mine.

“Don’t you find it hard to live like this, Gray?” Ergo asked, looking up at me from the place where he was suspended, probably because he could sense my feelings.

“No... because my mentor is with me,” I said, revealing the tall shadow that stood in the softest part of my heart.

Back in my hometown, my mentor had said this to me:

—“*Do you think people can grow?*”

He had no appreciation for the fact that he had gone from being one of many New Agers to one of the Lords of the Clock Tower. Not only that, he spoke of his lack of growth with words that seemed to be made of blood.

—“*The path we take down life’s crossroads is always determined by the smallest coincidences. If that’s the case, do we really grow? Doesn’t everyone want to remain a child and simply follow someone greater; someone born to be a king?*”

—“*I...want to change.*”

He didn’t try to advise me. He simply confessed bluntly to his problems. What a foolish speech. How selfish. How... redeeming.

It was an invitation to make mistakes together, to get hurt together, to walk alongside each other even when we knew we could lose our lives.

At the time, I thought that I could go with that.

“My mentor brought me out of my hometown. After meeting all sorts of people in London, I finally feel that I can stay there. Maybe there’s someone else inside me, but I belong there.”

“So you can, too”— I left that part unsaid.

“Have you made any friends?” After a while, Ergo’s question sounded in the night.

“...Yes. I’m not sure what she thinks of me, but she is a very important friend to me.”

The image of the golden-haired young woman appeared in my mind. Reines El-Melloi Archisorte, the person who had given my mentor the title Lord El-Melloi and the next person in line to become Lord.

“That’s why I don’t want to be left behind,” I said, hugging my shoulders.

I heard that some high-level magecraft could slow the process of aging, so others wouldn’t find it strange if I stayed the same age. Even so, I wanted to walk with the same strides as her and grow older as she did.

“It’s a good thing I became one of his students, then.” Ergo said, slowly returning to the roof at last.

“Yes.” I nodded. “To me, it’s...the thing I am most proud of, more than anything else.”

“Ihihihihi! Of course you pity your own kind, even though I guess the same goes for me!”

“...Add.”

I took Add from the hook at my right shoulder and shook it up and down to release my pent-up feelings. As it emitted a series of shrieks, I heard another sound.

Ergo’s stomach was rumbling.

We met each other’s eyes and smiled.

“I can make some food in the kitchen. What do you want to eat?”

“What do I want to eat...”

For a moment, Ergo did not know what to reply.

“Could you fry an egg for me, please? If you could, I’d like it fried on both sides.”

“Alright, of course.”

I nodded and went down the ladder. Midway, I rubbed my neck with my finger a few times, and the strange chill I had felt melted away like a lie.

(...*Why?*) I wondered.

Though it was only for a moment, why had Ergo looked so troubled when at a loss for words just then?



Sitting at her desk in the dark, Rin stared intently at her fingertips.

She was in the apartment’s basement. The Singapore branch of the Clock Tower had offered a special lab, but this time she had refused it and chosen a regular basement instead.

The candlelight reflected in hues of red, green, and blue.

Jewels— rubies, emeralds, and sapphires, all of them large and brilliantly cut. Rin watched them carefully as she turned the knife in her hands.

The tip of the blade dug into her index finger, causing a bead of blood to swell on her skin. It eventually reached its limit and turned into a drop, which fell onto a ruby.

“Adjust your breathing.” Lord El-Melloi II said quietly from near the ventilation shaft connected to the surface.

The tip of his cigar glowed faint red, flickering in the dark room like a firefly.

“You have already experienced this countless times. Contract with the jewels. Place a portion of yourself inside them. You aren’t dripping blood onto jewels; you are dripping blood onto yourself. Imagine that your forehead catches that drop of blood. Let it seep into every neuron in your brain.”

Following his instructions, Rin became even more focused.

At the same time, the jewels began to act strangely, vibrating violently as if blood had been sucked into them. —No, it was not just blood, the jewels were also absorbing an invisible power that the ruby had passed on.

A magic circle was created, and began to activate. To be precise, it was more like spiraling. With each revolution, the power increased in speed and intensity, gradually twisting it out of shape. The jewels’ oscillation also spread, resonating like a tuning fork from the ruby to the emerald and then the sapphire.

“It’s not enough,” said Lord El-Melloi II. “Sharpen your concentration. Focus beyond the Magical Energy. Think of the jewels as Magic Circuits, as yourself. Perhaps the image of a knife suits you more. Yes, imagine those jewels are your heart. Imagine you are thrusting a knife into it.”

Rin’s concentration changed according to his advice. The power surrounding her taut figure slowly drifted into the jewels, stabilizing right before the jewels were about to burst. It was like a river returning to normal after the dam on it was broken.

Rin turned, exhaling.

“How was it, sir?”

“Perfect, except for one thing. It’s not over yet.”

He pointed to a jewel that had begun to twitch.

“—Ah!”

In the next instant, a protrusion rose from the ruby like spikes on a hedgehog. It soon died down, leaving a startled Rin and a sighing Lord.

“Are you hurt?”

“I’m not that incompetent.”

Lord El-Melloi II walked up to Rin, who coughed awkwardly. He gently turned her hand over to check for wounds. Then, he took out a monocle and examined one of the jewels in the candlelight.

“Your magecraft is very similar to Miss Luvia’s on a deeper level, though it may be by conversion because they are both types of Jewel Magecraft. If her magecraft is the flow of value, yours is closer to its accumulation,” he commented, placing the jewels in a pile and clicking his tongue.

For some reason, a dour look surfaced on his face. If Gray was here, perhaps she would sense a hint of jealousy. He quickly looked down to conceal it.

“...To be honest, I thought around three sets would be wasted.”

“In that case, I’ll keep the rest,” Rin said, brightening.

“May I offer them at a discount? I paid for them with my own money.”

“Alright then, I don’t want my teacher to lose face. Deal. I’m such a gracious, talented student, don’t you think?”

She chuckled, deftly put the jewels into a leather bag, and tied them with a string as if she never planned on returning them.

“But Professor, when did you start thinking about this formula? You didn’t invent it just to counter Latio, right? The advice you gave me also fits too well with the nature of my magecraft and Magic Circuits. Do you always think about such things? It’s annoying.”

“I myself am only ordinary. I cannot help but look at others and wonder what they can achieve. So it’s only natural that I wonder how you can best utilize your terrifying talent as an Average One, isn’t it?” Lord El-Melloi II said in response, frowning.

“I was only joking.”

“I would rather you be honest. If I had even a tenth of your talent, I wouldn’t be a Lord.”

He put his cigar into an ashtray as if he no longer wished to continue. He walked a few steps from Rin and lit an alcohol lamp to boil water in a beaker.

Rin stared in wonder as he took out an old-looking tea set.

“A Chinese tea set?”

He cast the first pot of hot water away. Then, he added tea and more water and gently placed the lid on top.

“You know how to brew tea? Chinese-style tea, no less.”

“Making tea in a gaiwan can be difficult, but anyone can use a teapot (*cháhú*). Besides, I came to Singapore before when I was traveling the world, and I had to do everything myself.”

“I suppose since your apprentice has been spoiling you so often, you forgot you knew?”

In response, he only offered his student some tea.

“Hmm, nice,” Rin remarked after taking a sip.

“It’s important to relax after concentrating on magecraft. Tea is a necessity for mages in all sorts of ways.”

“Boiling water with an alcohol lamp and a beaker. How practical.”



Rin tittered. Though they were laboratory equipment, they showed that magecraft and science had the same origin. Later, the mages of the Clock Tower had begun to reject science, but common items still remained in unexpected places.

Lord El-Melloi II drank his tea while remaining standing.

“How nostalgic... but is it really alright?” He pondered.

Though he didn’t specify what he was talking about, Rin understood him completely. She grabbed his tie and pulled on it until their eyes were on the same level.

“I understand you don’t want to involve the students of the El-Melloi classroom in your personal conflicts. But I’ll kill you if you dare exclude me from this.”

Her gaze made it clear that she was not joking this time.

The mage shrugged as if he was giving in.

“It was you who found Ergo, after all.”

“You’re also responsible. Didn’t you say that you refuse to sell out your students? That applies to me as well.”

“I understand your reasoning. I just want to ask you again if that’s all.”

Rin blinked a couple of times as she observed Lord El-Melloi II adjust his tie.

“So you’ve seen through it all, Professor. —Hm, yes, I’m very excited,” she said, standing proudly. “This is what an adventure feels like, isn’t it? I haven’t felt this way for ages. I don’t get to give my all to fight an unknown enemy every day. How can you give up these chances left and right and still call yourself a mage?”

“We mages should always aim for the Root.” Lord El-Melloi II said suddenly.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever reach the Root,” Rin continued. “We all know that we won’t reach it in this generation.”

“Even though we know, we’ll continue to labor and pass it to the next generation. That is the cycle that binds us.”

“Then it’s not just my time that is being lost here,” continued Rin. “It’s the time of all the mages of the past, present, and future. As you say, Professor, it’s our ‘whydunit’. After accumulating so much, how could we betray our purpose?”

Whydunit— the term for the culprit’s motive in mystery novels.

Lord El-Melloi II nodded slightly.

“Good, if you are aware of that reason and think that this is the right time, I have no reason to stop you. ...Why are so many of the women around me hardcore fighters, though?”

“Don’t you know that all women are fighters?”

Rin gave Lord El-Melloi II a rare smile, which was charming and challenging at the same time.

In any case, the Lord took another sip of tea before he spoke again.

“I have something else to ask of you, pirate consultant.”

His student’s face was reflected in his eyes. This time, they were not a student and a teacher, but a pirate and a mage.

It did not take long for the pirate to reach a conclusion.

“I think that proposal works, but first, I have a question.”

“What?”

“There’s something funny about Gray’s power, isn’t there?”

She had carefully weighed the abilities of Lord El-Melloi II’s disciple after their fight on the pirate island.

“I don’t think she excels in magecraft, but the accuracy of her enhancement magecraft is extraordinary. That Mystic Code with a personality model can’t have been made recently. And most importantly... her face is why you haven’t let us meet until now, right?”

“.....”

For a while, Lord El-Melloi II did not reply.

“Did you see her during the Fifth Holy Grail War?”

“Yes.” Rin nodded.

Both student and teacher had participated in the magecraft ritual where seven mages fought another with seven Heroic Spirits as their familiars.

“Servant Saber— King Arthur. Gray has the same face as her. But you already know that, Professor.”

“Most people don’t bring it up. Just think of Gray as a distant descendant.”

“Do you plan on using that excuse to explain how she has stopped growing?”

“.....”

Lord El-Melloi II frowned as if he was surprised that Rin knew so much.

Gray’s body had stopped changing after a point in time. She also had the same face as King Arthur. Even in the World of Magecraft, these two facts were hard to ignore.

“If her face was famous in the Clock Tower, *he* would surely notice. So thank you for that, I suppose,” she muttered, pocketing the pouch she had just put the jewels into.

“She doesn’t look like she wants to talk about it, so I won’t. I just feel like Ergo and Gray are kind of alike.”

“Like siblings?”

“I guess. I can’t explain it well either, maybe like the two sides of a coin? No, not quite. Perhaps something more one-sided, like jewels and money?”

Rin frowned, a little confused.

“...Maybe they’re like a sheep and a wolf.”

“Huh?”

“No, nothing. Thank you for the advice. I’ll be careful.”

Wiping his monocle with a cloth, Lord El-Melloi II left the basement.

~Part 5~

The sky was shockingly blue the next day.

Only a tiny patch of clouds floated in it, so the sun was free to flood the land with light.

I could feel the glare even with my hood on. The weather was also incredibly humid, and I would have been drenched in sweat if my enhancement did not cover my nervous system. Despite this, I could see plenty of women with stoles because air conditioning in Singapore was surprisingly common.

At least the sea breeze felt good.

We were at the deepest part of the Port of Singapore, which lay between the islands of Brani and Sentosa. In terms of the volume of cargo it handled, it was on par with Hong Kong and Shanghai as one of the world's top ports.

Trailers came back and forth between piles of containers as we waited by a warehouse a short distance away. Despite the prevalence of automation, this one remained full of rust.

My mentor ducked into the building's shadow.

“Are you alright, Sir?”

“I’m fine, just a little dizzy.”

There were faint dark circles under his eyes.

It was only natural that the weather was a strain on my mentor. Unfortunately, his skills did not allow him to avoid the heat. But the apartment building's air conditioning had been adjusted to a comfortable temperature, so it couldn't be the reason behind his lack of sleep.

He had probably been up thinking for the entire night.

I knew that while my mentor could be decisive at times, he was susceptible to stress as a rule. His only method of dealing with it was thinking through it completely, again and again, even if he couldn't find his ideal solution.

Since his opponent this time was a mysterious alchemist of the Atlas Institute in a foreign land instead of a mage of the Clock Tower, his troubles were multiplied.

(...*The alchemy of the Atlas Institute...*)

Simply thinking about it sent shivers down my spine.

Though her Exoforms, magecraft that used bones, were terrifying, her true threat lay in what was essentially precognition through Thought Acceleration and Partition. We had been soundly defeated on the pirate island because she could predict the next few seconds of the future.

If we were to face the alchemist again...

“...Gray.”

A voice reached my ears.

“It’s alright.”

Though my mentor was still unsteady on his feet, he was already trying to comfort me.

The same thought had probably occurred to Rin, who was looking at him with a wry expression.

“I feel like you should work on your physical strength, Professor.”

“Thank you for your advice. I do train regularly. ...How about you, Ergo? How do you feel?”

“I-I’m fine,” Ergo said, swallowing.

“Hey! Ergo!”

A tanned-skinned girl suddenly appeared from behind the container boxes, laughed, and lunged toward the young man.

“Lana!”

It was the girl who had cut his hair for him on the pirate island. She hugged Ergo tight with her forehead against his abdomen and then looked up at him.

“Rin told me to come here! I’m the representative, everyone else is waiting by the ocean!”

“Did everything go well?” Rin asked upon hearing that.

“Yep, it was perfect, since you’ve always told us to build the farms somewhere else,” Lana said with a grin, showing her white teeth.

I couldn’t help but feel a little sad. Looking at her, it was hard to believe that the island she had lived on had been destroyed a few days ago. Perhaps this was a quality unique to pirates.

“You asked for my help as the Consultant. Is this what you want?” Rin asked, turning to my mentor.

“Oh, yes.”

“Is this the joint operation you were talking about, Sir?”

I had heard the gist of it back in the apartment, but the details were still being worked out. We knew where the alchemist of the Atlas Institute was hiding, our next goal was to capture her.

“The operation is extremely simple. We will lay siege to her position. Since the pirates are more familiar with the terrain, I will give instructions under their lead. But it will be dangerous for the pirates who adore Rin...”

“You feel justified scamming people, and not this?”

“...Is that a problem?” He replied a little awkwardly, probably because he was also aware of the contradiction.

“No. I appreciate your concern, My Lord.” Rin smiled and bowed.

“What do you think, Lana?”

“Are you trying to pick a fight with Rin and Ergo?” The girl challenged, sniffling. “If you are, we’ll have to fight you! Rin and Ergo are our friends! We have a right to hit back when people target them, even if little kids who don’t understand anything aren’t allowed to join the fight!”

As she spoke, she struck her cute little fist onto her chest.

My mentor held her gaze for a while before turning to his student.

“...Rin, what did you teach them?”

“I taught them how to survive, of course.” Rin proclaimed proudly, causing my mentor to put a hand on the area around his stomach.

If Reines was here, she would probably tell him 'She's not wrong, you know? So you'd better endure the pain.' She understood better than anyone that, at certain times, you have to fight regardless of your age, or any other reason. It was not a question of right or wrong. If you don't fight, you don't survive.

The simple idea that one could not let one's friends be hurt even if it defied all logic was necessary in this world. It was a world that I was sure I did not know, having only been to a few places outside my hometown and London.

“—Ergo,” My mentor turned back to the young man. “You are what our opponent is after. Do you mind being used as bait?”

“No.” Replied Ergo immediately.

“Are you sure? I don't want to force you to do anything, but since I am your guardian, my suggestions will inevitably be hard to reject. Forcing you to accept will only cause you to hesitate in critical moments, which could lead to death. I want to hear your true thoughts.”

“I can't say I'm not afraid,” confessed Ergo. “But I think I must understand myself. I must fight this battle so this self with only a month of memory can continue living.”

His words penetrated my heart.

He wanted to understand himself.

What better motive (*whydunit*) could there be? Even for someone who had not been devoured by gods like Ergo, or held in place by an ancient hero like me.

“...One of the three mages that created you?” My mentor muttered to himself. Then: “I see. Forgive me for doubting your resolve.”

After apologizing, my mentor took out a cigar. The sea breeze immediately dissipated the smoke.

The smell of the brine and cigar smoke curled around my mentor's fleeting silhouette, and for a moment, I was strangely afraid that he was going to be swallowed up by the sea.

“That hawk also bothers me,” he said, narrowing his eyes and taking the cigar away from his mouth. Then, he took a breath.

“One thing at a time, starting with what I can reach. Right now, we shall launch a preemptive strike against Latio Crudelis Hiram, alchemist of the Atlas Institute,” he announced resolutely, gazing into the vast blue sea.

◆ 第四章 ◆

-Chapter 4-



~Part 1~

Rin's companions prepared seven medium-sized motorboats.

My mentor, Ergo, and I were on the boat that Rin piloted, while the pirates took the other six.

Most of the pirate crew looked around the same age as Ergo, around eighteen. Their faces glowed with bravery as they boarded their small boats, which bobbed around in the sea foam.

(Miss Rin's pirates...)

Her expression was also full of pride. Regardless of how long Rin had trained them, they had evidently picked up on "how to survive". It was also easy to see the trust they placed in her.

"This is Alpha-1. All clear on the perimeter."

"Bravo-1. All clear over here as well."

Voices periodically sounded from the radio we had prepared. If I remember correctly, Alpha and Bravo are part of a phonetic code used to prevent mishearing. I heard them often in the war films that Flat loved, though I had never expected pirates to use them, too.

After listening to their reports for a while with her arms folded, she pressed a button on the radio.

"Alright. We'll stick with the original plan. If anything goes wrong, run as fast as you can. I cannot stress that enough."

"Understood! Aye aye, ma'am!"

Possibly because we were heading away from Singapore and into the Strait of Malacca, there were only a few boats around us. I had been afraid that the patrols would discover

us when we left the harbor. Now that we were so far out to sea, I was starting to miss being on land.

My mentor unfolded a map behind me.

“Luxcarta’s search revealed two of Latio’s strongholds.”

As he spoke, his slender fingers moved across the map, careful to keep it from blowing away in the breeze.

“One of the places is Sentosa, which we have already searched.”

That was the site we were just at. Though there were remnants of Latio’s hiding place, it seemed that she had long since moved out. After discovering that, we rushed out to sea immediately toward the other location.

“The coordinates we’re heading towards are in the middle of the sea. There are signs that some kind of operation has been taking place there for some time.”

Rin turned suddenly as my mentor pointed to the new location.

“What’s wrong, Rin? Please look forward when you’re driving.”

“Oh, why didn’t I notice?” Rin exclaimed, staring unblinkingly at the spot as if she were trying to burn a hole in the map with her eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“I know this place. I’ve investigated it many times.”

“You’ve investigated it?” My mentor frowned.

At exactly that moment, static appeared on the line.

“There’s...fog...” a muffled voice said.

In an instant, a fog as thick as cream had enveloped us. It obstructed my vision, turning the world into a swath of fuzzy, milky white.

“I guess the concealment magecraft I put on the motorboats to hide us from the harbor patrol was entirely unnecessary,” Rin said, a hint of nervousness creeping into her voice.

“Do you think this fog is natural?”

“Of course not.”

Rin shook her head. Her eyes seemed to say that she had accepted the challenge. In the Clock Tower, or perhaps before she came, she was always determined to make her enemies pay.

“—Lord El-Melloi II.” A voice came from somewhere in the mist. It was the same inhuman voice that had first spoken to us on the pirate island.

My mentor gave a slight sigh.

“I see you’ve remembered to add the ‘II’.”

“Are you here to hand us Ergo?” The voice asked, cutting straight to the point. In this case, it was a sort of threat.

“Surely you have already calculated the result, Alchemist of the Atlas Institute.”

“Very well.”

With that, a fuzzy shadow emerged from the mist.

...At first, we were mistaken about its size. I had thought that it was the bone giant, or perhaps a ship made of bone familiars. Though I knew little about Latio beyond her use of bones, she had confessed to not bringing any weapons out of the Atlas Institute.

For that reason, I thought there was a limit to the shadow’s size. Soon, though, it grew to become far larger than I anticipated.

“Whoa...”

I couldn't help but marvel at its majesty.

It was a ship over a hundred meters long, covered in shells and rotting seaweed. The great masts used to guide it forward were fractured. Though it was easy to imagine its former resplendence, it now seemed like an ill omen.

The phrase “ghost ship” fit it well, even though it was not a Western ship. Its design and shape told at a glance that it hailed from a different ancient civilization. Somehow, whether through design or Mystery, the ship’s builders managed to evoke the same imposing effect as modern ships.

I saw Rin’s throat tremble.

“It can’t be... Zheng He’s ship?!”

I found this name familiar. Wasn’t it the ship that Rin was searching for?

She had only come to Singapore upon hearing about the shipwreck of one of the ships in the nearly country-sized fleet of the seafaring hero Zheng He.

The ship’s hull was encased in something that looked like streaks of white lightning. I immediately realized that it was bone. The same substance that made up the familiars we had fought on the island was now repairing this timeworn ship on the brink of collapse. —No, it must be more than that. No ship like this could sail without a crew.

“It could not be completed in time for our encounter on this island. Rather, it was not necessary in the original plan,” said Latio. “It was only prepared in consideration of the possibility that Ergo could enter Phase 2. Though, of course, Latio wishes that would not happen, it is better to be safe.”

Had her bone alchemy brought the ancient ship into the modern era? It seemed almost mythical, as if she had rescued someone from the crossing into the underworld.

The pirates nearby appeared tense. Who would have imagined that modern pirates would confront a ship from the Middle Ages? Although they must have studied the fundamentals of countering magecraft, they could not have foreseen such an enemy.

“You- you thief!”

The next moment, an impassioned voice rang out in the fog, loud enough to be heard without the radios. Everyone turned to its source, which was naturally the pirate consultant, Rin Tohsaka.

“That’s mine! I spotted it first! Why else do you think I came all the way to Singapore and worked so hard, you thief of an alchemist!”

For a moment, the entire patch of sea was stunned into silence.

For some reason, I felt like the trust between Rin and the pirates had weakened a little. Just a little.

“Um, Miss Tohsaka...”

Just as my mentor was about to interject—

“—Fire.”

The cold command triggered exactly the attack that it suggested. Several rockets were blasted toward us from the ship.

“Rockets!?” Rin cried, eyes widening.

Since gunpowder had already been used in Chinese warfare in Zheng He’s time, perhaps those rockets had also been restored by Latio.

“Duck!”

The pirates responded to Rin’s command even though the situation could have easily frozen them in shock. When the rocket exploded in midair, they had already maneuvered their boats to safety. They also pulled out their own weapons from their hiding places on the boats, including a rocket that tore through the smoke and slammed into the ship.

The impact and the explosion didn’t make the ship tilt at all. With my enhanced vision, I could see that it hadn’t made a scratch.

(Is it the same material as the giant...?)

Not even Add's battering ram form could harm the giant. Though the ship's casing might not be as strong, its protection made all of the pirates' weapons useless.

“Run!” Rin shouted through the radio.

At the same time, I took up a position on the side of the boat and removed the hook at my right shoulder.

“Add, release first stage restrictions!”

“Ihihijihi! That's a big one! It's so big that it's pointless! It's the biggest thing we've fought yet, isn't it?”

The box in my hands changed into a scythe as it chattered, allowing me to cut away the rockets aimed at us. Ergo used his phantasmal arms to protect my blind spots.

“To your left, Gray!”

“Thank you!”

Seven rockets came charging toward us in a chain. Though I could only repel the ones aimed at our boat, Ergo's arms extended to protect the pirates' boats. Still, we could not catch everything. One of the rockets exploded after it brushed past our boat, sending us tossing.

“Miss Rin!”

“Oh god...”

Rin only barely managed to regain control of the boat. She clenched the steering wheel as her face grew red. However, instead of calming down, the boat began to shudder erratically, and the treasure ship began to approach.

“Miss Rin!?”

“T-the steering wheel...” Rin stammered, looking baffled at the steering wheel that had popped off its column. No matter how you looked at it, it wasn’t a good idea to be removing that of all parts. Her incredulous expression made the disastrous nature of our situation even clearer.

“B-but I didn’t do anything! It just came off!”

“Don’t worry, just let me drive!”

Forcefully, my mentor cranked the lever just as several rockets darted into the sea behind us. The shockwaves from them alone blew us away and launched us across massive waves.

Amidst a salvo of sea spray and wind, my mentor forced the steering wheel back onto its column and turn it all the way to the right.

“Do you know how to drive a motorboat, Professor?”

“I drove one when I was traveling around Greece! The rest I learned while playing simulation games with a newcomer to the Department of Law! —That aside, what’s with the acceleration? What did you do to this boat?!”

“I only altered it a little to prepare for a naval battle! I used the fire element to enhance the engine and wind to provide physical barriers on all the boats!”

“Thoughtful of you!” My mentor shot back while driving the boat.

Just as he said, he was not experienced. It took Ergo’s phantasmal arms to stop the boat from capsizing as he made haphazard turns.

(—No—!)

Just as I felt that we had reached the tipping point, I heard Lana’s voice.

“Miss Rin!”

One of the boats in the pirate fleet came alongside us just as we were about to topple. It supported us as if it were scooping us up.

One wrong move, and the two ships would have collided, dooming us all. But the helmsman's outstanding skill at adjusting the boat's speed ensured that just the right portion of the boats overlapped. I could not believe that it was the work of Lana until I saw her with my own eyes.

“Oh, thank you, Lana!”

“You'll have to buy me a parfait on the mainland when we get back!”

With an exaggerated wave, Lana's boat pulled away.

The rain of rockets had not ceased. Though the physical wards Rin mentioned appeared to block some of them, it would not last long.

At some point, the treasure ship had made its way straight ahead of us, allowing more rockets than ever to reach us.

“Latio will not fight you. Latio will crush you unilaterally.”

(--*Were we lured in?!*)

With her Thought Partition and Acceleration, it was probably easy for Latio to drive us into a corner, especially since our boat kept losing speed from trying to stay upright.

“So we've still come to this,” said my mentor, letting out a bitter sigh. “Gray, use your lance.”

“But...”

Since we were already ensnared, our opponents had likely predicted our next move. In other words, she was probably already thinking about countermeasures. Wouldn't activating the lance lead to a decisive defeat?

“No, rather, it's quite convenient for us. I didn't expect a ghost ship to appear, but what else can we do? Right now, I think we have a chance,” my mentor said, shaking his head.

Finally, I made up my mind.

“Understood. Ergo, can you intercept the attacks for a moment?”

I raised my head and looked squarely at the ship. Regardless of what happened next, I would not lose to the ghost ship in spirit.

I adjusted my breathing, concentrated, and began.

“Gray (*Darken*)...Rave (*Celebrate*)...”

The incantation flowed naturally from me, simultaneously acting as self-suggestion supported by a steady rhythm.

“...Crave (*Want*)...Deprave (*Corrupt*)...”

My focus gradually built, and my sense of self gave way to the words on my lips.

“Grave...me...(*Engraved in me*)”

I paid no attention to the rockets being fired at the boat. The only thing I was aware of was the treasure I was gifted as a grave keeper of Blackmore Graveyard. The steps to unlock it had seeped into every cell of my being.

“Grave...for you...(*A grave for you*)”

Dissipate, O ancient mystery.

O sweet enigma, return to nothingness.

“Pseudo-personality suspended. Mana yield exceeds regulation. Second stage restraint rescinded.”

Add’s carefree voice turned into— or perhaps, returned to being robotic. The scythe that devoured spirits turned back into a box, and then back into its original form, which Add had only been created to hide. I was also but one of the locks that kept this lance sealed.



Latio watched from the deck as light swelled above the waves.

“They really have an extraordinary Noble Phantasm like that...”

“That looks like trouble, Lady Latio!” Warned Tangere.

Even the voice of the familiar made by the Atlas Institute was laced with something akin to fear. That was just how the light was.

“Latio knows.”

The bracelet on the blue-haired woman’s hand clanged.



A change took place.

Some of the bones covering the ship’s hull grew in size. I realized immediately that it was meant to increase the ship’s defense.

I didn’t care.

What did that matter now?

Though my body became simply a mechanism to activate the lance, I heard one of my companions mutter something.

“...It’s exactly like her Excalibur (*Sword of Promised Victory*)...”

Ah, Rin must have seen it.

King Arthur’s Excalibur was one of the world’s most famous Noble Phantasms, but it was only one of her many treasures.

In my hands, I held another of them, the holy lance that had impaled the traitor Mordred and struck the last note of King Arthur’s legend.

Without fear or hesitation, I grasped the light that poured from the box.

“—Rhongo— (*The Lance that Shines*)”

Magical Energy that was enough to wipe a small island from the map formed a spiral around my arm. It had become more familiar to me over the years.

I hurled it forward as I announced its true name.

“—myniad— (*to the End of the World*) !”

~Part 2~

A hurricane of dazzling light enveloped the world, whipping up a storm like a dragon in flight.

Its power could have made someone think that the sun had appeared in this patch of sea. Shining with harsh, miraculous light, Magical Energy accelerated relentlessly, turning into destructive particles that obliterated everything it touched. If not for the alchemist's dense fog, the light would have been visible from the mainland.

I saw Latio freeze for a tenth of a second as the light subsided, for Zheng He's ship had been torn in half. The lance's radiance vaporized everything that it touched from the hull to the deck. What remained was red-hot and smoldering. I doubted that even a meteorite would be able to do so much damage.

“Was that your trump card?” Muttered Latio, but then quickly denied it and looked toward the front of the deck. “No, did you really use your trump card to escape?”

I heard another voice from the treasure ship.

“Gray, are you alright?”

“W-what?”

I nodded, stood up, and realized that I was on the treasure ship's deck. Ergo's phantasmal arms had pulled me here after I activated the lance.

The pieces of bone littering the waves looked like the surface of an alien planet, or like the intestines of some decaying animal adrift there. I could feel it throbbing through the soles of my feet.

“I never thought I would... ever board a ghost ship,” my mentor gasped. I thought the same.

I quietly walked over to him. He was not on his feet, probably because he had overexerted himself earlier.

Add was back in scythe form. In the past, activating Rhongomyniad would have made it listless for half a day. Now, I could continue fighting to protect my mentor.

“Latia’s calculation is complete,” announced the blue-haired woman. “Latia predicted the speed that Rhongomyniad diminished, measured its position, and gave up on the center in favor of protecting the sides. ...Even so, only the bare minimum of its sailing ability was retained.”

To tell the truth, I had activated the lance with the intention of obliterating it, but Zheng He’s treasure ship held. Was that because of its design, Latia’s Alchemy, or both?

Seeing that the attack would not destroy the ship, my mentor gave the signal for Ergo to pull us onto it.

“But if we fire that Noble Phantasm, we can devour them through sheer volume.”

Latia raised her bangled arm.

As if she had waved a conductor’s baton, a wave of bone familiars sprung up around us in the shapes of spiders, wolves, and even bats.

“Your defeat has been determined from the moment you set foot on this ship.”

More and more familiars emerged.

As I predicted earlier, this ship was proportional to the inside of Latia’s body, so she must have thought that she could dispose of us any way she wanted. Since Rhongomyniad hadn’t been able to destroy the ship, she concluded that her victory was guaranteed.

That was the result of her “precognition”, achieved through Thought Acceleration and Partition.

“Hahaha, you were close to wrecking the boat, though!” Said the bone giant, the alchemist’s companion, appearing in front of her.

One of its empty eye sockets closed, and then opened again. Maybe it was trying to wink.

“Let Latia say it again, Lord El-Melloi II. Hand us Ergo. The Atlas Institute does not wish to interfere further with the Clock Tower.”

Latia’s emotionless voice echoed across the deck.

Though it was a little dispassionate to be one, I supposed it was a declaration of victory, for it rammed into our core with no room for argument.

Just as I was tempted to curl up on the ground and admit defeat, someone beside me stood up.

“Ergo?”

“I brought these people here,” said the young man, bravely raising his head and extending his translucent arms. “I can’t back down here.”

“Your bravery is commendable, God Devourer.”

Tangere’s arm swung back and forth.

The fight on the pirate island had only lasted five minutes. It was enough for Latio to predict our movements. Worse, we were surrounded on all sides. The very ship we stood on was our enemy.

My mentor spoke up before the tightening circle of familiars could reach us.

“Stop, Ergo.”

“But, Professor—”

Turning around, Ergo saw a faint smile on my mentor’s face.

“It is our victory.”

“Huh?”

Things were happening so fast there was hardly time to be surprised.

“—Aha!”

Rin leaped down from her hiding place on the mast. She lashed out suddenly with the gem in her hand, but Tangere dodged it with an agility that didn’t suit his massive size.

“Too bad!”

Rin’s lips curved in a smile at the sound of Tangere’s playful voice. Unconcerned, she began to recite a new spell.

“Vorbereitung, neunzehn, achtzehn, siebzehn, sechzehn, fünfzehn (*Prepare, nineteenth, eighteenth, seventeenth, sixteenth, fifteenth*)—”

A wave of Magical Energy surged onto the deck from the gem. At the same time, something invisible breached the ship's hull.

“Tangere! Expand the Logical Sensing Net and Ether acquisition range by a hundred times each!” Shouted Latio, sensing Rin’s intention.

“Miss Latio, this is—” The bone giant responded immediately.

“I expected you to realize faster, alchemist of the Atlas Institute. I had our pirates who escaped earlier hold the gemstone that would serve as a catalyst.”

I saw that the pirates who had fled on Rin’s orders each held a gemstone. If you looked from the air, you would have noticed that their trajectories formed a pentagram.

“In return for your teaching me about Thought Acceleration and Partition, let me show you the Clock Tower’s magecraft! We send commands to the Magecraft Base engraved in the world to activate spells. After that, the larger the magic circle that contacts the Magecraft Base, the more layers of magecraft can be woven in--!”

I felt the Magic Crest on Rin’s left arm activate. With it at its center, the enormous magic circle began to converge toward Zheng He’s ship.

“Der Schlüssel sind Zahlen. Der Schlüssel ist die Welle. Der Schlüssel sind die fünf Farben (*The key is numbers. The key is waves. The key is the five colors*).”

“Stop her, Tangere!”

“Gray, Ergo, provide backup!”

Latio and my mentor shouted instructions at the same time. Ergo’s phantasmal arms and my scythes caught Tangere’s fists right above Rin as she chanted the final lines.

“Die fünf Elemente. Aus Gold wird Blei. Hühner in Eier verwandeln. Drehen, drehen, drehen, drehen Sie den Kreis rückwärts (*O, five elements, turn gold into lead, turn the chicken into an egg. Turn, turn, turn, turn, turn into a circle, reverse*)!”

I briefly wondered if the spell was complete. No fire or ice suddenly appeared. Instead, Tangere and the bone familiars suddenly stopped moving. Even the writhing boat stopped moving, evidence of a fatal malfunction.

“No, how could this...” muttered Latio.

“Hacking,” replied in a low voice. “All things rooted in mystery are powered by magecraft. The Atlas Institute’s alchemy is no exception; in fact, your Exoforms are a

perfect example. Its mystery is inside your body, so it can come into being without a Magecraft Base. In that case, I guessed that the parts outside your body should be more susceptible to outside interference.”

“Even so, you cannot just interfere with Latio’s Exoforms. That would be like guessing a several dozen-digit password by randomly pressing numbers.”

“That is correct. Types of magecraft have their own wavelengths and formulas. You can’t interfere with other people’s spells if they don’t mesh, though it isn’t a problem if you’re dealing with an inexperienced opponent. However, one of my students happens to be extremely talented at this. He knows certain tricks. In other words, it is possible to interfere once you identify the wavelength and formula of the magecraft.”

(Wavelengths and formulas...!)

Hearing those words, I came to a realization.

—“*As you may have guessed, it is a Mystic Code that checks the wavelength and waveform of magecraft.*”

Observation Sphere Luxcarta.

Had my mentor committed fraud not only to find Latio, but also to play this move?

“On top of that, Miss Tohsaka is an Average One with five elemental affinities. It is difficult to choose spells that suit this talent, as she is suited to basically every type of magecraft besides vexing ones with ether or no attribute. On the other hand, she is capable of interfering with almost any magecraft in existence.”

“That doesn’t sound much like a compliment, Professor,” complained Rin, frowning.

So my mentor and Rin had planned this from the very beginning. Even if just for a moment, our opponent had let down her guard after withstanding Rhongomyniad.

“The Atlas Institute’s Thought Acceleration and Partition are indeed frightening. If done perfectly, it is tantamount to Predictive Precognition. Though it can only predict a few seconds into the future, it can neutralize all our attacks in a battle, as demonstrated when you weren’t hit by Rhongomyniad,” my mentor muttered. “If you were truly perfect, you would have put a stop to our hacking before we began. But your processing power was occupied with blocking (*devouring*) the lance.”

He had deliberately chosen to unleash Rhongomyniad then to allow Rin to sneak in from the alchemist’s blind spot.

“Do you mean to say that Latio’s magecraft has been dissected?”

My mentor frowned as he eyed Latio, who was kneeling on the ground possibly because the interference had also affected her body.

“I’m told that I’m known by that alias, though I don’t like it much.”

At the same time, I knew that this was a terrible gamble, because my mentor’s hands were trembling slightly. I didn’t dare think about what would have happened if the lance hadn’t disrupted the alchemist’s calculations, or if Rin hadn’t successfully interfered.

My mentor hated to involve others in his battles. How much determination, how many hours of deliberation had it taken for him to take this risk?

“I have a question,” he said, not showing his apprehension. “What on earth did you do to Ergo?”

“...Did you not unravel his secrets already, Lord?”

As my mentor had already revealed on the pirate island, Ergo had devoured gods.

“That was just the illusion of a theory built up on guesses. I may have captured a shred of its essence, but it is far from reality. It is not a sufficient answer for my students. ...One day, Ergo will reach memory saturation. How can we prevent that?”

“.....”

She was quiet briefly in a different manner from before.

“Lord El-Melloi II. You said that you will protect Ergo because he is your student. Latio does not understand. Must teachers go so far for their students?”

I never expected my mentor, who was considering quitting his job, would be asked a question like this.

This time, my mentor was at a loss for words.

“I...”

He put his fingers to his brow and spoke as if he were trying to spit out uneven stones.

“I just want to be someone I can accept. I want to at least be quietly proud of myself for once in this life full of regrets. That is the sort of trivial pride I want to cling to as a teacher, alchemist.”

I didn’t know if those words meant anything to her. Perhaps she had already predicted my mentor’s answer with her Thought Acceleration and Partition. Even though they spoke in the same language, there was such a difference in processing ability that they must have radically different ways of existing.

To my surprise, Latio spoke again with her head hung after a few seconds.

“To stop Ergo from reaching memory saturation, you will have to return the gods.”

“Return them...?”

“The gods that Ergo devoured have all arisen naturally. The ones that made him devour the gods never considered this, but it is theoretically possible to return the gods to their natural state. Latio has no help to provide regarding the techniques or people required to do so.”

“Latio, no, Miss Latio...”

Ergo’s eyes were wide.

Briefly, it seemed as if an ill-fitting blanket of calmness had floated onto the ship. It filled my heart though we had been fighting a moment ago.

—It didn’t last long.

“...Hey, hey, you’re giving too much away,” came the voice of judgment, descending from the sky. “You’re violating our agreement, Crudelis.”

~Part 3~

The voice had come from a hawk.

No mere hawk could have wandered into a magecraft-made fog so dense. What was more, we had seen it before when Ergo's skull was suddenly crushed—

The hawk landed on the ship's mast and surveyed the half-ruined deck.

"I had planned on going in order... but the god devourer's contents are meant to be secret," quipped the hawk.

"You again, Mushiki."

Suddenly, another change took place. The wind picked up, and a tiny storm enveloped the ghost ship with wind speeds beyond imagination.

The ship moaned as if the world had been turned upside down. Even the mast strengthened by the Atlas Institute's bone familiars creaked, or swayed, or splintered.

"Wh-What the—!" Rin cried out as she held on to the mast for dear life. Ergo's phantasmal hands caught her just as she was about to be swept away.

My mentor only managed to stand with my help, and my scythe anchoring us in place. The deactivated bone familiars, however, had no way to resist and slid from the deck into the storm's waiting maw.

"A typhoon in Singapore...!" My mentor raised his head as the wind threatened to tear the hair from his head. "This goes against the Coriolis effect! How could a typhoon near the equator possibly be powerful enough to swallow up such a large ship!"

"So what is this, then?!"

"Pure Mystery! Pure Mystery at an unimaginable scale!"

Not ten seconds after my mentor's bellow, all the bone familiars disappeared from the deck, and the storm faded as if it had never been there at all. Though we were still

shrouded in fog, a patch of blue appeared above the ghost ship. The hawk swooped down through it with ease.

“There, I’ve cleaned it up for you. You should thank me.”

With that, the raptor took on the form of a silver woman.

She was like a white flame. On her glittering skin was a light blue pattern that was unlike a birthmark nor a tattoo. It made her look like a human-shaped ball of fire. She wore two crude, chain-linked shackles around her wrists, and a beautiful golden bell on her right ear.

“Of the three mages who made Ergo devour gods, you must be the second,” said my mentor.

“You should know that without my telling you, Lord of the Clock Tower.”

In contrast to the woman’s nonchalance, the alchemist looked up with an expression as if she was only restraining herself by wedging her bones into the deck.

“It should still be Latio’s turn!”

The woman nodded twice, unaffected.

“Look, you’ve clearly failed. You would know that if you only have but a tiny bit of self-awareness. Honestly, I feel sorry for you. I can’t bear to see the descendants of the people I once respected and studied with reduced to such a state.”

“Mushiki—”

Mushiki shrugged off Latio’s demand to speak no more.

“The Crudelis family was doomed to perish anyway.”

“You- you...!”

Latio's body suddenly darted upward. She had launched herself by shooting the bones from her feet. Propelled by its recoil, she jumped almost as if bouncing off the deck as she flew toward Mushiki and hurled a sword made of bone from her hand.

The woman easily deflected the attack with her manacles.

“Haha, so this is how the families of the Six Sources— the Six Sages of Atlas will meet their end.”

Latio's sword swung five more times with the speed of lightning, so she probably had some power left from the fight that just took place. She was probably directly controlling the bones inside her body to squeeze out more energy beyond her limits. She must also have calculated that her opponent would evade the attack with her Thought Acceleration and Partition.

Instead, the woman, Mushiki, deflected it all with her manacles again.

“Do you know how slow your strategy is? If you're going to calculate everything one by one before you act, you might as well let your bones do the thinking for you. Besides, the Clock Tower Lord is also here. They started this scuffle. So why don't we scrap this order of operations and start from scratch?”

She said the last half of that while staring straight at my mentor.

Before anyone else could make a move—

“Repairing internal hacking...Clear!”

Tangere stood up, having recovered from Rin's interference. With a cry of “Lady Latio!”, the bone giant launched itself into the fray, four bone limbs exchanging blows with the woman's two arms. Though she was tall, the giant was more than two meters taller. It was hard to see where she was as they grappled with each other, if only for the briefest of moments before the giant was overwhelmed.

I gasped when I heard the bone giant cry out. It should not have been able to feel pain.

“You are nowhere close to Xiang Yu's power, or Yu's inventiveness. How come you haven't reached either one in more than two thousand years?”

I recognized the first name. Xiang Yu was a famous general of ancient China. In that case, “Yu” must refer to his wife, Consort Yu. Though I never heard that the lady in the *Song of Gaixia* was a formidable fighter, perhaps the history *Mushiki* had witnessed was different from the one I knew.

With a crack, *Mushiki* tore off the giant's arms as if they were made of paper mâché.

“Hahaha, this is almost too easy!”

Chains extended from her manacles and wrapped around Latio and the giant. She spun them around as if they were attached to fan blades before pounding them down onto the shard of the mast that remained.

Before they made contact, the bone giant made one last desperate heave.

The chains loosened, and Latio fell onto the deck. Only the giant was impaled.

“Tangere!”

“Haha, as long as you’re safe... I can’t move anymore...”

Though the giant could mended itself even after having its head blown off, it didn’t even try to retake its detached arms.

“You must be kidding me,” said the silver woman, frowning. “I haven’t had the chance to have fun in ages. I knew you were weak, but surely you’re stronger than this. I haven’t let out all my anger yet, and you’re already broken.”

As she began walking toward Latio, Rin ran over to stop her.

“Aren’t you guys on the same side?”

“Hah? Have you been paying attention or not? Sure, I knew her ancestor, but now we’re only bound by a contract that’s lost its meaning.”

“Really? She seems to respect you, though. In return, you provoked and insulted them. That’s awfully rude, don’t you think?”

“So what?”

“So, I don’t like you!”

A red light shot out from Rin’s hand.

“*Anfang!*”

As it flew toward the woman, the gemstone seemed to blossom like a rose. She had instilled many times more Magical Energy into it. This was probably one of the true cards she had prepared to use against Latio.

“Sechs, fünf, vier, Verzehren Sie den Schatz! Vernichten Sie den Schatten des Feindes!
(*Sixth, fifth, fourth, fire all! Do not spare even one of the enemies’ shadows*)”

Rubies exploded before my eyes. Rin was giving it her all. Her attack was likely as powerful as the RPG the pirates had used not long ago. It could demolish a small house, maybe even damage the alchemy-enhanced ship. But the woman dispelled it yet again with a wave of her hand.

“Oh, so you like snowball fights? Alright then, I’ll play with you.”

She raised her thumb. It was simply compressing the air, not even magecraft, but it was enough to send Rin flying into the mast. She slid to the ground with a whimper.

“Rin!”

Her head was bowed. She did not stand up. Her magic crest should have responded to her condition and healed her automatically, but it would take her a while to recover.

This was pure, overwhelming violence.

All of my mentor’s and Latio’s careful planning was for nothing. This is what people in the Clock Tower meant when they said that fights between mages ended before they begun. Thought Acceleration, Thought Partition, and the holy lance that destroyed resources necessary for them. Our plans to overrun the deck, and for the pirates to

assist in interference. Somehow, this woman could trample over the rules of magecraft and alchemy to act upon her brutal will.

“How...?”

Mushiki tilted her head to look at me.

“What is there to be surprised about? You should know that mystery is canceled out by stronger mystery. That fact hasn’t changed since the Age of the Gods. Neither the Atlas Institute’s Exoforms nor that girl’s Gandr have a stronger mystery than my skin. They didn’t stand a chance.”

“...That means...” My mentor muttered through trembling lips. “...You must be a Xian...”

“What do you mean?”

“The Philosophy Magecraft rooted in Continental Asia is mostly managed by the Spiral Manor. However, a few lingering individuals survive with the authority to connect to the Magecraft Base and form the organization known as the Summit Court. The organization’s leaders are the Ten Officials, all of whom are true Xian.”

Right. My mentor had brought this up before we used Luxcarta— there was another organization beyond the reaches of the mortal realm, the realm of the Xian.

“If all the rumors are true, Xian are the pure embodiment of mystery. Even their breaths and tears would be brimming with it, their bodies more so.”

“Enough about that. I was banished from the court ages ago, alright? I’m not one of the Ten anymore.”

The woman scratched her head sheepishly. I, on the other hand, was completely frozen in place with shock.

Latio had been strong enough. This Mushiki was of an entirely different caliber, like a mountain to a rock. It was difficult to break apart a rock with your fists, but no one would be stupid enough to try and do the same to a mountain. That was how overwhelmingly different they were.

Mushiki paid no notice to me and walked toward the red haired youth. She gently brushed his face with the tip of her finger.

“Why, hello.”

An alarmingly charming smile appeared on her face, in stark contrast to her casual greeting. Allured by it, I instantly forgot that my life was still in danger. Though I didn’t quite understand the feeling, I suppose this was what they meant by someone beautiful enough to collapse a city by looking its way.

“You’ve been hungry all this time, haven’t you? Since you’ve woken up, you’ve never been truly satisfied, isn’t that right?” She muttered with her lips close to Ergo’s ear.

“Agh...” Ergo let out a whimper as she caressed him.

She had clearly shaken him. I was witnessing a carnivorous plant lure in its prey. Even though being captured could only lead to death, there was something enrapturing about the woman’s face that made her impossible to resist.

The woman cast me a look with her uncanny eyes. Their irises were golden, and their pupils a deep red, like a golden ring floating in an orb of fire.

“Devour that girl,” she urged him. “Honestly, I must have still been half-asleep to not have realized before I saw that Noble Phantasm. It must feel so awful with that girl beside you, always holding yourself back... You mustn’t let your desire pile up. I’m practically your mother, so it’s only natural that I would want to see my dear son released from his suffering, isn’t it?”

(...Mother?)

That was certainly a shock, but something else had a greater impact on me.

(...He’s been suffering all this time?)

I didn’t understand what that meant. —No, I did.

I didn’t understand what she was trying to do. —No, I understood that too.

The word Yomotsuhogui echoed back and forth in my head. My mentor had hypothesized that Ergo had eaten the flesh of gods. In that case, what would satisfy them?

Shouldn't I have realized long ago, as a grave keeper, an expert on the realm of the dead?

“Eat her, Ergo!”

Ergo stiffly turned toward me. His expression was not one of joy or anticipation at the thought of release, but of pure despair, the emptiness that comes with being given the solution.

...Ah, yes.

All this time, the god-devouring young man had wanted to devour the hero inside me.

We were not some sufferers of the same plight. It was quite the opposite. He was the devourer (*wolf*), and I was the devoured (*sheep*).

“Gray! Snap out of it! Run for your life!”

Add's voice seemed strangely distant. It was Mushiki's doing. I couldn't move with her eyes on me. They were probably some sort of Mystic Eyes.

(...*Huoyan-jinjing*...)

A word appeared in my mind.

That was the name of a pair of eyes my mentor talked about, from a legend from the Far East. That story had involved Xian, too. For some reason, the desire to listen to one of his lectures again with Rin and Ergo throbbed with each pulse of my heart.

Ergo walked slowly towards me.

“Ergo!” My mentor shouted.

Not even that could reach me now. I could not protect him. I hoped he would forgive me.

“Gray...”

The young man opened his mouth as if he had no other choice. Saliva dripped down from his teeth and onto his chin. What a beautiful beast, I thought, for some inexplicable reason.

Tears were flowing, the only beautiful thing in this dangerous place.

My vision was flooded with red.



Something warm pounced toward me in the sea of red. However, I felt no pain.

Fearfully, I ran my hand down my face and was met with an unbelievable sight.

Ergo was biting down on his own arm, his own flesh. Bright red blood flowed from his open mouth. His teeth trembled with force that seemed strong enough to break his bones.

“Ergo!”

His mouth was stained crimson like a clown’s nose, but his eyes were moist, like a child’s.

“Ergo! You fool!”

Mushiki had hardly finished speaking before there was a sickening sound. It was the sound of flesh being severed from Ergo’s bones, which shone white between the shocking amount of blood. The storm-washed deck was spattered with red.

Just like that, Ergo fell to the ground, and the spell on me was lifted. My mentor ran toward Ergo, possibly after being freed from the same spell.

“You resisted it, Ergo.”

“...I’m your student... after all...” His quavering voice only made the pain in my heart grow. “You must know...why I’m so hungry...”

“Those who eat the food of the underworld must not leave or eat anything else. It makes sense for the same to apply to a god devourer.”

Ergo smiled a strenuous smile.

“Haha... How embarrassing... You always catch me...embarrassing myself... Gray...”

I thought back to our encounter on the roof, his song, and his flustered expression.

—Don’t be afraid of ghosts

At the time, I had thought that the ghosts were actually gods, those unknown people inside him. ...But what if they referred to his hunger? Hadn’t he struggled desperately to keep the urge to devour gods inside him? Rin said that he always seemed to be asleep. Was that so he could keep at bay the relentless hunger that had pursued him ever since he awoke?

So that was why my mentor commended him, and Ergo responded that it was because he was his student.

They had known since the very beginning, while I had tried to avoid it.

“Professor...if this goes on...I’ll lose control of my arms...”

“Not on my watch,” my mentor declared. “Think of the moon, Ergo.”

Gachirinkan.

In an instant, Ergo’s movements slowed. The bloodied young man did as my mentor had taught him and closed his eyes as if he had fallen asleep.

“Hey, hey! What are you doing?” Said the silver woman with an exaggerated sigh. “I expected better. I didn’t come here to watch you push water uphill with a rake, or however the saying goes.”

My mentor stood up and looked Mushiki squarely in the eye.

“...What do you want?”

“What do I want?” Asked the woman, tilting her head.

“Both you and the Alchemist have asked me to hand Ergo to you. But since you have gone through the trouble of deciding the order to attack him, you must have different goals.”

“Ah, well,” Mushiki said, clapping her hands together. “My wish is simple compared to the other two...It’s honestly a little embarrassing. I didn’t know I could still get embarrassed at this age. Perhaps there is some value in growing old, then.”

Though the word they used was the same, it seemed as if Ergo and the woman were talking about completely different things.

“I want to devour him.”

Her lips twisted, revealing show-white fangs brighter than a tiger’s, sharper than a wolf’s, and more threatening than both.

“...Devour him?”

“I suppose you could call it a food chain,” Mushiki explained casually, twirling her finger. “Ergo devours gods, and I devour Ergo. Isn’t that wonderful? He’s not just vintage wine but a crystallization of millennia of mystery. Not even the peaches of immortality can compare. You should feel proud that you’re going to be devoured.”

“Enough!”

Though even I was surprised to discover it was me who shouted it, I stepped forward, gripping my scythe with no intention of taking it back.

“Exactly, Gray,” said my mentor, also stepping forward and putting his hand on my shoulder. “He is my student, and your underclassman. Of course we cannot stand by and watch this nonsense.”

“Dear me, are the two of you serious?” Asked Mushiki with a face full of contempt. A gust of wind blew past and sent her white hair fluttering. “I might not know much about the modern age, but I can tell a mage’s skill level just by looking. You couldn’t do anything to help Latio, could you? Without your students, what can you do?”

“This is what I can do.” My mentor smiled a wry smile, took a breath, and made his intentions clear at last. “Like I said to Latio, I am a teacher. I keep thinking about ridding myself of the job, but it keeps coming back to me. And so, as a teacher, I will unravel the whodunnit of this mystery. Or perhaps it’s the other way around.”

“Huh,” said Mushiki, though I wasn’t sure whether she understood what my mentor said. “I see. So that’s what you’re trying to do. Don’t expect me to stand by and let you have your way, though.”

“Help us, Latin Crudelis Hiram,” my mentor shouted as the impaled bone giant looked on. “Regardless of your goal, we cannot let her take Ergo!”

“I don’t understand, Lord,” said the alchemist, shaking her head. “Why are you offering Latio your help? Were we not fighting you just now?”

“I’m just making the best use of what I have! It’s embarrassing to have to beg for help, isn’t it? But I don’t have another choice!”

Most people probably would have found my mentor’s answer laughable. But isn’t that how the weak fight? If you don’t want to curl up into a ball and cry, you must struggle with all the might you can muster.

Latio was silent for a moment before she stood up.

“...I shall. But only on Zheng He’s ship.”

“That is enough.”

“Oh? A temporary alliance?” Mushiki tilted her chin, revealing the blue patterns inked on her neck. The chains on her wrists jangled. “Good, more fun for me. Go on, keep trying. You won’t get anywhere.”

My heart pounded furiously in my chest. This was the first time I had ever been so scared. Though I had fought many times against opponents stronger than myself, the depths of her ability were completely impenetrable. My nerves stopped responding to my attempts at enhancement, and the handle of my scythe became slippery with sweat.

“Ergo, can you hear me?”

Even so, I heard a voice behind me.

“...Let us begin our one-on-one lesson.” Said my mentor calmly to the prone young man.



He was submerged in water.

He drifted in it.

He did not feel pain, only exhaustion that he had no desire to fight. He knew that something far scarier would come to replace the fatigue once it passed.

He hoped that he could stay like this forever.

Rin said they had found him floating in the ocean.

Now, he had simply returned.

He was sure that everyone else was fine.

No one was hurt. He didn’t have to worry about hurting them anymore. So all he needed to do was curl up and surrender his body to the tide.

Why, then, could he not sleep?

Why?

He didn’t know.

No amount of thinking gave him an answer.

He could only float along like a jellyfish subject to the will of the sea as he pondered the question in his hazy mind.

But just as he was finally about to give up on thinking, he heard a voice.

“...Let us begin our one-on-one lesson.”

(...Ah...)

The memory of his promise surfaced.

Even if their relationship was only temporary, a student should naturally listen to a teacher's class, and a student should naturally never be absent if the teacher is also there.

A faint light appeared in the water.

...It must be the moon, he thought.

Gachirinkan. Another word rose to the top of his mind. Perhaps this light was his mental image of the moon.

“Ergo.” Came the calm voice again.

“—And so, I indict the divine.”



It was as if we were under fire from a battleship.

With every blow, a shockwave rattled the deck. I could feel the ghost ship shudder beneath my feet, all hundred meters of it being tormented by a single person.

“Two steps toward eleven o' clock!”

I heard Latio's warning just in time for Mushiki's fist to graze the back of my head. There was no time to worry about my hood; my entire body was sent rolling across the deck. Another command was shouted at me the moment I stood up again.

“One step toward six o'clock! Use your scythe! One step toward two o'clock!”

Her voice was not transmitted using telepathy. Something the alchemist gave me was sending sound directly into my inner ear, like bone-conduction earphones.

As we fought, Latio thrust her bone sword to allow me to escape whenever I had trouble keeping up. Thanks to her, I was barely able to resist. Regardless, we were firmly stuck on the defensive. Our opponent was like a storm, after all, and what could you do against one even if you were warned a few seconds before it was going to strike? Even a light blow from Mushiki's perspective would spell certain death for me.

—Xian.

I understood the horror of that word for the first time.

At the same time, I also realized how impressive Latio's ability to defend against her was. If not for her orders, how many times would I have died?

Even so, we were walking a tightrope— no, dancing on a spiderweb. The problem wasn't that it could break at any moment, but that doing so was a challenge to the laws of physics.

“Ahaha, so two can manage what one cannot. Your agility is not bad, scythe girl. How about we see which one of us lasts the longest?”

I certainly didn't think a battle of endurance was a good idea. One second spent fighting against her was like an hour. To survive her violence, every deadly blow, even a moment's thought required all of my strength. I had to think desperately, move desperately, and fight desperately in order to survive the next second.

While this repeated again and again, I heard my mentor speak from behind me.

“First of all, the gods that you devoured, Ergo, could not have been random. The reason for this is simple. Gods are amalgamations of various attributes. Random combinations will surely repel each other.”

He had spoken of a similar concept in a lecture before. Since the concept of placing many gods into a container was improbable, there must be some sort of explanation.

“In this case, there are two clear similarities.”

Meanwhile, I launched myself from the tilted mast in order to block a palm strike from Mushiki. From the corner of my eye, I saw the mast snap from the shockwave her attacks generated. Following Latio’s instructions required not only absolute trust but also split-second decision making. Maybe it was also partly her calculations, but it made me feel like my brain was going to overheat.

“One is that the gods are associated with the sea. It cannot be a coincidence that you were found drifting at sea, not to mention your dreams. In fact, drifting on the sea is an attribute of the gods in many myths.”

Even in a situation like this, my mentor still managed to speak as if he was standing behind a pulpit, his voice ringing out across a quiet room.

“Some examples are Hiruko of the Far East and Njord from Norse mythology. Beliefs that consider castaways or washed-up objects as the embodiments of gods exist worldwide. Considering your dreams, I can surmise that the gods within you possess the attribute of the sea or water.”

(—*Chains!*)

They extended from Mushiki’s manacles.

I used my scythe to deflect them, and turned it back into box form just as it was about to be caught up in her chains. I had to avoid that at all costs. I had seen what happened to the bone giant Tangere when he was captured.

“Ihihihihi! Well this stinks, doesn’t it!”

Even Add’s voice had a trace of nervousness in it.

Amid all of this, my mentor continued.

“The other commonality is the hands,” my mentor said, raising a hand that he tried to steady. “There is no better clue than the hands you control. Like I said before, hands are a sign of evolution. It was the pressure of information from hands that turned apes into man.”

It was really so much like a one-on-one lesson.

(...Ah.)

Why did I suddenly feel like crying?

As I had always known, he was suited to this role, which was part detective and part surgeon. Yes, my mentor could only be a lecturer.

“To a god, hands represent infinite reach. In Asia, the compassion of Avalokiteshvara is represented in her thousand arms. On the other hand (*TN: pun not intended*), the hands of war deities like the Asura represent destruction. Therefore, if one has the hands of a god, one can reach information normally inaccessible to humans. In other words, they can reach new heights of evolution, which caused you to reach memory saturation... your creators should have predicted that this would happen. Didn’t Mushiki ask you about what you remember?”

—“*Hahaha, so you remember me? Or perhaps I should say, have you not forgotten me?*”

Indeed, the hawk had said such a thing. It must have been based upon the assumption that Ergo had lost his memory.

“In that case, the commonalities I mentioned should be the same. What if the three gods you ate have something to do with evolution?”

“Haha, what an interesting lecture!”

Mushiki closed one beautiful eye and laughed. Of course, she was engaging in high-speed battle as she did this. To her, I suppose it was like a mother chatting while trying to calm her child down.

“At the very least, I have to give you credit for giving such a pretentious speech in the midst of battle. But where will you go from there? There are as many gods on Earth than there are stars in the sky. Do you think *this* is going to narrow the list down? Actually, if you exclude the ones you can’t see from Earth, I’m sure there are more gods than stars.”

I understood what she was saying.

After all, how many mythologies were there on earth, and how many gods did each one have? Just the North Star alone has different names in different cultures, and was tied to different deities. Using my mentor’s logic was like trying to identify a culprit based solely on their hair color and blood type.

My mentor nodded.

“I agree, it’s impossible. My current guess is only a summary of Ergo’s current situation. However, one of the gods has practically been given away already. It’s like a bonus question slipped into a test. Let us use it as the starting point for a more difficult problem.”

I had witnessed my mentor grumbling to himself as he tried to think of test questions more than a hundred times. Of course, I would be taking the test myself, so I always had to keep my distance. He was always rather miserable looking after a night spent working on them as a result, but his persistence was admirable. He often reminded us to consider the feelings of the person who came up with the questions.

“The question here is your name, Mushiki.”

“Oh?”

The woman’s eyebrow twitched slightly.

“In ancient China, under the rule of Yu the Great, one of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors, there was a monster that was said to be invincible. It had the appearance of a monkey, the strength of nine elephants, a green body with a white head, snow-white fangs, and blazing eyes. While King Yu tried to control the floods of the Huaihe River, the monster caused great storms and summoned armies of monsters to disrupt him.

King Yu was greatly troubled but eventually managed to capture it with the help of gods and dragons. He then bound it using special chains with golden bells attached.”

“Oh..!”

I gasped. My mentor’s description matched the woman exactly, aside from the part about the monkey. She had the same fiery eyes, golden bells, and chains.

In the midst of the raging waves, my mentor uttered the monster’s name.

“This monster’s name was Wuzhiqi.”

“.....”

I saw a wry smile appear on the woman’s face.

“Which is to say, Mushiki. This monster is said to be the prototype of a divine figure that is still famous today. That is why the identity of one of the gods within Ergo can be guessed. Excuse my roundabout way of talking, but I had to explain it as such so Ergo could understand the process,” my mentor continued. “The monkey king of the Water Curtain Cave of Flowers and Fruit Mountain— you see? That name already contains water. That stone monkey, brought to life by the essence of nature, leaped into a waterfall and became the king of all manner of mythical beasts. Though this fact is often overshadowed by his role in journeying to the west to retrieve scripture, he is also a sort of water deity. This is evidenced by his prestige in the port city of Singapore.”

“Enough of this nonsense, Lord El-Melloi II!”

Mushiki raised her voice for the first time. She slid between the crossfire and approached my mentor quite literally in the blink of an eye— right on time to meet me launching myself at her.

“Now, Gray!” Latio instructed me according to her predictions.

“Add! Remove first stage restrictions!”

“Damn it! I don’t think I can take this monster head-on!”

My scythe transformed into a giant shield. Forcing my way in, I blocked the woman's attack.

In spite of the shield, my body strained under the impact even though I had reinforced it to its limit. The strike was both magical and physical, piercing into the minute gaps between my bones and my flesh.

“Reverse!”

As I shouted the incantation, the magical energy turned into flames and turned against my opponent.

“So you can even take my Shentoujin?”

The woman clicked her tongue and batted at the flames, striding forward all the while. I was more surprised than her. Even though I sent eighty percent of what Add defended back at her, she had only flinched.

My mentor was still a distance away, but he would die as soon as *Mushiki* laid even a finger on him.

“Sir!”

Before my warning could leave my mouth, a green gemstone was thrown beside her.

“Ich werde Sie gehen lassen. Sturm, der umstürzt! (*Release, storm, strike!*)”

It was emerald magecraft, and the storm it summoned managed to knock *Mushiki* off her feet.

“Rin!”

“...Xian or not, I refuse to be underestimated...”

She looked up, pale after being smacked into the mast.

Though *Mushiki* remained unharmed, this move at least bought us some time. And even in the middle of such a battle, my mentor stood in place.

“...It seems that I’m still utterly useless even after all this time. The title of Lord doesn’t change a thing. But apparently, there are still some things I can do.”

My mentor chuckled at his own weakness. He was still trembling as he had been since the beginning, and I remembered why I was able to continue fighting.

It was because he was more scared than I was. He was not the heroic sort of person. He was weak, cunning, selfish, and sometimes so kind it was ridiculous. And yet, all I wanted was to stand alongside him.

If he wanted to fight, I would do the same.

“I, Lord El-Melloi II, shall reveal the god’s name as the oracle,” my mentor announced.

This was the whodunnit. Who was the culprit— or perhaps the very opposite, who had been devoured?

“Your name, O God that Ergo devoured, is—”

—

[1] Now, if I was going to be consistent about romanizing names, I should put the surname last, but that feels needlessly confusing.

[2] Also called the Hegemon’s Lament, specifically the line “Ah Yu, my Yu, what will be your fate?” (虞兮虞兮奈若何)

[3] Xian = Xianren = hermit. I chose the former because these are more than people who’ve decided to hole up in some mountains.

[4] This is hardly an ideal translation. 火眼金睛 (lit. Fiery eyes, golden gaze) refers to the magic eyes of Sun Wukong, which allow him to tell monsters from human beings.

[5] Some kind of martial arts technique meant to cause internal bleeding or something.

—————

~Part 4~

“Finally, someone else’s voice.”

Only upon hearing that did he realize where he even was.

He was on the ocean —Or maybe not.

(...*Wait, this isn’t the ocean...?*)

Blinking, he surveyed the strange sight around him.

It was as if the sky surrounded him on all sides, or a pool of water. It was also like a photo of a foreign place that Lana had shown him, but he knew it was not the same. This was a world of pure blue.

“What’s the difference between oceans and pools? Whether the water’s salty or not is none of my business.”

The figure was sitting atop a pillar jutting out of the water. Though, he knew that it was not actually a pillar but a very large stick.

The figure stared at him with interest.

It quite literally had the face of a monkey. It looked friendly.

“What really matters is that this is the cradle of water gods, just like that prattling teacher outside said.”

(...*Outside?*)

The young man’s thoughts began to cloud over. He didn’t understand where he was. However, he knew that despite the fact that the figure was quite a bit shorter than him, he felt an oppressive pressure as if he was looking up at a giant mountain range.

“Yeah, outside. A strange oracle for sure, but he’s doing things the right way,” said the monkey-faced figure. “Oracles need to do more than just say our names, you know? Us

devoured gods are digested already, so to speak. Naming us requires a process. The right answer can't be reached unless it comes from what you've seen with your own eyes."

The figure rambled on, turning to Ergo.

"And now, the answer is in your hands. What will you do, god devourer?"

"I..." he stammered. "I was told...I was told that since I was his student, I should think about what I should do and what I want to do...I'm thankful for that...so..."

Though he nearly choked on his words several times, he managed to reach a decision.

"...I will answer the question."

"In that case, pray. That's what we were made for," replied the monkey-faced figure. "In the end, gods are just vessels to receive peoples' wishes. Ignore the question of whether or not we can actually save people. Besides, I'm literally inside you."

(Inside...?)

What was only a blur before suddenly came into focus. His consciousness became clear. At the same time, a strange power welled up in his stomach and made him feel as if he was burning up from the inside.

"Say my name, kid!" Commanded the monkey-faced god.

"Your name is—"

[1] Previously translated as inquisitor. I really should have done some extra research, because it turns out this is a proper noun! The word used here is 番神者, which means something like god-examiner and refers to an oracle/priest/sage in Shintoism tasked with interpreting and conveying divine will. This translation could change in the future.

~Part 5~

Ergo opened his eyes.

He rose as if he was floating, and I saw that his eyes were a completely different color than they were before.

Now, they were golden like Mushiki's.

“That's...”

As I gazed up at him, stunned, my mentor paced absent-mindedly and muttered to himself.

“Of the number of deities in Continental Asia with Huoyanjinjing, one is undoubtedly the most famous: the stone monkey with the ability to shapeshift into seventy-two forms and ride clouds, whose eyes became fiery golden after he was subjected to Laozi's Brazier of Eight Trigrams.”

Of course, I knew who he was referring to—the character that my mentor and I had seen in the Wayang show at the hawker center.

“...Sun Wukong.”

“Yes, also known as Sun Xingzhe. Mushiki spoke of thousands of years. If we look at the story of the Journey to the West where the Sun Wukong accompanies the monk Sanzang, it follows that some component of the stone monkey had already been taken before then. But just like Divine Spirits, gods also exist in a world beyond our timeline.”

My mentor's gaze fixed onto the two people standing a few meters away.

Ergo and Mushiki.

“Are you awake, Sun Xingzhe?”

A strange menacing look appeared on the face of the woman we had been fighting just a moment ago.

It seemed as if no one could stop the two of them now.

“Mushiki...Miss Mushiki.”

Hearing the young man's voice, Mushiki gave a quiet snarl. "Are you still Ergo?"

Soon, however, her eyes widened. Latio did as well, her entire body going rigid in disbelief.

"Hahaha, brilliant! We've succeeded! The Crudelis' persistence, the Baldanders' grudge, and my curiosity have borne fruit at last!" Mushiki laughed, her fiery eyes reflecting Ergo's. "Let us begin!"

Her half-joking attitude took a sudden dead serious turn.

"I am Mushiki, the extra eleventh member of the Summit Court!"

She took the opportunity to slash an arc in the air with her hand, but Ergo blocked her attack with his translucent arms.

Each blow sent shockwaves through the air, as if a giant bell was being struck. Those shockwaves alone could have knocked out an ordinary mage, which was why my mentor was clutching his chest as if he were about to collapse.

To my amazement, Ergo had caught Mushiki's blow.

Not dodged, *caught* it.

Even Add's shield form would be crushed by an attack of that caliber. Beneath Ergo's feet, the deck of the ship spiderwebbed with cracks, proving that the power of the blow had not dissipated in the slightest. That hull had survived a direct hit from an RPG unscathed!

With a thud, Ergo leapt from the hull. Mushiki jumped at the same time.

Their two shadows tangled as they exchanged attacks in midair. Each time they moved, a roar echoed through the air like thunder, and a flash of light tore through the smoke. The sea swelled beneath us, tossing Zheng He's ship around in the waves as if it was just a dinghy.

This was a battle of mythical proportions.

With every punch and every kick, the laws of nature were twisted.

In the midst of this, I caught the transformation of Ergo's phantasmal arms with my enhanced vision. The six of them overlapped and fused with Ergo's original ones.

"Divine Core Loading: Great Sage Equal of Heaven"



—Loaded/Bullet by the name of god.



There was something hidden inside the fused arms.

“Ah...Finally!” The woman laughed as if she was witnessing a beautiful flower about to bloom. “But this is far from enough to have my fill!”

Chains extended like metal snakes from her manacles.

In response, Ergo simply muttered something.

“Divine Case Deployment: Sun Xingzhe.”



—Deployed / replaced barrel.



Mushiki’s chains wrapped around Ergo’s arms.

“Ergo!” I cried instinctively.

The young man continued to chant in a low voice, unaffected.

Beneath the chains, something began to take shape.



“Divine Chaff Entanglement: Ruyi Jingu Bang.”



—Entangled/My hands represent a god!



At once, the power took shape.

With a snap, the chains that not even Tangere could escape nor my scythe cut through simply shattered.

They revealed giant, pure white arms.

They looked sort of mechanical, with many streaks of light adorning the smooth surface like Magic Circuits. Their beauty blew my breath away.

These hands were no longer phantasmal or mortal, but divine.

“My chains broke?!”

“I think,” came a whisper heavy with the might of a god, “therefore I am.”

The divine arms lashed out. *Mushiki* dashed away from its range with incredible speed, but the arms seemed to cut through space as they pursued her, ripping off a few strands of her hair and smashing a hole into the waves.

(—*She escaped?!*)

Right after I thought that, I realized that *Mushiki*’s face was contorted in dismay.

“That was a bad move...a careless escape.”

I instantly understood what she meant.

She had stopped very unnaturally in midair, as if the air around her had turned solid.

“According to legend, the staff wielded by Sun Wukong was not originally a weapon, but rather something used to secure the sea. You could say that it gives a form to the obscure. In a sense, it is one of the Noble Phantasms that holds the world together,” said my mentor.

I was stunned by what he said because the holy lance that I wielded did the same.

“It seems the surrounding air has been solidified. A deified Sun Xingzhe would naturally have this authority.”

The divine arms let out a groaning noise in front of the immobile *Mushiki*. The segments from the wrists to the elbows split into rotating parts and began to spin like a drill, emitting shocking amounts of magical energy and sparks with every rotation.

A thought occurred to me. *Ruyi*— that meant the staff could transform according to the user’s will. In that case, wasn’t that equivalent to saying that the Noble Phantasm contained an entire world?

The arms were once again raised to the sky, and the space around them began to splinter.

There was a star between the cracks. After all, if that staff could anchor the sea, surely it could also tear open the sky.

The first blow had locked the enemy in place. The next would certainly pierce her.

“I see, so this is the modern age.”

Mushiki smiled.

Poised at the ready, the divine arms shot out like cannonballs.

It was as if a black hole had been brought to earth. Light vanished, color faded. There was only emptiness, the lingering scent of myth.

“Not bad, not bad at all. To think that all that effort spent pitifully scraping together every scrap of material left from the Age of the Gods was all so that we could hobble along for less than a decade... Haha...It’s almost like...”

Her voice was cut off then, when she was sucked into the rift in space created by the divine arms.

The twisted nothingness tore everything apart, rendering all mystery meaningless regardless of its strength. By this point it was an unbreachable physical phenomenon.

Like the husk of an old, dying star, the emptiness continued to expand, consuming not only the surrounding air but also parts of the ghost ship— and then, as if awakening from a dream, it returned to its original state.

All that remained was the sound of the waves.

~Part 6~

Things were calm for a while after that.

After his divine arms disappeared, Ergo returned to his original form and collapsed to the ground. I rushed over to help him and found him extremely weak. Though his self-inflicted bite wound had healed, probably thanks to the divine arms, he looked impossibly tired. It was no wonder. I had no idea where all that magical energy had come from, and using power unsuited to you was bound to lead to adverse reactions. It was just like how I used to be unable to withstand the recoil of the holy spear.

“I’m fine... just a little tired...” the young man said wetly, smiling. Wincing in pain, he leaned back.

Next to him, my mentor squatted down at the spot where Mushiki had vanished, furrowing his eyebrows.

“...A yang deity, just as the legends say.”

“Yang?”

“A tangible incarnation, so to speak. According to the Chinese classics, while yin deities are capable of astral projection, yang deities need to gather magical energy in order to create temporary physical forms.”

“You mean, the Comprehensive Mirror of Xian throughout the Ages? Wasn’t there a legend where monks that used yin deities couldn’t bring back flowers, while those who used yang deities could?”

Rin had added that part. I knew nothing about the terminology in this field, but I did at least understand that we had not defeated the true Mushiki.

“So, where is her true form right now?”

“I’m sure she’s perfectly unharmed, even if she was affected by the destruction of that body,” my mentor muttered with a look of loathing. “The fact that she didn’t use magecraft apart from the initial transformation and the storm and the absence of proper technique lead me to believe that is the case. If she is indeed an extra member of the Summit Court, she doubtlessly has access to special domains without needing to use Philosophical Keys... In other words, the Mushiki we fought was like a regular mage without a Magic Crest or the ability to cast magecraft beyond the basics.”

What was that supposed to mean?

I didn't know how to respond. Despite unleashing such terrible violence, she had not been using her full power. Ergo and I were both stunned into silence. I felt a chill run down my spine.

"However, the true form or another incarnation will not come immediately," added Latio. "Did you see her manacles? That is why."

"In the legend, Mushiki was sealed by King Yu with golden chains in ancient times. Is she still under seal?"

"....."

Latio did not respond.

A light feeling of tension returned to the ship.

I stepped in front of my mentor. "Please don't do anything drastic."

"Latio will not. Our truce is limited to this ship. We will not be on it for much longer."

Latio nodded, and what looked like a small mountain behind her started moving. It was the bone giant, Tangere, who pulled himself out of the mast. His arm had also regenerated.

"Ah... That was terrible."

"You were useless."

"Come on, Lady Latio, you're being too harsh."

"Come."

The giant knelt, letting Latio onto his shoulder. Her sea breeze-tossed hair matched the color of the giant's bone.

"We will meet again one day."

With that, the two of them plunged into the sea, sinking out of sight amongst the waves.

"They're gone..."

I looked down from the deck and couldn't help sighing.

“What do we do next?”

“Well, I suppose we return the gods that Ergo devoured.”

That was what Latio had told us.

—*To stop Ergo from reaching memory saturation, you will have to return the gods.*”

“Is that even possible, Professor?”

My mentor pondered Ergo’s question for a moment before answering.

“Actually, I have a plan in mind... Originally, I came to Singapore to give a lecture, hoping that it would help with my research. But first, we need to uncover the identities of the remaining deities.”

This was the whodunit, or perhaps the opposite, the “whomdunit.”

Who was it that Ergo devoured?

It felt like there was a long journey ahead of us, a journey that began in Singapore to seek the truth about the gods.

After a pause, my mentor took a cigar and a match from the waterproof case in his pocket. He lit it, took a puff, and changed the topic.

“By the way, Rin, have you contacted the pirates?”

“Yes, I just did. They’re safe, and I don’t think Latio would target pirates who don’t pose a threat to her.”

“I see. I’m surprised you made time for that.”

“What do you mean?” Rin tilted her head, confused.

“This ghost ship is collapsing...Ah, so that’s why she emphasized that the truce only applies while we were on the ship. Typical of the Atlas Institute.”

I looked in the direction my mentor was pointing at. The bones that covered the ghost ship were shrinking in front of my eyes, and this ship was clearly not seaworthy on its own.

The fog also started to dissipate. Presumably, just like the bones, it could not remain without Latio.

“Hah—!?”

Rin’s expression changed immediately.

“H-hey, wait! We haven’t searched for treasure yet! This is Zheng He’s treasure ship, you know! Everything here should belong to me!”

She rushed into the hull at top speed. Though, of course, it was dangerous in there with the ship about to fall apart, she was gone before I could stop her.

“Haha.”

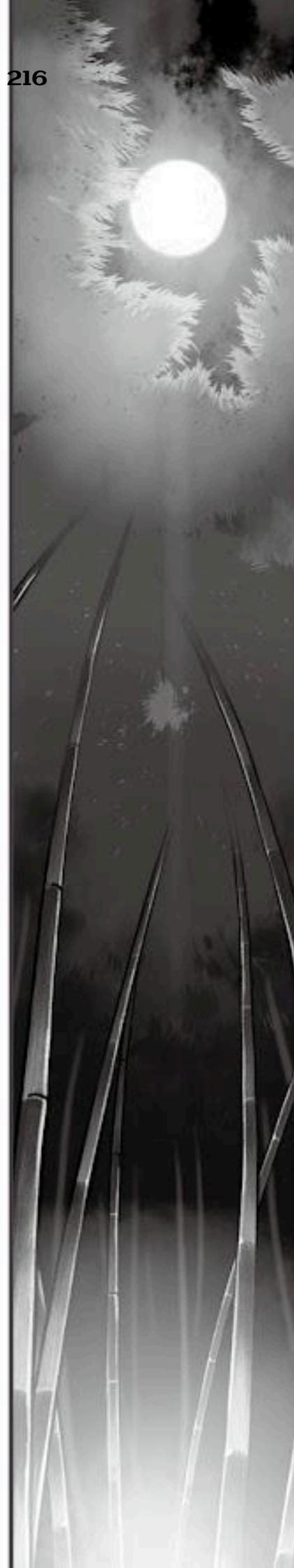
Ergo laughed as he saw my bewildered expression. It was the first time I had heard him laugh like that.

My mentor followed suit. Eventually, I was also unable to resist.

Rin’s wails, our laughter, and the sound of the engines of the pirates’ motorboats as they came to pick us up could be heard as the ship gave way and sank.

[1] This is a rough and hopefully correct translation of 歷世真仙體道通鑑(abbr. 仙鑑, meaning the Xian Mirror, which makes me think of some sort of newspaper for ancient Chinese deities). I couldn’t find a more authoritative translation.

◆ 終章 ◆
-Epilogue-



I could hear the sound of jets taking off and landing in the distance.

The air conditioner was on full blast, making it almost chilly as people bustled past rows of duty-free shops. Lively conversations and suitcases of various colors rolled across the linoleum floor.

The journey from Singapore's northwestern commercial district to Changi airport took roughly half an hour by MRT. A few days had passed since the incident, and now we were waiting for our plane to arrive at the airport.

Four of us were present: my mentor, myself, Ergo, and Rin.

(When I was last here...)

When I had last been here, Singapore had been a completely foreign country that I had been assigned to only because my mentor was going there. When I had arrived at this airport from London, I was far too nervous to notice what was around me.

Now, I felt the overwhelmingly cold air conditioning, smelled a unique blend of spices, heard the jovial conversations of other passengers, and saw meticulously designed signs in all sorts of languages. Merlion plush toys made me think of the view of the sea from Shenton Way. Posters of beaches reminded me of our time on the pirate island.

Perhaps this was what travel was all about: coming into contact with the unknown, experiencing unfamiliar cultures. Before I knew it, a whole new world had popped into existence inside me.

I had finally felt this wondrous feeling firsthand.

“That was fun, I think,” I muttered to myself.

My mentor turned around. “What is it?”

“We experienced a lot of hardship here, but I’m starting to think that it was also fun.”

“That’s how it is. The more fun something is, the harder it is to notice until it is gone,” affirmed my mentor gently. “This is quite a nice country, though our trip was far from recreational. It’d be nice to visit again with a bit less trouble next time.”

“I think so too,” I agreed with a spirited nod.

My mentor cleared his throat and continued. “Of course, it will take a lot more work to clean up the mess. We were detained for quite a while at the Singapore branch of the Clock Tower. I wonder how much they know about the ghost ship.”

“But there’s nothing we can tell them anyway, right, Professor?” Rin chimed in, closing one eye.

She was right. If we explained the circumstances further, we would have to reveal our fraudulent use of Luxcarta, and I couldn’t imagine how much turmoil would be caused if we told them about the Atlas Institute, the Summit Court’s Xian, and Ergo’s god devouring.

I still had no idea how large the storm we were in was. It was such an overwhelming story that it made my head spin just thinking about it.

Seeking respite, I turned to the last person in our group.

“How are you feeling, Ergo?”

“Me? Um, I...”

Stammering, the young man’s left hand crossed his body to clutch his right.

Ergo had fainted after the ghost ship collapsed. Because his right arm had healed when he activated the divine arm, with the rest of his injuries treated by Rin’s healing jewel magecraft, he made a full recovery in a few days. I didn’t know which was more remarkable, Ergo’s stamina or Rin’s magecraft. Both likely deserved praise.

I was pretty much back to normal. As a side note, my mentor was the one who suffered the most lasting injury. It seemed that the seasickness still hadn’t faded away completely, so he had been rubbing his chest and groaning late into the night. I worried that he wouldn’t be able to handle being on an airplane, but he somehow managed to recover by the morning, and we breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“Hmph. Something on my face?”

“Oh, no, nothing.”

Hesitant to tell him my true thoughts, I shook my head. The row of duty-free shops caught my eye.

“That reminds me... I’ve prepared souvenirs for the other students, but I should probably get something for Svin, too.”

Svin was a student who had already graduated from the El-Melloi classroom. Even after graduating, he still came by often to help his underclassmen, and he still regularly caused trouble with Flat, with whom he had a particularly deep friendship. He was the original nuclear bomb of the classroom, no less dangerous than Rin or Luvia. He also disliked me for some reason and stared whenever I was around.

“He’ll probably appreciate something that smells nice. Perhaps tea would be a good choice for a specialty of Singapore. You can’t find the same flavor in London. I’m sure he’ll be moved to tears if you brew a cup of it for him in place of regular black tea.”

“Really?”

I thought my mentor was exaggerating a little, but I could trust his recommendation.

“Well then, I’ll be right back.”

“Ah, wait! You can’t go alone, Gray! Who knows where you’ll be tricked into going. What if you’re forced into buying an armful of souvenirs?”

Rin accompanied me with a somewhat resigned expression. Seeing her concern for me, I couldn’t help but smile.



“...Is it really going to be okay?” Asked Ergo after Rin and Gray had left. His face was gloomy in contrast to the brightly lit transit area.

“What do you mean?”

“I...I wanted to eat Gray then.”

Lord El-Melloi II knew that this was not a metaphor.

“Your whydunit, huh? It’s different from a cannibalistic urge. Like I said on the ghost ship, yours could be called a god-devouring urge.”

“God-devouring urge...” He repeated the phrase carefully as if the words themselves were monsters.

“What resides inside Gray is not a god, but something similar, in a sense. It is also too great an entity for a human to contain, at least in our age.”

The ability to wield the holy lance.

That was why she had the face of an ancient hero, and also why her body had stopped aging.

“You likely sensed that, which made you want to devour her.”

It was just as he had said, the relationship between a lamb and a wolf. Predator and prey.

He had predicted all the way back then that Ergo’s instinct to devour gods would draw him to Gray.

“...It’s all back to normal now, but I couldn’t control those divine arms at all. If you hadn’t been there to question the god, Professor, I might have gone out of control right then and there. Even now, there’s a possibility that I could attack Gray...”

“Hang in there,” Lord El-Melloi II said firmly. “Everyone is enduring something— me, Gray, even Ms. Tohsaka, talented as she is... Your case is just a little more unique.”

In a sense, this was a self-centered thing to say.

He had no way of knowing what other people’s suffering was like. Suffering is not something that can be measured. To assume what someone else can endure is nothing but arrogance.

Despite this, Ergo’s expression softened slightly upon hearing it.

“...Is it okay for me to think that way?”

“I can’t tell you that. No one can decide that apart from yourself.”

“...I guess so.”

Suddenly, Ergo’s somber face had its cheeks tugged apart.

“Aah!”

“Loosen up a little, will you? You’re being too serious. In that regard, you and Gray are quite alike. Though your apparent ages are reversed, you might as well be her younger brother.”

“Aah.”

Ergo nodded. His face was unexpectedly stretchy, almost like a balloon. Combined with his good looks, this created a comedic situation attracting the stares of many passersby.

Lord El-Melloi II cleared his throat after making sure the crowd had dispersed.

“There were a few clues that helped me solve the problem,” he said, raising a finger.
“The first is the Wayang actor who led me to the pirate island.”

“That’s the Chinese opera, right? They performed as Sun Wukong at the Hawker Center and secretly passed a letter to you and Gray.”

Sun Wukong was a popular subject here in Singapore. However, though it could have been a coincidence, once magecraft is involved, such a possibility disappears, and it becomes a very blatant hint. Even after contacting Latio and Mushiki, the identity of the actor remained unknown.

“I’ve requested an investigation through my connections, but it’ll take some time... the other hint was—”

He was interrupted by some light music coming from his chest pocket. It was from a soundtrack from a famous game, though Ergo certainly didn’t know it.

Lord El-Melloi II pulled out his phone, pressed the button, and passed it to Ergo.

“It’s for you.”

Receiving it with a surprised expression, his face instantly brightened.

“Lana!”

“Ergo!” A childish voice came from the other end of the phone. “Rin said you would pick up if I called around this time!”

“Oh, um... how has everyone over there been since then?”

“You can ask them directly! Come on, Yao, you’re up next!”

Several pirates took their turns to speak to Ergo. They talked about their troubles repairing the boat, the fruit they harvested at their new base, how scared they were when they saw a storm for the first time, and Rin’s story about missing out on the ghost ship’s treasure. It was a lively, even rowdy, and lighthearted conversation.

“Ergo,” said Lana, who had gotten the phone back at the end. “No matter where you go, you’re one of us. Don’t forget that!”

“I won’t,” Ergo replied, wiping the corner of his eye.

“Alright. Take care of yourself, mmkay? And remember, we’ll be waiting for you, so make sure you come back.”

Lana issued the order as the pirates’ representative and ended the call.

Ergo now had a renewed expression with a quiet determination deeply ingrained in it.

At that exact moment, the broadcast announced the arrival of a new plane.

“Our destination is Japan, right?”

“Yes, although we’re not headed to the hometown of Ms. Tohsaka, which we both have a complicated history with. We’re going for the second clue I mentioned earlier.”

“So, where in Japan are we going?”

“Tokyo,” replied Lord El-Melloi II. “To find a way to return the gods inside you.”



—And now, the stage shifts.

A full moon shone in the sky, veiled by a thin layer of clouds, exuding an atmosphere cherished in this country. It was a common composition even used on Hanafuda cards.

Someone gazed up at the moon on the veranda of a mansion.

It was a young man wearing a distant expression, with hair covering one eye. He appeared in his late twenties, and was the sort of person who could blend in anywhere, yet had an aura that drew people in.

An aura. That was the only way to describe it.

Every other of his features was utterly unremarkable. However, his gentle presence could somehow make everyone around him feel more relaxed.

The dense thicket of bamboo around him rustled in the wind, almost like the drone of cicadas during the day.

The moon, bamboo, and the clouds.

It was just like one of the oldest stories of this country, Princess Kaguya.

If he were older, he might have looked as if he was reminiscing about a departed lover. And after ten, twenty, even a hundred years, it seemed that his aura would remain the same.

A child's voice called from inside the mansion.

"You've been sitting here for so long, Kokutou. What's wrong?"

"I got a letter from an old acquaintance. Also, how many times do I have to tell you to stop calling me that?"

"Okay, okay. Just don't catch a cold, Dad."

With a gentle admonishment, his daughter reluctantly returned into the house.

The sky was high, and the moon was a pale blue.

The young man's face was tinged with a slight sadness.

In one hand, he held an envelope that was quite worn out, not in a valuable way, but rather as if it had last been touched back in the Showa period.

"It's been a while since Ms. Touko sent a letter," he murmured, stroking the envelope's surface.

There were no honorifics after the name. All that it said apart from the address were simply two words—Mikiya Ryougi.

~あとがき~
-Afterword-

—I ask the gods.

—I answer the gods.

It is that which exists in the sky.

It is that which meanders through the mountains.

It is that which flows through the sea.

It is also in the shape of your hands.



Who are you, dear reader who has picked up this story?

Is this your first encounter with the TYPE-MOON universe most represented by the Fate series? Or, have you already read the previous work, the Case Files of Lord El-Melloi II? Whatever the case may be, I have done my best to make sure that you will enjoy it as much as possible.

On that note, let me explain the premise a little for older fans.

As they may already know, my previous work, the Case Files of Lord El-Melloi, shares the same universe as the game Fate/Stay Night. As a game where the player makes choices, there are three routes: Saber, Rin, or Sakura whose details diverge.

To depict the future of Case Files would be to choose a route. It would have no small influence on the dismantling of the Holy Grail that is to come—the lingering echoes of Stay Night.

For this reason, I consulted the original author, Mr. Kinoko Nasu, and we devised an independent route for this story that leads to the war of the dismantling of the Holy Grail. Although it is not directly related to the story of Adventures, please take this into consideration when wondering what routes characters such as Rin took.

(Beside this, thank you, Mr. Nasu, for being patient when I asked him how much I should take the lines in Hollow Ataraxia and even the extra chapter A Day in Ahnenerbe into account.)



The stage has shifted away from London and toward the rest of the world.

The story, which up until this point has been focused on mages, has also been restructured around the word “god.” In this case, gods are higher beings, history, culture itself. Even now, they occupy a significant position in the human consciousness.

How will Lord El-Melloi II face those gods?

How about Gray, who plays the part of Watson?

And how about Ergo, the brand new key character?

That is our story.

If I were to put it into a genre, it would be a title as the title says, with some mystery elements in the broadest sense of the word.

It is an adventure in search of three whodunits beneath the lush backdrop of the TYPE-MOON universe. “Whodunit” usually refers to “who is the culprit”, but I have used it here in a different way. I think it has a unique TYPE-MOON flavor, and I hope you will find it enjoyable.

Finally, I would like to thank Nasu-san, OKSG, and other members of the TYPE-MOON staff for supervising and editing many parts of this book; Kiyomune Miwa-san for traveling outside London to and compiling even more research than usual; Mineji Sakamoto-san for their hard work despite also having to work on illustrations for the paperback edition (*TN: Of what? And also, why do I feel like this is a subtle downgrade from “providing exquisite illustrations”*); and finally, Ryogo Narita-san for supervising and correcting Flat’s lines.

And of course, I must thank you for picking up this book.

Let us meet again in the summer of 2021.

—The end of 2020, while reading Blue Man • The Man Who Ate God

(Thank you to Hideyuki Kikuchi who kindly gave me permission to use the subtitle of his book.)
