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「case. 冠位決議(下)」

グランド・ロール

三田 誠  
イラスト 坂本みねち



# ロード・エルメロイ III世の 事件簿



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原作 TYPE-MOON

# Lord El-Melloi II's Case

## Files

Volume 10

### Case. Grand Roll (Lower)

# 事件簿

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# ロード・エルメロイⅡ世の事件簿



グランド・ロール  
「case. 冠位決議(下)」

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# Characters

Lord El-Melloi Case Files

ドクター・ハートレス：「フェイカー」のマスター



时任次郎坊清玄：極東出身の僧侶修験者



エルヴィンゼリッタ・エーデルフエルト：エーデルフエルト家の次期当主

ヘファイスティオン…サーヴァント・フェイカー

フリュー…「師父殺し」の名を持つ占い師



ロード・エルメロイⅡ世：時計塔現代魔術科君主

◆ 第一章 ◆

~Chapter 1~



It was my second time on this train, and it felt just as strange as it had before.

I could hear the turning of the wheels and the steam escaping from valves. The cabin also rocked comfortably. However, I felt as if I was atop a floating carpet. It didn't make any sense, but these contradictions coexisted aboard this train.

The Rail Zeppelin. What a beautiful yet terrifying name, fitting for a secretive train meant for illegal organ trade.

“...Are the interior decorations... different?” I muttered to no one in particular.

“We redecorate once in a while,” Rodin said. His pallid face remained emotionless, making him seem inhuman. His appearance made him well-suited to be the conductor of such a unique train. “However, not many guests notice. Out of the ones who frequent the train, most partake in the auctions through their familiars. Only a few board the train in person more than once.”

“...Oh, really?”

I could sense a feeling of familiarity in his words. Maybe that was because of his staff member’s spirit.

Either way, the conductor was just as distant from the normal world as the train itself.

Apparently, he was a Dead Apostle’s kinsman.

Though Dead Apostles were also associated with Mystery, they were different from mages and Heroic Spirits. They were also unlike the spirits and ghosts I had been taught to fight, so I found them unbelievable rather than scary.

Perhaps this was a sign of how impactful Dr. Heartless’ plan was.

After much speculation and thought, my mentor had deduced that turning Iskandar into a Divine Spirit was Heartless’ final goal. To this end, he had stolen my mentor’s

artifact, stolen Mystic Eyes from the Rail Zeppelin, and summoned Faker. All of the scheming he had conducted in the dark was in preparation for this final act.

Through creating Divine Spirit Iskandar, Heartless planned to bring back the Age of the Gods, making modern mages lose the reason to search for the root.

That was why he had gone into Spirit Tomb Albion.

I understood the reasoning.

However, the scale of it all was beyond my imagination. Even though I still didn't understand what Heartless' motivation was, his actions had the power to overturn millennia of mages' effort.

In response, we had gathered a somewhat strange group of people to stop Heartless. Our team was both a result of my mentor's journey and of Heartless' actions.

Of course, both of these journeys were incredibly long. My mentor had been involved in countless incidents since he was forcibly made a Lord, while Heartless might have started plotting even before he left his post as the head of the Department of Modern Magecraft.

The two of them were like mirror images—No, it was more like one was the distorted version of another, like the two sides of a Möbius strip. The likeness(*TN: alternatively, contrast*) was present both in their skill as mages and their ways of thought. Though they couldn't be more different, I couldn't help but think that they approached problems the same way.

I was abruptly plunged into fear by a thought.

...What if my mentor was dragged into the depths of Purgatory along with Heartless?

I felt a gentle touch on my tense shoulder.

“It'll be alright.”

It was my mentor, who was sitting beside me. Even though his hand also trembled slightly, I found comfort in it.

“...Why can’t I see anything from the window?” The one-armed monk complained.

It was Jiroubou Seigen Tokitou. He was a monk of the shugendō religion from the Far East. I had learned during my mentor’s lectures that it was a complicated combination of Buddhism and mountain worship, but I didn’t remember the details.

“Why do you want to know what’s going on outside? This train travels outside of regular reality. Think about it. We’re going to Spirit Tomb Albion.”

The person who responded was the astrologer Flue, a buff man with a dirty headscarf who was currently juggling his knives. Even though we were all inside the train, he reminded me of a gust of dry, desert wind.

“If we accidentally take in more sensory information than our brains can handle, they’ll fall to bits. We’ll be entering a top-danger zone soon, so why would you take the risk?”

The next person to speak was the blonde-haired young lady.

“But shouldn’t this degree of chaos be exactly what we mages seek? If one wishes to reach the Root, one must not mind risks like these.”

Seigen and Flueger already had varying worldviews, making the team feel patched-together. The addition of this young lady only made it worse. Even I could tell at a glance that her blue dress was her expensive as it swished about gracefully. Her face looked as if it had been created by a heavenly sculptor. She was so different from everyone else, to the point where I felt that anyone would accept that she was actually a mage.

Her name was Luviaigelita Edelfelt.

All three of these people had been present in the first incident at Adra, the Castle of Separation. Now, they had joined us on an expedition to Spirit Tomb Albion.

“Haha, I don’t expect a high-class lady to have the same opinions as a spell caster mercenary anyway. That aside, what roles do you plan on assigning us?”

“Well, I’m undoubtedly the lookout,” my mentor said. “I can’t do anything else. Unfortunately, I am the worst among us in terms of capability in dealing with Mystery.”

“Yes. You’d come out on top if this was a magecraft theory test. For this task, though, your disciple is definitely the most skilled.”

I had heard that most teams that went on expeditions to Spirit Tomb Albion were composed of five people. There were typically three roles: the excavators dug out the resources that they discovered, the lookout warned the team of dangers nearby, and the fighters defended the team against the creatures of the labyrinth.

“We don’t need excavators, but guides. Other than that, the fighters have to sort out what specific role they fill. I’m automatically a guide because I’m the only one with experience surviving in the labyrinth, and Luvia’s clearly a fighter.”

“I never knew you were a Survivor of Spirit Tomb Albion.” My mentor said in response to Flueger’s words.

I also found that interesting. I didn’t recall hearing something like it back at Adra Castle.

“That’s probably because I put an ad up on TV about it.”

“No, seriously. Shouldn’t the fact that you are a Survivor of Spirit Tomb Albion improve your job prospects as a mercenary? Why don’t you use it to promote yourself?”

Flue was silent for a moment before he spoke again.

“You know my nickname, right?” He asked.

The answer to that question slipped from my mouth by accident.

“...The mentor-killer.”

I didn’t know the reason behind the nickname, but I had heard people address him as that during the first incident.

“It’s exactly what you think it means. I stayed in Spirit Tomb Albion while the incident cooled down. If I advertise myself as a Survivor, I’ll be held accountable. That’s why I’ve stayed silent.”

“...I see.” My mentor nodded.

To mages, teacher-student relations were incredibly important. If the teacher and the student were related, one could pass on their Magic Crest to the other. Even if they were not, they were still incredibly close because the student inherited the teacher’s treasured Mystery. This was a fact that I had become acutely aware of because of my experiences.

I suddenly had a somewhat odd thought.

What if mages were like the continuous thread of time?

That would explain why killing students or teachers was so frowned down upon. Doing so would be like splitting apart an ancient river of time. The act of erasing of the past(teacher) or the future(student) was antithetical to a mage’s existence.

Of course, in some mages’ eyes, this heinous act was nothing compared to their ultimate goal of reaching the root. I had met enough mages, so it wasn’t actually hard to imagine what I just mentioned.

The same went for the mages that were currently gathered on this train.

After a little while, the train began to slow down. Blue light also began to stream in from the previously pitch black windows. However, it was different from the sunlight of the surface world. It was a strange light, which filled me with nostalgia and excitement.

“...We have arrived,” the conductor announced solemnly. “We are currently situated in the top floor of Spirit Tomb Albion. Unfortunately, this is as far as this train can safely go.”

I thought I sensed a slight tinge of emotion in his voice, but maybe that was a figment of my imagination.

Rodin bowed as the doors of the train slowly slid open.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you all the best of luck.”



We got of the train at the underground equivalent of the foot of a mountain. Not long after, the Rail Zeppelin departed, disappearing in a veil of fog. Perhaps because the fog came with the train, it soon dissipated too, leaving us with a full view of Spirit Tomb Albion.

“...That’s not the sky, is it?”

That was the first thing I said.

I was referring to the faintly glowing dome that stretched out far above us. Was the dome several kilometers wide, or several hundreds of kilometers wide? I didn’t know. It was the first time I had seen a dome that was so giant, possibly because such a thing did not exist anywhere else.

In contrast to the “sky”, the ground that encircled us was made up of rivers and strange-looking streets, which snaked between several mountain ranges.

Was this the Mining City? I thought.

I had heard Flue talk about it as we made our way here on the train. It was a bridgehead built by mages for those who wanted to challenge the deeper levels of the labyrinth. Gazing upon it from afar, who could believe that such a place existed kilometers beneath the city of London?

“Underground at last,” Flue said, examining the periphery somewhat impatiently. “Yep, this is the place. ...As expected of the famous Rail Zeppelin. It took us to just the right place.”

“Did you tell them where to take us, Mr. Flue?”

“Yes. Though it is the famous Rail Zeppelin, it can’t take us directly to the center of the city. Time is of the essence, so I prepared some supplies before we got on the train.”

The tanned mage scratched his chin and pointed at his backpack. Then, he looked around once again as he continued to speak.

“Before we head off, just so you’re all aware, it’ll take approximately twenty-two hours and fifty minutes to reach our target floor. We’ve all rested up as much as possible while you were on the Rail Zeppelin, but are you guys sure that you won’t need to sleep or relieve yourselves in the process?”

Seigen was the first to reply.

“Being able to go without sleep or food for three days straight is the bare minimum requirement for us monks.”

“Well, of course. That is only the most basic form of enhancement(*TN: enhancement = strengthening*).” Luvia said with a slight frown.

“...I-I’ll be fine as well.” I responded, feeling my ears turn red.

Though I wasn’t a proper mage, adjusting bodily functions was part of my training as a grave keeper of Blackmore Graveyard. I also recalled the executors of the Holy Church using this tactic, so it was probably a basic requirement for people involved with Mystery.

“...I’m extremely sorry, but I don’t think I can operate without sleep,” my mentor said with a pained expression. “I’ve been overexerting my brain for the past day. I’ll probably be able to walk without any problems with the help of some kind of stimulant, but it would be very hard for me to maintain a normal mental state.”

“OK, that’s quite the honest confession coming from a Lord of the Clock Tower,” Flue said, closing one eye and raising both hands. “It’s dangerous to traverse Spirit Tomb Albion without taking breaks anyway. In that case, let’s take two or three breaks, each around twenty minutes in length. Is that better?”

“Yes. Meditation-style healing magecraft can also increase the effectiveness of the rests. There are side effects to using it, but they’re within an acceptable range.”

Seeing my mentor say this with a frown, a giggle escaped from Luvia, and she covered her mouth.

“Aha, how plagued must you be by sleep deprivation on a daily basis if that is enough to cause side effects?”

“I am constantly plagued by sleep deprivation, Lady. Please don’t mock me too much, though. It reminds me of my sister.”

“Haha, consider it payback for earlier.” Luvia said, putting a hand to her lips, which curved like a lovely crescent. “I never expected that I would end up as your teammate.”

I shared her sentiment. I couldn’t help but marvel at how far we had all gone since the incident at Adra, the Castle of Separation. We had just rode the Rail Zeppelin to Spirit Tomb Albion to chase after a mage from the Age of the Gods and her Master, the former head of the Department of Modern Magecraft. That summary alone was probably enough to make some people feel dizzy.

“Put these on.” Flue said, putting down his backpack and passing each of us a piece of cloth.

“What!? You want me to wear this dirty rag?”

“Oh, give me a break! Are you planning on going to the Mining City dressed as a noble? The same goes for you, Lord. No one will mind a monk, but you two stand out too much.”

It took Luvia a while to process Flue’s words. Finally, she reluctantly covered her beautiful hair and shoulders with the cloth. Though she was a proud, spoiled person, she could accept things that were not in her style as long as she understood them. She knew that she needed more than powerful magecraft to survive in the World of Magecraft.

“Um...” I asked in trepidation as my mentor and Seigen donned their capes as they were told. “Is it fine if I stay dressed like this?”

“Yeah, you wear a hooded cape all the time anyway. You’ll be fine.”

“S-sure...”

“Ihihihi! You’re just glad to be in the same outfit as everyone else for once, aren’t you?”

“What? N-no!”

Add laughed like a creaking machine as I shook my head vehemently.

To this, Seigen, the monk who was missing an arm and an eye, cleared his throat.

“Flue, should we get going?”

“Sure. Come with me.”

Flue began to walk forward quickly. The entire group moved forward at an enhanced pace, but my mentor fell behind the group and tripped several times. I actually decided to carry him part of the way when he was out of breath. Despite this, we reached the plains at a surprising speed. In less than twenty minutes, we arrived at the beginning of the streets.

“...Wow.” Seigen muttered to himself.

From a distance, the city reminded me of desert cities in the Middle East. Up close, it was different. To be honest, it looked more like a giant beehive or anthill.

The buildings were not separated with concrete like everywhere else in the modern day, but rather with dirt walls. People walked about in the shadows of these somewhat primitive buildings. The streams of pedestrians were exactly like those on London streets. In a certain sense, the people here were more diverse than the people in the rigid social classes of the Clock Tower. In terms of similarities, there were few old people, and most were dressed like us.

Instead of cars, the streets were also full of all kinds of strange creatures. Much like the mounted police above the surface, people rode about on rhino-like creatures and giant, shelled beasts. I had no idea whether they were Phantasmal Species or regular animals that had evolved into strange beings over time. Either way, there were all kinds of creatures here that could not be found elsewhere.

“...So this is the Mining City. Are these creatures commonplace here?”

“Every region is different. In the central area, for example, you two will stand out even though you’re in a different outfit. You’ll probably be fine in this place, though.”

Booths and stalls lined the streets as well, selling a variety of items, including, but not limited to, food. Perhaps because of the diverse nature of this place, there was an enigmatic mixture of scents, comprised of strange spices, barbecued food, and the stench of mystical creatures.

I thought I smelled some kind of spice that I didn’t recognize. The ones on sale here probably had all kinds of special effects that I knew nothing about. Maybe they sold talismans that I knew of, like Spirit Roots, here as well.

“.....”

Suddenly, I heard the shouting from one of the booths nearby. Some kind of fight seemed to have broken out. I immediately felt a ripple of Magical Energy, so someone-- actually, probably both sides had probably used enhancement magecraft. Dust was kicked up into the air, and fell to the ground crackling with purple energy. This seemed to be a normal occurrence for the people there, so everyone else just walked by without caring.

“Don’t look around too much,” Luvia urged in a small voice. “We are considered newcomers, so we should not mind others’ business. I have already sensed three people take note of us.”

“Haha, you’re already used to it, huh?”

“I might not have been to Albion before, but I have visited many foreign countries. No matter where the Edelfelts are, glory must accompany us.”

“Yeah, I know. If only money could solve all your problems. The thieves here are more concerned with stealing blood and guts.”

Flue’s words were more than just a threat.

“I know mage blood sells everywhere, but guts...” Seigen said, shocked.

Now that Flue said it, I could see livers and kidneys on display at the back of some booths. Just like how the Rail Zeppelin specialized in the trade of Mystic Eyes, it appeared that the people in Albion specialized in selling internal organs.

“The buildings here are made of dirt. Is that because...?”

“Oh, you realized that? You have a keen eye for spells, then. Let me show you an example.”

Flueger touched the wall beside him and closed one of his eyes. Then, he gave it a knock before grabbing one of the small knives he usually used for divination and stabbing it into the wall.

However, it was not Flue’s strange behavior that surprised us.

The gash created by his knife closed up right in front of our eyes.

“What...!”

“It’s kind of amazing, isn’t it? It’s like the Fēng in Chinese Mythology(*TN: Also called the Shíròu. Basically, a giant lump of flesh*). Any minor injuries heal immediately.”

Flue shrugged as I stayed silent, still too surprised to say anything.

“This is only the uppermost layer, but it’s already Albion proper. Specifically, it’s the tail of the dragon. Even the dirt has been altered because of the ancient dragon’s energy, which is particularly evident around here. Most of the buildings are made by using magecraft to manipulate the properties of the dirt.”

Flue’s explanation did not make it any less surprising. This was completely at odds with what I had been told about magecraft and Mystery.

“But isn’t magecraft badly suited to mass production...?”

“That only applies on the surface,” my mentor added. “This place is different. The material makes the houses less durable, but it’s not like the people here could have brought down construction equipment. Just like Flue said, there is an excess of Mana here. Even though it is still dimensions behind the levels of the Age of the Gods, Greater

Magic Formulae are easy to cast here... of course, the mages casting the spells still have to be skilled."

He frowned as he said this. No matter what the situation was like, my mentor was still my mentor.

"That aside, there are probably more skilled spellcasters here than there are in the Clock Tower."

"In summary, there are also composite workshops on sale here, which are also unique to the area. The environment around the city is constantly shifting, so the people here use tools like Formal Craft and artificial golems to construct artificial streets."

I listened to Flue, slightly bewildered.

Above ground, some people in the first department(Mystile) used golems as servants. However, none of them were capable of things on the scale of building houses.

Ah, this place was really a separate reality.

Spirit Tomb Albion surprised me even though I was a member of the Clock Tower who had experienced a fair share of Mystery.

In that case, I thought, what was it like for Heartless' students to have lived here? Ms. Asheara, who we had met at the Secret Autopsy Division, had probably been born in Albion. People who grew up in this wonderland must have had trouble accepting that there was another world above them, as if they had been displaced in time.

Just like what Faker must have felt upon being summoned to the modern age.

"Either way, every nook and cranny of this place is based upon the labyrinth. That is to say, the body of the nameless ancient dragon. This city only survives on scavenging through its rotten corpse, tearing away what remains of its flesh, and feeding upon the maggots that spew forth from its bones."

"How delightful." Luvia said with a smile.

The Edelfelt were often called the world's most elegant hyenas. She was probably capable of saying something like "stealing from corpses is a noble's pursuit" in a dignified manner.

"Well then, Flue, where do you plan on taking us before we head into the labyrinth?"

In response to Seigen's question, a frown formed between Flue's eyebrows.

"To my mentor's place." Said Flue, the mage who was known as the mentor-killer.



Flue led us away from the city, to a place that truly resembled tunnels dug by ants.

This area seemed to be part of the labyrinth, with its sparsely-populated, winding streets. As I thought about this, I ran after the astrologer.

"Didn't you say you killed your mentor?"

"Shhhh." Flue put a finger to his lips, silencing Luvia.

Then, he carefully took out one of his small knives and tossed it into the air.

"Lead me."

It was a One Count spell.

Could the astrologer's knives function the same way underground? I wondered.

The blade of the knife traced an invisible arc in the air. It seemed to stop unnaturally as it flew before stabbing into one of the walls beside us. I thought that the wall would heal itself again. This time, however, it passed straight through the wall and fell to the ground on the other side. The place where the wall should have been disappeared, revealing a small path.

"Trying to trick me, huh? ... As bothersome as ever."

"You mean, your mentor, who is supposed to be dead?"

Just as Luvia was about to ask him in more detail, an unfamiliar, raspy voice rang out.

“—Trying to kill me again, bastard disciple!?”

An expression of distaste flashed across Flue’s face as he turned the corner on the small path. Then, he lifted up a sheet that had been draped there to reveal a small space. There were vaguely Middle Eastern decorations on the walls and cupboards, along with some star charts and knives similar to the ones Flue used.

The person who the raspy voice belonged to was sitting right in the center of the room. It was a short old man, who sat cross-legged on a carpet. It was impossible to tell his exact age, but I judged that he was more than seventy years old. He didn’t have a single hair atop his head, and his teeth were yellow and uneven. However, instead of emitting some kind of stench, he smelled strangely sweet, like perfume.

There was a jar of water next to him, and the old man reached out to pick up the hose that was attached to it. He had probably been smoking a hookah alone before we interrupted him. The strange smell was probably also a result of it.

“So you’re back, stupid disciple. And you’ve brought guests.”

“Uh...” Seigen said, at a loss for words.

“Call me Geraff. I’ve given up on everything besides this name.”

“So Flue didn’t kill you?” Seigen asked, blinking in surprise.

“Yes, he did. As a mage, I’m completely dead. My Magic Circuits are all in shambles. My abilities now are worse than those of a Count-ranked child.”

“...It seems you’re as dismissive of your health as usual.” Flue complained in a small voice, seeing the old man smoke.

“Really? That’s what you take issue with? That doesn’t sound like something a mentor-killer would say.”

“As you can tell, my mentor is very good at getting people to hate him. If he wasn’t technically dead, the line of people waiting to take a stab at him will be longer than the ones in amusement parks.” Flueger admitted, covering his face with his hands.

In front of him, the old man who should have been dead took another drag on his hookah and smiled. Seeing this, Flue sighed.

“That’s why I ‘killed’ him. Specifically, I treated him as if he was dead. Then, after I inherited his workshop, I went knocking on the gates of Albion with him.”

“Hahaha, the guards of Spirit Tomb Albion are generally very strict, but they don’t care much when you enter. In the early days, Survivors would come here to train, so there aren’t many restrictions.”

Since a large number of mages from all manner of backgrounds entered Albion to excavate precious materials, it made sense that the security required for entrance was relatively lax. That was also how the Clock Tower managed to send so many spies into Albion, proving my mentor’s theory.

“Wait, so...”

“Yes. Like I said back on the train, I hid in Albion until the situation cooled down.” Flue said with a shrug as if he was tired of explaining.

“Thank me all you want. I thought back then that an old withered tree like me would get to blossom again.”

“There are so many people out there who hate me for killing you before they could, you know?”

“And that’s why you’re a spellcaster and not a mage. ...Well then, what are you trying to do with this team of people? Excavation is hardly as profitable as it used to be. Isn’t that right, Little Miss Edelfelt and young Lord of the El-Mellois?” The old man said, looking Luvia and my mentor with a sudden glint in his eyes.

“...For someone living in Spirit Tomb Albion, you seem to be quite knowledgeable about the world above.”

“Hahaha, my Magic Circuits might not work anymore, but I’m still a spellcaster at heart. Working hard in unconventional areas is the spellcaster way. Gathering information is one such area. I still don’t know why you’re here though. Especially not why my stupid disciple is with you. I know lots of people hate me, but I think the Edelfelt hyenas are above stealing from an old man like me. Right?”

“Geraff. Mentor.” Flue said. “I want to reach the Ancient Heart in twenty-three hours—no, we only have twenty-two left.”

“...Huh?”

The wrinkles on the old man’s tree bark-like face deepened.

“What? Has your time on the surface made you crazy? If you’ve got a curse on your brain, I can do you a favor and introduce you to an old friend of mine from the Department of Curses(Zigmarie).” He said, gesturing with his fingers around his temples(*TN: There’s got to be a better way to describe this*).

“I remember you saying once that you know a way to descend,” Flue said, not giving up. “You said that regular teams don’t need to go beyond the hundredth floor because they have no way of getting back, but there are plenty of ways to get down there.”

“I wasn’t being serious. I probably said that when I was drunk or something. If you really want to commit suicide, there’s gotta be an easier way to do that.”

The old man moved the hookah over and took another drag on it. He lazily twirled his finger about in the smoke, seeming to not care about his disciple’s request.

My mentor walked up to the old man.

“Tomorrow, a Grand Roll will be held in the Ancient Heart.”

“...Yes. It’s a meeting of the ridiculous folk who think they’ve found gold when they haven’t even seen glitter, isn’t it. I don’t care what they do to themselves or the world. I don’t care what depths they fall to. I don’t care about what your ‘Modern Magecraft’ is. I don’t mind being stuck in Spirit Tomb Albion, as long as I don’t have to witness this madness.”

“...In that case, I think this will satisfy you!” Luvia interjected, proudly stepping forward. She had thrust an expensive-looking jewel necklace at the old man. She probably brought it along because she reasoned it would be useful in Albion as well.

The old man gingerly picked up the necklace and examined it for a few moments before handing it back.

“Alright... But will anyone buy something like this down here? You Edelfelts should really reflect on your habit of obsessing over catalysts.”

“.....!”

“Um... Old man...” Flue said, somewhat conflicted. As he was about to interrupt, I couldn’t help but interrupt as well.

“Sir?”

My mentor was bowing.

His long hair hung from his ears like the feathers of a damp raven, concealing his expression.

“...What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry. I have nothing to give you in return,” my mentor said, not looking up. “I have things that cannot be traded for with money. I’m sure you do as well. But I can’t just come here out of the blue to ruin your pride. So this is all I can do.”

“Has anyone ever told you that Lords shouldn’t bow to others?”

“Yes. I’ve been scolded many times, including by people who I respect. I know I’m not worthy of being a Lord. This foolish solution is the only one I can think of.”

“Instead of wasting time bowing to an old man like me, why don’t you try breaking into the labyrinth?”

“Flue brought me here,” my mentor said, still bowing. “I haven’t known him for long, but I trust him. And he judges that your assistance is necessary.”

“.....”

The old man was silent for a moment. He let go of the hose of the hookah and stared intently at my mentor.

“...You’ve got a keen eye.”

“A keen eye?”

The old man ignored the echoed question and continued.

“A Lord, huh. A Lord of the Clock Tower bowed to me?”

I didn’t know why, but instead of floating upwards like smoke, the old man’s words sank to the ground.

“Oi, disciple.” The old man said to Flue. “There is a way to go down from the Great Magic Circuit. I never said you’ll be in one piece when you get there, though. You know that, right?”

“I’ve got a job to do. I have no choice.”

Flue’s almost mindless response made the old man frown.

“A job, you say?” He said, rubbing his chin. “Well, you’ve certainly sold your life for a low price.”

“Now’s not the time for this. Every second we spend here is a precious second wasted.”

“Ha, says the ones who barged into my house. Well then, are you all prepared?”

Even I understood what that meant.

“...Is what we have now enough, Mr. Geraff?” My mentor asked, after taking a few seconds to react.

“Fine, I’ll check. Since you came to find me, you’ve brought it with you, right?”

“If you’re asking for the thing I had with me last time...”

“Just give it to me.”

The old man grabbed the bag that Flue handed him and inspected its contents.

“Hmm. It’s so old.”

Then, he slowly stood up and made an announcement after giving his disciple a chittering explanation.

“Wait here for half an hour or so.”

“Half an hour!? Didn’t Flue say that we only have twenty-three hours left?!” Seigen shouted.

“If you wait half an hour, you’ll save half a day. You’d better thank me with tears in your eyes the next time you see me.”

With that, the old man who called himself Geraff tossed the cloth at the doorway behind him and walked calmly away.



Tomorrow was probably going to be the longest day of my life.

I, Reines El-Melloi Archisorte, firmly believed in this. It wasn’t just because of the impending Grand Roll. My brother had also just gone into Albion in pursuit of Heartless.

It was then that I suddenly realized I was playing with a chess piece.

It was so childish of me to liken the world to a chessboard, even though mages kind of viewed the world as one. Most people gave up on their delusions of becoming superheroes at a young age. Mages were just sad fools who refused to let go of the delusions they had unknowingly caught hold of.

I was one of this group of people beyond salvation.

Every human life is equally stupid. It didn't matter if we had only caught hold of fragments, it was more interesting this way. Scheming to make others fall, falling to others' schemes, meaninglessly chasing after the Root, and rolling about in pain and shame— this was the life I wanted to live. I never once wished for a complete, fulfilling life. I'd rather have my heart removed than to have that imposed on me.

I was only thinking about this because I was alone for the first time in a while.

Though my brother often went on business trips beyond London, I had never seriously considered the possibility that he might never come back. As a collateral, I had taken away his Magic Crest a long time ago, but I knew he didn't really care about it.

However, this was undoubtedly an exception.

Up until this point, we had experienced all sorts of incidents, but none of them could compare to the arcane depths of Spirit Tomb Albion. In a certain sense, it was quite close to us mages, as it was physically hidden beneath our feet. However, I could not grasp the full extent of its fearsomeness. I couldn't help but wonder how many mages had entered, never to return. I knew there wasn't a better way to chase after Heartless, but Spirit Tomb Albion was still too risky for comfort. Some people would probably start yelling at me until my head burst open if I told them of our plan.

I had already lost most of my cards.

That was why I kept staring at all the documents I had as the night wore on.

It seemed that my brother would not make it to the Grand Roll. Even if we had some method of communication, it would still be harder for me if he was not there. My mentor probably wasn't aware of the true impact of a title like "Lord El-Melloi II, who has a great influence on the New Age".

The Department of Modern Magecraft was in a disadvantageous position to begin with. Now, we had just lost so many cards right before the game was to begin. Our unpreparedness was almost laughable.

The biggest question of this Grand Roll was whether or not someone there was our enemy.

Is it too late to surrender to the Democratic Faction? I wondered.

I can't believe I actually seriously considered that option for a moment. It was impossible. Switching factions right now would seriously harm the reputation of the largest faction in the Clock Tower, which was headed by the Barthomelois. Doing so would completely wreck the El-Melloi Faction.

If we took one wrong step, maybe we would be completely wiped from the history of the Clock Tower.

Simply saying *c'est la vie* and giving up was like asking to be humiliated. Some other faction would immediately take up the opportunity and grind us into pieces. The Clock Tower's power struggles were not kind, simple things— every player of the game must continually establish their existence in order to survive.

“...Ah.”

After a while, I felt my stomachache worsen. It was my brother's fault.

Just as I was about to lean back on my desk chair, a voice came from behind the sofa beside me.

“—What's happened so far? Have they already gotten to Albion?”

It was Flat, who was tired of waiting.

“I think they're there.” I answered, frowning. “I used the strongest communication magecraft I can cast, but the connection still cut off. If they reach the deeper layers, I have no way of knowing what they're up to.”

“I want to ride the Rail Zeppelin too, even though there isn't an auction this time! I really want to buy all those Mystic Eye thingies! For the money, I'll just have to go on Van-Fem's boat again!”

“If you want money, why don't you do me a favor and sell your vocal cords?”

“Oh! That’s not a bad idea! Being mute would be annoying, so I should probably get started preparing new ones! But if I’m going to make new ones, why should I stop at my vocal cords? What if I just remove my right arm? An arm that can shapeshift and talk would be so cool, don’t you think?”

“Whatever makes you happy.” I said, looking away from the stupid genius who was now excitedly examining his own arm.

Usually, it was my brother’s job to deal with him. If he was here, this interaction would be much more interesting.

I pressed the area between my eyebrows in an attempt to focus. Of course, I could also achieve this by using enhancement, but I wanted to conserve as much Magical Energy as possible so I didn’t die of nervousness during the Grand Roll.

Speaking of which, I was also drinking iced tea.

“—Here, Your Highness.” Svin said, handing me a new cup of tea.

Ah, yes. I was glad to have this honor student around.

“How are things on your side?”

“The rest of the students are a little shaken, but they are still helping to rebuild Slur Street. Thanks to Mr. Shardan’s dedication, many teachers have been inspired to return.” Svin replied while organizing the documents I had already read.

Of course, Flat was also running around to assist in this. The twin jewels of the El-Melloi Classroom were surprisingly well-loved. Even Flat seemed to radiate a feeling that made people want to help. This was my weakness, so I couldn’t help but feel a little jealous.

“Are you attending the Grand Roll alone?”

“I’m only taking Trimmau. I wish my brother could be a bit more sympathetic.” I said with a pout.

Melvin had prepared the Rail Zeppelin, but I had gathered all the members of the team. If I had anyone else that could get things done on my side, I wouldn't have had to find my brother.

“I promise to protect you!”

“Do you think I’ll let you?” I shouted back reflexively.

The teenager snapped his fingers, bored again.

I took a sip of warm tea before I explained my outburst.

“...It isn’t actually dangerous to go to a Grand Roll. If someone managed to sneak in, they could topple the balance of the entire Clock Tower. Also, like Mr. Shardan said, you two are in charge of everything up here while the meeting goes on.”

“Leave it to me! I’m as trustworthy as the Titanic! All the glaciers and stuff will go *ka-ching* and fall to pieces!”

“What world’s Titanic is that?”

As I snapped at Flat, I considered another unsettling variable.

...What was Melvin doing right now? I thought.

I knew he communicated with the Trambelio Faction after preparing the Rail Zeppelin, but I didn’t know where he went after that.

Did the Democratic Faction get a hold of him?

That was very likely. After all, Melvin was a member of the Trambelio family, which was at the center of the Democratic Faction. It was atypical for someone of his standing to help us, as we were still technically part of the Aristocratic Faction.

Although saying that, Melvin was still Melvin. Considering how he valued entertainment more than his own life, he probably wouldn’t give in to power that easily.

Also, he might not look like it, but that guy was the public face of the Weinz family. He wouldn't be killed that easily. That meant...

The memory of the head of the Trambelios flashed across my mind.

Of course, if Lord Trambelio made a move, Melvin could be easily locked up.

Originally, Lord Eulyphis had also planned on taking action.

Lord Eulyphis seemed to represent all of the traditional side of the Clock Tower. Though the El-Melloi Faction was allied with them for the moment, he probably viewed us as a stain to be removed.

In terms of the other Lord representative, Olgamarie, I didn't believe that the Department of Astromancy would save us. Our connection was barely existent, so I didn't expect much from her.

...Goodness, a phrase like "[being surrounded on four sides](#)" was almost starting to sound cute.

As I thought of this reference to Eastern history, I tried to stop myself from smiling.

The most troubling part of this was that I actually felt quite happy. If I was in a position more suited to my personality, maybe I would become a tyrant. Please don't tell me that I'm already a tyrant. Give me a break.

“...Miss.” Trimmau said, interrupting my thoughts.

It appeared that she had received some kind of call from the reception area of the school building. Without giving me time to think, the words that I dreaded the most left her mercury lips.

“The car from the Secret Autopsy Division has arrived.”

“The Secret Autopsy Division?”

“Yes. The Grand Roll will be held tomorrow, so it is time for the attendees to head to Spirit Tomb Albion.”

My frown deepened. I should probably prepare some kind of magecraft medicine so I didn't end up like my brother.

"Typical of them to be impatient. Also, typical of the Secret Autopsy Division to not give Lords preferential treatment. I wonder if they'll give me some more time to plan if I ask nicely." I said quietly, biting my lip.

Unlike the train that had taken my brother into Albion, the vehicle that awaited me did not allow me to do as I wished. Perhaps someone from the Democratic Faction had chosen to take action to avoid muddying the situation. —Damn it, maybe the meeting itself would be moved forward.

"Your Highness?"

"Are you okay, Reines?"

Svin and Flat expressed their concern at the same time.

I had to concede that these two were undoubtedly worthy of their title when it came to tense moments. Though they were mostly annoying, they made up for it by also being lovable.

"Yes. Of course. Time to head off with all my dignity. Make sure you two see me off with a serious expression."

I drank the rest of my tea in a single gulp.

Not long after, Trimmau and I boarded the limousine that waited for us in the darkness.



The old man who called himself Geraff returned after exactly thirty minutes, right when Seigen and Luvia began to impatiently suggest that we head off without waiting for him.

"Oh, so you didn't run off?"

“You’re back!”

Geraff ignored Seigen and shrugged. I suddenly realized that he reminded me of his disciple, Flueger. It soon dawned on us all that the old man had not gone somewhere random, which proven by the basket that he bore on his back.

“Alright, now follow me.” He said to us, and then turned to leave again.

This time, we also enhanced our legs with magecraft. To the outside observer, we probably looked like we were riding on the wind.

The old man took us to the foot of a small hill in the wilderness.

It wasn’t much further away than the place where the Rail Zeppelin had dropped us off. However, in place of the lush vegetation from earlier, the ground beneath our feet was full of cracks that resembled dragon scales. Maybe I was being over-imaginative, but it looked like the dead dragon’s tail. Since I couldn’t confirm this suspicion, I decided to just pretend it was regular dirt.

The dry wind wasn’t like the winter gales of the surface. It carried trace amounts of Magical Energy, exciting my Magic Circuits like needles pricking my skin. Looking up at the luminous dome above us, I couldn’t help but swallow.

Even if the ground was made of regular dirt, Albion was still unusual. It was as if it actively repelled the modern world.

“Let’s go in from the usual entrance. This way.” Geraff said, mainly to himself.

Then, he turned to look at us, placing the basket he was holding on the rocks nearby.

“Say, monk,” he called out to Seigen. “How many strides would it take you to reach the top of that hill?”

“What?”

The monk in question looked toward the hill that the old man pointed at. It was around twenty meters tall, with a summit that stretched out like the head of a giant mammoth.

“Around two.”

The monk frowned and prepared to jump. Then, he extended his arms, leaping upward as if he had suddenly grown two giant wings. Though he said it would take two strides, he probably stepped on something as he made his way up the hill. He moved too fast for me to see clearly, and he was at the summit before I knew it.

“...Not bad. Is that a tengu art?”

“Yes. It’s the only thing that my father couldn’t help but praise.”

“That’s convenient. When exploring Albion, get as high up as possible. Shugendo training is very similar to the training you need to survive here. I’ve been in a team with a monk like you before, and his skills were quite impressive.”

Hearing this, Seigen blinked many times in surprise.

“Are there monks in Albion as well?”

“I guess you could say that Albion has a higher concentration of mages and spellcasters than the surface world. You lost an arm, right? Was that the price for using some kind of magecraft?”

“...Something like that.”

I looked away, even though I knew I probably shouldn’t. I just couldn’t meet his eyes because his arm had been torn away by my lance.

“That injury looks recent. Your balance was off when you jumped. You would have used seal magecraft if you still had that arm, right?”

“Well, there’s no way to get it back. There’s no point on dwelling it, either.” Seigen’s wry smile made me even sadder. “I’ve already given up on trying to count everything I’ve lost.”

Seigen had headed to the Castle of Separation to retrieve what he had lost, taking with him the Magic Crest that his brother had left behind. As a price for repairing the Magic Crest, the owner of the castle had taken away his original identity.

This ultimately resulted in our fight, which cost him his right arm.

For that reason, Seigen decided against explaining how he had lost his arm and opted to say that he had given up, probably so I wouldn't feel as bad. However, his actions made it even harder for me to look up.

“Let me see it.” Geraff commanded.

“Huh?”

“Roll up your sleeve. Let me see your arm.”

Faced with the unrelenting old man, Seigen reluctantly complied. Geraff stared intently at the mass of still-regenerating flesh grabbed ahold of it.

“Owowowow! What are you doing?! Are you mad!?”

“Bear with it for a bit.”

With that succinct response, the old man twisted Seigen’s arm and pressed hard on the exact place where it had been severed.

Seigen let out a cry of misery.

“Mr. Seigen!”

My mentor reached out to stop me from rushing forward.

“Don’t.”

“But...”

As I was about to argue, I saw that my mentor was not looking at Geraff or Seigen, but at the place the old man had just pressed down on. From there, a green sprout that glowed faintly grew rapidly from his flesh.

“I never knew Spirit Roots can be used this way...!”

“Gahhhh!”

As if it was urged on by Seigen’s cries, the seedling quickly covered the cross section of Seigen’s arm. Leaves appeared on the winding branches, and then withered as quickly as they came. It was as if the life of a tree had been compressed to a few seconds.

Before I had time to process what was happening, the woody branches that remained shifted into the shape of Seigen’s arm. Though it resembled a regular tree, it appeared that Seigen could move it freely. He used his normal hand to inspect the new one as he tried contracting and unfolding his fingers.

“Spirit Roots are meant to be for controlling stone statues so that they can move while keeping their original shapes. It also works for things like this as long as the person whose Magic Circuits you’re attaching it on is compatible with it.”

“...Ah...Huh... Where... did you... get this from...?” Seigen said, kneeling on the floor because the pain had not faded yet.

“These things aren’t common on the surface, but there are certain ways to get them down here. It’s a good match with your practices, isn’t it? It’s not exactly the same as your original arm, but you’ll get used to it.”

After he finished speaking, Geraff turned away as if he had just done nothing more than handing Seigen a piece of old furniture.

“Edelfelt.”

“Can you please stop calling me by my family name?”

Though Luvia’s tone wasn’t kind, her voice was missing its usual contempt, possibly because of the events that had just transpired.

“You know plenty of techniques for using gemstones to automatically search for enemies, right?”

“...Yes, of course, since mages naturally incur resentment.”

Luvia was a hunter— that was why they called her the world's most graceful hyena. In her mind, if someone hurt her, double the retribution was far from enough.

“Good. It’s useful here, but take care not to concentrate too much Magical Energy in the Great Magic Circuit. Every nook and cranny of this place is overflowing with it. That kind of magecraft alarm will keep going off. It might be less precise, but you probably want to limit its targets.”

“Targets?” Luvia repeated. The old man seemed to have piqued her interest.

“Yes. You should be all set if you constantly adjust the attributes it’s looking for.”

Before he even finished his sentence, the old man suddenly raised his hand. With a woosh, an assortment of things flew out of it and onto the wasteland around us. It appeared to be some minerals mined from Albion. Later, I realized that there was a contraption near his wrist that allowed him to toss things into the air while his hand remained still.

“How many did I just throw, and where did they go?”

“Testing me?”

Luvia took out a blue jewel and uttered an incantation from her lovely lips.

“Awaken(Call).”

With a single word from her, the gem changed color from blue to red and then yellow in the space of a few seconds.

“Seven.” The young woman replied, unfazed by the strange changes that the gem rapidly underwent. “No. There’s one hidden behind you. They’re in these places.”

Luvia flicked the gem. It flew toward the rocks that the old man had thrown, causing them to rise from the ground.

“So annoying. It only took you twenty seconds and a single word? I was expecting maybe fifteen minutes. If only my disciples were this talented.”

“Hey!” Flue complained in a small voice.

My mentor tilted his head and stepped forward as if he had a question.

“Do you have other disciples?”

“Oh, yes. I’m a spellcaster. I don’t need to stick to teaching magecraft one-on-one like proper mages,” Geraff explained, proudly patting the top of his bald head. “But apart from this idiot, all of them are dead.”

“...What? Why?”

“It’s just some boring stuff about the past. You don’t have time to waste on it. Take this.”

He handed us a sheet of what looked like regular printer paper. It probably had a protection spell cast on it, but it didn’t look like a catalyst or a Mystic Code. Fluttering in the wind, it looked anything but reliable.

However, my mentor gasped when he saw the its contents.

“—!”

“This is the latest map of Albion. I asked a friend who’s familiar with the underground to tell me the places where monsters have been spotted recently. With this, Flue can guarantee that you can dive to the bottom layers as safety as possible.”

At this, Flue’s expression shifted.

“Wait, how did you get this?”

“I’m an old man living at the borders of the Mining City who can’t even use magecraft well. I’ve got to have something like this. If you follow the routes on this map, you can keep fights with Phantasmal Species of the Great Magic Circuit to a minimum.”

“No, that’s not what I meant!” The astrologer shouted at his mentor. “This map and the Spirit Root... they’re not things you can get at a moment’s notice. If you asked me to get it back when I was in hiding, it would have taken me a year at least!”

I understood. This place was a giant labyrinth, so any map that showed the areas that the monsters here frequented must be worth a hefty sum.

“But why are you giving us this...?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Just like my stupid disciple said, I died a long time ago.” Geraff said, as if he was tired of explaining. “Dead people don’t need money or possessions. Since I’m not a mage but a spellcaster, I don’t have anyone to pass my belongings to. I always planned on letting go of it some day. Now, the opportunity to do that has come. ...Hey, Lord over there.”

“What?”

My mentor turned as he was called on. His expression was still stiff, probably because he understood the value of the piece of paper he had just been handed.

“Your actions have paid off. Not a single person I knew in the past would believe that a Lord of the Clock Tower bowed to me. It’s already hard enough to believe that a New Ager can become a Lord.”

The old man began to laugh while the mages around me had not yet recovered from their stunned silence. Who could have known that the old man would give away something so valuable?

“...Thank you for your praise.” My mentor said, bowing his head again. “If you will allow me one more selfish request, could you please help me pass on a message?”

“Haha, that depends on what the message is.”

The old man accepted the note that my mentor handed him. One of his eyebrows rose as he read its contents.

Why? I wondered.

This was such an interesting turn of events. This old man had only known my mentor for less than an hour. However, if Flueger was right, he was willing to spend his entire savings to help us.

Something in their conversation must have moved him deeply. Though I felt something as well, its impact on me was not as deep.

“—Flue, take these.”

The old man took out some tools and handed them to Flue.

“I made some slight adjustments to the tools that are popular right now. I don’t think you’ll need me to explain how to use them. Take this as well. I didn’t get the chance to give it to you before. It’s the knife I once used.”

“...Are you sure you’re giving it to me, old man? You wouldn’t give it to me no matter how many times I asked before.”

“I don’t have any use for it now. I only kept it because I was too attached to it.”

Flue picked up his tool-filled backpack and tucked the knife into his clothes after a brief inspection.

“Got it. Thanks.”

“You don’t need to thank me. Oh, it’s getting late. You all better get going.” The old man said, waving as if he wanted to be rid of us as soon as possible. Though his actions seemed to convey distaste, I had trouble interpreting it as such.

“Live a bit longer, okay?” Flue muttered after a moment of hesitation.

“Ha, really? Are you sure your time on the surface hasn’t made you forget about who I am?”

The old man smiled, revealing a mouthful of crooked teeth. His laughter reminded me of Add’s. It was not a nice sound, but it carried an emotion that I could appreciate. As I thought this, I felt a clunk from the box in the birdcage at my right shoulder.

I turned to see Flue urging my mentor forward.

“Let’s go, Lord El-Melloi II.”

“...Is it really alright if we do?”

“Well.”

Flue began to walk forward without properly answering the question. Luvia and Seigen also followed him after quickly bidding goodbye to the old man.

After a while, I heard the distant voice of the old man calling out to us.

“Flue! Lord El-Melloi II! You don’t have to show me your miserable faces again, but make sure you make it back alive!”

Though he didn’t turn back to look, the astrologer raised his arm to tell his mentor that he understood.



We followed Flue to a hilly area that still lacked vegetation. Instead, there were a few cracked columns beside us. It looked like a giant stone circle, but it didn’t seem to have been built intentionally. Rather, it was like another structure had been weathered and battered until it turned into its current form.

The old man continued to watch us like a stone statue on the horizon until he faded from view.

“...That old man is dead to the World of Magecraft. Half of that was his fault, but the other half was mine.”

“What makes you say that?” Luvia asked, weaving through the stone columns.

“You heard him say that all his students were dead, except for me, right?”

Geraff’s disciples. So, they were probably also spellcasters like Flue.

“He wasn’t wrong, but he wasn’t accurate. All of them were actually killed.”

“Killed?!” Seigen exclaimed, so startled that he let go of his new arm. My ears perked up as well at his statement.

“Geraff was already a Survivor of the Labyrinth.” Flue explained.

This fact was corroborated by what the old man had said when we first met.

“The Clock Tower above ground is the best place for magecraft research, but Albion is far superior as a place for spellcasters to gain fighting experience. After Geraff went to the surface, he made a name for himself for being smart and capable. Point of fact, he was an incredibly nosy person who kept taking other lonely, similarly unfortunate mages under his wing. I was one such mage.”

As Flue spoke, I could imagine what the old man was once like.

I saw him standing under the bright sun of the Middle East, surrounded by a group of young mages. Maybe the El-Melloi Classroom had been like that too when my mentor first took over. With Flue at its lead, the team was probably full of vitality as they interacted with different gangs and groups.

“He must have done something that upset the Clock Tower.” Flueger said, his voice sinking into the reddish-brown of the ground. “They believe that Mystery must be concealed. He always worked behind the scenes, and he never did anything that explicitly broke the rules of the Clock Tower. Still, he was a bit too carefree and flamboyant. He had a lot of enemies to begin with, and he only made it worse with running his mouth and other bad habits. In the end, I sort of drifted out of contact with him. I warned him several times that he’d better clean things up before he got noticed, but he never listened.”

According to Flue, the final incident happened when Geraff had been commissioned to sneak into a foreign country. His workshop was raided after he involved himself too closely with regional conflicts. Even so, it was difficult to imagine a group of mages getting killed by normal people with guns, no matter how unskilled the mages were. The bounded fields around his workshop should not have been so brittle that a few bullets could shatter it.

It was undoubtedly the work of a few spellcasters who hated Geraff.

When Geraff returned, his workshop had been reduced to ruins. The catalysts and talismans he had spent his life collecting had all been robbed from him. Every disciple

that he had asked to guard the workshop had been brutally killed, their bodies bearing evidence of torture.

“After his disciples died, Geraff was overcome with a desire for revenge.” Regret seeped from Flue’s words, potent and impossible to conceal. Was it because he never witnessed the scene of the tragedy? Or, was it because he didn’t manage to stop the old man? “All the people responsible, along with the people who just happened to be there and the people who instigated the crime— Geraff sought out and killed every single one of them. He was the man who taught me divination, after all. He’s not the sort of man you can hide from. In the two years following his disciples’ murder, Geraff was like a demon.”

“...”

It gave me the impression of a shadow.

Everyone becomes obsessed with something at some point in their life. But the old man’s experiences let such a cloud of darkness hang over him, that he and his shadow could no longer be told apart. After all, you don’t need to be afraid anymore if you become the thing you fear.

“...Ah, but there always comes a point where fate catches up with you. Geraff had to pay for his revenge spree. That night, fate came for him in the form of an assassin.”

“...An assassin?” My mentor repeated. He was struggling to keep up with Flue’s quick pace, sweat beading on his forehead.

“The assassin was pretty well known in those circles. He was some hotshot from the East, and used some kind of special magecraft to kill mages. I don’t know how it worked, but as soon as my mentor was hit by one of his bullets, his Magic Crest and Circuits were trashed.”

“—!”

My mentor suddenly tensed.

Maybe he suddenly thought of something. Or, maybe Flue was using this story to test him.

Regardless, I had no idea what he was thinking. But, I don't think I needed to know. If I had, I know he would have told me. I trusted him.

"You seem to know quite a lot about that assassin."

"Of course," Flue replied, "I formed a temporary alliance with him once."

My mentor was not the only one who took interest in Flue's story.

"Wait, didn't you say that you're responsible for his death?" Seigen asked.

"Like I said, half of it is my fault. I wasn't close with him at the time. I always thought that I hated the guy. Maybe I did, but... you know that my nickname is 'the mentor-killer', right?" Flue said as we walked up a slope. There was a guilty sound to his voice.

"Geraff's hitman was talented, and not just as a mage. He was a crazy strategist that knew his target's blindspots and how to exploit them. Geraff wasn't bad at magecraft, but the assassin never gave him a chance to fight. The bullet went through him, and then it was all over. If I hadn't pretended to finish him off and then hide him in Albion, I doubt Geraff would've been able to survive. ...There's every chance that the assassin knows he's still kicking, actually. Maybe he only left us alone because the old man's practically no longer a mage."

"..."

My mentor was unnaturally silent. Flue continued without regard for his response.

"I heard rumors that a Clock Tower noble was the one who hired the killers, but because the original hitman sub-contracted someone else, it's pretty much impossible to find that noble."

"That makes sense. People of high standing in the Clock Tower hardly ever commission such tasks themselves." Luvia commented as she walked behind my mentor. She was probably used to this kind of thing.

It was hard to imagine spellcaster mercenaries and mages of noble bloodline in the same room, but murder was one of the things that brought them together.

Flue reached out to touch one of the stone columns. His eyes wandered along its cracks.

“There was a time I heard Geraff go off about the Clock Tower big wigs. How he couldn't stand them scrambling to take over the world like that. He probably only went into Albion out of spite. After he returned to the surface, he acted even tougher than before, probably for the same reason. In his eyes, he was famous and successful, so why did he need to care about what those Clock Tower bastards think? And so he kept ignoring them.

“And thinking that way cost him his dear disciples, the workshop he had spent so much time on, and the Magic Circuits and Crest that he was so proud of. He lost everything. Even though he made it down to Albion, I wasn't sure he could keep going. Sure, he wouldn't have any trouble with rough living, but it's not like he had anything left to live for. People don't tend to last long if they're not living for anything.”

“...”

I think I understood.

I had never strived to achieve something with that much determination. My heart had never burned with the desire to prove myself. But if a wish that I held close to my heart was granted, my actions would definitely be restricted by it. That was because the weight of a wish was equal to the weight of a soul. In order to achieve a dream, you must be prepared to live a certain way. In that case, the dreams that you spent your life to achieve are not only your wishes, but also your way of life. With all that said, how was a person whose dreams led to the death of everything he held dear meant to live out the rest of his life?

“That's why he was so stunned when a Lord bowed down to him,” Flue said with a wry smile. “Geraff's not the only spellcaster out there who sculpts an entire career around wanting to prove the Clock Tower wrong. The difference here is that he achieved his dream. Then, fate played a cruel trick on him, and the life he created for himself was snatched away. Your actions seem to have reminded him of the dream he once had.

“Lord El-Melloi II. You bowed to him because you guessed that he was like that, right?”

“...Oh.” I blurted out. I finally understood why Flue was telling us all this.

“...Do you think I’m an evil person for using others’ wishes to achieve my own goals?” My mentor asked, his voice melancholy.

There were definitely people out there who would condemn him for doing so. It was probably one of the ways my mentor had managed to preserve his position in the Clock Tower. He wasn’t good at scheming or handling delicate interpersonal relationships. However, he was able to see the whydunit hiding inside mages’ hearts.

As long as his target’s goals were connected to the abyss of magecraft, my mentor’s discerning eye could see into the core of their soul.

—”*You’ve got a keen eye.*”

The old man had said this to my mentor not long ago. Was this what he had meant?

In response to my mentor’s question, Flue smiled. It was different from the self-mocking smile he had earlier.

“No, I don’t. Geraff knows that you’re exploiting his wish. But he thanked you anyway. He probably thinks all his hard work has finally been rewarded. In fact, maybe I should thank you.”

At this, Flue turned around.

The old man’s figure had disappeared from view, but I couldn’t help but think that his presence was still there, waiting for us at the foot of that hill.

I felt emotions that I could not control well up inside me.

Mages were supposed to be monsters who sacrificed their humanity to Mystery. That statement wasn’t false. I had experienced it several times myself. But why did I feel that they were so incredibly human sometimes?

After journeying in silence for a while, Flue stopped in his tracks.

“...Aha.”

I gasped.

We had entered a hilly region. Strange rocks were scattered all around us; some were spherical, some triangular, while others were even star-shaped. They were all stacked in vertical piles which remained stable for a reason I couldn't even guess. Rather than looking like the work of an artist, it was more like a giant child with a wild imagination had molded these shapes out of clay.

Upon closer examination, the rock piles were even stranger. Some stacks seemed to defy gravity, with giant, stony tumors and slanting towers. However, all of them stayed in place, causing me to question my sense of balance. Was this absurd sight also the result of the dead dragon's power?

As I marveled at the sight, Flue spoke again.

“There.”

“Where?”

“Over there’s one of many entrances to the main part of the labyrinth. One out of the ten or so groups I was familiar with had their own special entrances. The map Geraff gave us has shows all kinds of useful shortcuts we can take from here.”

“One out of ten of the groups you were familiar with, you say?” Luvia asked, interested.  
“You are part of the ten percent, then. How reliable.”

“It’s all just the result of dumb luck. You know I’m good at divination, right?”

Flue reluctantly reached for the small knife at his belt. However, just as he was about to take it out, he changed his mind and switched to another one. The first knife he reached for was the one the old man had just given him.

“*Lead me.*”

The knife drew an arc as it was tossed through the air. I thought I saw it stop unnaturally for a moment before it went flying towards one of the stone columns. I

reckoned that Flue used some kind of illusory magecraft, which he probably learnt from his mentor.

“...Good, this path’s still usable.”

“The structure of Albion is constantly shifting, isn’t it?” My mentor asked from behind Flue.

“That depends on whether we’re lucky or not. Anyway, there’s no way we can get to our destination in twenty hours if we don’t take a shortcut.”

“You’re right.”

“Watch your head!” Flueger said, bending down and diving in. Seigen was next, followed by my mentor, then Luvia and I.

We found ourselves inside a massive cavern.

“Well then, let’s descend to the Great Magic Circuit.”

Flue’s voice echoed back and forth in the cave as I peered down into the bottomless depths.



Light spiraled through the darkness, dancing about like a firefly and flickering like fireworks[1].

This light was unlike typical sunlight or artificial light, and more akin to the light of an explosive burst. It came from the Magical Energy surging through the interweaving tunnels violently repelling each other.

Here, Magical Energy from different sources in the Great Magic Circuit converged.

This place looked like an ocean with its coral-covered floor. This wasn’t regular coral, of course. Though the corals that thrived in the depths of Albion resembled their surface relatives, they were dyed in mystical colors by the Magical Energy-rich air.

It was all thanks to the long-dead dragon who had tried to tunnel his way to the Land of the Fairies and had died in the process. Too many things clung to its corpse, eventually forming a labyrinth.

The power of the dragon had created a space that preserved the texture of the Age of the Gods which was supposed to be lost. For this reason, all the creatures and plants that had evolved in Albion were completely different to their counterparts on the surface. It was the only place where Magical Energy could emit light.

Calling it the Mages' Association's most valuable asset would not be exaggeration.

Presently, two beings who didn't belong in this section of the labyrinth had snuck in.

A lion's roar echoed through the cavern.

The source of the cry, though, wasn't necessarily a lion. Unlike most lions, this beast had two heads, the wings of a vulture, and enormous claws that dripped with a viscous poison. This creature existed only in Albion, not even in legends from the surface.

Naturally, this beast wasn't one of the foreign intruders in Albion. There were other silhouettes beside the beast.

It cried out again, the Magical Energy in its roar catching the silhouettes' attention. Even a creature native to Albion would probably pass out from the roar and become the two-headed lion's food.

"It always makes me sad to see a valiant hunter whose attacks prove futile against a stronger enemy." One of the silhouettes muttered as a blade was slowly unsheathed.

The action only seemed slow because it was a logical move. In reality, the weapon traced an arc through the darkness with amazing speed.

"—*Hephaistos*."

It didn't matter whether or not the beast heard the silhouette softly chant a god's name. It still felt the blade cleave cleanly through its two heads, the power of the blade magnified by the silhouette's invocation of the name of the god of the forge.

“Ah, what a wonderful place this labyrinth is. If Callisthenes[2] was here, he’d probably be crying tears of joy.”

Looking around, Faker re-sheathed the Ancient Macedonian short-sword.

“Don’t you think it’s about time to make a move, modern mage?”

“...No, not yet.” Heartless said from behind her, smiling.

Despite his smile, the mage was far less composed than Faker was used to seeing. That was because he had been continuously supplying Faker with Magical Energy since they entered Albion with his Od.

So far, Faker had used her Noble Phantasm to defeat many enemies that blocked them. Even though she was a seasoned warrior who knew how to conserve Magical Energy, she was an Extra Servant with hardly any support from the Holy Grail. The Magical Energy Heartless had provided would have been enough to drain several regular mages.



Unlike the situation before on the Rail Zeppelin, Dr. Heartless was suppressing the extraordinary fatigue of supporting Faker, and fighting all the while as well. Of course, he had prepared for this, but he would have collapsed long ago if not for the rich Magical Energy that naturally existed in Albion.

“For whatever reason, I feel like I’m getting quite used to this. I thought we would have a much more difficult time.” Faker said, raising one eyebrow in admiration.

“While it has been a while since I resigned, the title of the head of a department of the Clock Tower is not a meaningless one.” With a wry smile, the mage sipped elixir from a flask. Not only was this elixir very expensive, but overusing it could cause one to overly rely upon it. Still, extreme situations called for extreme measures. Even if nutritional drinks concocted by modern scientists were safer and more effective in ensuring movement, this elixir was far superior in activating Magical Energy.

“I reckon that we’re about halfway there.” Faker said, shrugging and calmly watching her Master.

“Your intuition is impressive. My estimate is about the same as yours.”

“People with poor intuition are not worthy of following my king’s great conquest. Anyone who has lived through that many conquests must at least cultivate a decent sense of it.”

“I see. After a certain point, intuition is no different to predicting the future.”

Heartless took a deep breath of air so humid he might as well have breathed ocean water.

For a time, Faker was quiet as she walked, her eyes trained up at the darkness of the Great Magic Circuit. But all at once, she broke her silence.

“...That means that you will kill me in half a day.”

“Yes.”

Faker nodded to Heartless’ matter-of-fact response.

“You are using me as a catalyst to summon Divine Spirit Iskandar, after all. I’ll probably disappear from the modern age... You could say that my wish will finally be granted.”

“...Your wish?”

“I wish to die for my king. Can you help me grant this wish?”

To this, Heartless frowned.

“...Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Faker said with a smile.

It was the first time she had smiled like that since she was summoned.

Without really noticing, she brought her flask of wine to her mouth, relishing in the aroma of fermented grapes. They had to pack lightly for their trip here, but Faker had insisted on bringing the finest wine.

“You are a mage, right? In that case, kill me proudly and bravely. Guide your people forward, using the ancient yet new light from the Age of the Gods.”

At this, Faker suddenly changed the topic.

“...No. That’s not what you’re doing all this for.”

For the slightest instant— no, even slighter than the slightest instant— Heartless held his breath. It was such a small change that only a Servant could have noticed it.

“So you know?”

“Hey, I’ve known you for two months now. I’ve never been adept at grasping the subtleties of human hearts, but I have a sense of who you are. You are a modern mage, foreign in your own world. You have an uncanny knack for scheming, but because you hate it, it will never come naturally to you. You’re like a skilled chemist who makes neither poison nor medicine, choosing instead to stare idly at the clouds as they pass by. You live your life in such a stupor that you wouldn’t even heed my king’s calls.”

“...You’re the first one who has ever described me that way.”

“That means that you are surrounded by unobservant people.” Faker said with a snort.

After a pause, Faker stopped, and turned to stare blankly at Heartless.

“Oh, so you do have a sense of humor, then? Or are you unwell? Did the elixir twist your brain?”

“Hahaha, perhaps. But even I will laugh at jokes I find funny,” Heartless replied, a hint of nostalgia in his voice, “I’ve heard many tales of Albion from my students. Maybe what you said reminded me of the past.”

Faker tried to imagine the Heartless of the past, as he was when he was still the head of the Department of Modern Magecraft.

“Your students were Survivors of the labyrinth?”

“Yes. Their names were Calugh, Asheara, Jorek, Gesell, and Kurou.”

Heartless spoke his student’s names like the words of an incantation in a long-dead language.

“Kurou enjoyed listening to those stories most. For instance, I was told that Calugh and Jorek, who were in charge of defending against Phantasmal Species, used interesting techniques to fight. They used incense and flutes to cover for Gesell and Kurou while they dug for minerals in the Great Magic Circuit. I heard that Asheara, the team lookout, made maps of the labyrinth, which must have been a difficult task.”

“But weren’t they all spies sent into Albion by the Clock Tower?” Faker said, a little confused.

Faker was not unfamiliar with spies and plotting; they were tools of her age as well. Still, it was perfectly natural for someone to be overwhelmed by a scheme so intricate, that it spanned several decades and factions.

“Aside from Gesell, Jorek and Calugh caused a lot of confusion with their act.”

Just as Lord El-Melloi II had deduced, the two brothers constantly switched places. Their motive was also as he had deduced. They did so to steal information from the Secret Autopsy Division.

“Due to their switching places, I had no choice but to kill Calugh, or perhaps Jorek in the Secret Autopsy Division, even though Gesell could be transported(kidnapped) silently. I did what I could to deal with the body, but that Grand-ranked mage still easily saw through my efforts.”

“—*Whose students are your students?*”

Touko Aozaki had asked Heartless this. It had not escaped her notice that his missing students had belonged to other factions prior to their becoming his students. They had gone into Albion so that they would one day be able to help the more powerful people in their factions.

“Kurou died a long time ago, did he not? So it was only Asheara who managed to escape.”

“It doesn’t matter that she did. I might not ever return to the surface. I just wanted to rid myself of those attachments.”

“Attachments?”

Faker noticed the silver briefcase that Heartless was carrying in one hand. It didn’t look like something one would typically bring to explore a labyrinth.

“Master.” Faker called out lightly, after having looked at the briefcase for a few moments. “Remember that you are my Master. My wishes do not matter. You do not have to follow this plan to its end. Were it my choice, I would take you from Albion right this moment, to wherever you wanted to go; whether it be to the clinic where that doctor cared for you, or to a distant corner of the world where no one knows of you. Maybe I don’t have enough Magical Energy for that, but I’ll stay with you as long as I can, until the end of the Grail War.”

“.....”

Heartless hesitated for a moment before he replied.

“...Would you prefer that kind of life?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Faker snapped, her voice a bit louder than she had expected. She paused, then, and pondered for a few seconds.

“...Actually, perhaps I would.”

Muttering words that carried a few millennia of weight, Faker and Heartless continued to traverse the forest of coral that made up the Great Magic Circuit.

“When I was still alive, I never stayed in the same place for long once I reached adulthood. My king always had some place he willed us to travel. By contrast, his mother, Olympias, wished I remained caged up in a temple, repeating the same prayers over and over again so I could become a priestess of Dionysus. But I could not call that “life;” it was merely house arrest. The school I attended is the only place I could call home.”

“School? Do you mean Mieza, the Shrine of the Nymphs?”

It was the name of the school where Iskandar, along with his future generals, had studied under the great philosopher Aristotle. It was not an exaggeration to call it one of the best-known schools in history. And Faker had studied there as well.

“Did you spend your time watching the clouds while you studied there?”

“I did, sometimes,” Faker said, smiling softly. “I wish I had spent longer watching them. I am my king’s shadow, but I was not constantly with him. I only learned half of what the others did. Eumenes and Cleitus always shunned me because they were skeptical of magecraft.”

“Is that why you can’t forgive the traitors who fought in the Wars of the Diadochi?” Heartless said, his words as piercing as the sword that had killed the two-headed lion-creature.

“...Maybe.” Faker muttered.

After Iskandar's death, his mother and generals had begun a meaningless bloodbath in an attempt to prove who among them was the strongest. It was the reason why she hadn't heeded her king's call to join his army and chose to serve Heartless instead.

"I realized it soon after I was summoned. Even now, thinking of it fills me with hate. ...Maybe my brother would have fought as well if he hadn't died. Maybe we would have thought that we could have come out on top."

"Well, I think you're suited to being covered with blood."

"I had hoped you would disagree." Faker said, pouting.

It was Faker's turn to ask a question.

"How did it feel, being betrayed by your students?"

"...If only I could answer that question." Heartless's voice drifted slowly to the ground like a falling leaf. "If I was able to answer it with a quick, sloppy answer, I wouldn't be here. For most people, settling for whatever works is the way of life. Suppressing emotions is one of a mages' most basic skills. But I will never be able to do that. That's why I summoned you and brought you here."

Light from the Great Magic Circuit flickered across Faker's face, flashing white and red, the colors shifting as though in tune with her emotions.

"It does not matter that I feel like I would do the same if I was there. I cannot forgive them... It is selfish of me, but I cannot give up on the chance to have my king appear again."

...How could a Servant's smile be so innocent and pure?

"We're the same in that sense, aren't we?"

"Yes. We are."

Heartless nodded. Then, he suddenly recoiled. Faker had pressed her index finger to his forehead.

“You are a mess. Do not dare show such a weak expression again,” she said. “In truth, though, I do not hate that expression. I would like to see it again, perhaps over a drink.”

“I’m not as tolerant to alcohol as you are, you know.”

“Of course I know. Not even my king could outdo me in that sense. I am a priestess of Dionysus, after all.”

With another smile, Faker took yet another sip of wine.

“Either way, we have no time for wine now, do we?”

“Not necessarily.”

Snatching the bottle from Faker’s hand, Heartless drank the rest of the wine in one gulp.

The Servant from ancient Macedonia looked on at him, satisfied. But she had one more question.

“...The Grand Roll will start soon, will it not? Do you think it will go as you predicted?”

“Who knows? It doesn’t affect our plan.”

“True.”

Faker turned to look at the labyrinth before her, sure of the many twists and turns that remained in the forest of coral. It was beautiful in a way that lured unwary intruders to their deaths in the maws of unknown beasts.

As they forged ahead to even deeper depths, Heartless’ voice was firm and confident.

“Let’s go. I’ll make sure to give you a proper death.”

“I look forward to it, Master. I’ve awaited this moment for two thousand years.”

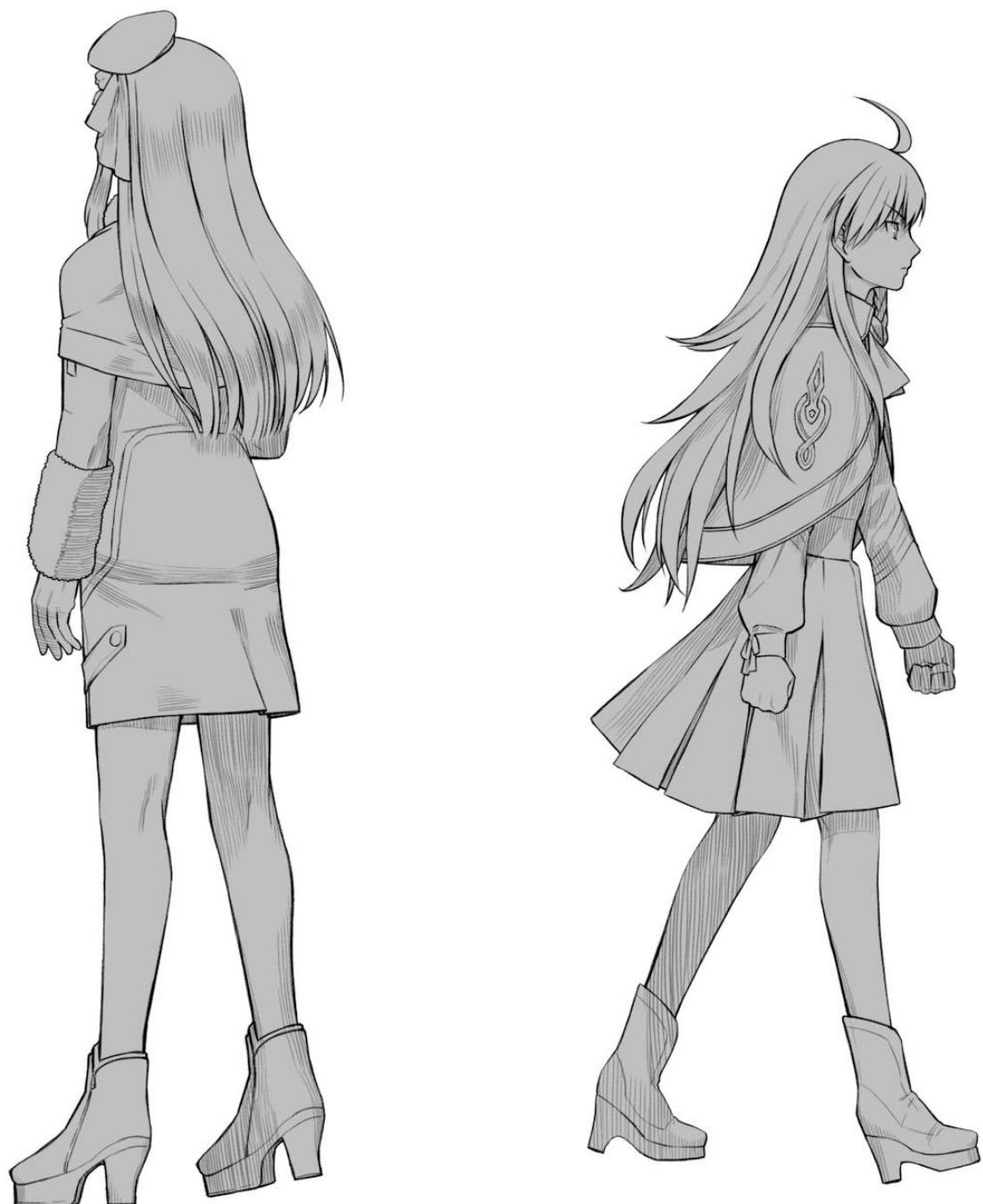
The two walked side by side down a road woven of light and darkness, as if they walked down a wedding carpet to a guillotine.

[1] Senko Hanabi, actually

[2] A Greek historian who accompanied Alexander the Great

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◆ 第二章 ◆  
~Chapter 2~



I could hear the sound of rustling leaves.

The sight before my eyes reminded me of the rainforests I had seen on TV. Ferns blanketed the ground while the leaves of giant trees stretched upward, filtering the light. Even though it was winter above the ground, walking through this forest had drenched me with sweat.

Strange creatures passed by us occasionally. If any of them were particularly dangerous, Luvia warned us before we made contact.

“There are two water elemental reactions and one wind elemental reaction at eight o’clock. We should turn around to avoid them.”

Flue and Luvia had already made us change direction countless times in response to signals received by the five gemstones that floated around Luvia, which each corresponded to an element. Like Geraff had said, it was a type of magecraft well-suited to Albion. Not only were we able to avoid most fights, but my mentor also pointed out that we knew the right way to respond to an enemy even if we encountered one. In the brief thirty minutes that we had been in Albion, the old man’s advice had already proved quite useful.

If it had not been for his map and Flue’s experience, our trip would have been much more eventful.

The environment never remained the same for very long. However, two things remained constant, much to our surprise. First, there was so much Magical Energy here that even breathing was enough to make our lungs feel numb. Second, there was always a strange river of light on the ground, made up of many tiny streams that babbled and pulsated.

Even though I had never seen this magnificent scene before, it felt kind of familiar. ...It almost reminded me of the Magic Circuits that circulated Magical Energy through all images.

It finally dawned on me.

“...So that’s why this place is called the Great Magic Circuit.”

“The dragon might be dead, but its Magic Circuits are still alive with the mystery of the Age of the Gods. That’s why the Great Magic Circuit is also called the Odvena.”

Luvia’s voice knocked me out of my absent-minded state of mind.

“Does that mean that the true Ether of the Age of the Gods might still be circulating here?”

“So there isn’t much a mage can do to damage this place, eh?”

Hearing Flue say that, I transformed Add into a different state and tried hacking at the band of light on the floor. It wasn’t affected at all.

“Is the strange ecosystem here also a result of the Great Magic Circuit?”

“Sure, it’ll do weird stuff to the critters living here, but it’s a headache to talk about. Every part of this labyrinth can shift at any second, although the movements tend to follow a pattern. Still, talking about cause-and-effect relationships is just about impossible when it comes to Albion.”

As if the labyrinth understood what Flue was saying, the band of light became red, and then green.

In the midst of the shifting light, something appeared.

“Watch out!”

A shadow crawled out from beneath the ferns, shifting from a two-dimensional shadow to a three-dimensional creature before our eyes. Even though it looked like a regular snake, it clearly wasn’t. What kind of snake could jump in the air and shoot purple electricity?

“Hmph!”

“Miss Luvia!” Seigen shouted, a little too late.

One of the gemstones floating around Luvia had absorbed the electricity. Luvia seemed to have seamlessly transitioned from using detection magecraft to defensive magecraft before Seigen could react to the attack.

Flue sent a knife flying at the creature, slicing it through its snake-like head before it could harm Luvia.

“Careful,” he warned as he retrieved his knife. “That snake is one such critter who spent too much time here and ended up more like a Phantasmal Species from the Age of the Gods. You could say its innate domain is like magecraft.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, the term ‘Phantasmal Species’ means a lot of things. Surface Phantasmal Species evolved naturally, for instance. But the Phantasmal Species in Albion, or ones from the Age of the Gods, have traits that shouldn’t exist. ‘Innate domain’ refers to what they use to bend the rules.”

“I see. Interesting.”

Luvia dusted herself off and walked a bit more before she spoke again.

“Our destination is the Ancient Heart, right?”

“Yes.” My mentor affirmed. “When the time comes, the Grand Roll will be held there.”

Heartless’ plan to perform a magecraft ritual right next to the stage of the Grand Roll was extremely bold. Of course, there was a reason behind his choice of location. The Ancient Heart held a concentration of ancient Mystery that was higher than anywhere else.

“Just to be clear, Heartless wants to bring back the Age of the Gods by summoning Iskandar as a Divine Spirit? I know how strange mages can be, but this is just too hard to believe.” Seigen said.

“The magecraft from the Age of the Gods allows people to directly access the authority of Divine Spirits. And since Divine Spirits are close to the Root, mages won’t have to search for the Root anymore.” My mentor explained.

“Do you think that’s a goal worth reaching?”

“No. Heartless’ solution is nothing more than a dream. Mages have been stuck on the same goal for two thousand years. He’s trying to solve a problem by running away from it, like daydreaming to try and dull the pain of living.”

Seigen’s next words may have sounded funny, but he wasn’t joking. Seigen looked to his new arm, and then to my mentor.

For a moment, he stared in silence at the person who had once convicted him of a crime.

“So that means you’re putting yourself in danger to destroy someone’s dream. That does sound like something you’d do, Lord El-Melloi II.”

In response to Seigen’s somewhat sarcastic statement, my mentor nodded sincerely.

“I agree.”

To be fair, though, sincerity was his only possible response. My mentor was often overly sincere toward the world. Just like how he called himself an evil person, he was likely aware that his sincerity would bite him in the back one day. The thought of that haunted me for quite a while.

“I also have something I would like to confirm,” Luvia cut in, “The timing of this Grand Roll is no coincidence, is it? Servants cannot be summoned without the Holy Grail, while the dike that separates the Ancient Heart can only be opened for the Grand Roll.”

“Exactly.”

“In that case, Heartless must have used his position as someone who is not a Lord but is close to the Lords to place himself in an advantageous position.”

This was the same conclusion my mentor had reached. In other words, one of the attendees of the Grand Roll was Heartless’ accomplice.

“Right now, my sister, Reines, is dealing with that matter.”

“You two really trust each other. Even though it is still unclear whether the accomplice belongs to the Aristocratic Faction or the Democratic Faction, the faction they belong to is now your enemy. What an interesting idea.” Luvia said as we stepped upon the ferns that covered the ground.

My mentor turned to look at the young woman as she spoke incessantly.

“You know, it’s very possible that the Edelfelts will be involved somehow. Why are you saying this and still helping me?”

“Why does my family’s involvement mean that I should not accompany you?” Luvia responded, much to my surprise. “I am a mage. Not many mages today have the chance to witness mystery like this. It’s only for the small price of antagonizing a faction of the Clock Tower, so why would I hesitate?”

“I see...”

Luvia was as direct about her thoughts as ever. Her attitude had been the same when she asked my mentor to tutor her. After all, besides being a mage, she was also a noble. Even when Luvia took things from others, she could probably arrogantly say “this is the way I am. I will never change.”

That was why I found her very beautiful.

“This is where the supposed shortcut can be found, correct?”

“Yeah, we’re almost there.” Flue answered.

Within ten minutes of walking, all the plants around us disappeared, leaving behind a nasty stench that originated from a river that barred our path.

We had witnessed plenty of strange sights since we arrived here, but this river was far too wide. It seemed to stretch for several hundred meters from one bank to the other. From the way the water filtered the light from the dragon’s Magic Circuits, we could tell that it was also quite deep. Normally, a river of these dimensions could probably be crossed by using magecraft to float or glide across.

It didn't take me long to decide that doing so may not be a viable option. I saw a rock roughly the size of a human head tumble down the bank and dissolve instantly upon hitting the water, leaving only bubbles behind.

"A river of acid—!?" I couldn't help but exclaim.

The rock had probably disappeared before it sank to the bottom. A person would probably last a few seconds in the acid. The only reason why it didn't eat further into the banks was the result of the dragon's Magic Circuits, which was probably the only thing that could resist the river's corrosion.

"This is the shortcut Geraff mentioned. It's one of the better ones." Flue said, rubbing his temples.

"How is this one of the better ones?!"

"Give it a second. I just scattered some spices. They should be here soon."

"Spices—?" Seigen started, frowning.

He was interrupted by a cacophony of violent fluttering and a strong gust of wind, which heralded the arrival of what Flue had been looking for.

"What?!"

I could understand Seigen's bewilderment. Even though the dark objects that flew toward us were more familiar to me than the other monsters of the labyrinth, I was just as surprised to see them.

It was a flock of giant beetles, each the size of a person.

"Yes! Here they come!" Flue said, grinning.

"...Uh, Mr. Flue?"

I had similar doubts as Seigen about the beetles, but I was still too shocked to speak.

"Just hop on up their backs!"

“How do you expect this to work!?”

Seigen’s cries were in vain. Flue enhanced his legs, leaping tens of meters into the air and landing on one of the beetles. It wasn’t a perfect landing, but he quickly adjusted his balance and jumped across one after the other.

Watching Flue jump with ease, I felt my stomach twist.

“Oh, this is just ridiculous!”

Though she complained, Luvia followed in Flue’s footsteps, unfazed by the absurdity of the situation. She sailed over the swarm of beetles with the grace of a princess ascending a glass staircase.

I didn’t know why, but I felt as if I had entered a scene from a kids’ bedtime story written by a person of terrible taste.

“...”

Sure, it was hard to believe. But considering the physical capabilities of mages, it was not impossible. Either way, it must have taken so much trial and error for the excavation teams to figure out a mind-boggling technique like using bugs as stepping stones.

I heard an awkward cough beside me.

“Sorry, Gray, but I’ll be counting on you if I fall.”

“Of course.”

I nodded, steeling my resolve.

Both with courage and fear, we began to make our way to the other side of the river.



I felt a twinge of dizziness as I walked through the rift (Portal). Phase shifting always resulted in this, as if my soul were a fraction of a second slower than my body.

It had been a few hours since I headed out from the Clock Tower. After being subjected to a security check by the Arcane Dissection Division[1], I was finally deep inside the earth near the meeting room I had been invited to.

The scene that I saw from the towers connecting to the rifts was far from what I imagined. This place resembled a giant altar.

Some types of magecraft can only work at a certain height because mystery can only prosper when separated from the regular world, so I wasn't surprised by the towers in the least. I wasn't surprised by the dimly shining dome above me, either.

What unsettled me was the constant deep rumbling noise, like the growling of a giant monster.

That metaphor was actually not that far from the truth. This city was basically a giant organism, made up of an endless sea of buildings that resembled a modern architect's remix of a beehive. Magecraft was probably the only reason why it wasn't constantly collapsing.

Was this place also an academic city like the street of the Department of Modern Magecraft? I wondered.

Apart from the first department, Mystile, which sat in the heart of London, every other department was scattered in the surrounding area like satellites. So was the Mining City of Albion one of them as well, not just an underground fortress like I had imagined?

I suddenly realized that I would probably need more than reports to get an accurate sense of what I was about to deal with.

“...So, it is... your first time... here.” Leaning on his cane, the old man stared at me unblinkingly.

His voice was accompanied by the clinking sound of his three necklaces bumping against each other. There were two diamond rings on each of his withered hands. All of

these trinkets were encrusted with gems that probably cost several fortunes. Even so, it didn't feel like the old man was showing off his wealth.

The glittering jewels framed his aged body, making it more like treasures buried along with a corpse.

If the old man dozed off on his own, he would probably be mistaken for a mummy that walked out of the British Museum, but his jewels surrounded him with a strange golden glow.

He was Rufleus Nuatha-Re Eulyphis, the Lord of the Department of Spiritual Evocation. Unlike my brother, he was a tried and true member of the Aristocratic Faction.

I nodded.

“While I haven’t had many opportunities to deal with matters relating to Albion, it’s not as though I’m completely ignorant about it. I’m aware that this was the original form of the Clock Tower, for instance.”

“One could say... that time has stopped here... If one considers mages to be beings who face the past... this underground labyrinth should be seen as our home...”

As he said this, the old man walked away at an amazing speed, despite the fact that he had to rely on his cane.

I turned in place, taking in the sight of the other structures littered about the area.

I was standing in a room about the size of a gymnasium, and filled with workers milling about. Everyone here appeared to either be a mage or a golem. The golems were of a better caliber than the ones you could see walking around the First Department. Really, that just goes to show how special Albion really was.

But there was something here that caught my eye even more.

“—Is this a composite workshop?”

I blurted out, my voice escaping my mouth.

It was a phrase that could surprise anyone even vaguely knowledgeable about magecraft.

Usually, mages didn't reveal their workshops to others. The only exceptions to that rule were students or disciples. Some might reveal a small corner, but never the inner workings. The core of a workshop contained the essence of one's own magecraft, so it was only reasonable to be so secretive.

I couldn't help but wonder what secrets my brother could reveal if he was here as well. If he conducted his usual unflinching dissection of the magecraft here, I'd be sure to hear a good cry of despair. Maybe it would also help our standing in the Clock Tower, but I didn't care about that half as much as I cared about making my brother despair at his worthlessness.

“...Ah, Composite Workshop Cliegra(クリエグラ)”, came a hoarse voice beside me, as a grand scene unfolded before my eyes.

An enormous machine was pouring a bubbling liquid from a flask twice the size of my body into several similarly-sized beakers. It was followed by a truck-sized container that was carried on rails to a distiller. All the while, different catalysts were being poured into the liquid to cause reactions.

These contraptions were not the core of the workshop. I could count at least several dozen. These machines were the source of the deep bellowing noise.

Eventually, the vat of liquid was transformed into a small golden prism the size of my finger. Even though I was a mage, I had no idea what processes had occurred to make this possible.

I was tempted to call it a waste of time, but I couldn't help but be moved by the spectacle.

Yes, this was what magecraft was meant to be.

Though equal exchange was the basis of magecraft, depletion was also an essential part. Rather than receiving an equal amount to what you give, magecraft sometimes involves diluting something into nothingness. By stretching something limited into something infinite, mages believed that they could create miracles.

The more I thought about it, the more stupid I realized we were.

“This is concentrated spirit ore, right?”

“...Only Albion contains concentrated spirit ore of this quality... In the past, the distilled block could be the size of a fist...”

“That’s why Lord Trambelio brought up his request, isn’t it.”

Of course the Democratic Faction would bring up a request like redeveloping Spirit Tomb Albion. The resources mined from Albion were evidently decreasing in quantity. Mages were already an endangered species. What would happen to us if Albion ceased to provide us with materials?

Even though it sounded like a good solution, I couldn’t easily comply.

The rewards were indeed great, but what about the costs? Considering the scale of mining operations in Albion now, it was plain to see that redevelopment would be expensive. If the redevelopment failed, all our hopes and dreams would evaporate quite magnificently.

It was a catch-twenty-two situation with no way out.

Why were mages such fragile creatures? I wondered, inadvertently feeling happy at the thought.

“...Any thoughts on witnessing a composite workshop...for the first time...El-Melloi princess?”

“Don’t think so highly of me. I’m quite impressed that we, as mages, can actually work together.”

“For someone who claims to dislike the nature of mages... you seem quite happy.”

“No, not particularly.”

“I feel relieved either way... This way... you can hold your own.” Rufleus said, patting his cane. The composite workshop was reflected in his murky eyes.

“Everyone in Albion fights to survive, and everyone here is a mage. This is the only place where a composite workshop could work without violating the rule of secrecy.”

Neither the secretive nature nor the pride of mages mattered here. No mage could survive by trying to hoard their magecraft. The underground dictated that mages had to dedicate their work to the common cause.

Many mages from the surface would be disgusted by this. Others might even die from anger, but this was the way of life in the Mining City of Spirit Tomb Albion.

“You’re not just here to be a tour guide, right?”

“Of course not... Look there...” The old man said, pointing with his chin to a silhouette that stood between the giant machines.

That person had probably arrived before us, or taken a different portal.

It was a girl who was even younger than I was, who was currently waving and staring indignantly at us.

“Come on! We don’t have much time.”

She had silver hair, and her amber eyes held shadows that didn’t fit her young face. It was a sign that she was a proper mage, well-soaked in the evils of our society. The more unfortunate the color reflected in someone’s eyes, the more vivid they were as a mage.

That was simply how our world worked.

When I was even younger than she was, I had been dragged into conspiracy upon conspiracy. Countless attempts had been made on my life. If a weak or maladjusted person is suddenly given a great deal of power, it’s only natural that hordes would rush forward to seize that power for themselves. It might seem contradictory, but warding off these hordes as one grows up makes for the best mage. A mage’s spirit is best completed with a struggle.

Thanks to my past, I could empathize with the wounds inflicted on her soul with a helpless authenticity.

“Hey, Olgamarie.”

Her full name was Olgamarie Asmleit Animusphere. She was the daughter of the Lord of the Department of Astromancy, making her the other representative at this meeting.

I couldn't help but find this matchup ridiculous.

“Sorry that your teammates this time are two little girls. I hope we don't burden you too much.”

Oh no, my terrible personality was extending to my elders as well. I didn't care about the old man's opinion of me, but I'd rather not have him hate me just yet.

“Do not fret...” Rufleus said, a disgusting smell wafting out between his yellow teeth.  
“Simply watch in silence from your seats...”

These words did not come from the bottom of his heart. Someone like Rufleus wasn't capable of saying something of that nature and meaning it.

Instead, he meant that he would win as long as he had the votes.

That was the old man's usual way of speaking. He had the pride befitting a member of the Eulyphis family, one of the oldest and most prestigious families in the Clock Tower.

I felt something cold slide across the inside of my throat, as if I had been stabbed by a well-sharpened knife. It was too easy to forget your place and fall prey to the truly powerful people in the Clock Tower.

“You may not be experienced... but at least you did not run away...”

...Of course he took the chance to criticize my brother.

“No, no, I think my brother gave this chance to me because the experience will be valuable for a future Lord.”

“Hm...”

I decided to defend my brother this time, even though the old man probably didn’t believe a word I said. I wasn’t sure if Rufleus knew what my brother was doing now, but it wouldn’t be hard for him to figure out.

My situation was actually better than my brother’s.

I may have been from an insignificant branch of the family, but I was still an El-Melloi. Rufleus, who considered bloodlines to be the only way to measure the value of a mage, probably thought me to be at least human. My brother was only a New Ager— A maggot in Rufleus’ eyes.

Well... I wasn’t sure if that was exactly what he thought, but it didn’t matter.

In front of my brother, I tried to control myself, but I was a mage through and through.

It was important to remember that I derived joy from other people’s pain. Since Gray and the other members of the El-Melloi Classroom weren’t here, I could reveal my true self. No matter how I tried to put up appearances, my core would not change.

The old man shifted his gaze from me.

“Come with me... Miss Animusphere.”

Oh, ‘Miss Animusphere’! How fancy.

She was the heir, after all, so it made sense for Rufleus to be polite. It was clear that she got preferential treatment, but I wasn’t angry. Maybe I should apologize that my family’s succession battle eventually ended with the crown being placed on the head of such an insignificant person.

“Understood.” Olgamarie said, nodding.

The old man then turned to look at me again.

“Reines.”

...And I was just being addressed by my first name. Fine. I had expected that.

“There is half a day until the gate to the Ancient Heart opens. Feel free to rest so that you do not faint during the Grand Roll.[2]”

“Thank you for your kindness, but I’d like to take this chance to explore the Mining City some more.” I said, curtsying with as much grace as I could muster.

I didn’t have much time. I needed to collect more information. There probably wasn’t much a newcomer to Albion could do, but I figured I’d try my best.

“In that case, let us meet again in the Ancient Heart.” Said Olgamarie.

I felt the scent of faint perfume as I passed her. In ten years, she would probably grow up to be a beautiful woman with many suitors. I hoped that at least one of those suitors would be a decent match for her.

Upon leaving the composite workshop, I squinted in the blinding light and stopped a few meters away.

“...What a girls-school way of doing things.” I muttered to myself. But I had to admit that it was the safest one, as I had no way to tell what magecraft Rufleus was capable of.

I slowly opened my hand, revealing a crumpled note. Olgamarie had written something on the edge of the piece of paper.

—

*([1] Why didn’t I change this earlier?)*

*“([2] I think Lord Eulyphis says this, which means he managed to say two sentences without ellipses!)”*



There was nothing before my eyes but a vast expanse of gray.

I stumbled around for a moment before I realized I was surrounded by gravestones.

Even though the gravestones had been regularly cleaned, erosion had still worn at them. I could imagine the engravings of the names of the dead being blown to pieces by the wind.

This was a dream.

I was in Blackmore Graveyard, a place that always reminded me of the raspy voice of a certain person.

—“That is what you must destroy! That, and only that!”

I had heard this countless times from Bersac Blackmore, the man who had taught me secret arts of grave keeping.

Thinking back, he probably wanted to give me strength to call my own, regardless of whether I was to become the vessel of King Arthur or my own person. But it wasn’t like he would have ever told me that.

“I...”

I staggered about in the thick mist. There seemed to be nothing beyond the graveyard, as if the place that made me so nostalgic was actually a prison. No, it was actually more like I would be safe from disaster as long as I stayed here. But eventually, I would rot and die here anyway.

“Hey, we don’t have time for you to think stupid things like that. This is an emergency, not nap time! Wake up.”

A sarcastic voice struck my eardrums.

“Add...?”

No. It wasn’t Add.

A hazy figure appeared beside me. For some reason, this figure seemed familiar. It dawned on me, finally, that the voice I heard had also belonged to a knight. But that knight was a shadow of the past, and should have disappeared after the incident in my hometown.

“...Sir Kay?”

“Don’t get too close to fairies, or else you’ll mess up reality. It’s even worse in dreams, thanks to that court mage, Merlin.”

Though I couldn’t see his face, he seemed to be smirking.

The sudden appearance of this man made my head whirl, as if I had been tossed into a hurricane. It wasn’t like I expected to ever see him again, after all.

“U-um...”

The figure continued to speak without pausing to acknowledge my feelings.

“Time and space seem fuzzy here... You’re probably here because that kid’s getting close. That also must be why your dream was set here, in the graveyard.”

“‘That kid’...?”

In response, the figure shook his head.

“I guess you could call her my little sister.”

Sir Kay’s little sister...?

...That must mean the great king who my body was supposed to belong to. What did it mean if she was getting close?

The ground beneath my feet began to shake, as if my dream was about to be torn apart. This, at least, seemed to finally get the attention of that figure.

“Alright, you have a place you need to go back to. You shouldn’t be wandering around here.”

The figure waved his fingers, drawing a shining line in the darkness.

“Is that...?”

The line's light grew, taking over my vision like an approaching star.

He was right. I couldn't stay here anymore.

"Have some faith in yourself. The end will be here soon, so I hope fate goes easy on you."

The knight's voice was low. I wrapped my arms around myself, and my dream shattered around me.



"Gray. Gray?"

I heard a worried voice and felt the weight of a hand on my shoulder.

Through the leather glove, the hand felt gentle and warm, as if handling something fragile. On that note, my mentor had changed gloves before we came down here. The soft smell of cigars and leather tugged at my consciousness, and I slowly roused from my haze.

Above me, the Magic Circuits of the dragon shone with brilliant light. In my half-awake state, I recalled that Flue had suggested that we rest for a bit. I had been so tired, I probably fell asleep immediately.

"Sir..."

My senses came back to me all at once, and I was immediately aware of our current situation.

My hair was stuck to my forehead with sweat. I probably hadn't slept in a very flattering pose. Thinking about it was enough to make my face heat up in embarrassment.

"S-sorry. I just had a strange dream."

"A dream?"

“I-It’s nothing.”

In any case, I couldn’t admit that I had dreamt of Sir Kay. I hurriedly wiped the sweat from my face and looked down.

“Sorry. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.” My mentor said, smiling gently.

“Heheh! What a worrywart! You don’t have to worry about how Gray’s doing as long as I’m here.” From beside me, the box I kept in a birdcage chimed, metal creaking as it moved its mouth.

I wanted to ask if he had seen my dream of Sir Kay as well, but I found it too difficult to ask.

Instead, it was my mentor who asked Add a question.

“Are you alright as well, Add?”

“...Oh, yeah.”

It was rare to see Add close his carved eyes so quickly without making any unnecessary jokes. Though he didn’t say it outright, his intent was clear. I would not be able to use Rhongomyniad again.

It was as the director of the Atlas Institute had said back in my hometown. Ever since I released the Seal of Thirteen during the fight on the Rail Zeppelin, Add had begun to break apart. Though its self-repair abilities meant that it was not eternally asleep, it would not withstand another use of the lance.

Even though I had kept this a secret from Add and my mentor, they already knew. Briefly, I wondered how bad I must have been at hiding things.

For this reason, there was something else I had to say.

“But Sir, you’re still going to continue onward regardless, right?”

“Well...” A frown formed between my mentor’s eyebrows.

“I don’t think inconveniencing other people will stop you from going, Sir, because Mr. Iskandar’s...”

I couldn’t finish my sentence. It didn’t seem right for someone like me to try and summarize my mentor’s relationship with the king who was about to be transformed into a Divine Spirit. I was the only one that needed to hear my thoughts. All I had to do was witness his journey.

Scratching his head, my mentor gave a troubled sigh.

“I feel like I keep getting scolded by you on this trip.”

“That’s because you’re usually the one doing the scolding, Sir.”

Strangely enough, I also smiled at that. Still, my happiness didn’t last very long.

“Sir, are you...”

“I’m fine. It’s nothing in comparison[1].”

Though his face bore a slight smile, it wasn’t only pale because of the illumination by the light of the dragon’s Magic Circuits. Still, that was no longer a reason for him to stop in his tracks. At this depth, the labyrinth would take a toll on us no matter how careful we were. Even though we had avoided direct conflict, the dense Magical Energy of Albion churned inside us. Since my mentor had the worst resistance to Mana among all of us, it was only natural that he would feel the effects first.

“Not to embarrass you, Lord El-Melloi II, but can you still walk?” Flue asked for precisely this reason.

“...To be honest, breathing is getting difficult, but I’ll be fine.”

“Take this.”

Flueger tossed him a bag of vials.

“You can think of it like magical altitude sickness. It’s water off a duck’s back to someone with strong enough Magic Circuits, but you’d probably be better off with these.”

“...Thank you.”

My mentor downed the contents of one of the vials with a miserable expression, only to look three times as miserable when he was finished.

Next, Flueger packed up the Mystic Code that we had used to camp. Along some more incense, it created a Bounded Field that warded off monsters. Flue had warned us that not all monsters would be deterred, but luckily, we had been spared that unfortunate fate.

We had just finished our second rest after being in the maze for nearly half a day. Every twist and turn of the Great Magic Circuit that we encountered along the shortcut we were taking brought a new type of terrain completely different from the last. So far, I had seen a lush jungle, a misty tundra, a field of bubbling lava, and hills illuminated by constant lightning. Even though I thought I had seen a lot, Flue insisted that we hadn't even seen one percent of this place.

Our journey was surprisingly peaceful, no doubt thanks to Geraff's map and Luvia and Seigen's efforts. Seigen was incredibly sensitive to subtle changes in the environment thanks to his training, a skill which he hadn't had the chance to use in the Adra incident, due to his being the culprit.

Now, we were probably around the twenty-seventh floor. Although saying that, we hadn't been descending one floor at a time. The dark passageway that Flue had led us through had deposited us on the fourth floor.

“The top ten floors of the Great Magic Circuit have all been scraped clean of resources. Nowadays, mining starts from the thirtieth floor, while the sixtieth floor is about the deepest skilled teams are willing to go. Where we're going is the Ancient Heart, which is on the one hundred and fiftieth floor.”

“...So there's no way we're going to make it in time.”

Instead of getting mad at me for the thoughts that escaped my mouth, Flue nodded dejectedly.

“Of course not. Most of the time, breaching the hundredth floor is accomplished by a bunch of teams working together. They set up campsites and roads along the way,

forming a path that can last a few months or a year. No matter how many shortcuts you take, this is as far as traveling half a day's gonna take you."

Before I came here myself, I never could have imagined that people would go that far to mine things. Now, the idea felt a little more likely.

"...So, in order to reach the Ancient Heart in half a day, we gotta take a different approach. A path that no excavator in their right mind would take."

With this, we left the place where we had just camped and walked for another half an hour or so.

Eventually, we came to a stop before a vast expanse of nothingness, and we all stood, shocked into silence.

"You wouldn't think it, but the entrance to the thirtieth floor still has some stuff in it. More experienced teams typically pass right by it, but the uppermost floors are the best place for the greener excavators to find talismans if they're too scared to go any deeper."

Flue's words were met by the low buzzing of the maze, as we were all still struggling to process the sight in front of us.

Finally, Seigen spoke up.

"...Is this what Geraff mentioned earlier?"

"He calls it the Pit of Oblivion (Naru Pit)."

The pit in question was the giant circular hole that we currently stood at the edge of.

I tossed a pebble into it, but even with my enhanced hearing, I couldn't hear it strike the bottom.

"...The Ancient Heart is approximately tens of kilometers under the Mining City. In regular reality, that would be deep enough to reach Earth's mantle, so of course you can't hear it hit the ground."

“But Albion doesn’t sit on the same coordinate plane as reality, right?”

My mentor nodded in response to my question.

“As far as theories of reality are concerned, we should have run out of oxygen long ago. Although magecraft can distort the laws of physics, creating things from nothing is not simple. The only thing that is keeping us alive is the fact that Albion exists in a fissure between here and there... However, such a nature also has a negative effect on us,” my mentor said, looking down into the giant hole. “...The Pit of Oblivion. What a fitting name. Is it really deep enough to reach the Ancient Heart?”

“No one knows, because nobody who’s gone in has come back alive. All I can guarantee is that my teacher is an astrologist. When he discovered this hole, he supposedly felt that the flow here connected to the dragon’s heart. It’s worth a bet, right?”

“Nonononono, that’s not the problem here at all!” Seigen interrupted, his gaze darting between the two people. “I know we’re mages, so we can survive jumping down from buildings. But tens of kilometers?! Also, the Mana here is peppered with holes. What’s there to stop us from going splat if the spell fails?!”

The situation had been similar in the Child of Einnashe, a forest that had appeared to obstruct the Rail Zeppelin. If it wasn’t for the support provided by Melvin, we wouldn’t have been able to use enhancement properly. I probably would have died there.

This situation was even more dire.

“We can’t use a rope, because they don’t make ropes long enough. So our only option is gliding down with Mystic Codes. You only need a pinch of Od to operate these.”

Flue took out several Mystic Codes that seemed to be made of small pieces of cloth. They looked more like bird wings than gliders.

“Are those Icarus’ Wings[2]? They must not have been easy to find.” Luvia commented.

“You can’t fly with them, but it should be enough to glide down there.”

“I suppose we’re not going to fly too close to the sun from here, after all.”

Though Luvia looked surprised, she still acted composed. Even so, I was sure that she must have had her doubts.

“Seems like a risky gamble...” Seigen said, shuddering and shaking his head.

“This entire trip is a risky gamble. The Ancient Heart is the deepest part of the Clock Tower that can be reached. If you go down even further, you’ll reach the Realm of the Fairies, a place where no human has ever set foot.”

My mentor’s words reminded me of the map that Svin had drawn. Beneath the Mining City, the Greater Magic Circuit, and the Ancient Heart, was the Realm of the Fairies. Albion did not end there. Rather, it was just that humans did not know what lay there.

Flue continued to explain as he passed out the Mystic Codes.

“Everything from here is unknown. Even if this hole is directly connected to the Ancient Heart, it doesn’t mean that our work is done once we get down. Remember, we’re here to find Heartless. We ought to take any rests we can as we head down.”

“Rest? As we glide down the pit? That doesn’t sound like a good idea.” My mentor said, putting on the Mystic Code. I followed his movements and clumsily put it on myself. It appeared that I only needed to activate my Magic Circuits to activate it as well.

“I want to test this a little before we jump.” My mentor said, touching his shoulder, which was now covered by the wings.

“No, we should probably jump right now. I was just wondering how a hole of this size was made. Now I get it.” Seigen said, leaning over so my mentor could hear him whisper.

“So what made this hole?” Flueger frowned.

One of Luvia’s eyebrows shot upward as one of the gemstones floating around her began to shine with a faint light.

Suddenly, the ground a few meters behind them burst, revealing the things that had been hiding inside.

“...An earthworm!?”

It didn’t seem right to call this monstrosity by the same name as its tiny surface counterparts. It was the same size as the Rail Zeppelin, less like an animal and more like a storm cloud. What made it worse was that it was not alone.

“Move it!”

At Flue’s instruction, we dove into the Pit of Oblivion.

However, the giant earthworms pursued us ruthlessly, like predators that finally tricked some prey. They twisted their way in behind us and began to close in.

“How are they catching up? We’re basically in a free fall!”

“That means they’re not as stupid as they look! This is Albion, after all!”

“This is truly ridiculous!”

The wings on Luvia’s back unfolded, allowing her to glide with the grace of an angel even though this was her first time trying it on.

“Call!”

Together with the short incantation, a magic bullet tore through the darkness.



The Mining City also had places to buy food and drink. The food was from cultures on the surface, which made sense considering the city above it was quite multinational. The mages and spellcasters here had created something like a compressed version of London.

Though saying that, the cafe described in the note didn’t belong in London at all. I felt more like I was in a Western amidst the old wooden tables, dust-covered blackboards with the menu scrawled on, and sparse guests.

In this environment, a girl in a hood blended right in.

Just so you know, most of the people here wore hoods, possibly so they wouldn't breathe in too much dust. I had also heard exciting tales of parasitic plants in Albion that took root in people's lungs if they breathed in its spores.

"So? Why did you call me here, Olgamarie?"

"You came. I thought you would stand me up." The heir to the Animusphere said with a smile. Her silver hair peeked out from her hood, giving her an ethereal look in the dim light. I take back what I said earlier. It'd take much less than ten years for people to start vying for her affection. Of course, that was assuming mages weren't too twisted for that.

I closed one of my eyes and shrugged.

"The last time I received an invitation like that was before I was named as the heir to the family. There's no way I could ignore something that reminds me so much of a girls' school."

"Are girls' schools like that?" Olgamarie asked, tilting her petite head. "I've never been to school. I was taught by tutors my father hired."

"They must have been excellent tutors, then."

"...Yes, they were. Especially Trisha."

I couldn't help but take note of the expression on Olgamarie's face as she said that. Trisha was the name of her attendant, who had been killed on the Rail Zeppelin. I could sense the importance of her presence from the way Olgamarie mentioned her name.

After a few seconds, Olgamarie tossed aside her sadness and looked to me again with her amber eyes.

"I have something to ask you," she said, as if she was telling me a secret. "I'll get straight to the point. Is the El-Melloi Faction opposed to the redevelopment of Albion?"

"Oh, that was sudden."

I lifted a hand in amusement, which only made her gaze harden. It seemed I couldn't get away with levity this time.

"Isn't it the best opportunity for you to rise to the top?"

Olgamarie's question was aimed straight at the heart of the matter.

I never expected to hear this question in, of all places, this dingy little cafe. I immediately worried that other people would hear our conversation, but no one looked toward us. It appeared that Olgamarie had created a tiny bounded field just then.

I deliberately paused for a few seconds before speaking again.

"It won't matter if we're deposed before that, though. If a weak faction like us dares go against the will of the powerful ones up top, our heads will roll. Literally."

"Yes, but the redevelopment of Albion has never been the true goal of either faction, hasn't it?"

It was a sharp observation. If Lord Trambelio brought up the redevelopment of Albion again, it would doubtlessly become the subject of the meeting. However, it had nothing to do with the major goals of the Democratic or the Aristocratic Faction.

"In addition, the Barthmelois sent us a letter from the previous Lord saying that the redevelopment of Albion should be stopped."

"The previous Lord? That means..."

That meant that there was no changing the Barthmelois' minds, even if you ignored the letter.

Gosh, what kind of scary things was this little girl thinking about?!

Since it was from the previous Lord, the Barthomelois must have anticipated that people would object. This letter ensured that they would not lose face.

"In that case, all we need to do is claim that this is no longer a matter between the Aristocratic Faction and the Democratic Faction alone. That evens the playing field so

the Animuspheres are not inferior to the Eulyphis'. If our votes are the only metric, the two of us can overturn the entire Grand Roll." Olgamarie announced, strong intent shining in her amber eyes.

I wasn't given an opportunity to say something in return. Now came the intermission.

Olgamarie looked away, and the bounded field around us shattered. A waiter walked up and served us a few dishes.

Although I wasn't really hungry, I took a bite of the oddly crunchy sandwich on one of the plates. Perhaps to hide less savory tastes, the meat had been overly seasoned. I couldn't even tell what kind of meat it was. How exhilarating!

I thought back to what Olgamarie had just said.

"...I see. You've grown up."

"I hope you can tell who I learnt it from."

To be honest, I found her backtalk quite cute. However, it was a bad habit for her to be so direct. She couldn't go around telling people things without grasping their weaknesses first. It was good for me, though, as I wouldn't have to run around in circles trying to understand her true intentions.

"...What? Do you have a problem with being on the same team as me?"

I knew I was just picking at a quarrel at this point, and I couldn't help but smile.

"Don't mind me. Being 'studied' just reminds me of the past. Unlike your tutors, my housekeeper was truly good-for-nothing."

The housekeeper in question left a long time ago. One day, I would get him to pay for turning me into this kind of person.

But for now, it wasn't the time to think about that. Back to the issue at hand.

The Aristocratic Faction was powerful, but it was far from stable. It was made up of a bunch of egotistical pieces that had differing goals and morals, liable to fall apart at the

slightest disagreement. This made the Barthomelois and the Department of Law ever more important.

If the faction did break into pieces, it would never piece itself back together.

This was probably why the faction at the very tip of the Aristocratic Faction, the Barthomelois, were always so slow to make a move. It was in their style to keep a plan in action for decades at a time.

Having said that, it wasn't like the El-Melloi Faction was united, either. We had fallen, only to fall even further down since the death of the previous Lord El-Melloi. The impact of his death still corroded us to this day, making our resurrection a distant dream.

At this, I sighed again.

"I can't answer your question right now, but I'll keep it in mind."

"That will be enough." Olgamarie said with a nod.

With that bombshell out of the way, her expression immediately cleared. She evidently had the guts to be a future Lord. Obviously, though, I didn't need to be shown that right now.

I finished my cup of suspicious-looking tea and left my seat.

What a troubling situation, I thought. The trouble was that I couldn't be sure whether you were Heartless' accomplice, Olgamarie.

Stepping out of the cafe, the light from the dome in the sky caused me to squint once again.

I only had half a day left. Considering that there was a limit to what tricks I could pull in a place like this, all I could do was wish my brother a safe journey and try and enjoy my time here.

"I don't have the know-how to gather information in the Mining City, after all." I muttered to myself, starting to feel tired.

Just as the words left my mouth, I heard another voice behind me.

“Reines El-Melloi Archisorte, yes?”

Damn it! How had I not felt anyone approaching? If the person behind me wanted to assassinate me, there was no way I could escape. I didn’t have the time to call Trimmau to my side from the place where she was on standby not far away. It had been a while since I made mental preparations to die.

At a crucial time like this, I couldn’t believe that the only thought in my mind was Flat’s offer to protect me.

“Don’t worry, I’m not your enemy.” Came the raspy voice.

I could tell that he was doubtlessly experienced from the way he noticed my alarm. Unfortunately for him, I was experienced in dealing with experienced people.

I allowed myself to be lured into the alley, where I turned to meet the person who had called out to me.

“...And you are?” I said, just as the wrinkled, smiling face of the short old man came into my view.

“Geraff. Just an old man who isn’t even a spellcaster.”

—

[1] (to the situation with Rhongomyniad, probably)

[2] Isn’t calling them Icarus’ wings like calling a ship the Titanic II?



We were falling at an incredible speed.

Even in a bizarre place like this, gravity was working as usual.

Though we were plummeting downward, the distance between us and the giant earthworms chasing us did not change. Neither Luvia's magic bullets nor Flue's knives were able to deter them from barreling towards us.

“This isn’t going to work—!”

I was the only one in the team who hadn’t gotten used to the Mystic Code yet. Though I was passing as much Magical Energy through it as I could muster, I was still tumbling around while everyone else was gliding, including my mentor.

There were currently three earthworms chasing us, generating a shift in pressure equal to a hurricane. With their terrifying speed, they were like moving mountains.

In the next instant, however, I gasped for a different reason. Something on the head of the earthworms chasing us opened, revealing crystals that didn’t belong on them.

—Eyes? I thought.

No, they were not simply eyes. The moment those crystals appeared, I felt a shift in the Magical Energy around us. For some reason, the shift felt familiar.

“W-what?!”

“They have Mystic Eyes!?” My mentor exclaimed as I felt myself freeze.

I couldn’t even begin to imagine how earthworms managed to get Mystic Eyes. It was something that could only exist thanks to the labyrinth.

The Mystic Eyes themselves were fairly basic, being only capable of low-level suggestion. However, it was impressive enough, considering that we never expected earthworms to be capable of using magecraft. Except for one person, we all froze in the air in various states of shock.

“Look over here!”

Seigen used his wings to flip himself around and reached out. The Spirit Root in place of his arm extended, turning into a hook that pierced the head of the earthworm closest to us.

“It’s kind of gross, but it sure is convenient!”

Using his other arm, Seigen lifted his eye patch. In an instant, Magical Energy gathered into something that surprised me again. The earthworms were probably similarly surprised as fire flared from their Mystic Eyes.

“—Gray!”

“—!”

My Mystic Code finally began working. I sent as much Magical Energy as I could muster, reversing the direction I was moving in.

“Add!”

“Gotcha!”



My scythe unfolded, and I slashed at the earthworm. The earthworm was too large to be seriously injured by such an attack, but it was enough to make the monster retreat.

“What was just that then, Seigen?”

Seigen smiled triumphantly, covering his eye again.

“I was just wondering how I was meant to get on that train,” he said. “Before we met there, I had a little surgery performed on my eye. I’m not famous in the World of Magecraft, but I have plenty of money from Ashbourne.”

“Right, his inheritance.” My mentor muttered to himself.

I was also reminded once again of the incident at Adra, the Castle of Separation.

“I almost forgot what that incident was originally advertised as.”

“...’The person who captures the angel will gain the inheritance’...” Seigen said nostalgically.

Adashino Hishiri had taken care of the inheritance on behalf of the Department of Law. It appeared that she had done the right thing with it. Though there was some debate at first, Ashbourne’s son, Granide Ashbourne— that was to say, Seigen— was eligible to inherit his father’s estate.

The will from back then stated that the estate belonged to the person who captured the angel. When asked for the angel’s name, my mentor had responded. In that case, had Seigen captured the angel, or had the angel captured him?

My mentor touched the Mystic Code covering his shoulders as if he wanted to rid his mind of pointless associations.

“It’s time for us to go down.”

Each flap of our wings brought us deeper and deeper into the depths, closer and closer to the bottomless darkness of the Ancient Heart.

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◆ 第三章 ◆  
~Chapter 3~



Magical Energy surged like ocean waves in a way that was rare even in Albion.

It was extraordinary both in quantity and quality. Some in the modern day might even say that it was close to True Ether. Others would probably argue that it was completely different from the True Ether of the past.

It wasn't clear which side was correct.

Regardless, the name of this place was carved into the mind of everyone who knew of Albion.

The Ancient Heart.

It was a place where the belt of light present elsewhere in the labyrinth coalesced into a spiral of white and aqua, signaling that it was separate from the Great Magic Circuit.

It was much smaller than the Greater Magic Circuit, which was made from a hundred floors stacked together. That meant that the Mystery here was more condensed, as the waves of energy had just demonstrated.

Although the dragon's heart should have stopped beating long ago, the great hall still seemed to pulse. It was as if the room wanted to emphasize that it was no more than a single cell carrying out its duty.

“...My plan ends here.” Heartless said, exhaustion seeping from his voice. In reality, it was not over yet, though he had just completed a large-scale spell. He glanced to the silver case he clutched under his arm.

“But of course, I'll still need your help.” He added, stroking its surface and removing the Mystic Lock. He then reached in from the opening and took out the contents.

“The magecraft of the Emiya family is a refined technique that allows the user to accelerate time within their body or a Bounded Field, where the spell cannot be interfered with. Even though Bounded Fields aren't meant to be copied, Spirit Tomb

Albion is a place where usual rules are bent. I believe your magecraft can reach its full potential here.”

Heartless took out a large jar full of sticky liquid. Floating inside it was a damaged brain with nerves attached, along with a pair of eyeballs.

Sealing-designated mages were stored in this way, so few mages knew this method of preservation. First, the target’s brain, nervous system, and Magic Circuits were immersed in a special kind of liquid. The jar containing this liquid would then act as a body or an exoskeleton. Of all the projects Heartless had undertaken in the past ten years, finding the mage responsible for sealing away other mages had been among the most costly.

“...Well then,” He said, taking off his watch, which had already stopped. It had been connected to his spell, precisely calculating time across tens of thousands of years in units of centuries. It was indispensable to the success of this operation.

“Is this where I die?” The person standing across from Heartless asked.

“There is no guarantee that our goal will be reached. Both of us are currently defenseless. Don’t you think this is too risky a gamble?”

“Well...”

Faker did not reply. However, her thoughts were made clear by the slight tremble of her lips. She had already completed her task as a crucial component in Heartless’ plan.

With a troubled smile, Heartless gave a nod.

“Hopefully we will make it,” he said, placing his hand to where his heart should have been, “Hopefully your wish will be granted.”

He spoke as if uttering a prayer, or singing a low song of praise.

“Hopefully my wish will be granted.”

Heartless watched as Faker was slowly swallowed by a pillar of light. Accompanied by the glow of the ancient dragon's Magic Circuits, the Ancient Macedonian warrior who had seen countless battles closed her eyes as if she was gently settling into a nap.

"Goodnight, Faker."

"Goodnight, Heartless."

Heartless was the only one to hear her final words before the hands of the clock above her began to turn, signaling the beginning of her transformation.



We fell for what felt like an eternity through patches of meaningless emptiness.

Apart from the walls of the hole, everything was darkness. It almost seemed as if the world had evaporated away. Though my ears had already stopped registering the whooshing noise of the wind and my skin had become dull to its chill, the fear I felt coursed through my veins. Without it, I would have lost my sanity in minutes.

Of course, it was all very strange. Since Albion didn't exist within the coordinate planes of reality, it could extend tens of kilometers underground. But would such a fall really take this long? My body told me that we had already been descending for several hours now.

Out of fear of hitting the ground, I constantly enhanced my vision. Even though the Wings of Icarus could control the speed of our descent, it couldn't possibly last this long.

"....."

I could tolerate this thanks to the grave keeper training I had underwent and my brief stay at the Clock Tower. Luvia, Seigen, and Flue were also fine, of course. Even my mentor was doing alright because this task didn't require much skill at magecraft. All it required was the willpower to endure a seemingly endless free fall into darkness.

Our descent was mostly uneventful, except for the times when the Pit of Oblivion suddenly changed direction or became narrower. Having to control the Mystic Code every time a change in course happened was the most nerve-wracking part.

“Don’t waste your stamina,” my mentor advised. “Try and automate the process with your nervous system rather than using your brain. It might be easier to relax and leave it to your instincts and Add.”

“Are you okay with that, Add?”

“Ihihihi! Of course! I can’t get tired, after all!” Add said from the hook at my right shoulder.

For now, I wouldn’t question him. The fatigue that had built up as we trekked through Albion was indeed eating away at my body. Though they hadn’t said anything about it, it must have been the same for Luvia, Seigen, and Flue.

Even if I used my Magic Circuits to automate the gliding process, the cold air still ruthlessly tore away chunks of my stamina. It was even more tiring than usual because of the strange Magical Energy present in Albion. Though it was possible to regulate body temperature with magecraft, we all chose to conserve as much Magical Energy as possible.

“...Speaking of which, I wonder if time actually passes here.”

My mentor’s words reminded me of what Sir Kay had said in my dream about time and space being fuzzy here.

Either way, we needed to reach our destination in time for the Grand Roll.

Suddenly, my mentor fell silent.

“Sir?”

“...No. That’s not right.” He muttered, shaking his head as he descended. “Maybe...”

“What have you discovered, Sir?”

“I think I’ve finally found the piece that I was missing.”

I didn’t understand what he meant by that. I didn’t really mind, though. I couldn’t always see the same truth as he could. I was satisfied with being able to help even the tiniest bit.

Dr. Heartless.

The recounts of his students and past acquaintances painted the picture that reminded me of my mentor. It was something beyond his being the former head of the Department of Modern Magecraft; I found the two of them similar in a more fundamental way. Though they lacked the proper mentality of a mage, for instance, they both acted in a bizarrely magecraft-like way.

Would my mentor really be able to stop someone like Heartless?

Even if he couldn’t, I hoped that meeting Heartless would help my mentor resolve some of his internal conflicts. Surely this journey to Albion was also for this purpose.

After falling some more, Luvia broke the silence.

“...The air has changed again.” She reached out to the five gems that floated beside her. “My gemstones tell me that we are entering a new region of Spirit Tomb Albion.”

She looked down, tossing her gaze into the depths.

“We are about to reach the Ancient Heart.”

That was our target, the deepest part of Albion where Heartless would be performing his magecraft.

At this, my mentor let out a low moan.

“...Are we too late?” Said Flue, looking over to him.

“I’ve just established a connection with Reines. It’s starting a few hours earlier than I expected. This is terrible.”

His response sent us all into a momentary silence.

Luvia was the first person to recover from the shock.

“That means the seal separating the Ancient Heart has been broken.”

“So—”

Before I could finish my sentence, I noticed it too. My mentor had told me that the deepest part of Spirit Tomb Albion was sealed away by an incredibly strong lock in order to keep away all outside interference. The dam was only breached when a Grand Roll was being held.

A sudden change in the air could only mean one thing.

“—The Grand Roll is about to begin.”



I could feel my heart thudding in my chest as I walked through the portal in the Mining City again. If it weren’t for the Grand Roll, I would never have set foot in that place again.

Though I hated the Mining City, I had to admit that it was special. The air made it so that my skin was numb, and my bones felt like they had been punctured. To be precise, it was because of the strange “pressure” here. Although no scientific instrument would be able to detect the source of this “pressure,” any regular scientist to set foot here would have the same fate as a finch in a mine full of poisonous gases.

Even I was in danger of being crushed by it. To the people of the modern age, Magical Energy from the Age of the Gods was basically a poison. Unfortunately for me, the Magical Energy here was infinitely close to that of the Age of the Gods. Ever since I arrived here, my Mystic Eyes had been burning with pain more intense than I had ever felt.

There was more to this place than its age, though. It was also like a separate history unaffected by the texture of the human order. Had humans not separated from the gods, then perhaps the rest of the world would have looked like this, too.

I was now approaching the Ancient Heart of Spirit Tomb Albion, the greatest asset of the Clock Tower.

I had never actually thought about whether or not it was the shape of a heart. After the dragon had died, its corpse had become many times larger, so how big was this area?

I couldn't tell what the walls that surrounded me were made of. I only knew that they were black and shiny in a way that was unlike metal or organic matter. The floor and ground were also made of the same material.

Yes. The time had come.

I felt a slight tingle in my Magic Circuits.

(—Reines.)

(—Oh, so you really made it!)

I took great care to stop my face from reflecting my thoughts. Up until now, I had still been in doubt about whether or not it was possible to get here in time for the Clock Tower to unseal the Ancient Heart.

However, even though the dam was no longer in place, the Ancient Heart was still a bastion meant to shield us from outside interference. The only reason why I could communicate so clearly with my brother, despite his second-rate abilities, was that he was close by.

(—Unfortunately, we were still too late. At least we've reached the Ancient Heart.)

(—I got all excited for nothing. You know that the meeting has been moved forward by four hours, right?)

(—I predicted that that would happen. I'll try my best to work around it.)

My brother's thoughts made his worries clear. I felt the exact same way. Ah, if only I could go home now and drown myself in pillows! Of course, if I allowed myself to do that, I would have to accept an early death by poisoning or suffocation.

Anyone unfortunate enough to be standing downwind in the Clock Tower would become the target of a rain of arrows. I had no desire to return to the state I had been in following Kayneth's death, before I named my current brother Lord El-Melloi II.

(—Did you meet Geraff?)

(—Yes, he gave me your note.)

That old man had passed my brother's message to me. It would have been so much more interesting if he was present at the Grand Roll, but he had adamantly refused my offer.

(—Reines, from now on—)

(—Yes, yes, I know. My job is to buy as much time as possible until you stop Heartless, right? I'll try my best as well.)

I momentarily silenced the telepathic link between us and walked along the fissure in silence, with only my shadow for company.

The presence of a shadow implied the presence of a light. Here, that light came in the form of the Magic Circuits of the dead dragon. It was said that the Greater Magic Circuit were like the blood vessels in a human body. In the Ancient Heart, however, the circuits formed a helix.

Soon, the space widened into a spacious room lit by a pool of the same spiraling light. Its magnificent glow ebbed and surged, telling me that I had arrived at the chosen place. It was uneven as it spread, pooling in some places and meandering away from others. In the darkness of the deep abyss, the light was like stars in the sky of a new world.

In the center of the room was a round table, also made of an unknown material. Evidently, it had not been brought here from the surface. Since the day the Clock Tower was formed, how many Grand Rolls had been held here between the darkness and the light? How many mages had drank from the goblets of victory because of the results while others cried out in despair?

The meeting's attendees had all arrived. To my left were the Lords of the Democratic Faction; Inorai Valualeta Atroholm and McDonell Trambelio Elrod. To my right were the Lord and Lord representative of the Aristocratic Faction; Rufleus Nuatha-Re Eulyphis and Olgamarie Asmleit Animusphere. No members of the Neutral Faction were in attendance, so the seats across from me remained empty.

In this situation, facing an empty seat was just as scary as facing a Lord. The Neutral Faction's absence did not indicate their disinterest. Rather, their so-called "neutral stance" meant that they tended to stay put until an opportunity arose. Instead of actively fighting for dominance, they usually stood on the sidelines, pulling the strings of the other factions under the pretense of research.

Of course, I had to sit on the right. Disregarding Olgamarie's suggestion for now, we were members of the Aristocratic Faction. If we chose to switch factions, no number of lives would be enough to keep me alive.

"The preparations are complete." McDonell spoke first with a smile on his face. As the leader of the Democratic Faction, even attending a Grand Roll wouldn't make him drop his dominant attitude.

"It's good to see some new faces. I've gotten bored of seeing the same old attendees every time. Although we are mages, it's good to replace the old with the new once in a while...By that logic, Rufleus and I should be the first to go."

The thought of Inorai retiring was funnier than her joke. I couldn't imagine anyone less likely to back down than her. Lord Valualeta had taught Touko Aozaki, the Grand-ranked mage; that alone was proof that she was not just any mage.

"Hmph..."

Came the response of the oldest among us, an old man with wrinkles only rivaled in depth by the marks carved into his soul. In fact, considering that he was the Lord of the Department of Spiritual Evocation, it wouldn't be out of the question for him to actually have spells engraved upon his soul.

Inorai and Rufleus. From the perspective of their departments, Inorai and Rufleus were on equal standing.

“—My father entrusted me with the votes of the Department of Astromancy(Animusphere). I hope that does not offend you.” Olgamarie said, curtseying.

Oh no. She was probably more comfortable here than I was. I felt the situation become even less favorable for me as I was robbed of my privileges as the youngest member.

The Lords all turned their gazes towards me.

This was why I hated going last. Even if it was just a coincidence, I would have to be extra careful with what I said.

I took a deep breath.

“I am honored to have the privilege of being here. Please excuse my immaturity.”

I kept my salutation short and took a seat with as polite of a smile as I could muster.

Ouch— my stomach ached. Alas, the affliction had spread to me as well. My blood was ice cold, and I felt like my nerves were being filed. I couldn’t tell whether all of this was due to my anxiety or a curse.

All I could do was try to swallow my fear and enhance my brain as much as possible.

“Well then, let the Grand Roll begin.” Announced McDonell.

To be honest, my tactic was horrible, for a very simple reason. The data on mining operations in Albion had been released by the Trambelios, which made their accuracy questionable, to say the least. This made it harder for me to predict and delay his actions.

I would need to chase after and wrangle over every claim he made. I needed to latch on to even the tiniest foothold. If I lost my footing here, I would never be able to stand up again.

Before I could do any of that, however, McDonell spoke again.

“Actually, I have someone I would like to introduce before we begin.”

McDonell looked to the side, and a dark-skinned woman walked into the light. I had known that there was a person standing there, but it had been too dark to see her face.

“I am Asheara Mystras, from the Materials Branch of the Arcane Dissection Division.” She said, introducing herself with a courteous bow.

Though I tried to stay silent, a gasp still escaped my mouth.

She was Heartless’ last student, who had gone missing after either Calugh Ithred or Jorek Kurdice was killed.

“I’m sure everyone is already aware that the subject of the meeting is the redevelopment of Spirit Tomb Albion, yes?” McDonell said, steepling his hands. “I have called her here to represent the Arcane Dissection Division, as its opinion is indispensable. Also, to avoid further confusion, I’m telling you all that she is my adopted daughter.”

“Wha...!”

Olgamarie silenced herself before she could finish her exclamation.

This was also a surprise for me. McDonell had an adoptive daughter in the Arcane Dissection Division?

(—What the heck?)

(—It just gets more and more complicated. I’ve heard that McDonell has tens of daughters.)

Both of our anxiety was made clear through our conversation.

“Haha. Of course, the Division doesn’t exclusively provide me with information. That would only overcomplicate things, wouldn’t it?”

McDonell looked happy, but I found it hard to sympathize with him. There was simply no chance for us to win like this.

Then again, that was probably the impact he wanted his first attack to achieve, especially since Olgamarie's attachment to the Aristocratic Faction was not very strong. If he broke through from there, he could easily end the meeting.

I started seriously considering using flattery to attempt to prolong my life as I peered at Rufleus, who was clenching the arms of his chair with his withered fingers.

This was a problem. If I turned my back on the faction I belonged to now, he might explode and kill me without regard to the meeting. I didn't trust the others to protect me at all, especially since they could be Heartless' accomplices.

“If the topic is truly the redevelopment of Spirit Tomb Albion, as I have heard...” Olgamarie started. She probably also felt the tension rise. Even if she planned on betraying Rufleus and agreeing to redevelop Spirit Tomb Albion, she couldn't ignore McDonell.

“You are not mistaken. Asheara?”

“Yes, Father— Pardon me, Lord Trambelio.”

At McDonell's instruction, Asheara placed a few sheets of paper onto the table before us. Though she was technically a representative from the Arcane Dissection Division, she acted more like McDonell's secretary. Of course, it was to remind us of their relationship. It was also why she deliberately called him her father and then corrected herself.

“Lord Inorai Valualeta, I have prepared detailed information on Spirit Tomb Albion as per your request.”

“Thank you, McDonell.”

Inorai picked up the files and inspected them carefully.

While the rest of us followed suit, McDonell scanned the room. His eyes rested upon Rufleus for a while, before passing over Olgamarie and myself. It was appropriate, given our difference in age and prestige. I couldn't find a single flaw in his actions, which annoyed me.

“Forgive the fact that it is written on modern printer paper. That is the Arcane Dissection Division’s style.” McDonell said, uttering the opening line. “As the data indicates, the amount of talismans excavated from Albion has continued to decrease in recent years. If we are to continue to maintain the Clock Tower, this fact must be taken into consideration. At this rate, mystery will decrease along with the possibility that we mages will reach our goal.”

By that, of course he meant the Root, our purpose, the proof of our existence, and our final destination.

“In other words, we will lose the purpose of our existence if this trend continues.”

That sentence demanded to be taken seriously, especially since it was being said by one of the most important people in the Clock Tower, Lord Trambelio. Lord Eulyphis was probably the only person in the world capable of contending with its power. After all, he was the central figure in opposition to the redevelopment of Albion.

McDonell’s stocky build was reflected in the old man’s dark, glassy eyes.

“Maintaining the Clock Tower... you say?” Came a raspy voice, as we all turned to face its source, “What exactly... are you trying to maintain?”

“Our future as mages, of course.”

“...Ha...how foolish.” Rufleus said in response, not concealing his disappointment. “The Clock Tower... is our domain...”

He tapped his knuckles on the gems on his chest. Though he acted arrogantly, it seemed well-justified.

“If we do not have enough talismans... we should reduce the number of New Agers... If we still do not have enough... we should dispose of useless branch families... There was never a need to spend so many resources on... the redevelopment of Albion... The others do not matter... they will never reach the essence of Mystery... Your wasteful plan will harm the entire Clock Tower... I will not allow us to be known for such stupid acts...”

From his perspective, this was the obvious solution. To the Aristocratic Faction, everyone else was subservient and replaceable.

Though I was saying that, he wasn't wrong. The Democratic Faction also valued people based on inborn talent. They accepted New Agers not out of kindness, but because there weren't enough mages in the modern world to provide them with human labor. The old man was simply advocating that we ought to carry through with this philosophy.

"If we are discussing... our future..."

Just as he was about to continue, he looked to the side. Though he didn't look shocked or even mildly surprised, neither him nor Lord Trambelio would have been able to predict this turn of events.

"What's... going on?" Said Lord McDonell.

It didn't take long for the interruption to show itself.

"Apologies for interrupting your meeting." The new arrival, a woman dressed in an elaborate furisode, said as she adjusted her glasses. I was reminded again of a beautiful snake that watched over the Clock Tower with ice cold eyes.

"Adashino Hishiri?"

To my surprise, Inorai was the one who had called her name.

"It has been a while, Lady Inorai."

"I didn't expect someone from the Department of Law to be here. Are you here to represent Lord Barthmeloi?"

"No. This time, I am acting as a guide."

"A guide?" The old woman said, her frown shifting to a wry smile.

Someone else appeared behind Hishiri. It was another person who did not fit in among Lords. On second thought, considering that this was a Grand Roll, it made sense that she would be here.

“Oh, you’re here as well, teacher. It seems like I wasn’t too late.” The East Asian woman that Hishiri led here said with a slight nod.



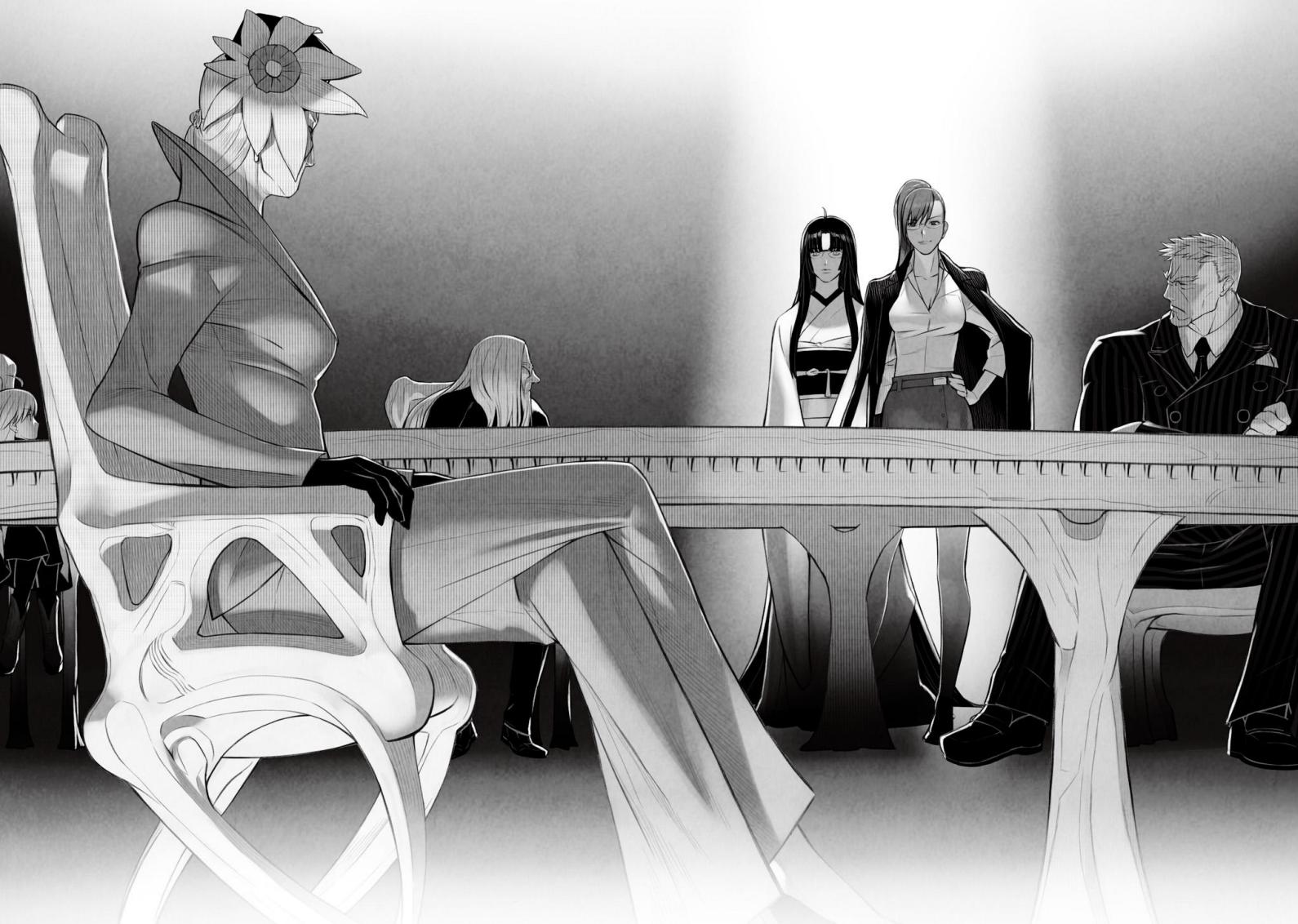
“Hasn’t the meeting already started?” The woman asked again, breaking the silence.

“...Touko... Aozaki...” Rufleus said, his voice like the scraping of rusted metal.

I didn’t know exactly what she had done to make Rufleus hate her, but I knew that the Grand mage was particularly skilled at gathering hate and jealousy.

“...Someone like you... has no place here...”

“Haha, is that your way of greeting people, Lord of the Department of Spiritual Evocation (Eulyphis)?” Touko smiled. “Sorry, but I have the right to be here today. I know you might have a hard time accepting it because of your age, but my presence is in accordance with tradition.”



“...Right? What right...?”

At this, the old man froze.

Touko was holding an old piece of parchment with a signature on it. Rufleus understood its meaning immediately.

“It seems that you understand that I am here to represent a Lord.”

“On behalf of the Department of Law, I can vouch for its legitimacy.” Affirmed Hishiri.

A moment of heavy silence ensued, not because it was impossible, but precisely because it was the opposite. Everyone present could grasp that the Grand Puppeteer was capable of something as frightening as this.

“You always get hired for the strangest jobs.” Inorai said, frowning.

“Isn’t that because of your influence, Ms. Inorai?”

Though Touko was her student, Inorai had been the first person to agree to her Seal Designation. That was the nature of student-teacher relations among mages.

Rufleus spoke again, this time sounding like a pot of boiling water.

“...Which family...did this...?”

“The Department of Curses (Zigmarie). In fact, you could call me the representative of the entire Neutral Faction,” Touko said. “I have the authority to vote in this Grand Roll. Don’t worry, I only have the vote of one family, not the entire faction. Even if I were given so many votes, you still wouldn’t approve of it, would you?”

Touko leisurely took one of the chairs beside her. Though it had been made for the Lords, the Grand Mage sat down as if there was nothing special to it.

(...You actually did it?) My brother said telepathically after being briefed on the situation.

(Of course I did.) I replied after taking a second to calm down. (In any case, we needed an element of uncertainty – someone who had absolutely no chance of working with Heartless – to figure out the identity of his accomplice, don't we?)

Before I departed from Slur Street, I had requested something from Touko— or rather, the faction which had commissioned her in secret. Though the Neutral Faction usually chose to watch from the sidelines, even they found it hard to ignore the fact that Heartless snuck into Spirit Tomb Albion using a portal hidden beneath the Department of Modern Magecraft. That was why they had given in to Touko's taunts despite their usual attitude toward politics.

Even so, I hadn't expected them to send Touko as their representative.

After a moment of silence, my brother communicated to me again.

(...How long have you known that Miss Touko was searching for Heartless' students at the request of the Neutral Faction?)

(Actually, half of it was my intuition.)

It would be nice if I could look good as well as be right, but I'd have to worry about that later. Evidently, it hadn't been the work of the Aristocratic Faction. Though the Department of Law could commission Touko at the cost of not giving her another Seal Designation, she wasn't trustworthy in the least. If it had been McDonell or Inorai, their request would have been more discreet. They would have avoided contact with us at all costs for fear of leaking information. With such a delicate balance of interests, Touko wouldn't have been set free to do whatever she wanted.

By process of elimination, that left only the Neutral Faction. Even though they didn't want to directly interfere in the Grand Roll, they still needed information. Touko was a reasonable choice, considering that she had already been involved with Heartless in the Ilsema case.

(...I see.)

(I didn't expect Hishiri Adashino to be here as well, though.)

As I thought this, the mage behind Touko smiled. She then moved to stand behind Lord Trambelio in a similar position to Asheara, Heartless' last student. It was a place where she could stay hidden and wait for the perfect moment to strike.

“.....”

I thought I heard a deep rumbling noise despite the fact that there should have been silence.

As a freelancer who did what she wished, Touko Aozaki held no power in the Clock Tower. From one perspective, her presence was worthless because she had no one to back her up. From another perspective, however, she was a formidable opponent even among the elites of the Clock Tower. Most of the Lords gathered here only achieved the rank of Brand, one rank below Touko.

As Albion related so deeply to the future of mages, all three factions held a stake in it. As such, it would be hard to dismiss Touko's opinion.

Touko disrupted the premise of this meeting. Basic politics could not be applied to this Grand Roll anymore.

As I considered what dynamics Touko changed with her presence, McDonell spoke up.

“Let us continue the conversation that we were having just then, Mr. Rufleus.”

With a wave of her pale hand, someone interrupted before Rufleus could respond.

“Enough of the stuff that will make me fall asleep!”

“What!?”

Touko shrugged as Olgamarie stared up at her in disbelief.

“This is just another boring fight between the Aristocratic Faction and the Democratic Faction, isn't it? Another argument about whether or not the Clock Tower should expand and allow in more New Agers. I'm sick of hearing your two opinions over and over again. I went through all the trouble of coming here. I want to hear something new.

—You must nearly be ready by now right, El-Melloi?” She said, abruptly directing all the attention at me.

“What are you talking about?”

Touko failed to hold back a laugh at my response.

“Don’t play dumb! Since you’re here, and you still have a refreshing look of determination in your eyes, you must have reached one of the truths.”

(—Hey, brother!)

(—Yes, I know.) My brother replied agitatedly. (—Back at Slur Street, she told me that she was looking forward to the denouement.)

What an arrogant thing to say. She had essentially told us that her own enjoyment should come before the fate of the entire Clock Tower.

I had no doubt that she thought this way. Touko Aozaki was not the kind of person who would be interested in political drama. The trends of the World of Magecraft over millennia failed to pique her curiosity. She wasn’t here to represent the Neutral Faction, but to find out the truth about the case that she had become involved in.

(—You probably also noticed that she was addressing both of us.)

(Of course she knows we’re communicating using magecraft.)

I wasn’t trying particularly hard to conceal it, but it still made me a little unhappy that she saw through it in a single glance. What could I say? This was Touko Aozaki, after all.

There was a limit to how much I could joke around. I must reiterate that Rufleus was perfectly capable of killing me if he wanted to, even though I was technically part of his faction.

(—Should I use Trimmau to create a scale model of you again, like last time?)

I had put Trimmau into a briefcase so she wouldn’t attract so much attention. Since my brother was the detective, he should be the one doing the grand reveal.

(—No. How am I meant to convince the other Lords of my reasoning like that, especially since I'm already missing from the Grand Roll?)

That made sense. The Grand Roll was only held in a place so hard to access because its authority had to be indisputable. Several Greater Magic Formulae had been performed here before. Though they might not have involved actual magecraft, the repetition of anything on such a large scale was essentially a curse. For example, while the Catholic Pope is being elected, all of the candidates are not allowed to leave the Sistine Chapel. That made the selection process dangerous, as many Cardinals were incredibly old.

Why? Because “tradition” and “authority” were just different words for restricting people.

(—What should we do then?)

(—How about you do it?)

I froze at my brother's words.

“...Huh?!”

Though I was trying to keep myself from crying out, something still slipped from my mouth.

(What? What do you mean, brother?)

(You should do it, Reines.) My brother repeated.

(—You're not joking, are you?)

(I'm serious.)

“What's the matter, El-Melloi?” Touko called out with a bemused expression.

I had no doubt that she could tell that something had just been imposed upon me.

“Nothing. I was just thinking about how I should explain the situation.” I replied, trying my best to look confident. Of course, I was a hundred percent bluffing. Bluffing while standing on a tightrope was a subject I graduated from when I was in kindergarten.

(—I’ll provide you with my deductions in the right order. You can say it in your own words as you sort them out.)

(—What the hell are you thinking!?)

I wanted nothing more than to cover my ears and yell my heart out right now. If it weren’t for the people around me who would relish every mistake I made, I would have done exactly that.

No matter how I phrased it, not all the people present would pay attention to my brother’s reasoning. They would doubtlessly try to intervene to make the answer more beneficial to themselves. Though Heartless’ students were related to this Grand Roll, it wasn’t meant for tracking down a perpetrator.

Even though I couldn’t make them all listen, I needed to make at least half of the attendees interested. On top of that, I needed to thread my brother’s reasoning into a logical story that would make the identity of the culprit clear. You might as well have asked me to shoot down a fighter plane while performing acrobatics.

(—Have you caught up with Heartless yet?) I asked, holding back a sigh.

(—Not yet, but soon.)

(—I don’t want to give you any extra pressure, but please hurry. Even if I manage to smoke out his accomplice, it won’t matter if you don’t stop him.)

Revealing the identity of the accomplice could cause the Grand Roll to fracture, sending the Clock Tower into chaos. It wasn’t unlikely that people would rush to support him. Stopping Heartless was our goal. This meeting was just a mountain we had to climb to reach it.

I clenched and unclenched my hands, making up my mind.

“I suppose I should start from here.” I said slowly, surveying the room. “Does everyone present know of Dr. Heartless, the former head of the Department of Modern Magecraft?”

“...Unfortunately, I’ve only heard of him because he left the Clock Tower before I was old enough to remember him.” Olgamarie said with a frown.

I didn’t know why his name would appear here, or if Olgamarie’s frown was genuine. Either way, I continued speaking, carefully choosing my words from the thoughts that my brother passed to me.

“In the past few months, his students have been disappearing one by one. Ms. Asheara, you already know this, especially since your colleague, Calugh Ithred, was murdered not long ago. Hishiri Adashino can testify that such a murder occurred.”

Hishiri nodded. I couldn’t be sure of her motivations, either. Did it have something to do with the fact that Heartless was also an adopted child of Norwich?

“I believe that Dr. Heartless was the culprit.” I continued, not waiting for my audience to finish processing what I had just said.

“Oh, really...”

It was Inorai who spoke.

“...Is something the matter?”

“No, I was just a little surprised. I thought he was quite close with his students.” Said Inorai with a shrug.

Great, another troublesome testimony was just what I needed. I knew nothing about what Heartless was like ten years ago. Back then, I never could have dreamt that I would become the heir.

“Did you know the former head of the Department of Modern Magecraft well?” McDonell asked. Then, he turned to the other Lord. “What do you think, Rufleus?”

“...Why would I waste my time... on a department head who wasn’t even a Lord...”

The old man answered his question tersely. His way of thinking had probably stayed constant for the past century. The Department of Modern Magecraft back then was not part of the Aristocratic Faction, so he had no reason to care about it.

“Why would I know anything...about pointless fights between New Agers...? Are you trying...to waste our time, El-Melloi...?”

“No, Lord Eulyphis. I promise it’s related to the topic at hand.”

I finally understood my brother’s thoughts on him. Damn this old idiot. I wanted to feed him to some dogs. He wasn’t even trying to understand what I was saying.

Regardless, there was no use trying to avoid it.

It was time.

I struggled to keep a smile on my face as I spoke.

“Someone at this meeting is Heartless’ accomplice.”



“Hey, how’s the meeting going over there?” Flue asked as we continued to glide down the Pit of Oblivion.

My mentor was too busy to reply. Though I didn’t know the details, I could tell that it wasn’t going well from his ever-deepening frown.

Seigen approached my mentor.

“Lord El-Melloi II, do you mind if I connect to your Magic Circuits?”

“Feel free.”

With a nod from my mentor, Seigen gestured with his fingers, creating a sigil the shape of a wing that shone like Magic Circuits. The situation in the meeting room suddenly came flooding into my mind.

“—What is that?”

“Ashbourne’s intelligence sharing magecraft. I guess you could say it’s mainly about manipulating Magical Energy, but his technique also involves the sharing of magecraft.”

I think I could understand this. The mage of the Castle of Separation, invented a way to fuse many Magic Crests together to overcome the problem of incompatibility. From the way Seigen’s personality was eroded by the Magic Crest, I had the impression that this technique was dangerous and invasive. However, he was saying that it was actually about “sharing.”

“His magecraft lives on inside me.”

Though Seigen sounded a little sad, we were all preoccupied with the information that we had just received.

“...I never expected Touko Aozaki and Hishiri Adashino to attend the Grand Roll.”  
Remarked Flue.

I was similarly surprised. Though I knew the Grand Roll was no ordinary meeting, even the Lords seemed to be surprised at the presence of the renowned Touko Aozaki, who I had met before. The thought that she was in the same room with others who were to decide the fate of the Clock Tower sent shivers up my spine.

“Hey-” Luvia called out. Her face was filled with a tension that I had not seen on her before. Was she nervous because she was the only one here who could understand the true gravity of the situation?

I was a second slower than her to realize that one of the gemstones surrounding her had found something.

“The time has come.”

“Lead me!” Shouted Flue, reacting instantly. He threw a knife into the darkness. It was not meant to pierce the enemy but rather to divine the safest future. We immediately understood, staggering in the direction of the knife.

A heartbeat later, we were hit by a truly terrifying shock. Like a hammer through tissue paper, black lightning tore through the defenses we had carefully prepared, and sent air whooshing upward. It burned away the darkness, sending us spiraling out of control.

“Flue!” Seigen shouted.

“I’m alright...!” Answered Flue, clutching his injured arm. He had used it to protect his Mystic Code. If he lost the wings now, he would fall to a fearsome death.

“A dragon!?” Exclaimed Luvia, looking up at the thing that had just attacked us.

It was the skeleton of a dragon— No, it was more than that.

My mentor’s eyes were wide as he stared at the chariot pulled by two skeletal dragons. There was familiarity in his expression, as if he had rode in the chariot before.

“Gordian Wheel... No, Hecatic Wheel.”

It was the chariot that Faker had used on the Rail Zeppelin, which had once been used by her king. A Noble Phantasm whose name echoed proudly in ancient battlefields.

“So Heartless knew of this place too, huh? I reckon I should thank the old man for finding a path that takes us to the Heart.”

That made sense. Since Heartless hadn’t taken the portal in the Clock Tower meant for taking attendees of the Grand Roll into the Heart, he could have taken the same shortcut that we used. Moreover, if he anticipated our pursuit, it was only natural that he would place traps.

However.

I noticed something strange, not about the dragons or the chariot itself. The Noble Phantasm was missing something that was required for it to activate.

“There’s no one riding it...?”

The rider who should have been holding the reins was nowhere to be found.

“It’s Faker’s... magecraft!” My mentor cried out, his voice full of anger.

Even though I was face to face with the riderless chariot, I still found it hard to accept.

“—The Noble Phantasm is driving itself!”



“The dam has been opened...” Heartless murmured. The hand he had over his eye shone red with the light of his Command Spells, marks that indicated how many absolute commands he had. Having used one during the incident aboard the Rail Zeppelin, two remained.

“So he’s come. If only I hadn’t guessed correctly. —No, actually, there’s nothing that calms me more than the thought that he understands me.”

Without removing his hand from his eye, he looked to the pillar of light beside him, where his Servant was undergoing ascension.

One hundred years of compressed time had passed. It was not enough. Not even close. It took hundreds—no, thousands of years to turn a Servant into a Divine Spirit.

He had dubbed this process “Shadow Ascension”. It was a practical application of the ritual used by the people under the domain of the grave keeper, intended to recreate King Arthur from her body, mind, and soul, combined with the Initiation of the labyrinth.

If his magecraft succeeded in creating a god for mages, the people of the Clock Tower would be able to use the same kind of magecraft as the mages of the ancient past. Of course, certain requirements also had to be fulfilled for the Age of the Gods to continue, but magecraft infinitely close to the Age of the Gods could be revived.

The last thing that stood in his way was the person who could not allow his plan to succeed.

Heartless made up his mind.

“—It’s time to settle this fight for once and for all, Lord El-Melloi II.”

Then, he turned again to look at the woman floating inside the pillar of light.

“Faker.”

She had come here to be killed, so her king could be revived as a Divine Spirit. She was a selfless person, willing to sacrifice herself after Heartless had told her his goal.

Heartless couldn’t help but think that she was so similar to himself.

“For your sake, I will keep my promise.”

With his uncovered eye, he looked at the clock once again. It had not been long since they said goodbye to each other, but he already missed her.

And then—

“By my Command Spell, I order you.”

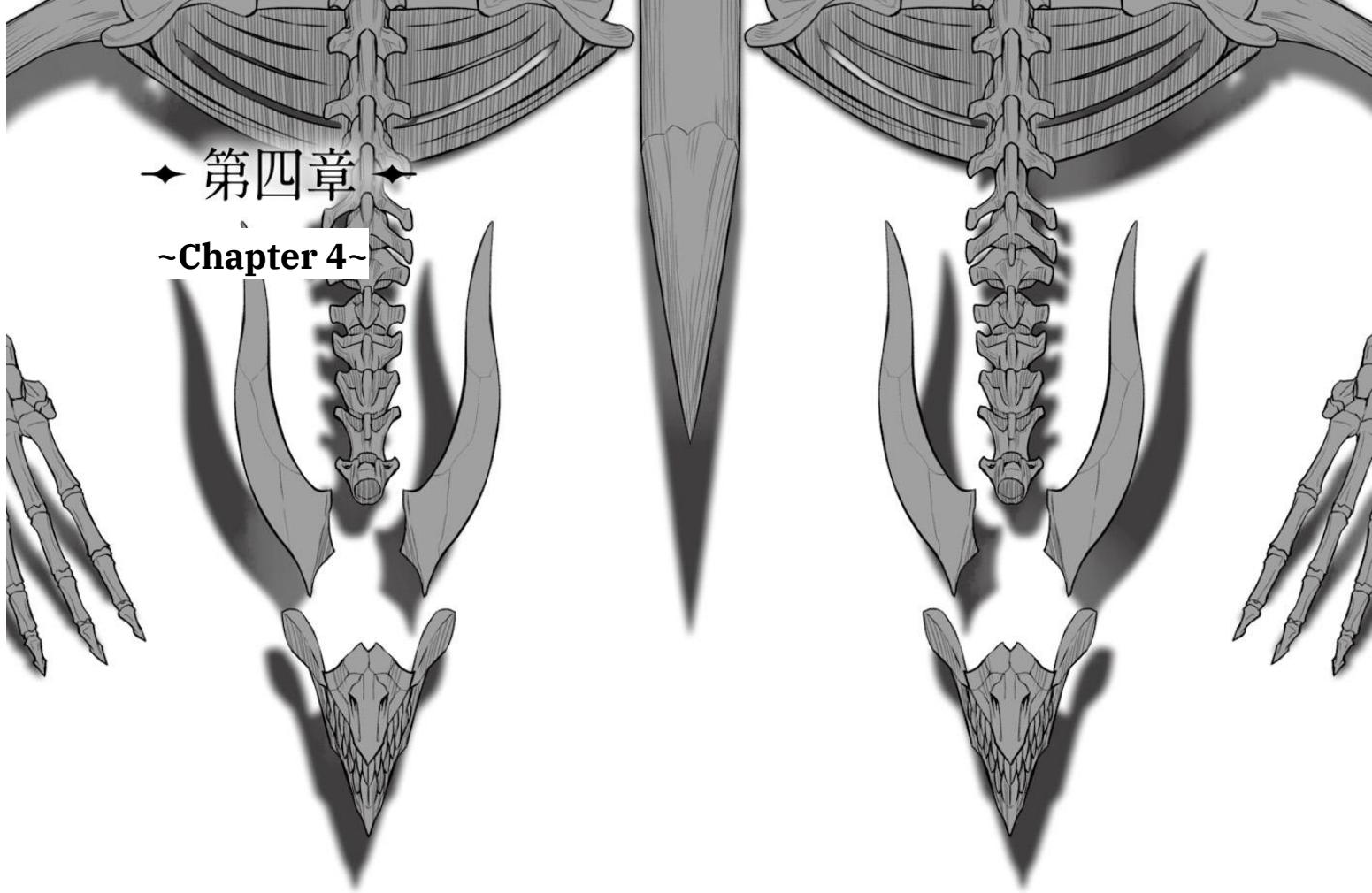
As the light from the Command Spells grew brighter and brighter, Heartless uttered his command.

“For my sake, please wait two thousand years.”

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◆ 第四章 ◆

~Chapter 4~



“Hahaha...hahaha....”

Lord Eulyphis, the Lord of the Department of Spiritual Evocation, laughed. It made me feel as if the gates to hell had opened, letting a foul wind blow onto my face.

In a certain sense, it suited the labyrinth which we were currently in.

“...A culprit, you say...? You must be eager to show off...girl from the Department of Modern Magecraft...It is too late now to take back what you have said...”

“That’s alright, because I don’t plan on doing so.” I retorted, confident.

The confidence was fake, of course. I was desperate to act like I knew what I was doing. No one would listen to what I said otherwise.

“.....”

Lord Eulyphis glared at me for a few seconds.

“...It is not worth my time...” the old man said, turning back to the Lord across from him. “Continue, McDonell... This is no place for someone to amuse themselves by playing detective...”

*He doesn’t want me to speak at all*, I thought, biting down on my lip. I had expected things to go this way, regardless of whether or not Rufleus was the accomplice. Though it was infuriating, Rufleus’ dismissal was perfectly in line with the laws of the Clock Tower. By that, I meant that there was no law forcing people to listen to a detective’s reasoning. No matter how excellent of a theory my brother created, it became meaningless if I messed up over here. I had to admit that this was an effective move.

“We should not care...about the death of a member of the Arcane Dissection Division. The same applies to Heartless’ students...How can we waste the Grand Roll on such trifling matters...”

However.

“There is meaning to this.” Came a dignified voice.

It came from the only person present who was not seated, the woman standing behind Touko Aozaki.

Rufleus turned to face her, grinding his yellowed teeth.

“Hishiri Adashino...”

“In the name of the Department of Law, I request that the Grand Roll discuss Heartless’ students.”

“What are you trying to do...!”

“I am simply doing my duty,” Hishiri replied.

With pale fingers, the woman dressed in an elegant furisode nudged her glasses and scanned the Lords and Lord representatives before her with ice-cold eyes.

“We are obligated to make the greatest effort in maintaining the order of the Clock Tower. That applies to the Grand Roll as well.”

She was right. That was why the Department of Law was different from the other twelve departments. Rather than devoting itself to mystery, it existed to make sure the Clock Tower could operate peacefully.

“And what meaning do you think it has?” McDonell asked.

“Naturally, I believe that it will impact the outcome of the meeting.”

Despite being questioned by two Lords, her face betrayed no emotion. Even among other members of the Department of Law, it was rare to see someone as courageous as her.

“On top of that, this meeting should also aim to gather as many testimonies as possible, except for the testimony of Heartless himself.”

“...Testimonies...?”

Though he had just been complaining about how stupid we were, Rufleus faltered when Hishiri asked him her first question.

“Lord Eulyphis, are you familiar with the name Makiri Zolgen?”

“Yes... that is the name...of a mage who loved to dream.”

“I believe the Clock Tower has kept records of his essays on Ghost Liners.”

“...So you visited my home not to pass on Barthomeloi’s message... but to ask me to find his essays...?”

This was the first time I had heard of Hishiri visiting Rufleus’ home. It was likely she had gone there to prepare for the Grand Roll.

“Heartless summoned a Ghost Liner named Faker. That raises the question: where did he find the requisite formulas and information? Makiri Zolgen’s essays are a powerful piece of evidence in that regard.”

“Interesting. I see,” McDonell said, nodding his large head, “I have also heard of the attack on Slur Street. While limited and fragmentary Access is a staple of the Department of Spiritual Evocation, a Ghost Liner being summoned to its complete form, with enough quality to enable the use of Noble Phantasms, is a rare occurrence even if we take the Clock Tower’s entire history into consideration. We must hear your opinion, Rufleus.”

Yes! He’s hooked now.

Of course, that was also because Hishiri helped. With the introduction of a paper on Ghost Liners, the conversation became difficult for Rufleus to shut down. Even if he tried again, the other attendees were also interested.

Light from the ancient dragon’s Magic Circuits drifted sparsely down from the ceiling, settling on the backs of Rufleus’ wrinkled hands.

“Such an essay does exist...in our secret archives... yes, the essay that told of the ritual...where seven Heroic Spirits fight to the death...to win the Holy Grail. Though I do

not know this man named Heartless...perhaps he was also drawn in by this fantasy... much like the previous Lord El-Melloi..."

Rather than discussing whether Noble Phantasms and Ghost Liners actually existed, they were only talking about the essay.

While I analyzed that this was a good solution, I tried to hold back a burning question. Had Kayneth also read that essay? Rufleus was shifting the suspicion onto the previous Lord El-Melloi by suggesting that the deceased Lord had leaked the information to Heartless. Ugh, he just kept on getting more annoying!

(—Hey, brother.) I called out across my telepathic link with my brother, telling him to start giving me information.

(—We're in the middle of a fight over here!) My brother snapped back at me, nearly causing another cry to escape my mouth.

How far along was he now, I wondered. I had prepared for the possibility that we would have to deliver the verdict while we investigated the identity of the culprit, but I had never considered the possibility of combat.

Although, to be honest, it did cross my mind, but I had just forced myself to stop thinking about it, and prayed that it would never happen.

But this was just the mess that we were in. No matter how difficult our predicament was to accept, it was the truth. We had to juggle a meeting, a battle, and an investigation at the same time; a task as dizzyingly complex as a carousel at maximum speed.

Rufleus then turned, ensnaring me in his murky gaze.

"As that despicable puppeteer said...enough of the tedium...If you have something to say that is more valuable than the Grand Roll...give us a conclusion...What do you mean when you say... that Heartless' accomplice is at this meeting..."

"....."

I needed to prepare myself to throw away some cards.

In the worst case scenario, I might become lifelong enemies with half of the people in this room. In that case, what should I give up? If I do give something up, what should I give it up for?

“I have an answer,” I said as I studied my audience’s reactions. “Right now, Heartless is preparing for a ritual in a corner of the Ancient Heart.”

Hearing this, Touko smiled wryly. Hishiri coldly observed. McDonell and Inorai both looked intrigued, Rufleus miserable, and Olgamarie stiff-faced.

Each reaction was unique. If Heartless’ accomplice was really among them, they must have been quite the actor.

One reaction stood out.

“He wants to use this labyrinth to create a god for mages.”

I did not miss Asheara’s sharp inhale as I said this.



“Are you okay, Sir?”

“...Sorry, my focus was dragged over there for a moment.”

My mentor’s faltering gaze returned to normal. He pressed his temples as if he was trying to suppress a headache and turned to the battle happening in the air.

“...Fuck! It isn’t being operated from a distance – the chariot is being automatically steered! It’s with a level of coordination *he* could never pull off[1]!”

My mentor’s voice contained unconcealed fear.

“Faker won’t be able to fight once the ritual to turn her into a Divine Spirit begins. That’s why he prepared this trump card!”

“Only a mage from the Age of the Gods would be able to control dragons auto and an automatic Noble Phantasm at the same time. I see. So this is how magecraft was, back then.”

Luvia’s words were justified. It went without saying that Noble Phantasms and ancient dragons were special. Though the chariot was right in front of me, I found it hard to believe that Heartless was willing to throw away something so extravagant just for the sake of trapping us.

“However!” The young woman shouted, standing tall as best as someone gliding could. “Even though it is ancient mystery, it must have been conjured by modern magecraft!”

The gemstones around Luvia multiplied. Soon, a swirling vortex surrounded her, made of countless catalysts she had prepared to conquer the labyrinth. Magical Energy surged through the tunnel, resonating with the gemstones and rivaling the chariot’s lightning.

*“Lead me!”*

Luvia aimed a One-Count incantation in the direction of Flue’s glowing knife, which promised to lead us to a better future.

*“Call!”*

The gemstones surrounding Luvia glittered like a kaleidoscope, creating a beam of light that shimmered in a thousand colors.

At the same time, Hecatic Wheel charged toward us, releasing streaks of black lightning. It collided with Luvia’s magecraft in the darkness, filling the cavern with magical light.

*“Add!”*

I removed Add from its hook. It instantly transformed into a shield, which I used to scatter the shockwaves so we wouldn’t be knocked from the air.

Luvia’s attack had succeeded in causing the chariot to stray from its intended path, but it was far from enough to damage it.

“.....”

I was suddenly reminded of the difference between the Age of the Gods and the modern age.

While the Age of the Gods was like an eternal cycle, the modern age was transient. In a certain sense, the jewels that Luvia had expended and the mages that entered Spirit Tomb Albion to find remnants of the past were emblematic of the age that we lived in.

“Servants are restricted by the abilities of their Masters, right? This chariot won’t be able to operate on its own indefinitely...” Flue muttered to himself.

I also thought about this.

“...I think it’s less powerful than it was on the Rail Zeppelin.”

Since Faker wasn’t here to unleash its true name, these were only the chariot’s normal attacks. Though it was hard to defend against it, it wasn’t impossible. It was just that the odds were stacked overwhelmingly against us.

“...Lord El-Melloi II.”

After the space of a breath, Luvia spoke again.

“Why do you think we rode the Rail Zeppelin here to help you?”

“I’m not sure why, but I’m grateful for your kindness.”

“I am grateful for your appreciation. Now forget that you heard me say that,” the young woman said with a smile, “Because I am very angry.”

If I didn’t know Luvia, I would have thought that I was hallucinating.

“The revival of the Age of the Gods would be like a miracle to generations of mages. Reaching the Root would no longer be an unattainable dream. This new form of mystery would be far more efficient.”

That was what Heartless hoped to create: a god that existed for mages, one who would revive the Age of the Gods. Though his plan sounded absurd, it would provide salvation to so many people. My mentor had said something similar not long ago.

“Even so, allow me to say this. —To hell with him.”

Though it was a normal insult, Luvia spoke as if it was a shining banner to rally behind.

“That is an act which betrays our ancestors, who willingly bid the gods farewell and chose modern magecraft. It is an act that asks us to abandon two thousand years of progress.”

I recalled learning about this a long time ago.

Modern magecraft began when the Age of the Gods ended. The goal of magecraft became attempting to return to the past. Over two thousand years, mages had spent enough talent and resources to make someone pass out from astonishment, all so they could reach the Root, the shining ideal in the distance.

A mage from the Age of the Gods must find this act incredibly foolish. Reines had told me that not even a monster like Touko Aozaki stood a chance against Faker.

However, this decay was exactly why Luvia refused to give in.

“I will not regret my choice, even if I will be hated and cursed by my descendants for making it. My anger will not dissipate, even if the mages around me judge me as a criminal.”

Though each of her gemstones shone with dazzling light, none of them shone brighter than her eyes.

“If you wish to ask why, my rage will be my answer.”

There was no other way to describe her. Though she was a mage, she refused to give up her integrity. She was not surrounded by darkness, but by light, where her righteousness would persist.

I couldn't help but marvel at the beauty of her anger.

“You should proceed without us.” Luvia said with a fearless smile.

“What?”

“Like I said before, we can withstand these attacks. You are running out of time. The Grand Roll has already begun. Every second is precious.” Said Luvia, making her point clear, “Now that I think about it, automatic control is rather quite convenient. There appears to be a restraining spell that stops them from acting of their own will, if dragons made of bone have any will to speak of.”

“Wait, do you mean that...”

My mentor was silenced by another radiant smile.

“By the name of Luvia gelita Edelfelt, I pledged to help you reach your goal. We will take over here so you can continue pursuing your target.”

“Well, the circumstance demands it.”

“It’s too late to give up! I’ll be disappointed if we came all this way for nothing.”

Flue and Seigen also voiced their support.

“—I’ll leave it to you, then!” My mentor decided instantly.

He maneuvered his Mystic Code, accelerating further into the darkness.

“I will as well!” I called out, following after him.

Gemstones continued to batter the chariot like hailstones. Around us, the walls of the hole closed in until it became just narrow enough for the chariot to fit through. It had probably tunneled its way here, which meant that it would be hard for it to chase us.

Sounds of a battle echoed in the air above us. Most of it probably came from Luvia’s jewel magecraft. Though I could only wonder what was going on up there, with Luvia, Seigen, and Flueger involved, I was sure that it was a grand battle. They were strong

enough to keep the Noble Phantasm at bay, but that alone was not enough to set my mind at ease.

We continued to fall through the Pit of Oblivion in the flickering light of the dragon's Magic Circuits.

My mentor called out to the attendees of the Grand Roll, resisting the force of the wind.

“—Can you hear me, Reines?”

—

*[1] Alternatively, a more literal translation would be “...even if he stood on his head”, which is a saying in Japanese that I quite like.*



(—Hurry, brother!) I said in response to his call.

(—We might be in contact with Heartless soon.)

My brother's reply finally conveyed a decent result. At first, things progressed slowly. Now, it was rapidly increasing in speed like the cases in a pandemic. I could handle it now, but I got the feeling that things would get out of hand very quickly if I made a mistake.

Once a stone started rolling down a hill, there was no way to stop it. We had to finish our plan before that happened.

I took a deep breath.

(—Good, I'm running out of cards over here.)

Heartless' goal was the creation of a god for mages; I had just given the attendees of the Grand Roll the gist of Heartless' plans to reach that goal.

Most mages would probably think that I was joking. However mystical magecraft was, it still had its limits. Otherwise, the world today would still be governed by it. Any normal

mage would dismiss this idea as absurd and insist that we return to discussing the the subject of the Grand Roll.

Of course, no one present at this meeting was a normal mage.

“Interesting.” McDonell said, nodding twice and clasping together his hands. “A god that exists only for mages... if he succeeds in creating it, we will not have to seek the Root anymore. Isn’t that a wonderful proposition?”

I had expected an answer like that from the head of the Democratic Faction.

If their goal was to have more mages climb to higher rungs of the ladder, the magecraft of the Age of the Gods was definitely a shortcut. Since he was a guide for other mages, it was no wonder that he affirmed Heartless' plan.

“...No.”

Came a voice accompanied by a strong will of refusal.

“...This is no time to joke around,” said the old man clearly. “Are you suggesting that we abandon two thousand years of history...and bring back the Age of the Gods...? Perhaps people would do that in some obscure place...like the Far East...but not here, in the Clock Tower...We cannot allow that to happen...!”

It was the same opinion that Luvia held, which my brother had communicated to me. One thought so out of pride, while the other was out of stubbornness, but they had arrived at the same conclusion. They rejected a chance for salvation so that they would not lose what they had been working on for two thousand years.

Yes, this was how mages are. It didn’t matter that it made no sense, logically or politically. Anyone who could think in those terms wouldn’t have chosen to walk down this path. It also made perfect sense for Rufleus to reject Heartless’ plan as the head of the Aristocratic Faction.

“You...are Heartless’ student...yes...?” Rufleus said, staring daggers at Asheara.

“Yes. I was indeed taught by him.” Asheara coolly replied, with a nod.

“Then answer me this...did that foolish former department head...truly complete such a formula...?”

“.....”

For a moment, Asheara held her breath.

“Asheara. I would like you to disclose your opinion from the perspective of a member of the Arcane Dissection Division.” McDonell gently warned.

There was nothing to stop Asheara from only saying things that were beneficial for McDonell, and he wasn’t even trying to hide it.

Whatever. Regardless, Asheara began to speak after a few seconds.

“You said that he summoned a Ghost Liner on the Rail Zeppelin. ...He may also have read Makiri’s essay and seen Emiya’s magecraft. Then, he used an unstable portal underneath Slur Street to sneak into Spirit Tomb Albion.” Said Asheara, laying out the important pieces.

I had completely left out the part about Gray’s hometown. We didn’t have the luxury of playing each of our cards one by one as I observed the scene. Beside that, I had another reason for doing what I did.

“I do not believe that it is impossible. If he has gathered mystery more valuable than a position as the head of a department, it is not unfathomable that he has created something over the course of ten years. Though it would be an incredibly difficult formula, I believe that Dr. Heartless has enough talent and unusual ability to accomplish the feat.”

“Do you mean...the strange abilities he gained...when he was spirited away by fairies...?” Said Rufleus with a faint snarl.

Not even a Lord from a family as notoriously arrogant as the Eulyphises could ignore the significance of fairies. They were beyond the realm of modern mystery and impossible to analyze, much like the Noble Phantasms of Heroic Spirits. I guess you could say that modern magecraft was only a tiny corner of the lengthy history of mystery.

(We have Asheara's approval. Good.) Said my brother through our telepathic link.

(—What should we do next?)

(—If we corner Asheara, we can take the meeting to the next important point.)

Easier said than done. If I tried tugging the subject over there by myself, it wouldn't matter if I caught our enemy's tail. McDonell was on a different level than me. He could ruin everything by simply saying that it was unrelated to the meeting. However, if I brought up something that piqued Rufleus' interest, I could connect it to the rest of the meeting because his rank matched McDonell's.

Ugh, Touko Aozaki was wearing that evil smile again. She silently watched the chessboard that was this Grand Roll, observing every one of our thoughts and moves. It didn't matter, though, because I couldn't choose my moves anyway.

“Can I ask you a question, Ms. Asheara?” I asked, raising my hand. “What do you think of the relationship between Heartless and Kurou?”

“...Kurou?”

It made sense that Rufleus was confused. He hadn't even met Heartless, so he definitely didn't remember his students' names, especially not if the student was some unimportant New Ager.

“He was probably Heartless' protégé,” replied Asheara. “Out of all the students he had, Kurou was special. I don't know if he was aware of it, but Kurou always understood Heartless' many theories and techniques better than the other students.”

“By ‘the other students’, do you mean the five of you?”

“.....”

Another flash of nervousness crossed Asheara's face.

“The ones who were killed or kidnapped—actually, that one’s probably dead as well—those people were in the same team as you and Kurou when you were in Albion, weren’t they?”

“You say that as if I am hiding it. I am not.”

Hmph. That was a blatant lie. It wasn’t hard to find scattered traces of false reports of her background to make her status as Heartless’ student seem more natural. However, that was not the main issue. Even if I tried to interrogate Asheara about that, she probably prepared a number of ways to get around my questioning.

All I could do was move my pieces forward and wonder if she was prepared to be exposed.

“Sorry if this humiliates you, but you’ve been smuggling goods out of Albion since then, right?”

“...What?” Rufleus turned. “...Smuggling...from Albion...?”

Asheara’s face was reflected in the old man’s clouded eyes. Maybe I should commend her on not denying it straight away. If she tripped and made a wrong step here, my job would have been so much easier.

Of course, that didn’t happen.

“Do you have evidence?”

“It’s only circumstantial, but I’ve looked into Slur Street’s ledgers,” I said, placing a copy on the table. “Though you’ve tried to hide it, Slur Street’s financial situation had a miraculous improvement in the five years that Heartless was probably in contact with Kurou. One of our current students never pays attention in class, but he can notice irregularities like that at a glance.”

If you haven’t guessed, I was talking about Flat.

According to him, numbers that didn’t fit seemed to float in the air. My response had been “so your brain is just as perverted as your Magic Circuits”. Svin had checked the

numbers that Flat had picked out, transforming them into undeniably powerful evidence.

Asheara frowned slightly as she examined the copy of the ledger.

Excellent. Time to press on further.

“As you all know, Albion was made so that smuggling would be impossible,” I continued. “However, Dr. Heartless proved that is not the case. He discovered an unstable rift that leads to Albion underneath Slur Street. Not only that, he perfectly predicted where and when it would appear.”

Without that knowledge, his plan to use Faker’s Noble Phantasm to tunnel into the ground would not have succeeded.

“Now then, how did Heartless get this knowledge?” I said, clapping my hands together. “Is it because you five were there to teach him? No. I think the student who you call Heartless’ protégé was the key to the success of your operation.”

“.....”

Asheara fell silent. I wished that she hadn’t. Cornering her was bad for my heart, too.

I had so many hypotheses, so many guesses. The tightrope on which I walked could break at any time. I didn’t walk on it so that I could find the culprit, but so that the Clock Tower could continue to operate long into the future. If my shaky logic wasn’t enough to capture Asheara, the subtle balance of power would.

“The five of you earned money by smuggling goods and returned to the surface through legal means. After that, it’s natural that you were protected by your smuggling partner, Heartless. From his perspective, it’s safer to keep you at hand.”

That was why I had to reveal another card here.

“Why would Heartless want his other students to go missing?” I said as calmly as possible. “I think he wants revenge.”

“Revenge?” Said Inorai, raising an eyebrow. “A teacher taking revenge on his students. I suppose that makes sense.”

I expected her to be somewhat confused. What I was about to say was a little complicated.

“Is this ringing any bells, Miss Asheara?”

“No.” Asheara replied, shaking her head.

(—Hey, Reines—) Interrupted my brother.

(—I don’t have a choice. The evidence isn’t complete, and it doesn’t make much sense, but I have to get a confession from her.)

This was the key to my brother’s theory. I had to confront her here, even if it meant that I would sound like a fool.

“Because,” I began.

“Ten years ago, the four of you, excluding Kurou, who was chosen as his protégé, killed Dr. Heartless.”



“—What was that just then?”

Hearing my question, my mentor paled. He answered it as if he had expected this outcome, but did not welcome it.

“It’s Reines’ bet.” He said succinctly.

The magecraft that Seigen had cast was still in place. Though the others were cut off, I could perceive what was going on to a certain degree.

“I don’t have proof, but it’s the only way we can threaten Asheara. I guess you could say that Reines is better suited to this job than I am.”

“But isn’t Heartless still alive?”

If that wasn’t the case, who were we chasing? The thought that we were chasing a ghost made me feel uncomfortable. What if Heartless became the thing that I had been so afraid of back when I was a grave keeper?

“I have an answer of sorts. But at this stage of the Grand Roll, we have no choice but to proceed like this. And now, we have to catch up to Heartless if we want more evidence.”

That, I understood. Just as we had previously talked with McDonell while we investigated Heartless’ student’s workshop, these two had to happen in tandem. As the Grand Roll went on, our fate wandered through the vast labyrinth, drawn in by the gravity of Heartless’ mystery like satellites.

As we fell through the void, I felt my anxiety steadily fade away.

It was as if I was riding on a roller coaster, or maybe a shooting star.

There was nothing in the darkness but the two of us.

“...I think we’re going to be there soon.”

“...I agree.” My mentor said, nodding.

Though we were falling, we settled into a peaceful silence.

Since we parted from Luvia and the others, I got the feeling that the trail of incidents that began at my hometown was finally coming to an end.

“Ihihihihi, sorry to interrupt your thinking! Don’t forget that I’m here as well!”

I couldn’t help but smile at the sound of his voice.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I replied. “I’d be troubled if you were gone.”

At this, the box was quiet for a moment.

“It troubles me when you’re too honest, you know!”

I smiled wryly at Add's remark. I felt that after so long, we had finally become a team as we plummeted closer to our destination.

"Once we get there, I can finally track down Heartless." My mentor said, taking out a golden coin from his pocket.

"That's... the golden Stater."

It was the coin that Reines had picked up after the fight between Touko and Faker. Thanks to it, my mentor had realized that Heartless planned on summoning Iskandar as a Divine Spirit.

"This is directly connected to Faker and her ascension. If we follow the flow of Magical Energy, we can find them no matter how they try and hide."

"Ihihihi! It's finally time! I've been waiting for this moment! Ihihi—"

Add suddenly stopped laughing.

I also noticed something odd.

It was above my head. Since I was upside down, that was to say, it was below me, at the bottom of the Pit of Oblivion.

"Wait, what's that..."

It was the first time I heard fear in Add's voice.

After a few seconds, my mentor looked toward it as well.

"What if..."

My mentor's voice had turned raspy.

"What if the Pit of Oblivion doesn't lead to the Ancient Heart...?"

"Sir...?"

It was the most desperate expression that had appeared on my mentor's face since we entered Spirit Tomb Albion.

We couldn't see anything yet. The feeling alone was enough to send us into despair. I had never felt this powerless before, not even when I faced Faker, who was a mage from the Age of the Gods.

“What if this hole leads to the Fairy Realm, or somewhere close to it...? What if the place that it leads to is more dangerous than the Age of the Gods...?”

Soon, we were able to catch a glimpse of it in the darkness.

There was light at the bottom of the hole.



To be more precise, there were six glowing eyes. That meant that there were three giant beasts waiting to devour us whole.

“Huh...?”

Strange. We should have been getting closer and closer, but the monsters didn’t get any larger.

“Is it because...they’re too big...?”

If that was the case, each of the eyeballs would be tens of meters wide. There was a contradiction between the size of the beasts and the size of the Pit of Oblivion. Our senses struggled to process this contradiction as we continued to approach them.

“Is it... Cerberus...!?” My mentor exclaimed. “No, it can’t be. Is it a monster of the same origin...? Depending on the situation, it might be...”

I felt my throat dry up as my mentor continued frantically guessing in a broken voice.

It was as if my soul would dissipate if those eyes turned to look at me. That creature was more than just a Phantasmal Beast. It wasn’t some creature that had evolved into a monster because of the strange qualities of Albion. The authority it had over its domain could not even be compared to modern magecraft.

...I remember dealing with something that made me feel a similar way— the thing that had been in Touko Aozaki’s briefcase, or perhaps her body.

They were definitely different, but they both felt alien. The being sitting at the bottom of the pit was not something that a human could comprehend.

In a sense, that beast was the ruler of Albion.

“S-sir...” I managed to say.

“Stop breathing...” my mentor replied. “We can’t...let it notice us...”

As we continued to glide to our demise, my mentor tightened his grasp on the gold coin and clenched his teeth in desperation.



(—What's going on?)

I clenched my teeth as my brother fell silent again. The connection was still intact, which meant that they were in a situation that demanded his full attention. Why did he keep running into trouble? I knew the gist of his reasoning, but I might as well have been without help.

“We killed our teacher, Dr. Heartless?” Asheara said with a light laugh. The light of the dead dragon’s Magic Circuits glistened on her dark skin. “What an interesting speculation. Wouldn’t that nullify your previous theories about Heartless kidnapping his students and creating a Divine Spirit?”

“I’ll talk about that later. I just want to confirm this fact with you first.”

“Why are you insisting that it is a fact? How would killing our teacher benefit us? You are right in saying that, apart from Kurou, we were all heading toward the next stages of our lives. That does not explain why we would get rid of the backing of our teacher.”

“It would bring you plenty of benefits,” I said, grasping the opportunity like a merchant who had found a chance to profit. “That’s because you four were never Dr. Heartless’ students.”

“Oh? What do you mean by that?” Asked Inorai.

“I mean that many of the people who enter Albion were ordered to do so by the Clock Tower. Then, they can infiltrate the Arcane Autopsy Division.” I continued, turning to the old woman.

This was the hypothesis that my brother had arrived at after Touko gave us a tip.

Rufleus didn’t speak up, probably because either he or a faction close to him was involved in this operation.

“Out of these five students, we know that this was the job of Calugh, who was murdered.”

I was putting aside the possibility that he switched places with his brother for now. The Lords probably weren't interested in that, and I needed to keep their attention.

"I'd also like to point out that I'm not the only one looking into this. Miss Touko Aozaki is as well."

"Passing the baton to me? Alright. Come to think of it, you were there when I talked to Heartless." Touko said with a wry smile. She had guessed that Heartless' students were spies sent from other factions before we had.

—*"I'm asking you whose students they really are, former department head."*

Touko had said that when she fought Faker underneath Slur Street. Now, it was time to confirm it with Asheara.

"I didn't want to reveal it, but I have to admit that it's true. I have indeed asked Heartless about his students. He replied that he told them to dedicate their lives to the most radiant things, and that they went to search for what they thought were the most radiant things in their lives."

"....."

Asheara's gaze wavered for a moment. The confirmation of a Grand-ranked mage made my statement harder to dismiss. Now, she couldn't deny my charges easily without losing her position in the Grand Roll.

"And so? What does that prove?"

Hm. That was a better tactic than denial. She was willing to make certain concessions to end the entire conversation.

"Besides, we couldn't have assassinated Dr. Heartless. No one would be able to get away with killing the head of a major department in London." She said, diverting the focus of the conversation again.

She still had the upper hand in this situation. I was again reminded that all she needed to do was cut the right part of the tattered rope I was walking on for me to fall to my death.

Therefore, I nodded cautiously and planted the next trap into the conversation.

“Exactly. You’re right. The Clock Tower watches over every nook and cranny of London. Though it’s not impossible to assassinate someone as important as Heartless was, any traces of a struggle would be discovered.”

“I’m glad you agree with me.”

“However, you have a place that no one will be able to watch over,” I said, feeling the surface of the round table and letting my words sink into the audience. “You led Heartless into Spirit Tomb Albion ten years ago, didn’t you?”

“You mean, using the same mechanism that enabled smuggling?” Olgamarie asked, wide-eyed.

I nodded and continued.

“Yes. Just as Heartless used an unstable portal underneath Slur Street to enter Spirit Tomb Albion, you four baited Heartless there. At that point, apart from Kurou, all of Heartless’ students had left him. According to my research, you seem to have been the last one. You might have said that you wanted to bring him on a tour through Spirit Tomb Albion as thanks. An opportunity to enter Spirit Tomb Albion without the restrictions set by the Dissection Division is too good to pass up. Heartless must have been delighted.

“At the same time, the Clock Tower’s surveillance doesn’t extend to Albion, because it has its own rules. Though Heartless was a better mage, Albion was your domain. Your team was trained through combat the treacherous environment of Albion. I’m sure you had plenty of means to kill a mage absorbed in his research.”

“.....”

Asheara fell silent again. This time, she showed no signs of argument. She probably realized that a careless defense in the face of Rufleus and Touko Aozaki would only make her situation worse.

“Kurou must have objected to this. He was Heartless’ protege, after all. You could have gone ahead without him, but you didn’t. That means he must have been necessary to find a portal. As we saw when Faker attacked Slur, portals don’t disappear immediately. Once you got to Albion, you could have killed both of them. Or maybe you planned on persuading Kurou, but that would have been impractical considering the portal’s duration.”

“...You’ve taken an absurd leap of logic.” Asheara finally said as if she was wringing out her words.

Of course. I was aware of that. Did she think that this was the place for careful, logical reasoning?

“That means that you couldn’t check their corpses, right?”

“...What are you talking about?”

“I’m answering your question from earlier. If Heartless is dead, who are we dealing with now? If you didn’t have the chance back then to check their corpses, we can narrow down the identity of the current Heartless. That’s because the current Heartless is able to find unstable portals, just like his protege could in the past.”

“...!”

McDonell watched his daughter eerily quietly.

“Are you trying trying to say that... the current Heartless is actually Kurou...?”

“We’ve already witnessed the extent to which the mage who calls himself Heartless can transform himself. He caused us a lot of trouble on the Rail Zeppelin.”

With shape-shifting skills like that, it would have been easy for him to impersonate his teacher, who he knew better than Caules.

“...Impossible!”

Asheara’s voice was distorted to the point of anguish.

“That’s why I asked you if you checked their corpses.”

“.....”

The color had been leached from her face. Asheara was an accomplished mage. Controlling basic bodily functions should have been a piece of cake for her. That meant that the shock she had just suffered was so great that she had forgotten to do so.

“That’s...That’s just a bunch of nonsensical hypotheses piled on top of each other!”

“Yes. You’re right.” I admitted.

I had no other choice. After all, this was just the first few pieces of the puzzle, a set up so we could move on to the main point.

“But the next part is not a hypothesis. An acquaintance in Albion provided us with evidence.”

I was referring to Geraff.

This next part was what my brother had wanted me to look into.

“I’m talking about Kurou’s full name.”

“Kurou’s full name?” Asheara echoed, furrowing her eyebrows.

They had both been born in Albion. Maybe they were even childhood friends. Still, it was the nature of a mage to betray others. Maybe McDonell had been the one to make her betray him.

“You don’t know it either? I should have guessed. It isn’t strange for people here to lack last names. If you had known, there was a good chance that it could have been documented somehow.”

I had to thank Geraff for this final piece of information. It was the final silver bullet that I needed.

“You did not manage to kill Kurou, who opposed the murder of Heartless. Maybe he even pretended to be dead. We happen to know someone else who is good at that.

I turned to look at the mage standing behind Touko.

“Oh? Are you talking about me?” Hishiri said, blinking in surprise.

I didn’t know what score to give her acting. It would have been convincing if she hadn’t come to the Grand Roll for this very reason.

“His full name is Kurou Adashino(クロウ・アダシノ).”

No one spoke, probably because everyone realized the importance of that last name. Asheara stiffened, Olgamarie swallowed, and McDonell stroked his own neck. Rufleus sputtered a dry cough. Touko’s eyes sparkled in a way that reminded me of Inorai.

“Or, in the style of Eastern names, Kurou Adashino(化野九郎).”

For some reason, finally arriving at this conclusion made me want to sigh.

This puzzle was needlessly complicated. I was used to Clock Tower conspiracies that stretched tens or even hundreds of years, but this took it to a whole new level.

I almost wanted to praise the Department of Law for managing to keep it under wraps for so long.

“This is the card you were hiding, isn’t it? Gray told me that you were looking for your brother on the Rail Zeppelin. You explained that, like you, Dr. Heartless was an adopted child of Norwich. Now I know that was a terrible excuse.”

Hishiri’s explanation back then had been so simple, because she had realized that the current Dr. Heartless was related to her by blood.

“So? What do you have to say for yourself, Ms. Hishiri?”

Hishiri smiled faintly, reminding me of a Noh mask from Eastern theater.



Countless spirals of light illuminated the last Command Spell on Heartless' right hand, which was covering his face.

“...So you’ve still come.” He suddenly said, looking to his feet.

Several things had been placed there for the ritual. First, there was a living Mystic Code that used to be the mage, Emiya. Then, there was a clock that was there to control it. Finally, there were piles of golden Staters scattered around the floor. All of those coins were now shaking, probably because Lord El-Melloi II wanted to locate him using the coin that he had found.

Heartless had noticed that the coin had been taken.

If Lord El-Melloi II could use the coin to find a path, Heartless could do the same. These coins were his final trap, just in case Lord El-Melloi made it as far as he had.

“This is either my last and greatest obstruction to your plans...” He said in a low voice, feeling the surface of a coin. “...Or the final trap that pushes me over the edge.”

He seemed exhausted, as if he was also experiencing every second of time as Faker was.

Magical Energy spread across the cavern of twisting light along with his voice.

“Good night, Lord El-Melloi II.”

With that, the red-haired mage closed his other eye.



We continued to glide silently, afraid to make the smallest noise. I tried to keep my use of Magical Energy at a minimum. The conclusion that had been reached in the Grand Roll was less impactful than a fairy tale in the face of the all-consuming darkness that slowly filled my heart.

The name of the darkness was terror. In its face, I finally understood where we came from. We had been born from a dark, hopelessly empty void. The abyss that was darker than night was our cradle.

I felt as if we had been released into the vacuum of space, except our souls was about to freeze instead of our bodies or minds.

And yet, we had no choice but to continue gliding. I saw a couple of smaller tunnels on the side of the pit. One of them was probably connected to the Heart.

It was not sufficient to call my mentor's face pale anymore. He continued to stare at the golden coin in his hand, trying to stop himself from trembling. Some people may have called his demeanor pathetic. But for me, seeing him persevere was endlessly reassuring, like a fragment of a star in the midst of unsurmountable darkness.

"Just...a little more..." I said as quietly as I could.

Neither of us had the courage to look down.

From the perspective of the creature, we were probably no more than a few grains of sand. It lived in a completely different dimension from us. It was the embodiment of the world beyond the farthest reaches reaches of Albion. Had people created the existence of the myth of the guard dog of hell because they could not forget about this beast?

The wind carried a faint stench.

Though it wasn't very loud, its roar shook every loose rock on the walls of the Pit of Oblivion. I was sure that we would pass out if we had been any closer. All I could do was summon all my willpower and wrench myself away from it.

My mentor's gaze quivered as he clutched the coin in his hands.

"Gray...!"

He gestured to one of the tunnels. Suddenly, I saw hope again. But it only lasted an instant.

One of the six eyes turned to us.

—Time ceased to exist.

The beast of Albion did nothing.

It only stared us with its eye that wasn't magical or evil. Nevertheless, it was enough to tear us apart, crushing our nails, our skin, muscles, internal organs, bones, and brains until it reached our soul

My breathing completely stopped, as did the blood in my veins. Each of my cells froze as if they were never part of a living thing in the first place.

Someone said that fear was born of the unknown. I didn't agree. Fear didn't come from things that we didn't know, but things that we couldn't know. In the face of such an immense presence, all of my senses closed themselves off and brought about their own demise before I surely would as well.

“...Sir...”

Of course, my mentor was going through the same thing.

“It's gaze...was drawn to us by someone...”

He said in a voice that was indistinguishable from panting, as if he knew that these were his last breaths.

“I finally understand...what Heartless' Mystic Eyes are...”

Just before I lost consciousness, I finally realized where we had gone wrong.

Despite all our preparation, we had badly underestimated Spirit Tomb Albion.



After a pause, Hishiri nodded as if she was impressed.

“You have done your research well.”

“My brother, Lord El-Melloi II, always had a hunch that something was special about him. Sure enough, everything became clear after we found the last name of the person who was listed without one.”

He believed that detail had been deliberately hidden. I had come to a similar conclusion, just not in the same way as him. My brother’s way of thinking was based on people rather than things.

In this case, both Kurou and Hishiri Adashino were suspicious.

“During the incident on the Rail Zeppelin, you were too actively involved to be acting on behalf of the Department of Law like you claimed. You explained that you and Heartless were both adopted by Norwich, but he adopted a lot of children. I don’t think that’s enough to explain your obsession with Heartless.”

“I didn’t lie.” Hishiri said with a mischievous smile. “I believed that there was a high possibility that he was my actual brother. Though I say that, we are only half-siblings. My father left his child and ex-wife behind when he returned from Albion.”

“So your father was a Survivor?”

“Yes. He managed to leave Albion on his own by scrounging money. He claimed that he came to the surface to ensure that his bloodline would not end, though he wasn’t a particularly skilled mage. Don’t you think that was a foolish decision?”

Hishiri’s furisode-covered shoulders shook as she laughed.

“Once he arrived at the surface, he regretted not bringing his wife. As a result, he died not long after he fathered me with his new wife. Thanks to that, I had to go through all manner of tribulations to be adopted by Norwich. His death also made my brother reluctant to reveal his last name.” She continued in a more cheerful voice.

I found it hard to disguise my surprise. Though, thinking about it, the clue was always there. She probably used her original last name, Adashino, instead of Norwich because she wanted to use it to find her brother. Maybe she had even joined the Department of Law for the same reason.

“When did you discover this possibility?” I asked after taking a deep breath.

“As you may have guessed, I discovered it not long after I entered the Department of Law. Unfortunately, Heartless and Kurou had already disappeared by then.”

They had disappeared ten years ago. Considering Hishiri’s age, her story made sense.

“So you know Kurou’s secret, then?”

“Yes. He fit all the right conditions,” she replied, putting her fingers on the floral patterns on her glasses. “Unfortunately, I never met my brother in person. I think it would be better to ask his teammate instead.”

Her eyes fell on Asheara like a snake eyeing its prey. A frown appeared on Asheara’s forehead in stark contrast to the calm demeanor that she previously had.

“...Kurou...” Asheara started. “Kurou did indeed have unusual powers. He had a talent for finding unstable portals between Spirit Tomb Albion and the surface.”

“Hm...”

Rufleus frown deepened, making him look less like a sinister Lord and more like an old, cunning demon.

“It wasn’t always that way. He discovered his talent one day when we came across a portal.”

“You came across a portal?” I repeated.

Asheara nodded with some hesitation. “Portals appear frequently in Albion, though no one knows about them except for the explorers. Kurou was unusually good at finding them. He was too shy to admit to it. Most of the time, when he came across one, he would act like he didn’t know how it happened, but I heard him say once that it was as if the portals were attached on a string and would appear when he pulled on them.”

“That was the effect of some kind of Mystic Eye,” Hishiri explained. “Supposedly, it’s a rare talent in the Adashino family. It allows people to find pairs of things. You could also call it a trick to locate something that has been lost.”

...Ah, now it was starting to come together. This was the piece I needed to complete the puzzle.

The Mystic Eyes themselves were probably nothing impressive, comparable in rating to mine. However, by a coincidence, Kurou's Mystic Eyes entered Spirit Tomb Albion. As Hishiri said, though it was a type of Mystic Eye, it was closer to the magecraft of the Far East.

"I see. Is the magecraft of the Adashino family derived from snakes?" Interjected Touko.

"That is correct, yes. Why do you mention it?" Hishiri replied.

I had witnessed Hishiri's magecraft several times before. It had indeed reminded me of snakes, much like the mage herself.

"Snakes have long since been connected with searching for lost objects, especially lost money.<sup>[1]</sup> This mysterious power has been attributed to their pit organs. Snakes are also sometimes treated as dragons because of their similarities."

Touko nodded as if she understood.

"In that case, Kurou's abilities probably developed the more he became accustomed to Albion. You could say that Kurou's Mystic Eyes had merged with the dead dragon's vision."

"You sound like you're onto something, Touko," Commented Inorai, eliciting a shrug from Touko, "I'm learning more and more from you."

Even in the entire history of the Clock Tower, it was rare to find a Lord who taught a Grand-ranked mage. I looked to the mage who had suggested her student be Seal Designated, and then back to the mage who had wandered the world for years after receiving a Sealing Designation.

Thinking about it was pointless. There was no point in trying to compete with them in magecraft, let alone politics. I decided to leave futile efforts like that to my brother when he returned.

Asheara spoke up just as I started thinking of something else.

“I’d like to point out a mistake Miss Reines made.”

“What mistake?”

My heart leaped up and battered against my ribs. Was this it? Was the tightrope going to snap?

“...What is it, Asheara?”

“.....” After a few seconds of hesitation, Asheara spoke again.

She began by apologizing to McDonell.

“My apologies, father. This is about something that I—that we did of our own accord. ...Miss Reines. You are right, we were in contact with the surface while we were in Albion.”

“...That means...”

I had a terrible feeling about this. Why was she suddenly admitting it?

After another pause, Asheara said exactly what I feared.

“However, ten years ago, we killed Kurou, not Heartless.”

It took me a second to process what she said. It was as if my opponent had struck a blow that ended the contest in a tie when I had expected to be pounded into the ground.

Her statement had indeed invalidated our argument. But I could tell from her expression that she wasn’t happy that she had to concede this step.

“...But why?”

“Because there was a chance that Heartless would become too successful if we didn’t step in. But it would cause too much chaos if two department heads died at the same time.”

Asheara's words made me lean back and gaze up at the ceiling.

There was only one incident that she could be talking about.

"You mean, because the previous Lord El-Melloi died."

"...Exactly."

Of course she thought that way.

The death of the previous Lord El-Melloi— that was to say, my brother, Kayneth— caused a great uproar in the Clock Tower. The Meluastea Faction had forced the El-Melloi Faction into the Department of Modern Magecraft so they could control two departments at once. Maybe I should commend Asheara for reaching the correct solution.

If Heartless hadn't also gone missing then, it would have been much more natural for him to become the head of the Department of Minearology instead of the Meluastea Faction.

"So you wanted to stop Heartless by killing his right hand man, Kurou?"

Asheara nodded with some hesitation. "Yes."

"In that case, you got more than you bargained for. Not only did the disappearance of Kurou stop Heartless' career from advancing, but he also quit his position and disappeared."

It was a result that no one could have imagined.

My heart still pounded. Had I made a mistake? I wanted to discuss it with my brother, but he still hadn't replied. What was going on on his end? Was there a flaw in my logic? Had I tripped on something at this critical moment without noticing?

"Is that all there is to this strange story?" McDonell asked.

I nodded with an emotion that I could only call sincerity. The words of the Lord who had been mostly silent up until now were like strikes of a gavel.

“Evidently, my daughter has committed a crime. If she has deprived Dr. Heartless of his pupil, she must provide equal compensation.”

...Compensation? I thought as my mind filled with despair.

Even though the laws of the rest of the world didn’t apply in the Clock Tower, killing a department head was a heinous crime. However, if the team only killed an unimportant student, Asheara would be sufficient payment. In a certain sense, the Clock Tower’s justice system operated like that of the Mafia. It was an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

“What do you mean by equal payment, McDonell?” Inorai asked in response to his affirmation.

“As I said, she is my daughter. So this is my fault.” McDonell admitted. He put his fists on his knees and bowed his head. “Even if it was her decision, I had a part to play. Since she is my daughter, I will take full responsibility.”

“.....!”

This, too, was an unexpected development. I could tell that both his mage’s spirit and his love for his daughter were true. Though he was ruthless when he schemed against his opponents, he did not lack humanity, which only made him more terrifying.

Inorai stroked her chin, amused.

“Responsibility, you say? What do you mean, exactly?”

“The El-Melloi Faction is currently in charge of the department that Heartless presided over. Therefore, I will give them my votes in this Grand Roll.”

“What the...!”

I had nothing I could say in response to that. His solution didn't make any sense in the world of normal people. Heartless wasn't compensated at all. Somehow, the death of Heartless' student could be repaid by compensating the faction that they belonged to.

"Oh? I can take my votes back if you don't want them."

—What the hell?!!!

Why were we being hounded after we found the culprit? It made our situation more favorable, but the weight of the votes that had just been entrusted to me were overwhelming my brain.

"What about...Heartless' accomplice...?"

This time, it was Rufleus who spoke up.

"...Do you not think that his accomplice is...the fool who called his plan to create a Divine Spirit...'a wonderful proposition'...?" He said, not bothering to hide his animosity.

By contrast, McDonell only shrugged.

"I did say that it is wonderful. I'm not sure if that is enough evidence. Besides, my daughter was the one who stopped Heartless from gaining power. Furthermore, didn't you say that you don't care if one or two of Heartless' students died?"

The meeting began to pick up speed. An invisible balance swung back and forth, never staying still for a moment.

I needed to find the best solution in the midst of it all.

(...You promised to stop Heartless, right, brother?) I said to my brother, who still didn't respond.

The connection was still there. It was possible that the connection wouldn't be severed if he had just died, but I didn't want to think about that. I needed to make a bet here. In this meeting, there was no way to win without taking a risk.

"...May I confirm something?" I asked Asheara.

“What is it?”

“You were communicating with McDonell, who guided you with the knowledge of Kurou’s unusual abilities. Perhaps you intended to invite him to McDonell’s faction.”

“...That is correct.” Asheara answered with some hesitance. She was probably wary of her father.

“However, to your surprise, he went with Heartless instead. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

I frantically grasped at the chance before me as Asheara continued to affirm my guesses.

Even if my brother’s theory was correct, I hadn’t heard all of his thoughts. At this stage, I didn’t think his theory was even complete. This was the answer I had arrived at as I watched the meeting progress. My brother hadn’t been listening to the situation here.

I took a deep breath and let my prediction play out in my mind. After three seconds, I spoke.

“I have decided to abandon the search for Heartless’ accomplice.”

“What...?! Reines!?” Olgamarie exclaimed, dumbfounded.

There had to be detectives that gave up after getting close to the end of a case. There were probably many detective novels out there that ended that way. It was just that most readers didn’t like those endings.

For that reason, I repeated my statement.

“I’ll say it again. I’m not searching for his accomplice anymore.”

“After all this? What a selfish but interesting choice.” Said Inorai.

Touko held a hand over her mouth, as if she were trying to stop herself from laughing out loud. Though it was a matter of life and death to me, she watched the Grand Roll as if it was a movie. I hoped that my performance satisfied her.

“I have another proposal,” I continued. “Lord Trambelio, you said you’re giving your votes to me, right?”

“Yes, I did say that.”

With his confirmation, I continued to show more of my cards.

“In that case, the El-Melloi Faction and the Trambelio Faction relinquish the right to vote in this Grand Roll.”

“...You...!” Rufleus snarled, looking as if his eyeballs were going to pop out.

I honestly expected my heart to stop beating then. The Lord was powerful enough to curse someone by simply glaring at them. I pushed the fear down into my stomach and pressed forward.

“We should all do that.” I said, slowly weaving my words as if I was squeezing them out.  
“We should pretend that this meeting never happened.”

“...What did you say...?”

“Only a few people know about the Grand Roll. If we all throw away our votes and insist that this meeting never happened, no one will know.”

This was our final goal— to reach a settlement that would force everyone to give up their strengths after finding their weaknesses.

For the Aristocratic Faction, this was a chance to prevent the redevelopment of Albion. For the Democratic Faction, this was a chance to remove the stain of the murder committed by Lord Trambelio’s daughter. The Neutral Faction, which had given their votes to Touko, didn’t have anything that they had to fight for.

Now, at this moment, we could reach this compromise.

Inorai's shoulders shook as she laughed.

"I never expected you to play your cards this way."

The old woman from the Department of Creation had maintained a unique position in this meeting. Even though she was not as ambitious as McDonell or as sly as Rufleus, Inorai gave off the air of a Lord.

"But I am still curious about the identity of the accomplice."

"Finding that out is my brother's job, not mine."

"What do you mean by that? How do you plan on stopping Heartless, anyway?"

"Exactly. Didn't you say that Heartless' magecraft could go into effect at any moment? We won't be able to pretend that the Grand Roll never took place if that happens."

"That's why my brother has entered Albion to stop him." I answered.

Rufleus tapped his cane on the ground.

"...The New Age...Lord...you say...?"

"Didn't you just say that Heartless is performing his ritual in the Ancient Heart? How is he meant to get here?"

It was natural that Olgamarie was confused. I had no other choice but to answer honestly.

"He has already gotten close to the Ancient Heart."

"Oh, my. As always, your brother does not know what to fear..." Adashino said, still smiling faintly.

I didn't know what she could be thinking now, after learning of her brother's death. I wondered what thoughts tugged at the heart of this Eastern woman from the Department of Law.

Though my brother didn't give me an update on his exact location, I knew that he was near the Ancient Heart.

"But can Lord El-Melloi II really stop Dr. Heartless?"

"Of course. If I didn't trust my brother to be capable of doing something like this, I wouldn't have given him the title of Lord El-Melloi. Of course, his predecessor would have had no trouble dealing with a problem of this caliber."

That was a massive lie. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to work on Hishiri. In case you were wondering, I had plenty of trust in Gray.

"Since this is a place for politics, let's do some proper politics. That's what I came here for."

"An impressive use of sophistry." Inorai said, with a charitable nod. Then, she looked to the person beside her and lowered her voice. "McDonell. You don't plan on taking back your vote, do you?"

"Of course not, Ms. Inorai."

"In that case, let's wait thirty minutes." Inorai took out her pocket watch and put it on the table. "If Lord El-Melloi II is close, we should be able to notice if he succeeds in stopping Heartless. Let's wait for him."

"...El-Melloi...You have Trambelio's vote...we have no reason to withdraw..."

"Come on, Eulyphis. The El-Melloi Princess said that we should throw away our votes. There's no need to be so stubborn, is there?" Inorai said with a wink.

The two oldest participants in this Grand Roll refused to give in to each other. The essence of power flowed in their veins instead of blood. It wasn't my place to say anything about them, though.

At that moment, something happened.

The flow of Magical Energy suddenly changed, severing the link between me and my brother without any warning.

(—Brother?!)

I fought the urge to scream.

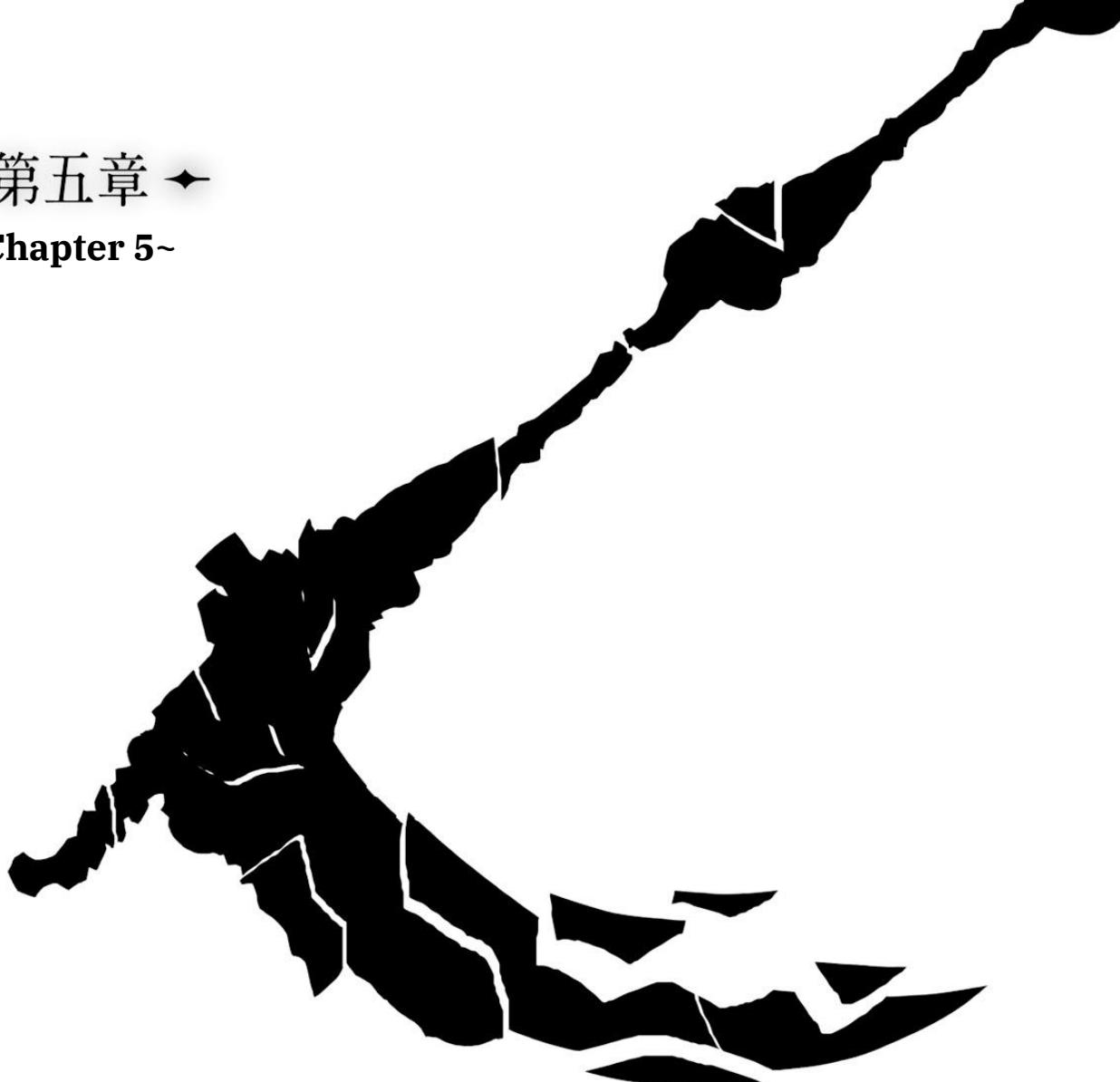
That severance seemed like a death sentence.

*[1] I can't find a reference to this anywhere. How is being able to see infrared radiation supposed to help with finding money, anyway?*

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◆ 第五章 ◆

~Chapter 5~



Several hours passed in the space of a second. Several days passed in the space of a minute. Several decades passed in the space of an hour.

This contradictory flow of time was created by the Seal-Designated magecraft that Heartless had prepared. Though it was originally designed to allow its user to see to the end of the universe (sky), it was now being used as a rocket to accelerate Faker into a Divine Spirit.

Faker swayed slowly in the cradle of time, rocking back and forth through more lifetimes than any other human would experience.

In spite of this, the anger that drove her remained unchanged.

(...Why had he left that will?)

(...Why did they take the will to heart and slaughter each other over it?)

(...And why hadn't she stopped them even though she was still alive?)

Those questions circled in her head hundreds, thousands, millions of times. Each time they did, her anger would begin to course through her veins of Ether and simmer in her mind.

Faker didn't know if she could endure this because she was a Servant. Back when she was still alive, her body would have decayed long before those questions could drive her mad. Or, perhaps it was her Master's Command Spells that kept her mind stable so she could endure the seemingly endless flow of time.

However, there was one thing that was not there when she was alive.

She had not had the man who continued to look up at her as if he was praying.

From Faker's perspective, he had prayed to her for several centuries already.

A thought crossed her mind which she dismissed as ridiculous, but it shook her nonetheless.

(...What an idiot,) she thought. (You have no need to look as though you'll cry, you know.)

Faker wondered who had given him the name Heartless. If he had come up with it himself, he had some self-reflection to do. Before, Fake would never have thought of him as an emotional man. But now, she had been with him longer than anyone else.

In reality, they had only known each other for two short months, but Faker had stared at him for hundreds of years.

From Heartless' perspective, those hundreds of years felt like two hours, during which he hadn't looked away from her once except to blink. Even if it meant using Command Spells, he wished that she would make it.

“.....”

His faith would make Faker into a god.

Of course, the many catalysts that Heartless had prepared and the power of Albion were also necessary, but his sincere belief was what determined the direction of this ritual.

Faker wondered what his starting point was.

(It must have been an important event for you.) She thought.

Naturally, she knew that he was hiding something from him. But for his two hundred years of prayer, Faker was willing to be tricked. Truth was not something that mattered here.

(...For your sake, I am willing to become a foolish god...)

Faker thought in the silence.

Time continued to speed up.

Two hours had been several hundred years. Three hours became more than a thousand.

Her perception expanded as she stabilized as a Divine Spirit. Now, connected to the Root, time no longer mattered. She was now able to search for a point in the past while remaining in the present; not because she could see the past, but because she could see everything in the instant that her divine Saint Graph was compressed back into the form of a Ghost Liner.

There were limits to her power, of course. The bounds of her vision were limited by her scale as a Divine Spirit, and Faker was only a newborn god. She could only calculate points that she had a connection to.

(I see...)

She finally understood.

(So that's why...)

Finally, she saw the truth behind not just her only believer, but the destiny that was closely related to them both.

(The future king...has come...!)



Darkness.

That is what I would soon become. It was a harbinger of death, the sign that we had fallen from the Texture of the Human Order and were about to be wiped out.

I could feel the memory of the person named Gray fading away, crushed by the beast until not even a fragment of me remained.

(.....)

It shattered, shredded, dissolved. I felt as if the fibers that made up my being were being slowly unraveled as it stared at me.

“—*I ask*—”

...Somehow, I heard something.

A voice that could not have reached me.

“—*I ask you*.”

It was not an actual voice, but something that came from a place as far away as the earth’s center. But it must have been a place connected to a Ley line.

“—*Are you my Master?*”

My body screamed at me that somewhere, someone had made a contract.

A tremendous vitality filled me as if each cell in my body was being replaced. This power continued to grow, far exceeding the limits of a human vessel, awakening my consciousness even though I should have been dead.

(...Ah.)

So that was why Sir Kay had said that in my dream.

—“*You’re probably here because that person’s getting close.*”

In that case, the other thing he had spoken of was the fate I could not escape.

—“*The end is almost here, so I hope fate goes easy on you.*”

Even the tips of my fingers burnt with energy. Each breath I took sent fire coursing through my body. Upon opening my eyes, thousands of times more information than I was used to entered my brain, which somehow managed to receive it all after being energized.

I let the flood of information surge through me as I activated the Mystic Code on my back. I did not know how far I had fallen. Time and space were both fuzzy here. My mentor would probably hypothesize that time had stopped while I was dead.

I could see my mentor beneath me, still plummeting into the void.

“Sir—!”

He did not respond to my call. I knew that he would die if I didn’t do anything. No human could withstand the gaze of that monster. His soul would be crushed and returned to nothingness, just as mine had been.

“What point is there to holding back now, Gray?” Came a piercing voice from the hook at my right shoulder.

“Add!”

“Unseal it! I’m sure you can now!”

I didn’t need to ask to know what he meant. More Magical Energy than I could imagine was propelling me, yet I was shuddering like a terrified fawn.

“I...”

“Get a move on, Gray!”

“But that means you’ll—“

“That doesn’t matter! You’ve left your hometown! Time to be brave!”

The scolding of the box that used to be my only friend ignited something within me.

I poured all my emotion into my right hand. The box I was holding dissolved into a vortex of light.

“Gray(Darken)...Rave(Celebrate)...Crave(Want)...Deprave(Corrupt)...”

The incantation of self-suggestion flowed naturally from me. However, I didn’t enter a trance like usual. This was the only time that the secret techniques that Bersac Blackmore had drilled into my head failed to work the way I wanted them to.

And yet, I continued to chant, just as he taught me.

“Grave...me(Engraved in me)...”

“Pseudo-personality suspended. Mana yield exceeds regulation. Second stage restraint rescinded.”

Add’s voice turned mechanical as it usually did, signaling that its pseudo-personality had stopped so that as much Mana as possible could be taken in from my surroundings. Though the Magical Energy of Spirit Tomb Albion was different from that of the surface, Add consumed it without any problems.

“Seal Thirteen, Decision—”

(—No—!)

I barely managed to maintain the final restraints on the holy lance.

“Grave...for you(A grave for you)...”

The Magical Energy that should have been released rushed back into my Magic Circuits, tearing the flesh surrounding it. Blood gushed out from my right shoulder. If not for the “power” that had entered me earlier, I might have died then.

As I felt the slight warmth of my blood dripping down my right hand, I announced the true name of the spear.

“—Rhongo(The Lance that Shines)—”

This was the first time I had uttered its name with such despair.

An intense light surrounded my right hand. It was the anchor that held the world together, the tower at the farthest end. The Anti-Fortress Noble Phantasm that should not have existed in this age of diminished mystery roared to life.

“—myniad(to the End of the World)—!”

For just a few seconds, the radiance of the lance filled the Pit of Oblivion.

Each molecule of air burnt up as all the Magical Energy in the area was eradicated. And then—

—A tiny sound came from the lace itself.

I should not have been able to hear it amidst the carnage, but I did.

I understood what it meant. It was the sound of a final blow that could not be mended, like the breaking of a heart or a delicate castle made of glass that I could never put back together again.

Just as quickly as it appeared, the light from the lance disappeared again. Not even it was able to harm the beast that lived at the bottom of this hole. It could only divert its attention.

That was all we needed. Lunging toward my falling mentor, I dived toward a cavern that opened from the side of the Pit of Oblivion.



I landed on my knees.

“Aghhh...!”

I felt like my entire body was being put through a blender. It was a hundred times more painful than growing pains. The outside of my body was already identical to hers. Now, the inside that connected to Mystery was shifting as well.

The foreign organs inside me now were not made from my existing cells. Each breath brought more Magical Energy cycling through my chest cavity like magma.

However, none of that seemed to matter now.

I needed to talk to someone.

“...Add!”

“Yeah?” It replied.

If I ignored the exhaustion in its voice, it almost sounded the same as usual.

“Why do you sound like you’re crying?”

“...I’m not... I’m not crying.”

I shook my head, but I understood.

No matter how Add tried to hide it from me, I knew what would happen.

By some miracle, Add managed to stay in this shape. I knew it would not last. If I had unsealed the Seal of Thirteen, nothing would have remained of this strange, talking box.

“...Gray...”

My mentor looked at me with a tense expression, as if he didn’t know what to say.

When would he learn not to make that kind of face? I really think he is a fool sometimes. I wanted to tell him that he had done nothing wrong. We had entered this maze knowing that we would lose our lives or the lives of our friends. This was all to be expected. It was stupid of him to think that this journey could be completed without making any sacrifices.

“Sir,” I said, changing the subject so I could say what he could not. “I think the last Servant of the Fifth Holy Grail War has been summoned.”

Though I didn’t manage to say “King Arthur”, my mentor knew what I meant.

“The people of your hometown always believed that the once and future king would appear again.”

Even the Atlas Institute held the baseless belief that King Arthur would be summoned again soon. The prayers of my hometown had finally been answered, even if they were now meaningless.

“...I’ve changed again.”

It was just like ten years ago, when I lost my face. From now on, what will happen to me?

My mentor averted his gaze as if he had decided on something.

“Add...”

“Hey! Don’t give me that look! Oh, wait, you always look like that. Sorry!”

At the sound of Add’s voice, my mentor’s lips trembled as if he was about to cry.

He must have been like this ever since he was a teenager. Though it was less obvious now, it was only because he had gotten better at acting.

“Gray...”

“It’s okay, Sir,” I said, forcing a smile. I was a little proud of myself for being able to do that, even if it only lasted for a moment.

“Sorry, Add looks a little tired, too. You should head on without us.”

“...Understood.”

My mentor nodded, stood up, and began to walk away.

I knew I needed to follow my mentor if Heartless was waiting for him. Fortunately, the power brimming from my body was still present. Not only that, it seemed to grow with every second to a frightening degree.

“...Can you hold on just a little longer for me?” I said, watching my mentor walk into the distance.

“Whatever you say, milady.”

Add's remark was painfully gentle. I had been accompanied by its sarcastic voice for ten years. Without it, how would I have survived the years in my hometown before my mentor came?

I think it was the one who taught me that being alive was more than breathing.

"...We're both very honest, aren't we?"

"...Yeah, I agree."

How long had it been since I last heard Add speak sincerely in the ten years that I had known it?

"Sorry, stupid Gray. I'm going to get some sleep now."

"...Okay."

I nodded and stood up. The box in my right hand had shifted into a scythe, but Add did not speak again.

I tried not to think about how I might never hear Add's voice again. I needed to focus on the reason we had entered this maze. We had pledged to succeed, no matter how much it took.

"...Ow..."

I put a hand to my stomach and wondered how long I could stay like this.

I hurriedly stood up and followed after my mentor, grateful that my friend had left me my scythe so I could still fight.



"That light—!"

"She must have used that lance," Luvia answered, not taking her eyes off of her enemy, the pitch-black chariot being pulled through the void by a pair of skeletal dragons, Hecatic Wheel.

“What are they fighting down there? It can’t be Faker, not while her Noble Phantasm is still here.” Said Seigen.

All three mages had witnessed Gray’s Noble Phantasm before, so they knew its devastating power. They had seen it tear an entire castle apart.

“That is impossible to know. This is Albion, after all. Anything can happen here.”

“—Luvia!” Seigen shouted, spreading the wings of his Mystic Code. He launched himself by kicking the walls of the pit with what was probably a Tengu art and picked Luvia up.

Luvia leaned into her intuition and released her jewels, the smell of ionized air spreading through the space.

“*Call!*”

More rainbow-colored beams shot toward the chariot. Like before, they all bounced harmlessly off. It was as if the chariot was impervious to harm.

However, Luvia had heard from Reines that Touko Aozaki might have been able to damage it. That meant there must be some way to destroy the armor system from the Age of the Gods. Mystery may have been more powerful the older it was, but that rule only applied to mystery of the same nature.

Luvia’s jewel magecraft could stack usually impossible things, turning them into something she could manipulate. Jewels that had gathered peoples’ obsession as they were passed from one owner to the other allowed her to use even stronger magecraft. Perhaps those would be able to harm the bone dragons, but they were still far from enough to defeat them.

(...As I guessed, it is taking all of our efforts just to stop it.) Luvia concluded calmly.

More valuable gemstones were crushed with each charge of the chariot. Even with Seigen and Flue’s support, Luvia’s reserves would not last forever.

She wondered what Lord El-Melloi II and his disciple were doing now and what they would lose once they met Heartless in the deepest part of Albion.

(I hope he has not forgotten my gift.) She thought.

When they first met, she had thought that he was the worst kind of mage—a despicable New Ager who stubbornly held on to mystery despite being incapable of reaching its secrets.

However, he had proven his worth. Luvia had never thought that someone could leave a positive impression on her by dismantling her magecraft and showing her how it could develop.

(That is why I trust you to succeed, tutor!)



I wondered whether this place was a fitting stage for the final act.

I looked up at the glowing ceiling above us, filled with swirling lights that made me think of the legendary World Tree. Though we were nearly entering the mantle, it glowed as brilliantly as the night sky.

Gold coins dotted a magic circle drawn on the ground, along with a clock and a silver suitcase.

“.....”

In the center of it all stood a red-haired mage and a mysterious pillar of light.

Though he surely must have known we arrived, the mage did not immediately turn to face us, making me wonder how important the pillar of light was.

“How is the Grand Roll going?” The mage asked, his back still turned to us.

“Our connection was interrupted while Ms. Inorai was speaking, which was about fifteen minutes ago. I believe they plan on waiting to see if I can stop you before they decide if they should pretend that the meeting never happened.” Came my mentor’s reply, as if he had expected Heartless’ question.

“...Oh, what a surprising turn of events.”

“I found it surprising as well.” My mentor said with a wry smile.

That was the first thing we confirmed once we had re-established communication with Reines. Though I could still understand the gist of what was happening over there, Seigen’s information-sharing magecraft had become much less accurate, either because we were deeper into the Ancient Heart or because the path was momentarily severed.

Many mysteries remained. I did not ask my mentor about them, because I didn’t think he would know either until he spoke to Heartless.

“It seems a lot will come down to these fifteen minutes, Lord El-Melloi II.”

As Heartless slowly turned, it suddenly struck me that this was only the second time I had faced him. He had pushed us around from the shadows for far longer than we had actually been in contact with him.

“What have you come here to do? Do you want to stop me?”

“Of course.”

Heartless tilted his head as if he found my mentor’s answer curious.

“Why? You should already know my motive, creating a god for mages. Not only that, the god I am creating is Divine Spirit Iskandar. There should be no reason for you to stop me.”

“I think I came to confirm it with my own eyes.” My mentor said without a hint of hesitation, as if he had prepared for this exchange on the way here.

“...I see,” Heartless said, nodding before he continued with a friendly smile. “For some reason, I had always suspected that the creature would not have been enough to stop you.”

Simply thinking of that monster made me shudder. Rhongomyniad had only managed to make it look away. Even now, with unprecedeted power flowing through me because of the summoning of King Arthur, I could not think of a way to fight it.

“You were eaten by that creature ten years ago.”

“.....”

Heartless did not respond.

“Actually, it wasn’t ten, but thirty years ago, wasn’t it?”

“...So you’ve guessed that much already.” The red-haired mage said with a somewhat troubled look.

I nearly gasped. That expression reminded me so much of my mentor. Why did I feel like these people were so similar?

“...What does that mean?”

“You’ll understand soon enough.” Said my mentor with another wry smile. Then, he turned to face Heartless. “I have something else I want to confirm. Your spell has already started operating automatically, hasn’t it?”

“Yes. At this stage, it will continue even if I die. Haha, you probably know that I spent all my reserves on this. To get this far, Faker has had to use her Noble Phantasm over and over again.” Said Heartless, looking at the silver suitcase.

My mentor looked to it as well. “Did you use that suitcase to carry the Seal-Designated mage and the holders of the Mystic Eyes that you kept in storage?”

“Oh?” Heartless said with a raised eyebrow. I stared at my mentor with increasing confusion.

“On the Rail Zeppelin, you said that you stored the entire heads of people with Mystic Eyes.”

This, I remember.

Heartless had used the technique of removing people's heads without killing them and taking information from their Mystic Eyes while he was researching the Fourth Holy Grail War.

"Mystic Eyes generate Magical Energy. They are almost like external Magic Circuits, which is why they are precious regardless of their abilities. Heartless burnt them as fuel for Faker and his magecraft."

"...Does that mean-?" I blurted out.

That meant that there used to be Mystic Eyes in that suitcase— no, there used to be living, human heads. Had Heartless tossed them all into a furnace to open a path through Albion? Did he use them to fuel the Greater Magic Formula in order to create Divine Spirit Iskandar?

My mentor continued without mentioning the cruelty of Heartless' actions.

"There are less than fourteen minutes left. if it's alright with you, I'd like to see if my guess is correct."

"Go ahead." Heartless urged.

Their conversation reminded me of a student and a teacher who were meeting each other for the first time in years. I couldn't help but feel uneasy. My mentor was in uncharted territory, after all. Maybe he shouldn't have come here.

"At first, I theorized that you weren't actually Dr. Heartless, but Kurou, Heartless' missing student."

Reines had also said this during the Grand Roll. The meeting had revolved around this theory momentarily before Asheara overturned it by admitting to the murder of Kurou, not Heartless.

"That must mean that you think differently now."

"Yes. I always thought something was wrong with that theory," replied my mentor, "When you worked behind the scenes, you acted with too much skill to be Kurou. The

same goes for this ritual. It had to have been created by the former head of the Department of Modern Magecraft himself, not a student that only studied under him for a few years.”

“I’m sure you already know Kurou’s true identity by now.”

“You mean his full name, Kurou Adashino? I’ve already confirmed that with Hishiri Adashino. Though the Adashino family’s magecraft is unique, it is nowhere close to the advanced techniques of a department head.”

Kurou Adashino. That name had probably been the most surprising revelation during the Grand Roll. I had never expected Hishiri’s older brother to be one of Heartless’ students.

With that as a premise, my mentor changed the subject.

“Dr. Heartless, we’ve already spoken to Dr. Gurrot, the doctor who saved you many years ago.”

For a moment, Heartless seemed shocked by my mentor’s words.

“...I should have expected you to track him down.”

“A friend of mine told me about him.”

I wondered how much weight was packed in the word “friend”.

My mentor was talking about the last video that Atrum Galliasta had left us. The first time we met Atrum, he had left an awful impression, to say the least. His ever-present arrogance made him a natural enemy of my mentor.

And yet, he had left us something after his death.

“‘Dedicate your life to the most radiant thing.’ You told Dr. Gurrot that, right?”

“Yes. Quite so.”

“The doctor also told us about something strange,” my mentor said, raising a finger,  
“He contracted a mysterious illness while he sheltered you.”

Oh, right, He did say that, I thought. While I had almost forgotten about it, my mentor had linked it to a theory.

“I heard that you healed him with a touch.”

“.....”

Unease flickered across Heartless’ face for the first time. Catching this as well, my mentor immediately followed up with more questions.

“You gained those abilities when you were spirited away by fairies, right?”

My mentor’s words seemed to shake the air.

“There are records of your special abilities, but no one in the Clock Tower knows exactly what they are. Maybe Mr. Norwich learned of it when he adopted you, but nothing can persuade him to speak against his adoptive children.”

“...Yes, Mr. Norwich is that kind of person,” Heartless affirmed with a nod.

Despite their differences, it seemed both Heartless and my mentor greatly admired the character of the person the Department of Modern Magecraft was named after. Right now, though, I cared more about Heartless’ abilities.

“...So what exactly happened on the Rail Zeppelin?”

Heartless had used the powers he acquired from fairies to summon the Child of Einnashe to block the tracks of the Rail Zeppelin.

—“I don’t have an Imaginary Number Attribute, but I can do similar things, which I exchanged my heart for.”

He had said something along those lines.

“It’s exactly as he said. Though children who are spirited away are usually given both blessings and curses, Heartless was only given a curse. The doctor told me that no instrument could locate your heart. There must be some kind of alternate space in its place created with imaginary number magecraft, which resembles a portal.”

“Correct,” Heartless affirmed again. “Hahaha, that’s why I feel like I will die every time I use it. Don’t you find it unfair for someone called Heartless to have to experience the pain of having his heart split open?”

“What’s more,” my mentor said, the pillar of light beside him casting a shadow on his face. “I don’t think the doctor lost his sight. I think it was stolen from him.”

“Stolen...?”

My mentor smiled softly at my question.

“That is the effect of those Mystic Eyes. Or, perhaps I should say that it’s become the effect of those Mystic Eyes. I missed something critical on the Rail Zeppelin. Gray, do you remember what Olgamarie’s servant said back then?”

“...You mean, the woman with Mystic Eyes of Precognition, who was killed?”

“Yes. She said that Rainbow-ranked Mystic Eyes would appear in the Auction, right?”

“...!”

For a moment, I forgot how to breathe.

If I recalled correctly, Rainbow was the highest rank of Mystic Eyes. But the best Mystic Eyes sold in the auction were Karabo’s Mystic Eyes of Transience, which were Jewel-ranked.

“But, Trisha said that she could only see the most likely future... right?”

Yes. She had probably said that. That was why she had gotten Jewel-ranked Mystic Eyes mixed up with Rainbow-ranked ones. That was probably it.

“Initially, I also thought that was the explanation. But we were tricked. ...You must find this strange as well, Heartless.”

“.....”

Heartless remained silent, so my mentor chose this as a point to attack from.

“We have already established that you have preserved the entire heads of Mystic Eye holders.”

“So?” Heartless said, turning to look at the silver suitcase again.

“The fact that you kept their entire heads is the key. Back on the Rail Zeppelin, I thought that you wanted to ask the holder about the information they obtained through their Mystic Eyes. But you don’t need to. You have a much faster means than that.”

A shiver ran down my spine. Did my mentor have to continue? Did he have to reveal the truth, which I could scarcely imagine?

“What if you have Mystic Eyes that can usurp the vision of others?” He said, steepling his fingers as his words landed like knives.

That explained why Heartless cured the doctor’s vision with a touch. Was that what his Mystic Eyes truly were?

“For simplicity’s sake, let’s call them the Mystic Eyes of Usurpation for now. They can usurp the vision of anything next to them, even Rainbow-ranked Mystic Eyes. That’s why the beast noticed our insignificant presence. You usurped its vision.”

“...!”

So that was why it had noticed us, even though we held our breaths, and why my mentor said someone had guided its line of sight.

“That is why Trisha predicted that Rainbow-ranked Mystic Eyes would appear in the auction. It’s easy to become confused by predictions that appear unconsciously. Her Mystic Eyes didn’t use logical reasoning to construct theories, so Trisha couldn’t

differentiate between someone with Rainbow-ranked Mystic Eyes, and someone with Mystic Eyes that could usurp the vision of Rainbow-ranked Mystic Eyes.”

“...Good grief, I can’t hide anything from you, can I?” Heartless said with a smile that all but confirmed my mentor was correct.

“You didn’t use them on the Rail Zeppelin. Is that because you have trouble controlling them?”

“They aren’t the kind of Mystic Eyes to be casually used in battle, you know. They would have added to the chaos, making the situation less favorable for Faker. Besides, there was no need for me to win.”

Heartless had already achieved his goal when he summoned Faker. He only fought us because he couldn’t control Faker.

My mentor took a deep breath and continued.

“Ten minutes left. Let’s return to the beginning.”

Even someone like my mentor could use his Magic Circuits to keep track of time.

“As Touko Aozaki revealed in the Grand Roll, Kurou’s ability to find portals that link to Albion comes from a combination of the Adashino family’s magecraft and the dead dragon’s eyes. That is to say, after you were spirited away, your Mystic Eyes of Usurpation began to perform essentially the same function.”

“...Huh?”

I gave up. I couldn’t understand any of this. Wasn’t Kurou’s special ability searching for portals? What did it have to do with Heartless? Surely it had nothing to do with him.

“What do you mean, Sir?”

“It took me so long to arrive at this conclusion. In fact, I only became sure of it after we entered Albion. What Reines said about Dr. Heartless’ true identity being Kurou isn’t wrong, but it isn’t accurate either.”

“.....”

Heartless smiled silently.

“That’s because Dr. Heartless was always Kurou.”



I could no longer keep up with this turn of events.

Didn’t Asheara’s confession rule out the possibility that the Dr. Heartless we knew was actually Kurou? Why did the possibility return again?

Wait, no. My mentor said he “was always” Kurou. What did that mean? Even though the answer was already right in front of me, I found it hard to accept.

“Thirty years ago, Dr. Gurrot saved a dying man known as Heartless, who lost his memory after being injured,” said my mentor. “What if that man was actually Kurou, who was betrayed by his friends ten years ago?”

“...What?” I found myself exclaiming in disbelief.

That was impossible. The order was wrong! How could a betrayal that happened ten years ago happen thirty years ago? What was my mentor trying to prove?

“Yes, the order is wrong,” my mentor continued, as if he could read my mind, “The problem is that Kurou had the means to travel from Albion to the surface. If Asheara was telling the truth, the betrayal took place in Albion. In his dying moments, Kurou must have found another portal. He tried to escape to the surface, but he went the other way instead.”

My mentor pointed downward.

“What if that portal led down the Pit of Oblivion, and into the Fairy Realm?”

The Fairy Realm.

The deepest part of Spirit Tomb Albion, even further down than the Ancient Heart.

“It’s impossible to know what exactly happened there. The mysteries of fairies are still mostly unknown to us mages. We do know some things, though. For instance, we know that people who are spirited away can jump between time and space.”

My mentor had said something similar in the office of the doctor who sheltered Heartless.

“—The tale of Urashimatarou from the Far East is a classic example of this, where the abducted person is taken to a completely different time and place.”

Not only that, but Sir Kay had also told me while we explored Albion that time and space were fuzzy here.

Was that enough to prove that it was possible?

“Most people would probably be baffled by it, which is why I didn’t tell Reines. If she brought this up during the Grand Roll, no one would be able to take her seriously.”

I suspected that another reason he hadn’t told Reines everything was that he wasn’t sure about it himself, either.

“Sure, it sounds absurd. But we are both mages.” My mentor said, looking Heartless in the eye. “Kurou didn’t necessarily find the portal. If you were always Kurou, you could have helped him find it with your abilities, since you went through it before.”

“You mean... Heartless sent a dying Kurou into the Fairy Realm?”

“Exactly. Ten years ago, after he was eaten by the monster, Kurou was spirited away and traveled twenty years into the past. I can’t guess how exactly being spirited away changed you. When did you retrieve your lost memories? Was it when you assumed the name Heartless? Was it when you met your past self, Kurou? Or, was it when you were betrayed, and Kurou was almost killed?”

“.....”

I was stunned.

On the surface, it resembled the incident in my hometown. Logos React, one of the Seven Superweapons of the Altas Institute, had created a reenactment of the past and sent me and my mentor into it. But this was different. Although this was a remote corner of a labyrinth filled with unknowable secrets, this was the real world, not a virtual one. Was it even possible? Even if it was, what about time paradoxes?

“...I’m impressed.” Said Dr. Heartless, who was Kurou, who was Kurou Adashino.

Like a circle set into place long ago, the parts of an equation were sliding into place.

“Time travel falls under the realm of magic. Though our magecraft cannot reach it, it still exists as a form of Mystery. After all, some of the Five Magics have similar effects. We also witnessed Logos React in Gray’s hometown.”

“But wasn’t that just a reenactment of the past?” Heartless asked, voicing the same question I had.

“Yes, it was nothing more than that,” my mentor said with a nod, “But it helped me realize the possibility. When I read your essay in the reenactment, I saw that you were researching several spells besides the one about Divine Spirit Iskandar. Unfortunately, I only realized their significance after I entered the labyrinth.”

“...I see. But I abandoned those ideas a long time ago. In theory, it should be possible to travel back in time by observing the past through Reverse Summoning— though Rayshifting is a more appropriate term. However, to stabilize this kind of time travel, I would need the full support of the Atlas Institute and the secrets of a prestigious family that has produced many Lords at the very least. Hahaha, that alone is already impossible. On top of that, I would have to win a Holy Grail War to find enough money to finance the facilities and experiments required. Even then, only a limited number of people are naturally endowed with the qualities that allow them to go back in time.” Heartless confessed without hesitation.

Every word he uttered would probably be stunning to a true mage, but my mentor merely took a small breath.

“Good,” he said. “I was afraid you were just going to call me delusional.”

“You must know the identity of my accomplice by now.”

“If you mean the one in the Grand Roll, it’s Inorai, isn’t it?” My mentor revealed plainly. “It’s just a simple process of elimination. Since McDonell’s daughter killed Heartless’ student, I don’t imagine McDonell would ally with you. Lord Eulyphis is a steadfast member of the Aristocratic Faction, so he would never agree to help bring back the Age of the Gods. I hesitated for a while between Olgamarie and Inorai, but surely the Lord himself would appear if you joined hands with the Department of Astromancy(Animusphere).

“Ms. Inorai doesn’t have any complicated ideology. She only supported you because it would benefit her. Gaining power is like breathing to her. I’m sure she weaves schemes without any malice.”

“Ms. Inorai has always been like that, after all.”

“Even now, she is still urging the Department of Modern Magecraft to switch sides and join the Democratic Faction,” my mentor said, closing one eye. “However, Ms. Inorai does not care if you succeed. Either way, she has full control over the situation. As for McDonell, he probably suspects that you have been working with Inorai.”

“McDonell also knows...?” I parroted.

My mentor nodded.

“That’s why Reines stopped looking for the culprit. Since we already know the culprit’s identity, cutting off her retreat would only needlessly antagonize her. At worst, it would damage our reputation because we tricked McDonell, but that is easily repairable. It’s a natural decision to make when dealing with Lords.”

Exactly how many layers of speculation and intrigue shrouded that meeting? Even with his explanation, I couldn’t understand half of what was going on.

Heartless looked up and then closed his eyes. The dome above us showered his face with light.

“You are not a detective. Your role is not to convict someone of a crime. All you do is dissect cases out of necessity.”

That was why he did not reveal the culprit or seek justice.

All he did was dissect the case, as if he were taking the gears from a clockwork machine, rendering the core of his beloved mystery meaningless.

“So? What do you think is my whydunnit?” Heartless asked, somewhat mischievously.

This was the same strange duality I had seen in him the first time we met. Maybe it was because he was both Kurou and Heartless.

“By traveling through time, you were able to watch over Albion and the Clock Tower from both the student’s perspective of Kurou and the teacher’s perspective of Heartless, which means that you were betrayed by your students and friends twice,” my mentor said sternly, “And the lesson(whydunit) you learned from that experience was that it doesn’t matter how many times they betrayed you.”

“An excellent answer,” Heartless said, clapping. “I did nothing wrong. Asheara, Gesell, Jorek, and Calugh did nothing wrong, either.”

Those were the names of Kurou’s former teammates, the mages who had betrayed and attempted to kill him. Apart from Asheara, Kurou/Heartless had taken revenge on all of them.

“...We were a wonderful team back then. Asheara was my childhood friend. Gesell was a reliable alchemist who could use potions. Jorek and Calugh filled in for what I lacked, acting as reliable fighters and mood makers. All of them were also my beloved students.”

Kurou/Heartless accompanied them from two perspectives, sharing life and death with them in Albion and discussing the secrets of magecraft with them in the classroom. They had accompanied him and ultimately betrayed him.

“In that case, the fault lies with the state of the world of magecraft that forced them to betray me. Yes, that’s where the tumor lies.”

...Ah, we had finally arrived here.

This was Dr. Heartless' whydunit. His ritual to bring back the Age of the Gods and setup of the stage in Albion were merely means to this end.

After a few seconds, my mentor continued.

“...You aren’t bringing back the Age of the Gods to save the New Age. Your motto has always been to dedicate your life to the most radiant thing, but you have already lost your most radiant thing. This is what you must do to compensate for its loss. Instead of trying to recover it, you turned your hate to the fools who stole it from you; except, those ‘fools’ are not humans, but the world of magecraft. You just want to use the revival of the Age of the Gods as a bomb to destroy every trace of it.”

I suddenly remembered something.

In the past, I spoke to Faker twice.

She said that she hated her former comrades for starting the Wars of the Diadochi. Perhaps it was because they were all dead that she wished to make her king a God in compensation.

In that case, weren’t the anger that she and Heartless carried the same?

“Exactly,” Heartless said, nodding again. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“I don’t,” my mentor replied, shaking his head, “But I must stop you nonetheless. I have no noble principles to guide me, nor rewards to reap that would justify my gamble. I simply cannot allow my students’ futures to be at the mercy of your destructive impulse.”

“...Stop me, you say?” Heartless said, smiling as if my mentor had said something humorous, “There is no point in stopping me now. I have already ‘stopped’. The baton is in her hands now. My god will do the rest.”

—Just as Heartless was about to finish, something stood up in the pillar of light behind him.



“It” opened its eyes painfully slowly, over the course of what must have been several years.

Humans and gods did not perceive time the same way. Gods lived within an entirely different dimension. They were entirely different from humans because they did not care about perceiving human activity— Or, perhaps because they perceived it too well.

“It” no longer thought of itself as humans did.

Heartless called this method of reconnecting Servants with the Throne of Heroes Shadow Ascension. The Ghost Liner that contained information about Faker and her class had already been altered with records about Faker and Iskandar.

The scale of the records expanded far beyond the limits of a Servant, especially one who was originally only one aspect of a Hero. It grew until it could become an object of faith, a Divine Spirit.

“It” was Divine Spirit Iskandar, the cumulation of Iskandar’s experiences and the millennia of worship. On its other side, it was the experiences of Faker and the few short hours that a certain mage had prayed to her.

—And then, “it” saw the world.



In an instant, our surroundings changed. An expanse of red sand replaced Albion and the circle that Heartless had drawn.

“What...?”

I frantically scanned my surroundings. Not only had the ground changed, but we were also surrounded by so many soldiers that they seemed to stretch beyond the horizon. They were dressed in armor from various cultures. Some held spears, while others rode horses.

“...Ionioi Hetairoi(the Army of the King)...” uttered my mentor.

I had heard this name before. It was the unorthodox Noble Phantasm that Iskandar wielded when he manifested as a Servant, a call to the tens of thousands of soldiers that had fought by his side.

Were they all here to bless his awakening as a Divine Spirit?

As I pondered this, I saw a tall, glowing figure atop a horse in the center of the rows of soldiers. It was Divine Spirit Iskandar.

I could not perceive the figure properly.

Though their heights and builds were far from similar, looking at him reminded me both of Faker and the stories I had been told of Iskandar. Even though I was now infinitely close to a Servant because of the summoning of King Arthur, I could not look straight at that being. My eyes could only translate the excess of information they were receiving as a dazzling light.

“...So this is what a Divine Spirit is like.” Exclaimed Heartless in a voice filled with unconcealed glee.

Just as he had wished, the magecraft of the Age of the Gods had returned. Thus, the world ruled over by the Clock Tower’s Aristocratic Faction had come to an end.

After a moment, my mentor spoke.

“In a Holy Grail War, Masters are the core of Servants. No matter how strong the Servant is, their Magical Energy will rapidly deplete if they lose their Master. Does this also apply to Divine Spirits?”

“You want to know whether Divine Spirit Iskandar will disappear if you kill me? That’s a foolish question coming from you. No, he will not. I have already given many New Agers on the surface golden coins. They will not agree with you,” Heartless said with a wry smile. “All mages with Golden Staters are linked with pathways similar to the bond between a Servant and a Master. Naturally, they can also act as generators.”

“...So that means I am also one of Divine Spirit Iskandar’s Masters.” My mentor said, clenching his coin and biting his lip.

“Is that surprising?”

“No. In fact, I’m finally relieved.”

My mentor casually dusted off his suit. He then turned to the Divine Spirit.

“What are you going to do now?”

“Rider...” My mentor said, striding towards the glowing Iskandar.

“He has no memory of fighting alongside you in the Fourth Holy Grail War. Iskandar, the Heroic Spirit and Iskandar, the Divine Spirit are nothing more than two beings that share the same source. Gods do not care about your sentiments.”

I wondered if my mentor heard Heartless. Either way, he continued as if he was walking on air, as if he were a man of faith on the cusp of death in a desert, who just discovered a blessed oasis. Even if the oasis itself was only an illusion conjured by his desperate mind, the salvation he felt was not.

My mentor removed one of the gloves he had been wearing since we entered Albion.

“What...!?”

“Huh...?”

Heartless and I were both shocked. It was impossible, and yet it was right in front of our eyes.

A single, strange, red stroke glowed on the back of his hand— a single Command Spell!

“How...Lord El-Melloi II, where did you get that from...?!”

“The Third Holy Grail War.”

That was hardly an answer, but I understood because I was there when Luvia gave my mentor a jewel box that she called her tuition. She had said then that her relatives once participated in the Third Holy Grail War.

Considering that they were the relative of the self-proclaimed most elegant hunter, or perhaps hyena in the world, it wasn't difficult for me to imagine that they preserved their Command Spell and brought it back to their homeland.

“You said I am also a Master right, Heartless?”

“Stop!” Heartless shouted for the first time, realizing what my mentor intended to do. He raised his hand and fired magic bullets at my mentor.

“—I won’t let you do that!” I shouted in response, leaping up and blocking every one of his attacks with my scythe.

Along with my unprecedented agility, I also felt unprecedented pain. My body was filled to the brim with energy as I became closer to King Arthur, but that strength came with a price.

Divine Spirit Iskandar was key to this. The Magical Energy released during his ascension was burning our Magic Circuits.

My mentor was probably in more pain than I was now. His Magic Circuits were not as strong as mine, so he must have been tormented by pain more intense than the flames of hell with every step he took.

“...You said you wanted a physical form, right?”

Though I couldn't see my mentor's face, I realized through my heightened senses that there were tears in his eyes.

“Sorry, Rider. I wanted your wish to come true.”

“Stop! Stop, Lord El-Melloi II!”

My mentor acted as if he couldn't hear Heartless' desperate cries at all.

“Sir...”

I remembered that my mentor once said that he wanted to summon Iskandar again in the Fifth Holy Grail War to prove that the Servant was capable of winning. That was

definitely not a lie. It was the atonement for his immaturity and foolishness that my mentor had sought for so long.

However, there was another wish buried deep inside his heart.

Heartless had summoned Divine Spirit Iskandar as a tool. Faker had reincarnated him because she wanted him to be worshipped as a god. But, in the end, what my mentor wanted was...

“I really wished that your wish would be granted. I really did.” My mentor said in an unusually calm voice.

It was the first time I heard him speak like this.

Without any orders, the soldiers had not moved. Divine Spirit Iskandar also stood completely still, just as he had been when he was first summoned. Was this how newly born Divine Spirits were?

Heartless began to run, and I raced to intercept him.

I needed to protect my mentor, even if just for a moment. That was why I was here. It was what I wished for from the bottom of my heart.

“You’re always so impatient, always barging into places before you’re ready, making a mess, and then leaving,” my mentor said as he walked.

The pain from my Magic Circuits became less important than something that was rising in my heart.



“Shut up and wait for once, will you? Just laugh like you always do and watch me from a distance. I promise I’ll get there one day. You can pat me on the back when I do, you idiot.”

Maybe there was some other way.

My mentor had complained countless times that “if only he was a proper mage”, or “if only he was as skilled as the other Lords”.

But still.

“A promise is a promise, even if no one believes me. I don’t even believe in myself. I know I don’t have the capacity to become a Heroic Spirit.”

Each word my mentor spoke was like a drop of his blood.

“But I will spend my life trying to reach you.”

Each step he took seemed to contain a part of his soul.

“Because I am your Master... and your subject... You are my king...”

Now, I could see his face. He looked as if he was going to break down in tears.

“And also...my friend...”

He slowly raised his right hand.

The final stroke on it glowed red as tears flowed from his face.

“By my Command Spell, I order you.”

“Stop, Waver Velvet—!”

Heartless also raised his hand.

He was probably also going to use his last Command Spell to command the Divine Spirit. However, before he could do that, I sliced it from his arm with my scythe. The severed hand flew through the air with a spray of blood.

“Leave, Rider!”

My mentor had called him Rider. Not Divine Spirit Iskandar, but the title of the Saint Graph that he had once summoned.

Regardless, his intention reached its now divine target.



“Ah...”

I heard something that my mentor could not have.

It was a thought that only I, as a grave keeper of Blackmore Graveyard who was too sensitive to spirits, could perceive.

For the first time in my life, I was grateful for my constitution for letting me hear that voice—



Our surroundings returned to normal just as quickly as they had changed.

“Sir!”

The red desert disappeared before I called out, sending us back into the Ancient Heart. The chamber was still showered in the white light of the dead dragon’s Magic Circuits, as if nothing had happened here.

“...What an idiot,” said my mentor, his eyes fixed upward toward the dome of the Ancient Heart, “Couldn’t you have listened to me before?”

Though the words themselves were lighthearted, he spoke in a heavy voice.

“...Lord El-Melloi II...!” Came a voice.

Heartless lay on the floor, clutching where his hand had been severed from his arm. Another person had returned to the room.

“Why...?” The woman cried out. “Why have you used your last command spell to summon me, Heartless?”

“Faker...!”

I watched, mouth agape, as the dark-haired warrior helped Heartless climb to his feet. Before, or perhaps even after his hand was cut off, his Command Spell had managed to establish a path and carry out his order to separate Faker from the core of Divine Spirit Iskandar.

I didn’t know how such a thing was possible. All I knew was that he did it.

“If you used your Command Spell, there was a good chance that Lord El-Melloi II’s command would have been ignored, and the Age of Gods would be brought back. Why did you do this?”

“Good question...” Heartless said, frowning. “I think in the moment that I thought I might not be able to stop him, I realized that I would rather meet you again than complete the Greater Magic Formula.”

“.....”

I think I understood this.

Kurou/Heartless had been betrayed by his teammates, both as their friend and as their teacher. That was why he resented the world of magecraft. Contrary to her name, Faker was the only person who had not betrayed him.

So, what if that was what Heartless really wanted...?

“...Sir.”

I braced myself for a fight and held my scythe with a different hand. But my mentor patted my shoulder and shook his head.

“You’ve done enough, Gray. Heartless’ magecraft has already...”

“...Haha, even now, you continue to see right through me.” Heartless said with a troubled smile.

In order to create this Greater Magecraft Formula, Heartless had used Faker’s Noble Phantasm multiple times. Though he had burnt up Mystic Eye Holders to replenish his Magical Energy, he could not be unaffected. Heartless had already reached his limit.

If that was not the case, he would have done more than fire a few magic bullets at my mentor.

“The magecraft that has taken you ten— no, thirty years is over,” my mentor announced. “If you would prefer it, the El-Melloi Faction can take custody of you. At the very least, I think I can guarantee you better treatment than the other factions.”

“How thoughtful of you. If Ms. Inorai made the same offer, she would definitely be thinking about some kind of plot, but I trust that your intentions are pure. That isn’t a good quality for someone in the Clock Tower to have, you know.”

“I am fully aware of that.”

Heartless smiled at the sight of my mentor’s sour face.

“I don’t want to rot in that kind of place. Especially not under your watch. ...Faker?”

“What?”

“Help me stand up.”

Heartless stood with one arm on Faker’s shoulder. His other arm brought to his chest, he muttered something that may have been “Turn, my heart.”

With that, the two vanished.

Heartless had used the portal that replaced his heart to teleport. But...

“...That kind of mystery would kill you even in the best of circumstances.”

My mentor’s mutterings matched my thoughts.

“It seems he’s made his choice.”

Heartless had decided to bring everything to an end.

Where were he and Faker now? Where would the man who was both Heartless and Kurou wish to go at the end of his strange life?

My mentor grasped at his upper arm, perhaps because the pain of having his Magic Circuits burned had not yet subsided.

“Two minutes left. Hopefully they’ve given up on the Grand Roll as they promised. I thought there was nothing to lose... but so much was lost.”

“I think...those two...”

Before I could finish that thought, I felt something strange happen around my hand. My mentor turned around as if he noticed it as well.

“What is it?”

“Add is...”

I raised my scythe with trembling hands as it began to glow faintly.



In a research facility on the surface, a teenager looked down at the floor.

To be precise, he looked beyond the floor, as if he could see deep into the earth.

“What’s wrong, Le Chien-kun?” Flat asked, tilting his head.

Flat and Svin were currently organizing the archives, as Reines had instructed. After all, she couldn’t ask the teachers to organize and destroy documents according to the results of the Grand Roll. Their work would be useless if things went awry during the Grand Roll. If it went horribly, maybe the entire Department of Modern Magecraft would be destroyed. Of course, Flat didn’t care about these things, and Svin put his teacher before his morals. That was why they had been chosen for this job.

The corner of Svin’s lips twitched in disapproval. “Don’t call me that. ... I think I just smelled the scent of the end.”

“The scent of the end.”

Flat knew that his classmate had not smelled an actual scent. Svin had perceived the tangle of cause and effect, which he believed was a scent, possibly because his brain was wired that way.

For that reason, Flat nodded.

“If Le Chien-kun says so, it must be true!”

Outside the window behind him, a shooting star streaked through the night sky.



Two people sat in the corner of a London bar.

The bar was only known to those with deep connections to mystery. It was so dimly lit that navigating it was impossible without enhanced vision. The seats were spaced in consideration of camouflage magecraft, should patrons wish to keep themselves hidden.

The two that were gathered here tonight were a strange pair. One was a girl with hair dyed a bright pink, a star-shaped patch over one of her eyes. The other was a silver-haired man with a violin case at his feet.

They were Yvette L. Lehrman and Melvin Weinz.

“Ah, the Grand Roll should be over by now, shouldn’t it?”

“It’s about time.” Melvin replied with a glass of wine in his hand.

There was a bloodstained handkerchief on the corner of the table, indicating that he had vomited blood, as usual.

“I’m sure you know something about the situation in the Democratic Faction. After all, you’re from a branch of the Trambelio family.”

“I intend to collect as little information as possible this time around.”

At Melvin’s reply, Yvette peered deeply at him, as though looking into his heart.

“Is that so you don’t accidentally betray your friend?”

“Of course. I am a man of deep friendship, after all!”

“I don’t think people of deep friendship accidentally betray their friends, but sure, whatever you say,” commented Yvette, yawning. “The trouble is that it’s true. You only invited me here because you wouldn’t mind if you betrayed me, would you?”

“Precisely. You’d also betray me at any time, right?”

“We’re mages. Obviously.”

For residents of the Clock Tower, this was a normal way of thinking, so Yvette was no longer ashamed of herself. This was why she took such great interest in people like Lord El-Melloi II and Gray, those weird heretics who thought so differently.

“I spoke with Gray on a snowy night, before Christmas,” said Melvin, “I couldn’t help but be a bit mean to her and let slip that Waver hadn’t chosen to become Lord El-Melloi II of his own will. Oh, and I also told her that he only does what Reines asks of him because she took the Velvet family’s mediocre Magic Crest as insurance.”

“How did she take that?”

“She didn’t say anything,” Melvin said, shrugging as though it still surprised him, “All she said was that Waver would remain her mentor, even if he were to stop being Lord El-Melloi II. That the same went for all his other students.”

“How childish of her.” Yvette replied in a singsong, a hint of admiration in her voice.  
“What an idiot.”

Instead of replying, Melvin lifted his glass and took a sip of golden Noble Rot wine[1].

“Hey, Waver,” he whispered, “Have you reached the dream that surprised me back then? That you’d chase after, no matter what it took?”

No one heard his whisper, so no one knew when he finished speaking, but it just so happened that at this moment, a star flew through the night.



It was a quiet night. A night so quiet, that everything seemed still.

Everything, but for a single shooting star, crossing the sky like the tear of a dream.

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[1] A type of sweet wine made from grapes affected by a fungus called *Botrytis cinerea*.

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◆終章◆

~Epilogue~



There was a diurnal cycle in Albion as well.

To be precise, it was probably only the case on the first layer, where the Mining City was situated.

Though the only thing that marked the difference between day and night was the brightness of the glowing dome, the change had been carefully planned by the Arcane Dissection Division based on a paper about increasing work efficiency.

Currently, it was the middle of the “night”.

On a hill some distance from the city stood a figure.

“Is this place alright?” Faker said, laying down the man she was carrying.

Though to all appearances the gesture seemed brusque, she was gentle as she placed him onto a rock. Heartless breathed several short, pained breaths that sounded like his last and opened his eyes slightly.

“It’s beautiful.” He said, smiling.

The lights of the Mining City shone like the stars above would on the surface, but they seemed all the brighter because of the absence of stars in this “sky”.

“Kurou used to love this sight. But he also wished to see the real sky,” said Heartless.  
“...Ah, he was so happy when he first came to London. He never would have thought that the department head he met was actually himself.”

He laughed shakily, a strange expression on his face.

If this was fate, it was a little too ironic to bear.

As both Kurou and Heartless, it was only natural that he felt something special as he looked upon the city. Heartless’ past as a young man had long left him, while Kurou’s future as an adult had slipped from his fingers.

“You really have no reservations about drowning yourself in nostalgia,” said Faker, sitting down so she could gaze at the city from the same perspective as Heartless. “If you die, I shall disappear as well.”

“...Yes. Since the spell has been taken apart, I’m your only Master. If I, the keystone, die, you have no choice but to disappear.”

“You truly are a terrible Master,” Faker criticized with the same expression as before. “You summoned a Servant for something other than the Holy Grail War. You told me that you sought to grant your wish, but you backed down at the last moment to rescue me. I thought that at least you might seek your revenge, but instead you fled. What in the world have you to say for yourself?”

“Hahaha. I have nothing.”

Heartless nodded; there was no denying Faker’s words. It was clear that he was not going to live for long. Such was the result of using his heart as a portal after having exhausted his Od.

There was suddenly a light sound. Faker had flicked Heartless’ forehead with her forefinger.

“I did say that I do not hate a weak expression such as yours. I must see you when you drink,” Faker said, taking a small bottle of wine from Heartless, who looked a little surprised. “Let us drink as you promised me.”

“A promise is a promise.”

At Faker’s urging, Heartless took a single sip of his wine. Satisfied, Faker drank hers in large gulps.

“I am glad that I met you, even though all I gained in the end was this wine.”

A cool breeze caressed the hills, ruffling the warrior’s black hair as it passed by.

After some more wine, Faker suddenly spoke up.

“Did you keep your relationship with Kurou a secret because you did not trust me? If so, you played the part of a stranger poorly.”

“I was just trying to be honest. My memories as Kurou are vivid, but they feel like they happened in another life. Haha, I’m like a ghost motivated by my previous incarnation. How could I confide in anyone about something as silly as that?” Heartless confessed through pained breaths.

Though it had lost all its color, his face carried a trace of happiness.

“You look like you enjoy being with me. That must mean that I really am a ghost.”

“Yes. You are correct.” Faker said with a nod. Her eyes were fixed out into the night, as though she didn’t care about the pain her master suffered. “This place is one of the ends of the world, is it not? That means I have seen something with you that even my king did not. Though it was only for a moment, I dreamt that my king had become a Divine Spirit. I know I will lose those memories should I be summoned again, but...”

Faker turned. Heartless’ face was reflected in her heterochromatic eyes.

“Even if in the end we are both nameless ghosts forgotten by the world, my journey with you has been meaningful, Heartless.”

“...I’m glad you think so.”

Perhaps because he didn’t even have the energy to smile anymore, his reply seemed to fall to the ground.

“I don’t completely agree with you, though.” He denied, lowering his head. Continuing, Heartless spoke in the same even tone any normal teacher might have used, “What you said gives me meaning, even though you are about to disappear, and I am about to die. Actually, I’ve already died.”

“.....”

Faker held her breath as if she had something she wanted to say.

But she didn’t speak again, because Heartless never did, either.

“Goodnight, Heartless, the man who forgot his dreams.” She said, closing his eyes with her pale fingers.

Faker took a final sip of wine and pressed her lips to Heartless’.

His throat quivered a little.

Then, everything melted into the fog of the night.



The uproar in the Clock Tower calmed down after a while, probably because all three factions decided to pretend that it never happened. Though I didn’t know what Touko had told the neutral Faction, all that mattered was that, by some miracle, they agreed.

The Aristocratic Faction also sent a few construction workers and mages to Slur Street, and in a matter of days had completely restored it to its former state as a demonstration of the faction’s power. Or, I suppose I should say that it was a demonstration of the difference in our power.

In any case, I was lying on the office’s table and complaining, as I had been doing ever since the Grand Roll ended.

I was exhausted, utterly exhausted.

“Hey, elder brother,” I called out, rubbing my shoulder, which was on the brink of falling apart. “I feel like I’m about to die, so would you mind handling the rest of the work for me?”

“I’m sure you will work until the moment you die, sister.”

What a heartless response. I, his little sister, had gone through so much in the meeting while he was gallivanting through the maze. Did he have dry ice in his veins instead of blood?

After the Grand Roll, my brother reunited with his companions in the Ancient Heart and used the same portal as I had to return to the Mining City. Of course, there was a checkpoint on the route from Spirit Tomb Albion to the surface, but that was handled

under the pretense that the Grand Roll never took place. Heartless' talismans and bags had also been taken care of. My brother had only just returned after a week of checkups, possibly because they were afraid he would bring some kind of germ to the surface.

As usual, or even more so than usual, seeing the wrinkles on his forehead was a great source of respite.

“Whatever the case may be, it’s better than rotting in a place like that.” My brother said as he read from a large pile of documents.

Either way, I had no choice but to continue efficiently organizing documents that were as boring as my brother. This time, though, the problem was different.

After signing his name on a few papers, my brother turned to the person sitting on the sofa beside us.

“Right, Hishiri Adashino?”

“Well, what do I know? Some mages would much rather rot in Albion,” said the furisode-clad woman.

She had received a report from the Department of Law and was examining it closely.

Though I said that, her presence was little more than a formality. Because we had decided to destroy all the records of the Grand Roll, all of the numbers were made up. It was ridiculous that we had to double-check fake numbers, but we needed to make sure that they were convincing. Real numbers could scare people just because they were real. To make fake ones achieve the same effect, we needed to dress them up.

After a time, my brother spoke up.

“Are you satisfied now?”

“...I suppose I am no longer dissatisfied,” Hishiri said with a hint of hesitation.

Heartless’ body had yet to be found. I didn’t know where he teleported to, but it must have been somewhere inside Spirit Tomb Albion. Surely the factions that knew he

planned on bringing back the magecraft of the Age of the Gods were scouring the labyrinth for anything he left behind. I wondered what they would find.

“What will you do if you find Kurou Adashino?” My brother asked.

“I’m not sure. Isn’t that strange?”

“No, it isn’t.”

Hishiri smiled at my mentor’s answer.

“It wasn’t until I became a student of the Department of Law that I realized that Heartless’ student might be my brother. There is only so much that one can entrust to a newcomer, but it just so happened that I was put in charge of the Department of Modern Magecraft.”

I see, I thought as I listened in on their conversation.

The fact that she was Norwich’s adopted daughter must have played a part in that decision as well. Norwich was connected to the Department of Modern Magecraft— it was named after him, after all. Though it wasn’t an official way of getting a position, personal connections were important in society.

“Exploring past incidents, I soon realized that Kurou might be Kurou Adashino. It was a natural conclusion to come to. I also noticed immediately that my brother and Heartless had disappeared at the same time. But why? I wanted to find out about him. I first considered that my brother and Heartless might have switched places.”

“It’s only natural to want to learn more about your sibling.”

It was a clichéd thing for an older brother to say, but it served its purpose here. At least, it didn’t make me have to force back a look of exasperation.

“Lord El-Melloi II,” Hishiri called out, “What would Kurou Adashino - or Heartless - have thought of me?”

“Well...”

My brother paused in the middle of a signature as he thought of what to say.

Trimmau spoke before he could.

“Miss, you have a visitor.”

The door to the office opened a few seconds later.

“Oh, you’re here as well.” Said the new arrival, smiling pleasantly at the sight of Hishiri.

My brother stood up immediately and bowed.

“I am glad you seem to be doing well, Ms. Inorai.”

“Hey, are you being sarcastic? This was an absolutely exhausting affair.”

Rubbing her neck, the old woman from the Department of Creation produced some papers.

“Here’s a boring report on the policy that we’ve decided on after discussing it with the Arcane Dissection Division. I was wondering if the Department of Modern Magecraft would be willing to cooperate with us.”

“So, you want to hire people to reassess Spirit Tomb Albion and request the Clock Tower to send more explorers?”

I see, so that was what they decided on.

After all, the Grand Roll where the subject was the redevelopment of Spirit Tomb Albion had never happened. But that didn’t mean their plan had been rejected. Even if they took a fall, they refused to take the fall for nothing. That was how the Democratic Faction operated. They didn’t give a damn about the Aristocratic Faction’s grace.

“Understood. I’ll inform my students.”

“Why, thank you. I look forward to their work.”

“Some students learn best in that kind of environment. It is not my place to stop them from going if they wish.” My brother answered. His next question came suddenly. “What does the Grand Roll mean to you?”

“Heartless is dead, isn’t he?” Inorai replied with a closed eye, finally confirming what had gone unsaid.

She rubbed her temples as she continued.

“In any case, I shall answer, even though you should have asked it earlier. I see it as a celebration. Life gets dull without a little excitement now and again, don’t you think?”

That was how she hunted down and helped people. In her eyes, everything was just a piece on a chessboard, to be moved around to make her position more advantageous. I doubted she would even hesitate to stake her own life in her chess game. Even machines had the most basic sense of self-preservation. What in the world could have made her live like this?

Though she had helped Heartless set a trap for my brother, she would have no trouble smiling and asking for our cooperation in the future.

“I’ve got to make an appearance at the First Department(Mystile). I’ll be back soon.”

“Please send my regards to McDonell.”

“I’ll be sure to.”

Hishiri stood up immediately as Inorai turned to walk out.

“I should leave as well. Ms. Inorai, may I have a word?”

“Oh, an invitation from the Department of Law. How worrying. —I’m kidding, of course. How about we go to that modern Chinese restaurant around here? I recently met the chef there, you know, and I plan on making an investment in it.”

“I would be honored to.”

I wondered what would happen between the two of them from now on. Even though the Grand Roll had never happened, this game of schemes would continue. As long as the Clock Tower continued to exist, meaningless political battles would, too.

Our dance would not end because the stage shifted slightly.

Hishiri turned just as she was about to exit the room.

“Thank you, Lord El-Melloi II. I am sure we will meet again soon.”

With an exotic smile reminiscent of the Far East, the witch(*TN: derogatory*) from the Department of Law walked away.



“Ugh, we’ll never get rid of those two, will we?” I said with a look of utter disgust after the two of them had gone. “They both have this look in their eyes that means nothing good. Why do you insist on associating with the most troublesome people all the time?”

“Like you have any right to complain about it.”

I wasn’t completely unsympathetic toward my brother, who had nothing else to say in response. But that wouldn’t be enough to stop me from continuing to exploit him. I hoped he would understand that I was sorry for being a little too honest.

“I don’t know how to say goodbye. I can’t think of any words.”

“Shut up, Trimmau.”

It was clever of her to quote Roman Holiday here. I wondered how advanced her AI was to allow her to find the right quote. Though I had given her an intellect based on my brother’s advice, its basis was the computing function of Kayneth’s Volumen Hydrargyrum, so I didn’t know how she would develop in the future.

There was one last thing that bothered me.

(...The Holy Grail War, huh?)

Everyone's hands had been tied, so the Fifth Holy Grail War in the Far East had basically been left on its own. But what if there was another one? Without Heartless, there was no one to cover it up. The veil protecting the Holy Grail War had been lifted. Next time, the Clock Tower would set its sights on it. I wondered what disasters would result.

It was impossible for me to be optimistic in the face of Heroic Spirits, which no mage could handle. I couldn't help but wonder if this was only the beginning.

“...Whatever, worrying won’t get me anywhere.”

I stood up and retrieved my favorite coat from the closet.

“Reines, we still have documents to sort through.”

“I need a break. I’ve got a pretty important mission. You should come with me.”



—I didn’t mind waiting.

Winter was my favorite season. Though the dorm corridors had central heating, I loved the cold breeze and warming up my fingers with my breath.

Or maybe I just liked the feeling of waiting for someone, because it made me feel hopeful. I loved the feeling of knowing that someone would surely come.

A little while ago, I saw a few specks of white outside the window.

It was snowing, something that probably didn’t happen in Spirit Tomb Albion.

For a while, I did nothing but watch snowflakes drift to the ground with my birdcage in my hands, as if doing so would change me from incomplete gray to pure white. I only snapped out of it when three people appeared in the hallway.

“Sir, Miss Reines.”

“Hey!” The girl with the mercury maid behind her said, waving cheerfully.

My mentor looked as glum as usual, but he brightened a little when he saw me.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were here, Gray.”

“Um...”

“It’s an important mission. Did you think we’d be able to handle it without her?” Reines said, coming to my rescue when I was at a loss for words. “Look, just follow me.”

Reines grabbed mine and my mentor’s hands. I wish I was brave enough to do something like that, but for now, I was just glad to feel the warmth of her fingers.

Two more people awaited us at the end of the hallway.

“Professor!”

It was Flat and Svin.

“Why are you two here?” My mentor said, frowning as if he was wondering what they were up to this time.

Flat twirled around. “Well, Professor, the answer will be revealed after a short message from our sponsors, so don’t guess, okay? Ready? 3, 2, 1, whoo—!”

Flat spun on his tiptoes like a ballet dancer, a flash banner unfurling as he spread his arms.

“Welcome back to rebuilt Slur Street!” Cried several students in unison.

They emerged from beneath their cloaking spell and crowded into the hallway, laughing. Behind them stood a group of clapping teachers, including Mr. Shardan.

“You lot...” My mentor said, covering his face with his hands.

“Surely this degree of relaxation is acceptable.” Said someone standing on the side. Her perfect golden curls were unmistakable.

“You too, Luvia?”

“I also invited Seigen and Flue, but they refused because they are not from the Clock Tower. They told me to send their congratulations to you. I also heard that Flue met Geraff again.”

“...I see.”

There was a trace of warmth in my mentor’s voice.

Though Flue hadn’t seen the old man since he escaped Albion, it seemed that he still cared about his teacher. I also breathed a sigh of relief at the knowledge that they had reunited.

“Speaking of which, I’ve given them rewards for their help in Albion. I’d hope my brother doesn’t think his dear little sister is cruel enough to use people without paying them.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. I know you prefer to pay your helpers well so you can take advantage of them for years to come.”

“Can’t you leave that part out?” Reines replied without denying it.

I finally felt like I was home.

Strange. Why did I feel like crying? There wasn’t anything to be sad about anymore. I knew I should be happy, but the feelings from our long, long journey had finally caught up with me.

I saw Svin’s nose twitch.

“The Professor and Gray-tan can come back later! We’ll be making preparations!”

“Huh? Aren’t we going to lead them on a tour, Le Chien-kun?”

“Yes, yes, we’ll do that later. Make sure to come back soon!” Svin called out, nudging Flat back down the hallway. All of the other students followed them. I saw Yvette mouth “just this once” as she pointed at me.

“Sir?”

“I’m a little tired of all this hustle. Let’s take a detour.” Said my mentor, who had remained behind with me.



Finally, the clouds parted, and a ray of sunlight appeared through the snow.

“I have a question,” I said as the sound of our footsteps echoed down the empty hallway. I hadn’t polished my mentor’s shoes in a while. Maybe it was time to buy more polish.

“Ask away, my fair lady.”

“I’ve finally realized that you haven’t given up on meeting your king, Sir.” I said, a little embarrassed.

“...Well- I- ...So you found out.” My mentor said in a quiet voice.

Of course I found it out. What made him think that I wouldn’t have?

—“*I will spend my life trying to reach you.*”

It almost didn’t sound like something my mentor would say, which meant that he had plenty of other thoughts that he kept to himself.

My mentor took out a cigar as if he gave up on trying to hide it.

“You don’t mind if I smoke, do you?”

“Of course not.”

I nodded. My mentor cut off the cigar’s tip, lit it with a match, and put it to his lips. The slight aroma of the smoke began to spread.

Ah, I missed this, too.

“Ionioi Hetairoi(The Army of the King) can summon thousands of Heroic Spirits,” said my mentor as smoke swirled in the air, “It should be impossible to summon so many. Not every soldier under Iskandar should qualify as someone who carved their name into history.”

He rattled off facts like he did when he gave lectures on magecraft, but the way he stood wreathed in smoke reminded me of someone looking through photos of precious memories.

“That means it must be the other way around. Iskandar’s soldiers were not heroes before they joined him. They only became heroes because of the bonds they forged with him.”

So this was what my mentor had been secretly wondering.

“In that case, maybe I have some kind of hidden skill as one of his subordinates. Even if I don’t have the capacity to become a Heroic Spirit...”

He looked a little embarrassed, as if he was a child whose parents had found out about his scribbles. I found it unfair that he sometimes made that kind of face.

I didn’t manage to stop myself from smiling, but I blamed that on him.

“I don’t think it’s wrong to think that way,” I said, nodding and trying to force back the smile that was reflected in the window. I immediately pulled my hood down to hide the strand of golden hair that had appeared there.

“Gray...”

“My body is still changing.”

It was slowly morphing into that of King Arthur. Though the process had stabilized after we left Albion, I didn’t know when it would start again. Once it did, there was no guessing what else would change.

“...I’ll probably cause you more trouble in the future,” I admitted. “Is it still okay for me to stay with you, Sir?”

“As I said before, I’d be more troubled without you.” My mentor replied immediately, stepping forward again with his cigar in hand.

I was with my mentor. His forgiveness relieved me. I was so afraid of causing trouble for him, and for this place, but now I knew that not causing trouble would be selfish as well.

It was probably one of the few things I learned since I came to London.

“I don’t mean to give you any false hope,” my mentor continued after a pause, “Heartless’ magecraft contained much regarding your relationship with King Arthur. Combined with the secrets left behind by Kayneth, there should be a way to stop your condition from progressing further. It’s beyond my abilities, of course, but with Flat or Svin’s help... Either way, I’ll have to count on you to help me with the fieldwork.”

“...Of course!”

I nodded forcefully. And then—

“Ihihihihi! Since you’re causing trouble and being troubled by other people, you must have grown up!” Said a grating voice.



—There was one last thing. A secret that I hadn’t even told my mentor—



Right before the Divine Spirit disappeared during the battle in Albion, I thought I heard a loud, self-assured voice.

“*So you managed to beat my shadow, huh?*”

I wasn’t sure if I had actually heard such a voice. Maybe I wanted to hear it so badly that I hallucinated it.

Iskandar shouldn't have retained his memories of my mentor after being summoned this time. I recalled learning from my mentor that in magecraft, mages must make a sharp distinction between real spiritual entities and figments of the imagination because of the complexity of the unconscious mind.

—No. In hindsight, as a Divine Spirit, maybe he could see the world across time and space. That was why he remembered my mentor— or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say it was how he learned of my mentor's memories of him.

Either way, I couldn't talk to my mentor about something this important before I figured it out.

*“Well, I must reward my subjects for their work, but I cannot even guarantee my own existence now.”*

*“I was a Divine Spirit for a moment, so take this tiny miracle as a reward. Your dreams are all so puny anyway.”*

So was it real or not? I wondered as I held the miracle as if it would shatter.

The glowing scythe was disassembled into many small pieces and became a box once again. The box had talked nonstop for ten years now, guarding me in the place of my mother, who could not voice her love.

It should have stopped working to protect me, and yet—

“Gray...” My mentor's voice came from behind me.

It was only natural that he was too shocked to say anything else. I could hardly believe it myself. I had already accepted that I could not reverse it, no matter what I did.

“...Add?”

“Mmhmm?”

The eyes on the boxes opened groggily.

“Oh, it's you...I'm a bit sleepy...”

“Add!” I exclaimed, hugging the box tight. “Add! Add...!”

“W-what are you doing, stupid Gray? Wait, no, don’t, don’t—!”

My friend’s voice echoed throughout the Ancient Heart, ending this case with my greatest blessing.



**—END—**

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## **Explanation:**

By Kinoko Nasu

Average talent, average insight.

A young man who was ordinary (and therefore alone in the world of magecraft), who desperately prayed to be able to witness the fallen “star” once more.

That was all.

The two were the same, with the same dreams and duties.

This is a story of mages, like the two sides of a golden coin.



With this volume, the Case Files of Lord El-Melloi II comes to an end.

First, I would like to express my appreciation for the content and the time spent on it.

It was a journey of discovering the “whydunit” through five bizarre stories set in the World of Magecraft, woven from mystery, intrigue, and will.

An unexpected mirror image lies at the end of these “Case Files”, where all the foreshadowing converges under the earth and becomes a shining star in the darkness... this is how his story ends.

As someone who took care of the world setting of this story, I could not be happier. The world of Fate has been expanded on greatly by another wonderful author and work. I would like to thank this age, all of the readers, and Mr. Makoto Sanda.

I would also like to explain the origin of Case Files.

It first began as a spin-off of the PC game Fate/stay night.

When I heard Takeuchi's request to launch TYPE-MOON BOOKS in the winter of 2008, a desire arose within me.

"I want to read a novel that combines magecraft and mystery in the World of Magecraft."

"I want to try to create a complete detective story that isn't possible in a TYPE-MOON game."

However, this wish was hard to fulfill.

It required a deep understanding of TYPE-MOON, the ability to write both fantasy and mystery novels, and, above all, the author must share the worldview and mood that TYPE-MOON has gathered over time.

I only knew of one author who met these requirements, but I thought it was impossible because he was a successful author with an incredibly busy schedule. I went to him anyway, and he told me that "it's not possible right now, but I will definitely free up my schedule. Let's do it."

That author was Mr. Makoto Sanda. He looked so serious then that I was a little afraid of him.

Four years later, the Case Files of Lord El-Melloi II began.

During the planning phase, Mr. Sanda came up with several alternative themes, but in the end we decided on "magecraft + mystery", as originally planned.

The things we decided on then were simple.

1. The work will be set in the world of Fate/stay night.
2. Because it will not be based on Tsukihime, Dead Apostles will be different.
3. The main stage of the story will be the Clock Tower, and the protagonist will be Lord El-Melloi II.
4. Lord El-Melloi II is a professor, not a superhero. He is only a second-rate mage.
5. The story must be centered around mystery (magecraft).
6. Existing characters from TYPE-MOON should appear as guest characters (this was Sanda's request).

This was the basis for “The Case Files of Lord El-Melloi II: Adra, the Castle of Separation”. I still remember the joy of reading the first draft.

Since the focus of the story is magecraft, the atmosphere was familiar to me.

I wanted it to feel suspenseful and bizarre; two charming protagonists, a mage that died in an enclosed space, and finally, an ending for someone who devoted their life to magecraft. Makoto Sanda managed to fulfill all my thoughtless requests in a way that exceeded my expectations.

After I finished reading it, I immediately told Mr. Sanda that he should make it a series with one book published every year, because this was something that I wanted to read. And so, Case Files was reconstructed as a full-length work consisting of five stories.

The writing process of Case Files was unlike other spinoff works such as Fate/Apocrypha, Fragments of Sky Silver, and Fate/Strange Fake. It was like a long-term collaboration between Kinoko Nasu and Makoto Sanda.

I said to him: “Since this story is about Lord El-Melloi II, please give me a detailed explanation of the Clock Tower.”

“This is what I have planned for the next story, does it clash with your framework for magecraft? No? Sure, then I’ll plan it out like this.”

“Alright, that should be about enough to fool people. Tell me about the other Lords, and the Grand Order(冠位指定, グランドオーダー)[1] of the twelve departments. If you haven’t thought about it yet, please stay up all night to get it done. Don’t worry, I’ve prepared a hotel— yep, it’s your house. I’ll help you. Come on, let’s have fun creating the Clock Tower...Hahaha.”

“What exactly is the department that issues Sealing Designations? A bell tower? Oh, it’s going to be in Mahoyo? I see. That means Case Files can’t touch on it, then.”

“What? Really? That’s the director...? If King Solomon is unique, why would there be this kind of setting? ...Please don’t use the seventy-two Demon Pillars, those will be the core of the next game? Alright, what do you want to do then...?”

“The final chapter will be set under the Clock Tower? What kind of place will that be? An underground maze like Wizardry[2]? Ah, that brings back memories... Huh? Another world? Spirit Tomb Albion? What are you talking about, Mr. Kinoko???”

This was how we proceeded. Every time Mr. Sanda saw a contradiction in the setting, he would mercilessly question me about it.

Other spinoff works were set in “what-ifs”, but Case Files was different. It was a direct continuation of the world of Fate/Stay Night, not something that existed in its own parallel world. The laws of the world that the authors are usually allowed to create on their own were already set in place for Case Files.

Mr. Sanda created each case in accordance with the Mages’ Association, the connection between magecraft and magic, the life, tradition, and abilities of mages, the history of human mages in Fate, and the history of the Holy Church in Tsukihime.

They were themed around the angels of the world, the beauty in society, the value of Mystic Eyes, records of death, and magecraft in this age.

He expanded upon this already-defined world without changing it. Many characters had already been revealed, but it was doubtlessly Mr. Makoto Sanda who gave them life through magecraft, as well as the atmosphere of the Clock Tower.

As a result, though Case Files is an original work, it correctly expresses the rules of Fate as they have been and will be. Not only is it an enrapturing novel, but it also serves as a guidebook to the World of Magecraft. That is what the Case Files of Lord El-Melloi II is like.



The detective of this story, Lord El-Melloi II, also has an interesting origin.

He first appeared in the Character Materials published by TYPE-MOON as a Lord of the Clock Tower. There, he was simply described as “A man with long black hair who wears a coat and smokes cigars. An average mage but a first-rate teacher who is eccentric, gloomy, and likes Japanese games for some reason.”

One of the characters of Fate/Zero, which was written around the same time, is him as a young man, making him a character whose two stages of life developed at the same time.

Though I say that, at that point, he was little more than a concept. I originally planned on introducing him in the story of the dismantling of the Fuyuki Grail.

In this series, he has grown to do more than the obligation he was left with at the end of Fate/Zero, a fact that makes me strangely moved. I only placed the stone at the beginning. Another author set it rolling and nurtured it, while yet another author allowed it to roll further to its goal.

Even though Lord El-Melloi II is no longer my child, he has given me the chance to foster bonds with many writers, and many strokes of luck. He is an important character to me, and I hope it is the same for you readers.

The incident that marked a turning point in his life has ended, but his story has not.

As we grow, characters grow as well.

There is no way that the man who has been tossed about by fate will leave the stage here.

I would like to conclude this behind-the-scenes explanation with the hope that, one day, along with the author, Makoto Sanda, we will be able to meet the frowning mage-detective again as he continues to chase after the unreachable.

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## Afterword:

By Makoto Sanda

—The secret meeting is over. The gates of the Labyrinth have closed. The Divine Spirit's dream has been scattered, and the hero's glory fades with the receding tide.

But we know that a fragment of the star remains. The dream that will never be lost is in these hands.

Thank you for your patience. I present to you the Case Files of Lord El-Melloi II: Grand Roll (Lower). Upon its completion, this book will be the longest in the series.

To be honest, when I planned to write the Grand Roll arc as two volumes, I never expected it to be this thick. The reason I decided to go this far was because I was determined to write about Spirit Tomb Albion, the greatest mystery beneath the Clock Tower, head-on.

Whether it be the Grand Roll or Spirit Tomb Albion, I must thank Mr. Kinoko Nasu and everyone from TYPE-MOON for entrusting me with subjects of such importance in this universe (especially since I have no prior experience with it!). I hope that readers have also found it valuable.

Most stories have endings. The Case Files of Lord El-Melloi II is no exception.

Contemporary stories like these can often be summed up in a single sentence—“someone did something”. This is only natural, because most stories are about distilling various complex elements of reality into a single theme.

However, at the same time, some things can only be expressed by the process with which the thing in question is done. What Lord El-Melloi II said in the climax of the story in Chapter 5 is an example. I would be very glad if you could interpret the emotion with which he spoke those words with your own heart.

Looking back, I think these ten books are special, even amongst all the books that I have written. Over the course of five years, my work has shifted dramatically. For instance, much more of it has become creating regional manga.

In addition to Bestia, the story of magical beasts in London that I mentioned in the afterword of book 9 and Yosuga Scenario Parade, a creator's coming-of-age drama, Wizard's Blue, a spin-off of The Ancient Magus' Bride, will be serialized in April this year.

Azuma Toh and TENGEND's manga has reached the Twin Towers of Iselma, and the anime will begin in July.

This volume of the Case Files of Lord El-Melloi will also be published by Kadokawa Bunko (for those of you who have ordered Case Files in e-book format, don't worry, it will stay as is. )

The past days have been hectic, but some things will not change, such as my passion for the story, my admiration for the world, and my love for these characters.

Writing a novel is like throwing a ball into the darkness, not knowing who will catch it. These unchangeable things are why I am not afraid of doing so. The fact that I have completed this journey with these characters is also a testament to them.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Mineji Sakamoto for always creating beautiful illustrations despite having a busy schedule, Kiyomune Miwa for helping with not only the anime's research but also part of the script, Ryogo Narita for supervising and correcting Flat's lines, and Kinoko Nasu and everyone at TYPE-MOON for entrusting this world and its characters to me.

Finally, I would like to thank you, the reader.

I hope the next story will also find its way to you.

Let us meet again in the winter, in the materials for this series.

—November 2019, while playing Kingdom Hearts III

P.S. Since this is the last afterword, I have a personal message too. Though my memories of the season are fuzzy, thank you, Kinoko, for inviting me to TYPE-MOON BOOKS on the way from Shinjuku.

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1. “Grand Order” refers to two distinct concepts relating to magecraft: 冠位指定(グランドオーダー) (Grand Order: Coronal Rank Designation; this one is complicated, but the gist is that mages cannot commit suicide) and 聖杯探索(グランドオーダー) (Quest for the Holy Grail "Grand Order"; This is the Grand Order of FGO). In this instance, Coronal Rank Designation is the Grand Order being referenced.
2. Wizardry is one of the earliest examples of a dungeon crawler RPG, and was originally written by two Cornell University students. It influenced the development of titles such as Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest.

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