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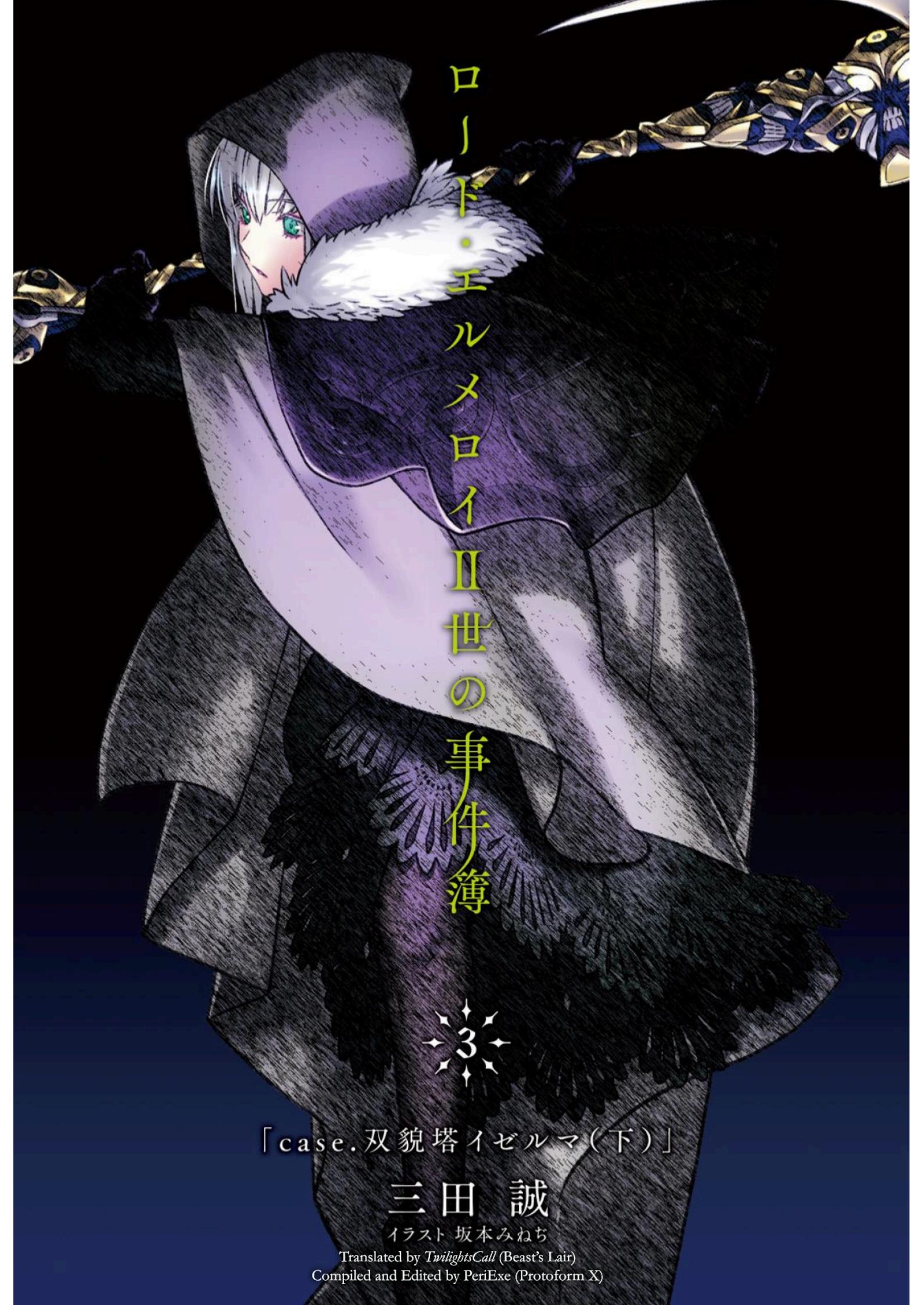
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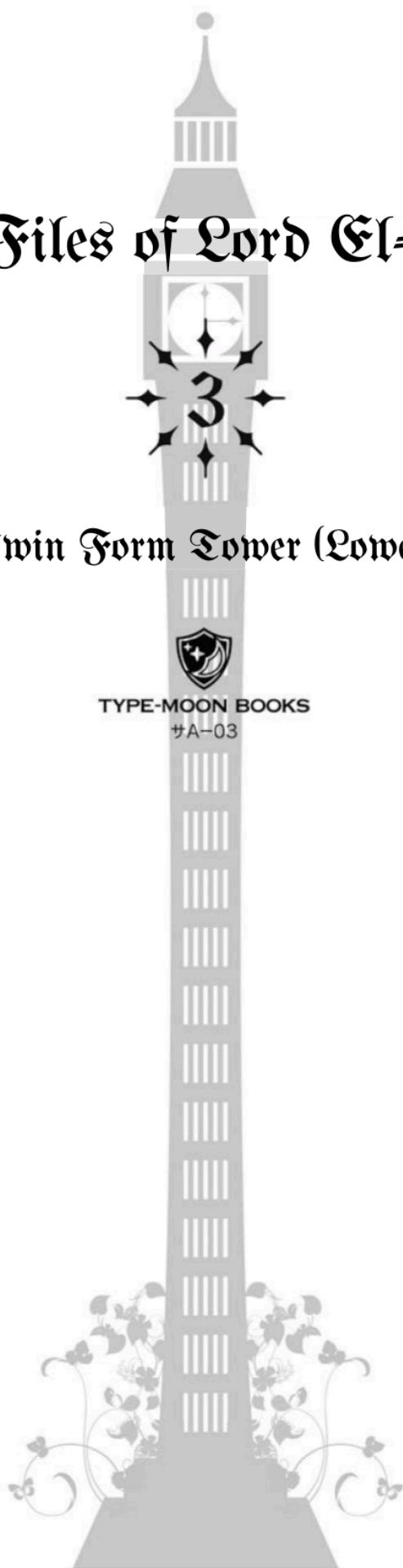
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Translated by *TwilightsCall* (Beast's Lair)

Compiled and Edited by PeriExe (Protoform X)



# The Case Files of Lord El-Melloi II



Lord El-Melloi  
Case Files

# The Case Files of Lord El-Melloi II

3 case. Twin Form Tower (Lower)

## 目次 Contents

『序章』 005

『第一章』 013

『第二章』 066

『第三章』 128

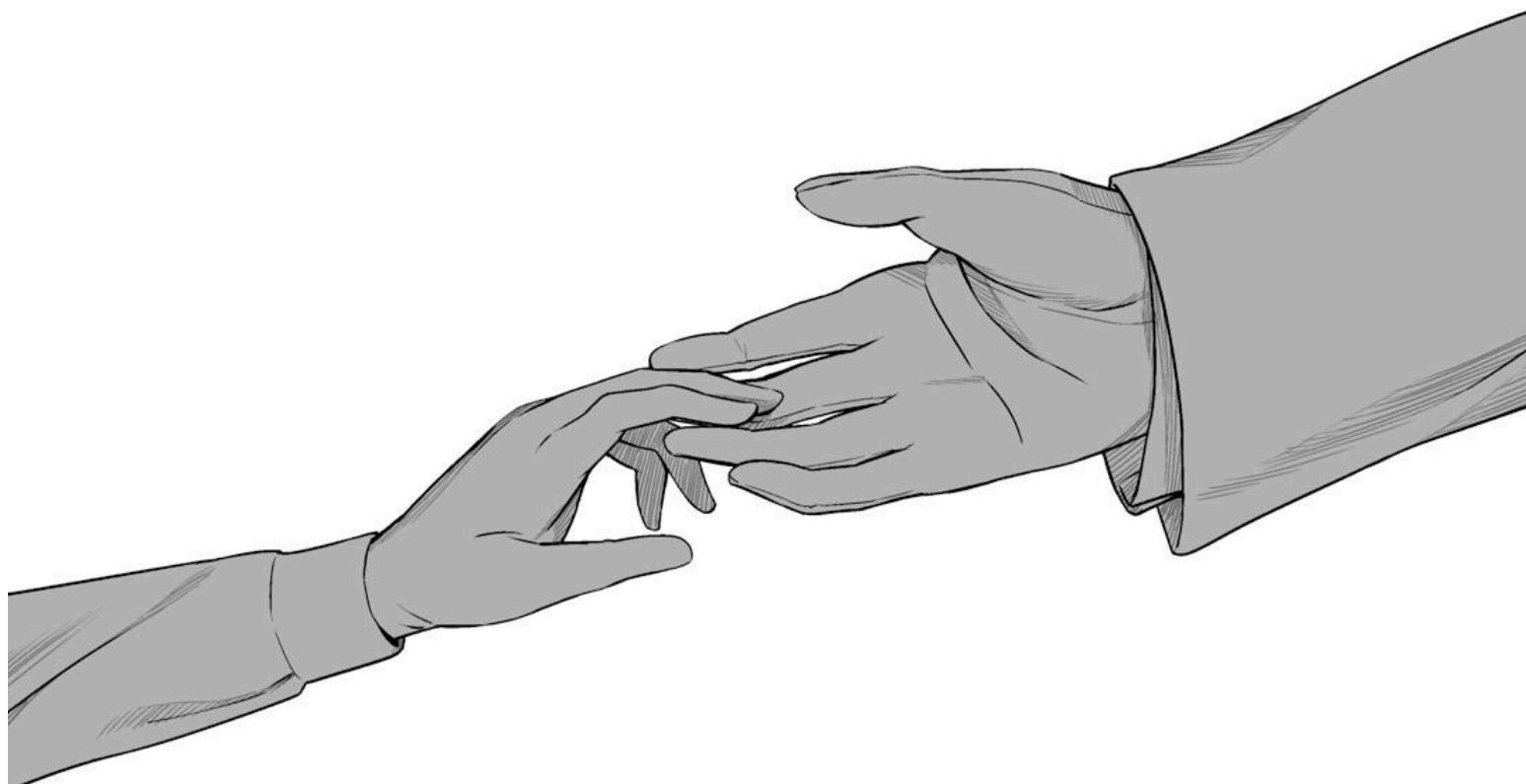
『終章』 195

『解説』 215

『あとがき』 218

## ♦序章♦

-Prologue-



"...do you think humans can grow?"

He spoke, almost as if praying.

On the surface, it may have seemed like an arrogant thought - that an ordinary person can never become more than that. While most may have derived that sort of implication from those words, in this case they were said with an honest sincerity, as if revealing a cherished, heartfelt wish.

Considering the stage on which they were offered, that may have been appropriate.

In that old, desolate church, with a black-stained visage of the Mother Mary looking down on us. In reality it wasn't something so grand as could be called a statue of Mary, but at the very least the local people had considered it as such.

And so, he asked.

"By repeated study, I became good at calculations. I memorized history. Of course in that respect, growth is certainly possible. Even among my students, just by giving some trivial advice, plenty of them have risen to remarkable heights. But...if we're talking about a person's true essence, can that really be considered growth?"

The true target of his question cut straight to the heart of the matter - the beginning of his own life.

Yes. In a sense, maybe it was impossible. After all, considering everyone around me, I couldn't point to one person who had. Within my own group I was special from the start, always treated as special and separate. Thanks to that, the only 'person' I could really talk to was the personality given to a particular Mystic Code.

In those unnecessarily spacious church grounds, I was always just cowering in fear. With the expectations of everyone around me on my shoulders, all I could do was try to avoid their gazes without accomplishing anything.

-Why was it, that this world had no colour?

That was always what I had thought.

No, I did understand that the problem wasn't with the world. Because of my own eyes being clouded over, I was trapped within a world of black and white.

Ashen.

Gloomy.

Vague and ambiguous.

Gray.

No matter how far I ran, I understood that that was the nature of my existence. Compared to that, how much more sincere were those who were already buried deep in the ground? Free from lies, released from vanity and ambition. Truly free, in every respect. To say the difference between us was like heaven and earth didn't do the comparison justice.

...when that person had finally shown up, I had already given up. I was already tired of giving up, thoroughly exhausted by my constant cowering.

Just like always, I remember him smoking on a cigar.

His jet black suit was lit from behind by the light of a stained glass window. Though the face, hidden in that shadow, was undoubtedly that of an adult, I felt like somewhere in that hard expression I could still see a child.

"But..."

I raised my voice.

"Aren't you...the most successful person in the Clock Tower?"

Considering who I was at the time, it was a rare thing for me to say - words that undeniably stepped into someone else's situation. But, because it was him, I felt the

need to ask. Even if it meant bending my way of doing things a little, I wanted to know about him.

Reluctantly, he answered.

"Right...I've held this position for a little more than nine years now."

His voice was full of regret, as if the achievement belonged to someone else.

With a sound like the squeaking of old, rusted gears, he opened his hands and clasped the fingers of his black gloves together.

"I've learned to use magecraft better than before. I've learned the boring skills of scheming and negotiating. Even my scholarship of magecraft has become somewhat considerable. But...where is the meaning in that?"

A time probably spent entirely as a desperate, frenzied climb. Even I could sympathize with that situation.

No doubt it was like having your flesh ground up, and your bones crushed to pieces every day. I wasn't very smart, and I didn't know much about the Clock Tower he had come from, but I could well imagine the intense study and harsh discipline that must have been required to reach where he was now.

But now, he was denying all of that.

"...long ago, I participated in a battle in the Far East."

Ignoring me, who was unable to keep up with the sudden change in topics, he continued.

"In that battle were a number of Heroic Spirits and their Masters. Of course the Heroic Spirits too, but even the Masters were all elites and professional killers that I could never compare to even now. If you ask how a me that was even less experienced than I am now managed to get through that battle alive, I'd have no answer to give you than luck. Because of my complete lack of ability, I avoided everyone else's attention. Yes, if it was me now, I would probably be marked and killed right away."

'Probably,' he said, but with a weight in his voice that spoke of the hundreds, the thousands of times he must have replayed those battles differently in his head. And in those different simulations, how many times had he seen himself die?

In the chilly air of the church, he spoke again.

"In that case, does that mean the me of the past was actually better than I am now?"

"...as you said, I think that's a matter of luck." Mumbling, I shared my own thoughts. Those words demanded an objection, or so I thought.

But.

"Yes, that's exactly right. But can someone who was just carried along by luck and coincidence really be thought to have grown?"

Once again, he returned to the original question.

It wasn't that he had led us back to where we started, but more that we had never left. It wasn't that he was particularly eloquent, just that his simple frankness made him drive that one question ever forward. That was just the way he did things.

His manner was so serious, it made one want to give a bitter smile.

Not that I was sure anyone else could take what he was saying seriously.

"The course we take when life comes to a crossroads is always determined by the smallest coincidences, the tiniest twists of fate. If that's the case, can we really say that humans grow? Even as a child, anyone can get caught up in the desire to just quietly follow someone greater than they are...someone who was just born great, born a king. Isn't that the case?"

He spoke as if he had already accepted that that was the way of the world, yet as if he was chastising someone for taking it as fact.

Who could that have been?

As if glaring back down at hell itself, he continued his angry rant.

"I haven't grown at all. Nothing has changed since that time. I haven't gotten any closer to becoming the person I wanted to be."

Those words came out thick with blood.

The wounds on his soul were completely raw, and even now bright red was flowing from them. Or rather, it was like he was digging his nails into the wounds himself, demanding that they stay open. As if the throbbing pain in his heart was a reminder of the impulse that had first set him on his path.

"I...want to change."

He was probably close to 30 years old.

At that age, someone from the same line of work would no doubt look at his success and question, why on earth would you want to change? But that desire was not some desire for a bright new future. It was nothing close to the everlasting ambition of a genius that had already reached the stars.

(...disgusting...)

So I thought.

It was a feeling I was quite familiar with. Like a buildup of mud under your skin.

(...ahh...)

At that time, I understood.

The people of my hometown always told me that I should change. That I should nurture the rare nature I possessed. That refusing to contribute when you had the ability was in itself a sin that could not easily be forgiven.

Alternatively, like the books that reached even to our rural part of the country, you should accept yourself exactly as you are. Irresponsible words, telling you to accept even the pathetic and absurd parts of yourself, which even I found hard to swallow.

But he wasn't like either of those.

Without seeing the creases carved between his eyebrows, or the thin line his mouth was drawn into, his message was still clear. A rejection of that simple, easy kind of change. A rejection of that slothful, lazy refusal to change.

"Even so...no, because of that, I want your help."

He spoke.

"This is entirely my selfishness. I have no guarantee I can provide you with a future or compensation that would satisfy you. Rather, it's more likely I'll just put you in danger. And I'm not so arrogant as to say that I'd be able to protect you. It's quite likely you could end up risking everything to protect me, and I'd be the only one who walks away."

One piece at a time, he laid out the honest truth. I thought he had no need to lay out all the negative points like this, but that was just who he was. But thanks to that honesty, I was able to get a glimpse of another truth.

Just as his words ran thick with blood, just as his soul was scarred deep with wounds, this person was even now still suffering. His past choices, his current way of being, his future possibilities, all of these were agony to him, as if he still held the spear puncturing his heart.

That's why, rather than logic, it was those words that soaked through me.

"Even so...I want you to come with me."

"...."

In that case, it would be fine, it made me think.

If you will worry with me.

If you will suffer with me.

If you will get hurt with me.

If it's this man, then his guidance would be better than the words of any sage. That's what I thought.

"...can I ask you to promise me one thing?"

I finally spoke.

"Please...keep hating my face."

Even now, I can still remember his flustered expression.

He must be a good person, I thought. So much so that he still felt the shame of his first terrified reaction upon seeing my face. But even so, after a pause of a few seconds, he nodded heavily.

"I promise."

So said Lord El-Melloi II - my master.

◆ 第一章 ◆  
-Chapter 1-



**~Part 1~**

(...has anything changed since then...?)

At the sudden recollection, my eyes narrowed.

The reason I had remembered it was nothing special. Just seeing my master hanging his head, lit from behind by the setting sun, I thought it was a similar image.

Becoming able to do something that you couldn't do before is not the only way that you can measure growth. And yet, my master continued to pile on new skills and knowledge as if that was all he knew. That's why his life held so much suffering. And yet from that excruciating life, he neither ran nor cowered. Even now I still didn't know from where he drew that strength.

We were on a hill.

From the place we had been observing the twin towers of the Sun and Moon before, we were now looking at them from the opposite side. The overpowering scent of the densely growing grass was enough to make you choke. Hidden amongst the dirt and grass were a number of rabbit holes, making it not hard to believe that such a place was often the stage for many famous works. Even in my hometown we had a number of books of the adorable Peter Rabbit and his family.

From this angle, the blood-like colour of the setting sun over the mist and grasses gave the impression the world had been replaced by some sort of far off fantasy.

My master stood silently, scribbling in his notebook.

"-Now, shall we start preparing for the coming battle?"

After such an impressive declaration, he had just gone back to his observations.

That being said, perhaps because of some sort of development caused by the piece of paper Svin had brought for him, he occasionally would pop his head up from his notebook to confirm details of the case with Reines.

"...the one who asked for asylum at the start was really the Princess of Gold, right?"

"Of course, esteemed brother. There's no way you could mistake her for someone else."

"And, the next morning, you found the body in her room. The Mystic Lock was still set."

"Correct."

In this way, he was slowly getting things in order.

After the Iselma's Social Assembly, the Princess of Gold had approached Reines hoping to seek asylum with the El-Melloi family and the Aristocratic Faction of the Clock Tower.

After that, when she went to meet her the next morning, Reines was the first to find the Princess torn apart, and soon became the main suspect. After that, Caleena was found dead by Trimmau, who had blood on her hands, prompting Iselma to take the Mystic Code hostage.

My master wrote all this down in his book with a fountain pen stylized in the manner of a gryphon. It was a treasure left behind by the head of the El-Melloi of two generations ago, so for my master to take to it after rejecting virtually all of the El-Melloi estate meant it must have been something of significant interest to him.

The smell of ink mixing faintly with the air was something I liked, as well.

Just like the smell of his cigars, it was something that always seemed to cling to him. For some reason, whenever I recognized that scent, I could always calm down. I didn't know the reason why. Perhaps my master had laced the smells with some sort of magecraft to help relax the mind, but I didn't feel the need to ask.

Alongside that came a certain rambunctious voice.

"That's why I'm saying the culprit must be a Baritsu user! It's really invincible! You can use it to survive when you fall off a cliff, or even to make a person explode! Turning invisible or passing through walls would be a piece of cake!"

"What kind of ridiculous magecraft are you on about now? First of all, is that even magecraft, or just a martial art?"

"Baritsu is Baritsu! Sherlock Holmes is famous for using it, so the professor must be able to use it too! It's a skill all detectives have!"

"Flat...are you saying our professor is something as plain as an ordinary detective?"

"Hey, real Baritsu uses a cane too! That cane must be the catalyst for some kind of magecraft! So it must be a martial art that was created to be used by magi! The only reason it hasn't spread more is that one family must have kept the secret of it to themselves!"

Though they had the same blonde hair and blue eyes, the impression they gave couldn't be more different. While the former's hysterical declarations painted him as a young, naive boy, the latter had an air of savage beauty about him.

Flat Escardos, and Svin Glascheit.

Even in the illustrious El-Melloi classroom, these two stood head and shoulders above the rest.

"On top of that, Sherlock Holmes is a hero! He's a true super star of London! The same as Jack the Ripper, though I feel a bit bad for his victims."

"Don't put our professor in the same group as a serial killer. In the first place, whether it's Sherlock Holmes or Napoleon, our professor isn't someone who can be compared to people who just showed up a bit in novels and history!"

Yes, well. Svin wasn't entirely right. While my master was looked up to as a true hero among the New Agers, the fact of the matter was that these two were the real vanguard. And while most people hoped dearly to just leave them to their own thing, the fear that their interactions could escalate to the point of destroying the classroom itself was the greatest source of unease in the current El-Melloi classroom.

That being said, I would do anything to avoid getting close to Svin.

If he was going to get that worked up and aggressive whenever he saw me, I couldn't think anything other than that he hated me for some reason. I was used to not being liked by people, but such a vicious rejection was still enough to make me feel a little sad.

No doubt, his gaze constantly flickering to me while he talked to Flat was a measure to try and keep me in check.

"Hold on, that's not true at all." Suddenly Reines, who was sitting beside me, spoke up. Sitting with her head resting on her knees, even so she seemed to be thoroughly enjoying herself as she looked sideways at me. That small smile at the corner of her lips was as good an indicator as any that she was going to begin teasing me again.

"...w-what do you mean?"

"Well, you're thinking something like 'Svin must hate me,' aren't you?"

My breath caught with a sudden jerking motion at being so clearly read. "...Miss Reines, mind reading is..."

Before I could say anymore, she put a hand to her mouth to hide her giggling. "I don't need anything like that. Anyone could tell just by looking at your face. To be precise, by looking at the way your eyes move and how you're resting your hands and fingers. You may think of yourself as somewhat uncommunicative, but you're quite talkative in your own way, you know? I'd say about half as much as Add."

"T-that..." After such a shocking evaluation, I found myself at a loss for words.

"Ihihihi! Me? Talkative?! Everyone knows I'm the quietest, most intellectual, most elegant box around!"

To the best of my ability, I ignored the voice coming from around my right hand.

Unfortunately, Flat was not willing to do the same, instead turning around to face me.

"Ah, Gray! Can I talk to Add today? Show me, show me! Let me talk to him! Let me take him apart!"

"Hey, don't talk to my...don't talk to Gray so flippantly!"

As the two drew closer to us, I could feel my shoulders start to tremble.

"...quiet down, you guys. Also Svin, keep at least five meters away from Gray unless it's an emergency."

With an exasperated voice, my master spoke.

And then,

"It seems we have a guest."

So saying, he capped his pen.

"-did you discover something?"

Just hearing it, I could feel that intoxicating voice cloud my thoughts as it washed over the grass.

Cutting through the scent of cigars and the colour of the sunset was the figure of that woman. Her shadow, cast by the setting sun, felt like something completely different coming from her.

Perhaps, the shadow of a God of Death.

"Princess of Silver."

My master called the name of the veiled woman.

And, one step behind her, her maid stood quietly waiting.

"Rejina..."

"..."

The remaining of the twin maids stood quietly, avoiding our eyes.

In her stead, her master spoke.

"A pleasure to meet you, Lord El-Melloi II. I've heard quite a bit about you."

"I can't expect there's much in the way of good rumors about me floating about."

Before my master's bitter smile, the Princess lifted her head.

It felt like the wind had stopped entirely. It was as if all sound had ceased, as if even the flowers themselves were spellbound by her face. Peering out from within her veil, her appearance was ever so slightly different from her sisters, yet it was of course still unfathomably beautiful.

"My sister....Did you discover something about the deaths of Caleena and the Princess of Gold?"

That voice hit my master head on.

It's awesome beauty pierced right through to my core.

"I would like to express my deepest condolences for your loss," he replied with a polite bow.

His voice had an unmistakable sincerity to it. Maybe because he was someone who knew what it meant to lose someone. What exactly had he lost in that battle so long ago? Even if one were to say he had gained a lot since then, would that be enough to even the scales?

"However, that is why I feel it all the more important to discover the true culprit."

"You believe your sister is innocent, then?"

"Yes."

His reply was instant.

For a moment, even I was stunned. Just a little, the Princess of Silver's manner seemed to soften.

"...you have a good brother, don't you?"

"Yes, I certainly do," Reines replied calmly, a nod indicating the deeper meaning behind that for her.

When Reines was like this, I sometimes felt like she would be better off acting and expressing herself more clearly. Maybe.

Following that, Reines spoke again.

"May I ask what happened with Trimmau?"

"If you mean Volumen Hydrargyrum, then my father has carefully stored it away somewhere."

"Good. I'll leave her in your care, then." Reines nodded sagely.

Even if it was her, there was no way she was as relaxed as she was putting on. Trimmau was one of the most important Mystic Codes of the El-Melloi family, so there was no way she didn't feel like she was backed into a corner.

As if under the threat of an invisible knife, a strange nervousness hung on the world. If magecraft was something built up out of will, then that may have been another kind of magecraft in itself. An ancient curse known by all humanity, independent of any sort of magical foundation or ritual. Words and will were both invisible, and therein lay their Mystery. Such was the driving force of many legends among those with no connection to magecraft.

Suddenly, my master moved.

"...by the way, I believe this belonged to your sister."

Saying that, he pulled an object from his pocket and showed it to Rejina.

A necklace, in which was set a stone engraved with a whirl. Rejina's eyes widened slightly as she saw the blood-stained accessory.

"...thank you. Yes, it was my sister's."

"It looks Celtic to me."

"Yes. When she was born, our grandmother..."

As if wrapped up in nostalgia, the Maid seemed to get lost within her own memory.

Suddenly, I was assaulted by a piercing chill across my entire body. Wrapping my arms around myself, I called out as if fevered.

"...M-Master..."

"Hm?"

"Yes, I felt it too. Though with his dull senses, he probably only felt slightly uneasy."

With one eye shut, Reines interjected. Were her Mystic Eyes reacting as well?

"Hey, watch what you're saying!"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't get all up in arms about basic facts. More importantly, Miss Silver Princess, would this happen to be related to Iselma's Boundary Field?"

Fundamentally speaking, a Boundary Field was 'something that divided the inside from the outside.' If hiding something was the objective, then the highest levels of Boundary Fields were ones that were themselves impossible to discern. After all, no matter how powerful a magi was, they couldn't dismantle a Boundary Field they didn't know existed. As such, it was kind of a given that they would be difficult to detect.

However, there was one other purpose for Boundary Fields.

In short, for defense.

A barrier to protect those inside from any sort of external force. A Boundary Field that reacted to the presence of enemy magi was one such example. A common type were those that would signal the presence of an enemy magus once they had stepped into the defender's territory.

Of course, something like a Boundary Field that revealed a person's thoughts didn't really exist. If they did, something like a murder investigation would be entirely unnecessary.

In short, this was a case of magecraft that wasn't bothering to hide itself from its opponent.

"Please excuse me."

With a succinct word of farewell, the Princess of Silver spun around and took her leave.

"...Professor."

"Flat?"

"I think, probably over there." Flat pointed down the hill towards the nearby forest.  
"Looks like more than ten people. Or twenty...thirty?"

While Flat's ability in most fields of magecraft were already fairly advanced, when it came to magical detection he was truly peerless. So while most of what he said was often dismissed out of hand as being silly or absurd, in this one area even my master put a heavy weight on his words.

"If there's that many...someone is attacking Iselma now, of all times?" Reines' reply was clearly coloured with surprise.

There was no way it could be a coincidence.

While still dealing with the serial murder investigation, an army of magi were attacking. If this were a coincidence, then something like magecraft would be

completely unnecessary. Magecraft was at its core a method of deceiving the world in order to recreate supernatural phenomena, but if that kind of negative miracle were possible, then magecraft had long ago taken control of the world.

"Of course, there's no way it could be a coincidence," my master said. "Svin, it's the people you were investigating."

"But Professor, if that's the case then we-"

Svin's words cut off abruptly.

From the beginning, Iselma thought of us as enemies. Would this be a situation we could work to our advantage? Or would we just get crushed along with everyone else? What would be the best play for us in this kind of chaos?

A problem of this magnitude, while our ability to think was already wearing thin.

Suddenly, the sun darkened.

Clouds. Dark storm clouds were racing across the sky from the east, throwing a shadow over the entire Iselma estate. As we watched uneasily, the clouds spread above us with a clearly unnatural speed.

The low rumble of thunder reached us.

"-Master!"

Instinctively, I leapt towards my master and grabbed him tight.

At the same time, a powerful impact struck my whole body from behind.

It felt like a bomb. I could only wonder at how much magical energy had to be invested in that attack, for it to shake the ground under us to such a degree. While the lightning itself had flowed mostly into the ground, the aftermath was enough to throw everyone around it into shock.

"-Gray!"

"...Gray?"

"I'm...okay..."

In response to Svin's alarmed shout and my master's quiet inquiry I gave a small nod. Even in this situation, Svin was keeping to my master's instructions to stay at least five meters away from me. His desperate, helpless meandering outside that space was almost amusing to watch.

"That lightning was-!"

"...their way of a polite greeting, it seems," my master whispered softly. Surrounded by the burnt smell left by the lightning, my master clicked his tongue as he looked up at the sky. "Weather-based magecraft aiming for an attack at sunset...doing things the old fashioned way, I see. The objective was to strip Iselma of the protection offered by the land, was it?"

By wounding the land itself, the natural flow of magical energy would be disrupted. If that land were being managed by a magus, it was natural to expect the land itself would be enchanted with protective measures, and as such it was equally natural for an attacker to begin by attempting to neutralize that advantage.

While the attackers' methods were certainly the opposite of subtle, there was still intelligence in them.

Without delay, I could feel magical energy begin to move in one of Iselma's towers in response.

The fact that the response came from the Tower of the Moon was as good as definitive proof that it housed Iselma's Workshop. While the form of the magecraft that had been set in motion there was still a mystery, the idea that it would treat us kindly was far fetched, to say the least.

"...Master."

"First things first, we need to withdraw to avoid taking losses of our own."

While 'withdrawing' made it sound nice, really what he meant was we needed to hide so we didn't get caught in the crossfire. Of course it was obvious that whether we considered the attacker or the defender, neither was a magus my master's skills in magecraft could hope to equal.

Reines replied with a small laugh. "'Let's run as fast as we can,' basically?"

"Of course we're running. I'd rather just cover my head and get out, and never have to set eyes on this place again. If only a certain someone hadn't given them collateral."

"To think, my brother would level such harsh words against me. My whole body is about to be set to trembling at the disgrace. Though if that's the kind of thing you're into, I think I can work on it a bit."

"As if anyone would be interested in seeing that in their sister. Now let's hurry up and find somewhere safe to hide until this blows over." The bitterness was evident in my master's voice as he spun to leave.

"...or," he stopped, taking back his previous words. "perhaps it's already too late for that."

"...huh?" At first I was confused, but the meaning behind my master's increasingly bitter voice soon became clear. "...Flat!" Turning, I blurted out his name without thinking.

Flat was, of course, nowhere to be seen. Even if we were stunned in the aftermath of the lightning, there was no way my master, Reines, and I would all fail to see him leaving unless he was intentionally trying to sneak away. Well, such sneaking was his specialty as a magus, anyways.

"I'm going after him!"

"Wait, Svin!"

Without waiting to let anyone stop him, Svin immediately broke off running. And at a speed that would be hard for me to match even if I had Add's support, too. Perhaps following his scent, he ran off in a straight line to the forest nearby despite having no apparent clues as to where Flat went.

"This is exactly why I told you two not to come here!"

Holding a hand to his stomach, my master's perpetual frown deepened as he gave a long sigh.

**~Part 2~**

"...not bad."

Atram gazed down at the crater left by his own magecraft with a cruel smile.

From a plateau nearby, though he was still a few kilometers away from the site, he was looking down on Iselma's territory using a pair of antique opera glasses that had been left in the hotel lobby.

Holding tight the scantily clad woman sitting near him, he whispered softly.

"What do you think? Doesn't it feel like calling down fire to burn away the castle of your rival in love?"

Patterning himself after the deeds of an ancient Heroic Spirit known as Medea in her massacre, he boasted about his work.

Of course, his actions could hardly be called comparable.

For someone like her, who had existed before the common era in an age where mankind was much closer to magecraft, a simple One Count spell would have been sufficient to replicate the effect of a modern bomber aircraft. If a modern magus dedicated their life to study and layered up ritual after ritual, it was still questionable whether they could reach the same level.

But, in that respect, that was what made this particular spell impressive.

While magecraft that put the weather to work was certainly of an enormous scale, it wasn't particularly rare. On the contrary, it would be harder to find a single place that didn't have its own long history of Rainmaking rituals. However, if one looked at modern magi, examples of success were few and far between, especially when one considered how much the current state of magecraft had declined. While it was true that Atram's success had hinged on the lakeside country of his target being the perfect environment for generating storm clouds, they were still results worthy of praise.

For this purpose, dozens of magi connected to his family had gathered to participate in the ritual.

On the border between night and day, where many kinds of defensive magecraft grew weak, he had driven forward the vanguard of his assault.

"Now, plunder! Take everything! Let's start this raid with efficiency!"

The young man laughed, his voice clear and bright.

That was how Atram's family - how the Galiasta family had risen to prominence.

If you want it, then take it.

If there's a blade in your hand, then swing.

Such was the teaching Atram was given. In order to determine the next head of the family, his father had pit him and his brothers against each other in a number of trials meant to curry political power. Atram was the one who dealt with those trials most efficiently. And so, while earning a title in the Clock Tower, Atram surpassed his father who had refused to step into the world of magi and joyfully adopted it as his own.

Seeing magecraft that was considered old and outdated, he instead saw profit and potential.

Even the agonizing physical pain of accepting his family's Magic Crest was pure pleasure for him. For that pain was a symbol of the power, of the value he had won.

"Now..."

Standing, he raised his glass of wine.

"...it's time to make you regret the sin of robbing me of my rightful spoils."



Of course, the custodian of the land was aware of the attack that had taken place.

In the Tower of the Moon.

A water basin.

In the center of the room, an old porcelain basin was filled with water drawn from the land itself. The ripples in that water reflected the strength and scope of the enemy magecraft.

While there were any number of similar magecrafts, this level of precision was only possible within one's own territory. On top of that, the usage of these kinds of Mystic Codes was a specialty of the Faculty of Creation (*Value*).

"A declaration of war, is it?" the magus muttered in a hate-filled voice.

Looking down at the water filling the basin, he bit down hard on the mouth of his pipe.

The moment Lord Byron, the head of the Iselma family, had felt something was wrong, he immediately activated the basin and took stock of the opposing force.

And that's why he had called it a declaration of war. If it was anything else, they would have been easily able to sneak in, just as the ones who had murdered his beloved daughter and her maid. Rather, that would have been more orthodox. Just as was often requested of by kings and aristocrats, the most powerful ability a magus could hope for in combat was to be able to kill their opponent without laying a hand on them. If one was to ignore that fundamental rule and act with such a grandiose opening move, one couldn't think of it as anything less than a declaration of war.

He had always thought that they would come for Iselma eventually.

He had heard the rumors of the Galiasta family, and was well aware he had earned their displeasure. While they were a family who had only just left the Middle East and begun their rise to fame, that was all the more reason to expect a kind of fervent savagery from them. Just as with many a family within the Clock Tower itself, if there was a reward to be gained, they would have no qualms with using force to get it.

But...for them to attack with this timing...

After mulling over the problem for a while, Lord Byron exited his Workshop. Two magi were standing immediately outside the door.

"Maio, Islo."

"Y-yes!"

"...yes?"

The pharmacist responded showing his clear nerves, while the seamster answered with a demure nod.

"Please accompany Estella."

"...and the fight?"

In response to Islo's question, Byron shook his head.

"That's not really your strong suit anyway, is it?"

Without another word, Byron walked off with as much speed as his cane could afford him.

As he did, he caught the attention of another servant.

"What is Lady Inorai doing?"

"Lord Valueleta is within her personal room. She has given instructions that she does not require dinner tonight."

"I see," he gave a small nod to the servant.

For a bizarre occurrence like this, there was no way a woman like her hadn't taken notice. In other words, she had as good as declared neutrality. That even if Iselma were to fall into some sort of quarrel, the head family of Valueleta had no intention of intervening.

"If Lady Inorai doesn't wish to be involved, then so be it," Lord Byron said.

There was one thing that concerned him, however. Like a thorn that had pricked his finger, one possibility sent waves of unease through his soul.

At first, he had thought the death of the Princess of Gold and her maid to be the work of an enemy faction.

Just like their main family Valueleta, Iselma was a family associated with the Democratic Faction of the Clock Tower. Any sort of sabotage from the Aristocratic Faction lead by Barthomelloi, or even by the fence-sitting Neutralist Faction would be par for the course. Within the political struggle of the Clock Tower, human life held value less than even refuse.

But now, a far more terrifying possibility was sprouting in his head.

(...Lord Valueleta herself is colluding with that family?)

He wanted to deny it.

But at the same time, a deep, cold part of himself refused to let that possibility go.

It was far from unprecedented. If it was for the sake of advancing their own magecraft, pillaging the resources and manpower of one's own branch families was an everyday occurrence. Stories of bloodlines who resisted such blatant thievery being completely extinguished were common. Though aligning oneself with one of the political factions of the Clock Tower added the benefit of their protection, it also added this equally unpalatable demerit.

But then again.

(Maybe, the one who killed the Princess was...)

Another terrible possibility raised its head in Byron's mind.

There was no way for him to deny it. Even if they were in a place of good standing with each other, that was far from a relationship of trust. After all, the person he was talking

about was someone who had given up everything for the sake of magecraft, who would no doubt tear their own flesh and blood to pieces were it to become an obstacle.

Who could become a magus without such an attitude?

"...ah," he nodded, his voice like that of old machinery creaking. "If it's Lady Inorai, then she would even welcome the company of an upstart. That's what democracy means in the Clock Tower, after all. 'If one has the passion, they should be accepted. If one is a magus, they should accept the change.'"

While walking down the hallway, it was difficult to keep the disgust from mixing into his voice.

Certainly, Iselma was aligned with that Democratic Faction, who believed that those with the ability should rise regardless of their bloodline. But it wasn't like they had embraced that philosophy whole-heartedly. A magus' instinct was always to reach towards the past, and that meant a strongly developed bloodline was crucial.

*Beauty itself is amazing. Even if it exists for only a moment, the fact that it existed at all gives it value. There's nothing for us to do but run as hard as we can through that one moment graced to us. In the same way, those of the present should pursue their work with no regard for past bloodlines. That is our belief.*

Inorai had said as much during the Social Assembly.

And that was exactly right. The eternal ideal of  
Value  
the Faculty of Creation  
was right here. But an ideal was just an illusion that could not be touched. Those of us  
who lived in reality needed to maintain a firm grip on it.

And what if bringing in new blood was just a means of expelling the old?

How would that young man - the Lord of  
Norwich  
the Faculty of Modern Magecraft  
answer that question?

Byron ground his teeth.

Thunder rumbled. The brief flash of white light illuminated the cane-holding gentleman - and for a moment, something else was revealed.

"...in that case, this Byron Valueleta Iselma will see to things himself."

The shadow briefly cast behind him could be described as nothing less than a demon lurking on the wall.

### ~Part 3~

-Flat Escardos.

The name of a young man, born in the Mediterranean, who had gathered the hopes and expectations of all sorts of people.

While the Escardos family itself was one with a long history, it had no particularly grand achievements to speak of. They had spent generations refining their magecraft and building up their Magic Circuits, but they had produced nothing beyond what could be described as mediocre - that was, until the birth of Flat, whose outstanding talent could be considered nothing less than an anomaly.

An excellent number of Magic Circuits, guided by an overwhelming talent.

Lauded as a prodigy, he was quickly sent off to the Clock Tower, but even that venerable institution couldn't match up to his potential. Beginning in the sub-faculty of Necromancy, he had been entrusted to Rock Belpheban, the head of the Faculty of Summoning. However, in only a few months, he had already transferred to a new faculty. With each faculty being unable to keep up with his talent, he rapidly moved between them, much to the vexation of his lecturers. His constant resubmission of his paperwork got to the point where he was on the verge of being expelled.

The reason was simple.

No matter how much his talent as a magus exceeded the ideal, no other attribute he had lent well toward the life of a magus.

His attitude was just too loose, he was often told.

In reality, what really forged the magus of the modern day was not a supernatural power or transcendent conscience, but a tenacity built and reinforced over generations. Clinging to a shadowed, intense ideology for hundreds, or in some cases even thousands of years, developed its own sort of extreme power. Even if science were to exceed magecraft in all other respects, as long as that ideal survived, magecraft itself would be ineradicable.

But, in that respect the boy was hopeless.

Really, it may have been due to his enormous talent rather than in spite of it. While the reason wasn't clear to those around him, it was at least obvious that the young man known as Flat Escardos lacked that key trait of persistence. Eternally lax, he would always invest himself in the business of others around him, yet as if he was a sponge he fully absorbed all the information presented in his classes, maintaining an almost perfect grade. In the worst cases, he would even interrupt his lecturers with a bright smile, adding his own tweaks and changes to improve the lecturer's own formula in the blink of an eye.

For a lecturer, there was no greater humiliation.

Like a flawless diamond set before them that needed not even a single cut. His talent was so extreme there was nothing they could do to develop his skill further, and as such he earned a wordless disdain from those around him. While the Clock Tower, which existed ostensibly to develop the talents of new magi, could ill afford to let such a talent go to waste, any instructor which tried to work with him found themselves driven away.

This situation persisted for about a year.

As a result, after being passed between different faculties and factions, as if bitterly letting go of a prized treasure, he was finally entrusted to the El-Melloi classroom. The classroom which had already taken on a number of problem children of the Clock Tower accepted him without reservation. Their ability to offer him guidance that led to easily recognizable growth drew all sorts of attention. In exchange, the pain it caused to the stomach of a certain Lord El-Melloi II was similarly devastating, but that was another story.

At any rate. Now, Flat was pursuing the magical energy of the attackers.

In the forest.

Having detected their magical energy from out on the hill, he had run off through the grass and into the forest after them. Despite the poorly maintained path, he traveled at a speed that would be difficult to match for a professional marathon runner. Of course, that was mostly thanks to his own Strengthening.

As he ran, he peered up at the dark clouds in the sky between the gaps in the foliage.

"Wow, that's amazing! Since the side effects of Weather Manipulation are pretty intense, you can basically never see it at the Clock Tower. Hmm...this person is being pretty inefficient about it though. They've got thirty one...thirty two people working together on this? But number seven and number twenty should probably be switched out. I should really let them know!"

With an honest brightness, he spoke those absurd words.

Just by listening to that, one might think he had nothing but good intentions. But it was those good intentions that had destroyed many Clock Tower lecturers. At this point, if one were to classify it as some new breed of curse, it was unlikely the claim would face much challenge.

This time, however, the chastising voice that answered him was born of a different purpose.

"...Flat."

"Whoa! You found me already!" Spinning around, Flat's eyes went wide.

Standing on a branch above him was the curly haired young man. Leaning against the trunk of the tree, he held a finger to the tip of nose as he looked down at his classmate with a dirty look.

Svin Glascheit.

Having joined barely a month before Flat, he was the most senior student currently active in the El-Melloi classroom. That being said, Lord El-Melloi II's policy was to let go of his students after they had surpassed the basics anyways, graduating them out one after another as if he was sick of looking after them.

"What do you mean, 'already'? There's no way I'd ever mistake your fluffy, frivolously yellow scent. Now come on, let's get back to the professor."

"Oh come on!" Flat complained, as if he was a child being told it was time to leave the toy store.

"...you'd rather I brought you back by force, then?"

"Whoa whoa whoa, hold on! Think about this, Le Chien! The professor's in trouble right now, right?"

"And you're just adding to the problem!"

"Not at all!" Flat waved a hand dismissively, laughing with a smile. "The professor's going to be happy about this!"

"...what?" Svin frowned.

"The Iselma family took Trim, right? So if we go beat up the guys attacking Iselma, they might give Trim back out of gratitude! And the professor will rain thanks on us too! It's a perfect plan, don't you think, Le Chien?"

Rather than being perfect, it was the sort of plan that deserved to be struck down immediately. It was like after seeing a trap hole before them, they were politely throwing a bunch of poisoned blades into it before jumping in.

But,

"First of all, stop calling me that," Svin said.

For a time, he was quiet. It was the kind of silence that would drive the Lord El-Melloi II straight to massaging his stomach were he around to witness it. Because rather than the quiet of things calming down, it was more like the calm before an awful storm.

"They were the people that tried to hurt my G...tried to hurt Gray," he muttered. At long last, scratching his head and licking his lips, he continued.

"Alright, I'm in."



In the middle of the forest, a number of shadows ran through the thick undergrowth.

Pushing through the waist-high growth with their own bodies, they rushed on towards the Twin Towers of Iselma. With their unwavering course and with their entire lack of regard for the uncertain footing and dense ivy growth threatening to trip them up, had it been a few generations earlier, they might have been described as a march of demons.

One of the figures raised their head.

In the open space before them stood a well-dressed man with a cane.

"...Lord Byron."

"Most impressive. Making the elements themselves your ally. While this area is particularly susceptible to changing weather, I've never been faced with someone capable of such a brilliant display."

At once, the gentleman assessed the levels of the invaders.

For modern magi, how difficult was that magecraft - or perhaps, regardless of difficulty, how possible was it? In a battle between magi, the most critical skill was the ability to see through to the nature of the opponent's favored formulas. Faithfulness to the basics, following an unwavering history, Lord Byron walked a path that was tried and true.

"...if you understand that much, how about just giving us what we want?" One of the intruders said with a playful lilt, as if their objective was explicitly clear from the start.

But.

The gentleman before them responded with a fearless smile.

"If you think Iselma is defenseless, I'm afraid you are quite mistaken."

Byron stuck his cane into the ground. As he did so, a flurry of globes appeared around him. The clearing rapidly filled with a cloud of bubbles, reflecting the mottled light of the setting sun peering through the leaves in a breathtaking display.

It's true nature was, of course, nothing so benign. Heedless of the air currents in the forest, the bubbles filled with Byron's magical energy moved unnaturally to surround the intruding magi. As the soapy surfaces spun, the bubbles reflected the image of the invaders.

Without a word, the intruders watched the bubbles.

None of them were foolish enough to carelessly break the bubbles before them. That was of course the very lowest level of prudence required of a magus.

But that meant those countless bubbles were able to spread out unchallenged, rapidly surrounding the intruders and cutting off their means of escape.

"What do you think of the Rainbow Spheres of Iselma?"

Was that the name of the spell that Byron had just whispered?

With a snap, the bubbles burst.

No monster or any such thing appeared from within them - at least, not that could be seen. Nevertheless, a number of the invaders fell to the ground, clawing at their throats.

"-Byron!!"

The enraged attackers unleashed a volley of bolts of lightning.

As expected, the bubbles that still floated around Lord Byron himself moved to intercept the attack, but they were unable to entirely protect him. As about a third of the attacks pierced through the bubbles, the bolts struck true, driving Byron to his knees.

"Hah! The collector who confined himself to his wilderness retreat falls after all!"

The attackers that had previously collapsed began to recover, and soon they began a new spell with their enraged companions.

Clutching a hand to the burn wound on his shoulder, Byron struck his cane into the ground again. The number of bubbles in the air doubled, forming into a rainbow fortress before the invaders. Considering that he was a member of the Faculty of Creation (*Value*), that meant this battle was a question of whether Lord Byron's art could sufficiently oppose the intruders.

But.

"Whoa, the fight's already started!"

A hysterical voice echoed from the depths of the forest.

In response, Lord Byron's collection of bubbles spun behind him, descending into the undergrowth in the opposite direction from the invaders as they autonomously responded to the new threat.

The primary function of the bubbles was to destroy the oxygen latent in the air, thus robbing his opponents of the ability to breathe. So to see someone completely unaffected by that kind of attack was the ultimate surprise for Lord Byron.

"What?!"

"One of Iselma's dogs?!"

The attackers at once tensed up at the new arrival.

But the expression of the youth that emerged from the undergrowth was anything but hostile.

"You're Lord Byron, right? From House Iselma?" he asked with a smile.

The fact he was somehow managing to keep the shock from showing on his face spoke volumes of Lord Byron's disposition.

"...and you are?"

"Flat Escardos, from the El-Melloi classroom! Reporting for duty!" With a sharp salute, the blonde haired boy turned to the invaders.

Folding his arms with a triumphant smirk, he called upwards into the trees.

"Now, take 'em out, Le Chien!"

"I told you not to call me that!"

With an angry yell Svin dropped to the ground. Muttering under his breath about having his cover blown, he lightly stroked his nose.

"You guys all smell like sharp metal, you know? Nothing but an ugly, disgusting thirst for blood coming from the lot of you."

Up until that point, the attackers had been looking down on the two boys.

It went without saying that anyone who would jump into this situation had to be recognized as a certain sort of dangerous. It was even more crucial for magi not to write off their opponents based on outwards appearances, as well. And that was why, even as they laughed at them, they wasted no time in activating their magecraft.

But before they could finish,

Svin howled.



The shockwave of that roar was enough to blow away the attackers' magecraft.

In many Asian countries, it was said that the voice of a dog had the power to expel evil. As if the boy's voice had similar properties, the magical energy that should have been flowing through their Magic Circuits vanished entirely.

"No way, you...!"

"-El Melloi Classroom, Svin Glascheit." Declaring his name before the wide-eyed intruders, Svin's howl changed to another form.



青ざめた死よ  
「Pallida mors」

それが、少年の呪文だったか。

ざあ、とスヴィンの髪がざわついた。あたかも髪自体が別の生き物と化したか  
のように蠢いたのである。

——1章より

"Pallida Mors (*Pale Death*)."

Was that the boy's spell?

With a soft hum, Svin's hair began to move. As if the hair itself had been transformed into a different creature, it began to squirm. As they watched, that hair grew, stretching down to cover his back, while his canines grew into bladelike fangs. Though the beauty remained unchanged, its nature had shifted.

He jumped.

Even so, the attackers responded as appropriate.

At once, they released the magecraft they had been holding back. Though the lightning they released was no more than a One Count spell, thanks to the enhancing effects of the Weather Manipulation, it should have had no issue tearing apart their unlucky opponent.

But instead, the hand one of them had extended forward vanished.

In the same way as his teeth had become fangs, Svin's fingernails had likewise become razorlike claws. Perhaps even unaware of that change, the magus was relieved of his hand, and collapsed to the ground unconscious due to the sudden mass blood loss.

Without pausing, Svin leapt into the trees. From trunk to branch, to trunk again, he soared around the forest as if gravity itself was no obstacle for him.

One of the magi managed to bring his wits to bear in time to try and give answer to the attack, but upon seeing Svin's form he gasped, eyes wide.

Svin's body had transformed.

Close enough to be mistaken for that legendary Phantasmal Species, the muscles of his body rippled and the hair of his body stood with the firmness of metal, giving the impression of a werewolf. No, his actual self couldn't have changed. Looking closely, one could see that his clothes and shoes remained undamaged by the transformation. The bizarre magical energy that wrapped itself around the young man's body was simply attempting to give off the impression of a werewolf.

Rather than werewolf, perhaps the term Phantasmal Wolf was more appropriate.

Bestial Magecraft.

Across many lands, magecraft was a pursuit that sought to replicate the abilities of animals in people.

No, it wasn't just magecraft. The number of Chinese martial arts, like Xingyiquan and White Crane Boxing, that took hints for their movements from those of animals was too high to count. In the west, motifs of swans and lions frequently appeared in dance and art as well. Since the time when mankind split itself off from the animal kingdom, it had revered it as a source of Mystery.

Such was the nature of Svin Glascheit's magecraft.

Just as the term Berserker originally referred to warriors who clad themselves in bear skins, his art was to draw forth a tremendous bestial nature from within himself. Infusing his body with the Mystery of beasts, he acquired an overwhelming level of speed and strength that far exceeded simple Strengthening magecraft.

Even if his opponent was a magus, his was a speed that could not be tracked.

As if they were no more than straw, he struck through the magi.

The fact they were in the middle of the forest no doubt also contributed to Svin's supremacy over the other magi. With the failing light of dusk cut further by the surrounding trees, even if they Strengthened their eyesight there was no way they could track his speed. But every time they made even the slightest contact with Svin's raging claws, flesh came away with them.

"If that's how it is, then...!"

The remaining magi shifted strategies.

Breaking from their tight-knit formation, they scattered themselves around the clearing as they activated another spell. If they couldn't match him at close range, then

they would dispatch him from a distance. Being able to rapidly shift into a different fighting style, it was clear that they were all magi experienced in battle.

But they didn't have any experience dealing with this ability.

"Right, right, now spin it, like this!" Flat said, waving his hand in a circle.

For an observer well versed in sports, one might have observed that Flat's posture just prior to waving his hands matched that of the other magi. In psychological terms, this mirroring was the act of adopting another's posture and mannerisms in order to set them at ease. In this case, however, the action had a completely different purpose.

"Intervention Start (*Play Ball*)."

With that, the vector of the magical energy changed.

Just as the lightning left the hands of the magi, it immediately turned, changing directions completely. Screams filled the air as the magi were struck down by their own lightning. Using a doll that resembled the target in order to place a curse on them - Flat's movements earlier had been for the purpose of replicating an effect similar to that well-known kind of sympathetic magecraft.

It was a curse one could see from time to time in various schools of southeast Asian magecrafts.

...in the Clock Tower, where European magecraft served as the foundation for all study, such a curse would never be taught.

But, the same thing went for Flat.

His style of magecraft was also unique.

Owing to his incredibly rare affinity of Void, the spells he would use were all but guaranteed to be bordering on heretical. Within the study of Modern Magecraft, the idea of collecting the strong points of various styles and combining them into a single art was categorized as Chaos Magecraft, but after Lord El-Melloi II had evaluated it as something that 'sounds more like Strange Magecraft,' Flat himself began spreading that name, proud of having his magecraft specially christened by his teacher.

Normally, such a formula wouldn't work at all.

Chaos Magecraft itself was brittle from the foundation up. Since one could only include variations of magecraft they were personally familiar with, though the idea of taking the strengths of other styles of magecraft and combining them into one made it sound almost omnipotent, the reality was that properly codifying those strengths into workable spells was a difficult endeavor. And yet, Flat's approach of 'I just did it that way and it worked' was certainly very maverick of him.

Above all, his ability to interfere with the magecraft of others was unreasonably potent.

"...the...El-Melloi Classroom...?"

With a moan, one of the attackers spoke.

The twin jewels of the El-Melloi Classroom. In short, the figureheads of the newly rising powers of the Clock Tower. Both having long and storied bloodlines, neither could be called part of the New Agers, but for that reason they were able to demonstrate true ability without restraint.

A marriage of the might of old magecraft to the flexibility of new instruction.

Whether they realized it or not, the two moved in perfect sync.

"Alright, Le Chien, let's pick up the pace! Let's show them what it means to be the aces of El-Melloi!"

"Stop trying to give me orders!"

Despite the face of the words coming through his muddled voice, Svin dutifully struck the invaders after Flat's interference nullified their magecraft. Though they were both of exceptionally strong egos, and the ability for anyone to smoothly cooperate with such vastly different schools of magecraft was unlikely to surpass mediocre at best, the two of them nevertheless executed their teamwork like twins that had trained together since birth.

At the same time, both of them came to a stop.

Not just them, even the attacking magi had stopped, turning away from the El-Melloi students. The fear written on their face was one of a completely different breed than that of earlier.

"...and what exactly is going on here?" the deeply tanned young man spoke.

As he spoke, Atram Galiasta's lips curled into a sinister smile.

**~Part 4~**

-My master and I leaned up against a tree with Reines to avoid the rain.

In order to maintain control over the strongest leylines, the land controlled by magi often avoided dense urban areas. As a result, areas like this with dense greenery were rather common. As if that leyline had conferred its blessing on the trees and shrubs growing in the area, despite the obvious age of the trees, they were each thickly crowned with young, vibrant leaves.

How long had they looked out upon this scenery?

There was no indication that the thunder was anywhere close to ending.

Thick storm clouds covered the entirety of Iselma's territory, as if the clouds were attempting to chase out the setting sun. It reminded me of the story of Orion, who after being killed by a scorpion, became a constellation eternally fleeing from it.

As my master stared at the heavy rain, I ventured a question.

"...is it okay to let Flat and Svin run off like that?"

"...yes. Either way, those two would try to force themselves into the fight. Even if their opponents are magi of any reasonable caliber, those two won't let themselves be outdone. As much as they are problem children, they frankly still have that level of ability."

As if in a bad mood, he spoke reluctantly with a puff of cigar smoke.

The fact that they had the ability sufficient to be considered problem children was likely an honest confession from him. Compared to the other faculties, the El-Melloi Classroom was already a collection of misfits and dissidents, but even among them those two stood out. For their ability in magecraft of course, but more so it was their entire way of being. While dedicating such tremendous efforts to learning magecraft, they still stood out as having a nature that was somehow different from the other magi of the Clock Tower.

Perhaps one could say that they were like my master, in his way of being both entirely magus-like and the furthest thing from it.

"Well, except for the fact their opponent is not normal."

"...not normal?" As my master said that, I felt a shiver run up my back. Though I felt it was somewhat pathetic, at the same time it was a difficult response to suppress.

"Atram Galiasta. The man Svin had investigated for me. Well, if worse comes to worse, it's not like he's an opponent those two couldn't escape from..."

"...Galiasta."

It was a pretty rare-sounding name.

Of course, when it came to the Clock Tower, I wouldn't have recognized any names, but even so it had a very foreign sound to me. A dry sound. Air hot enough to burn the skin. Swords with a thick, crescent blade. That kind of feeling.

As if to confirm my thoughts, my master continued.

"It's an old bloodline from the Middle East, only recently aligned with the Clock Tower. Their magecraft steps right into the field of Curses, so they are a rather troublesome opponent to deal with. At any rate, they used that magecraft to force cooperation from nearby organizations, securing the rights to oil drilling operations. As far as influence in mundane affairs is concerned, they're in the lead even among members of the Clock Tower...and, in an auction for a certain Talisman, they struggled right to the end against Iselma."

"Oh? That's the Talisman you said Iselma had bought up earlier, correct?"

At Reines' interruption, I recalled a certain man.

*"Actually, there's a certain Talisman I'd like to get my hands on."*

Mick Grajilie.

The man who had just casually announced that he was a spy.

Speaking of him, I hadn't seen him since this morning. I had to wonder what he was up to, now that Iselma was under attack. If his confession to being a spy was actually true, then maybe he and Galiasta were...

I swallowed nervously.

Reines spoke.

"So, does that mean Galiasta was behind the Princess' murder?"

"I wonder," my master responded vaguely.

Putting a finger to his mouth, he narrowed his eyes as he began to put the information in order.

"The idea that it was revenge for taking the Talisman out from under them is possible, but...if that were the case, wouldn't they have opted for kidnapping instead? On top of that, would there be any need to follow up with an attack like this?"

"What if, for example, they sent someone to find the Talisman covertly, but the Princess discovered the plot and had to be killed to cover it up?"

My master shook his head at Reines' conjecture.

"And after killing her, they just politely returned her to her bedroom? Sure, they could have used some sort of magecraft to keep the scene clean of blood, but how would they have dealt with the Mystic Lock?"

"Hm. Well...hm." Scratching at the air with a finger, Reines went quiet.

Unfortunately, I was completely out of my league in this kind of discussion. I couldn't grasp the thoughts and feelings of even the two in front of me, let alone someone I had

only met two or three times. There was no way I could provide anything close to a useful hypothesis.

As a result, I simply watched the two talk, hands clasped together.

"Ihahahah! What's wrong, what's wrong? Why don't you try adding your thoughts to the mix? If it's a mystery game, you might as well throw out a couple dumb theories. Heck, why not ten? As the Watson of this outfit, who cares if you're completely wrong?"

The sound of Add's laughter came from around my right hand.

"...I'm...not that smart, so..."

"That's just 'cause you always put off thinking though, right? 'I can't, I can't!' So much easier to repeat that than do any real thinking, right?"

I had no response to Add's sharp accusations.

Rather, I agreed with him. Frankly speaking, thinking like that was more trouble than it was worth. If I could just close my eyes and cover my ears, life would be so easy. I didn't even have the courage to kill myself - rather, I was absolutely terrified out of my mind that if I died, I'd become one of...those. If I could just rest peacefully in the ground, that would be fine, but the idea of wandering the earth, unable to die...

Hopelessly cowardly, hopelessly lazy. That was me.

Even if you said I should try and change, that first step was just too much for me. Ever since I put my old home behind me, I hadn't changed a bit.

Why?

...it was painful.

I felt nauseous, like I might collapse.

This incident was pressing close to my heart. Something about the situation here pressured me in a way so different than when we were at the Castle of Separation, but here I was, the only one unable to see anything.

"-but if we follow that theory, you can't explain the death of the maid."

"Urgh. But if we suppose there are two culprits..."

The conversation between Reines and my master felt so far away, while I felt caught up in the pain in my chest.

Probably, because it was so close to me.

Something so important I couldn't afford to let it go, yet something that struck so close to home I couldn't bear to focus my attention on it.

It felt like there were invisible needles mixed in with the incessant rain. Being stabbed would of course hurt, but it was scary to even think that you couldn't see them no matter how much you stared. You wouldn't have any way of knowing until the blood first showed.

You wouldn't know they were needles at all until you were dead on the ground, filled with countless needles.

And if you looked at that corpse after the rain had stopped, no doubt you would look on perplexed, wondering why they hadn't just run away.

"Hm. But by your logic, then the Princess of Gold's creation..."

"No, while the Princess' beauty was certainly something manufactured, at that level whether it was natural or not is irrelevant. The Concept of artificial is one that returns to nature anyways. Whether it's polished by running water, or polished by a person's hand, a rock is still a rock. In short..."

(...oh, I see.)

Suddenly, the words being exchanged outside by conscious thought leaked through.

The Princess of Gold, and the Princess of Silver.

Really, I was very much the same as those two. My master's lecture about cosmetic magecraft and its history had struck through me like those invisible needles.

Gently, I touched my hood.

These were my invisible needles. An ice that encased my heart, refusing to melt no matter how much time passed.

If talking about needles of glass, then it obviously couldn't refer to anything else. The fact I hadn't realized it until now just went to show how stupid I really was. No matter how far away I ran, my own foolishness still pierced my chest. Stabbed my heart. Poured out my blood.

(-I'd just be better off dead...)

I'd rather that imaginary blood just filled my throat and drowned me.

Let my neck get scratched out, let my face turn all purple. I didn't care how pathetic I looked when I collapsed. Rather, that seemed like it would be the most appropriate way for me to die. I wanted to avoid the disgrace of having my remains turn into a ghost, but if that could be avoided, then...

"-Gray."

I suddenly realized someone was calling my name.

"...ah, master?"

"What's wrong? You've gone pale."

My master's brow was wrinkled as usual as he looked down at me. Though he might have misconstrued my expression as me feeling unwell, the fact that he could tell something was wrong just from that expression was a sign of how long we had spent together.

"Actually, I..."

For a few seconds, I hesitated.

Though I was beginning to get flustered, I still remembered my thoughts from just earlier quite clearly.

In that case, there was a way much clearer than words I could use to describe my feelings. Just a little, I pulled back my hood.

Seeing that, my master's eyes went wide.

"Gray! I thought I told you not to-"

"...no."

Just like I had asked him to so long ago, he immediately began to reprimand me, but I was able to wave it off.

Though I had only pulled back my hood a tiny bit, and though the fingers that had done so felt like they were burning for it, at last I managed to get my mouth to work.

"My face...I think it could be related to what's going on...maybe..."

"To this incident? But-"

My master cut off, glancing quickly to his side.

He was probably trying to bring my attention to the fact Reines was still here. What I wanted to talk about wasn't something that should be known to just anyone. As if she had guessed as much herself, Reines tilted her head to the side a bit as she spoke up.

"Hm. Well if I'm the problem, I can excuse myself...?"

"...no, it's okay. I think this is something you need to know as well."

Briefly, I looked over at my master.

Though his expression was just as conflicted as before, he didn't seem like he was going to voice any objections.

Softly, I put a hand to my now revealed cheek.

"This is....not my original face."

"What-?!" Reines' expression immediately twisted in surprise.

Now thinking about it, Reines had pointed out my hood a number of times.

*You'd be so much cuter without that hood, you know.*

Though she had been teasing me, those words had stuck with me.

If she had taken interest in me, then I could only say I was sorry. Really, truly sorry, but I wasn't someone who met the expectations of others. In the end, I just couldn't.

"...you already know about Add, right?"

"Hey, come on! Don't take me out so suddenly! I need the time to brace myself!"

Releasing the hook under my cloak, I let the cage drop into view. The moment he appeared, Add's eyes and mouth immediately set about working busily. Thinking about it, back in my hometown, the only ones I could look to to help me relax were the people on the TV, and this box.

"This box has a Noble Phantasm hidden within it."

I decided against sharing its true name, The Spear That Shines at the End of the World (*Rhongomyniad*).

A treasure once wielded by the legendary King Arthur, to the Clock Tower it had a special significance. That's why my master had given me strict instructions to never say the name out loud except for when I was using it.

But even holding that back, Reines was still listening earnestly. She didn't ask any difficult questions about what it's true nature was. In short, she was acting like a true magus. She was used to asking questions limited to certain topics, limited to a certain scope. For that, I was now especially grateful.

Nodding, I continued.

"My family...their goal was to create someone who could wield the contents of this box."

In that way, we were the same.

Born not just with a purpose, but for a purpose. One that was decided for us. Just as the Princesses were born for the sake of creating beauty, so too was I born into someone else's role.

Also, that both of us were more successful than anyone else.

"In order to imitate the person who had originally wielded the contents of this box, so many...so many people were created..."

Just as the family of magi who had sought to create the ultimate beauty.

My family had believed that if they could create someone identical to that original wielder, not just in the face but in every capacity - from bodily proportions, to muscle structure, to the internal organs and blood vessels - if they could faithfully recreate that, then they would have someone who could use that Noble Phantasm. Of course, it went without saying that a perfect reconstruction was impossible, due to the numerous elements of Mystery that the hero of old had possessed but were lost to us in the present age. But if they were able to recreate the physical properties of that hero, then somehow or other that divine glow would follow, or so my ancestors believed.

To endure the hundreds, if not thousands of years of countless failures, I couldn't even imagine the madness that had gripped them. What had the family heads of all those

generations seen ahead of them, cursed to that fate of compliance that allowed not even the slightest waver?

"It first went really well about ten years ago."

Ten years ago.

I don't know why.

At the very least, at the time I was born, I was just as much of a failure as all the others. I had an excessive sensitivity to ghosts - something those around my family had considered a blessing - but even with that I had no reason to doubt that I was my own person. There wasn't even a single shred of evidence to justify it.

But, ten years ago.

Looking at myself in the mirror, my young self's face had drastically changed.

Though there were some faint similarities to my original face, little by little I watched as my face changed to that of a complete stranger. I could even hear the sound of my body reforming itself. With a pain completely different from normal growing pains, I could clearly hear my bones and muscles creaking and snapping as they rebuilt themselves into a new shape.

Inundated by that crushing agony, I spent a night on my bed, clutching my pillow, for what seemed like forever.

Seeing my face had transformed, held a much greater sense of nobility, my family had wrapped me in hugs openly weeping with joy. I didn't even know what kind of reaction was appropriate.

"...that was also when I became able to properly speak with Add."

Apparently, it was a problem of precision.

Something about how, once I had become similar enough to the original wielder of the Noble Phantasm, the false personality dormant within the Mystic Code was awakened. At any rate, he soon became one of the few people I talked to.

"...I see." Reines gave a gentle nod.

My master already knew this much. You could call it a preamble. Something we talked about the first day we met in my old home. When I had made that request.

*Please...keep hating my face.*

Thinking back on it now, it was really a cruel thing to ask of him.

I don't like it, so please don't like it either. Was there anything more selfish? I was just so happy that, unlike my family, someone had responded to seeing my face with fear, but even that was no excuse.

But that was a discussion for another time.

Pushing down my suicidal self-hatred for now, I got to my point.

"...there were no mirrors in her room, were there?"

When Raines and I had investigated her room, we couldn't think of a single reason why such a staple for a woman's bedroom was so conspicuously missing. Of course, at the time I couldn't say anything. For me, the absence of mirrors was a given.

"Umm...I was wondering if...maybe her face was something artificial as well...?"

As I said that, I could feel my own cheeks start to burn.

Maybe I was completely wrong. It wasn't something that could even be called deduction, just simply spilling out the ideas that came into my head. After all, what did it matter that there were no mirrors? Even I didn't believe that was something that could help us solve this case.

But, neither Reines nor my master laughed at me.

So, as I put my hood back on, I tried desperately to explain.

"I...was scared..." Though my voice was trembling, I couldn't stop the words from spilling out one after another. This time, the fingers of the hand that had returned my hood felt cold as ice. "...that face in the mirror...seeing my own face change right in front of me...was so scary..."

Why?

In front of these people, I just honestly confessed. Something I could never say in front of a single person in my home town came out so easily in front of them. It felt like I had just thrown up a jagged stone, but compared to the fear I had felt at that time, it was barely enough of a sensation to register.

"It's not...that I hate this face," I continued.

Of course, there were still some traces left of my original face. From the start I had that nature, and my ancestors had strived to produce that in me anyways. In all honesty, after ten years of wearing this face, I wasn't able to tell where the traces of my old face were, and where the entirely new face began.

Perhaps, if nothing had happened at all, I still would have ended up with a face like this. Or maybe, as I grew, I would have developed a face that was entirely different.

"But, looking in mirrors...even now, the idea is scary...like I've been possessed by the ghost of a long-dead hero..."

"...I understand. That's enough."

As he spoke, I felt his fingers touch my cheek.

Feeling that, I realized I had been crying. With a troubled face, my master wiped the tears from my face with his handkerchief.

After that, he returned his hand to his cigar, as if bored.

"Transformed...certainly, that would be terrifying."

Through my blurry vision and the smoke rising from his cigar, I couldn't make out his face very well.

The raindrops struck the earth.

Reines remained silent.

Surprisingly, even Add had nothing to say. Even though I had broached a secret known only to my master and the people of my home, he didn't make fun of me. Was he trying to be nice? As pathetic as it was, he was certainly one of my very few friends.

A strange sound rang out.

Still holding his cigar, my master struck his hand against the bark of the tree he was leaning on, his eyes going wide.

"Wait, don't tell me..."

"What is it, dearest brother?" Seeing my master's eyes going wide, Reines tilted her head in confusion.

"...really? Is it really that easy?" Returning his cigar to his mouth, he began to mutter.

It seemed as if he hadn't heard his sister's voice at all. As if switching places with me, he sank entirely into his own thoughts.

"...if that's the case, then the calculations match. In any case, it's a planet, so the 120 degrees is all they needed. But, for the other...no, that problem had an answer already. The two of them are complementary in beauty, so they would already have the maximum effect...I see, it's not an issue of comparing them to Perault or Bajille. The issue is far more superficial..."

Like he had suddenly fallen into delirium, he continued to mutter to himself.

His forehead was once again deeply creased as he dove into his own thoughts. It was an expression that I couldn't say I hated. Though I didn't enjoy seeing others suffer or get

unlucky like Reines did, somewhere deep inside I had taken a liking to that face which appeared so suddenly.

What kind of scenery was unfolding in his head?

I kind of wanted to see it for myself.

I wanted to share that view with him.

Though I wasn't anywhere close to being called smart, if I could catch just a glimpse of the world in his head...I felt like that alone could save me. It may not erase my doubts, or correct my flaws, but even so I marveled at it like one looking up at a sky full of stars.

Maybe, in the same way that he looked up to a genius.

"It was the opposite...!" Finally, my master spoke again. "The sun wasn't representing something else. It was standing for the sun itself. At a scope like this, using the sun itself as the symbol would bring the difficulty way down. No, wait...if that's true then..."

Once again, my master grit his teeth, grinding them with a moan.

This time, the voice slipping out was far different than the one from him being lost in thought.

"Esteemed brother, it's fine if you want to just jump to conclusions like that, but can you pay a bit more attention to the rest of us? What about the sun is backwards?"

Unable to endure it any longer, Reines finally spoke out, her frustration clear in the harshness of her tone.

But my master, putting a single hand to his face, just stared up at the clouds.

"...then, that makes the worst possibility possible, doesn't it? Why didn't I realize this sooner...what have I been doing all this time?! If I had been any slower, who knows what would have happened?!"

I felt like I could almost hear his teeth grinding in the back of his mouth.

My master finally turned, not to Reines but to me.

"Gray."

"Y-yes?"

Suddenly being called on, I gave a stiff nod. As if worried he had been reading my thoughts, my heart started thundering. Probably, thanks to my hood, he didn't notice that I was blushing.

But, paying no mind to any of that, he simply continued to speak.

"I have a favour to ask of you."

## ~Part 5~

Just a little, let us rewind time.

Just before Flat encountered Lord Byron, a certain magus nodded within the Tower of the Moon.

"-I see. So that's your move."

Touko Aozaki muttered softly.

On the desk in front of her, a faint steam rose from her cup of tea.

It was within the research space specifically allocated to her by the Iselma family. Through the square-cut windows of her room, she could see the dark clouds trying to crowd out the evening sky. Though it wasn't like she didn't know how unstable the weather was in lakefront areas like this, even so the change was far too drastic to be written off as natural.

Though she looked down on the happenings outside, what was reflected in her eyes was not the view from the nearby window.

A magus' servant. Depending on the school of magecraft, they were called things like Familiars or Agathions, or as in the Far East, Shikigami. Touko was of course using a puppet. Having taken an interest in the rumors of a certain magus using wires to create Familiars in the Fourth Holy Grail War, she had made a puppet out of springs, gears, and string herself.

Though looking at it now, it didn't seem like something that could be described as having been built on such a flimsy whim. For Touko, creating a puppet that served only a single function with no other features was, simply put, boring.

Wings were lined in brass, eyes formed of rubies, that Familiar was soaring above the tower twin to the one Touko now occupied.

"Well, it's kind of a pain, but a favour is a favour."

With a small sigh, Touko stood up.

At once, her gaze flicked to her feet, and to the object waiting there.

Somewhat rustic and overly large, a bizarre bag she had brought with her sat in the corner of the room.

◆ 第二章 ◆

-Chapter 2-

**~Part 1~**

Maio and Islo were holed up in the Tower of the Moon.

As Lord Byron had instructed them, they had retreated into their joint Workshop to avoid the fighting. In contrast to the primary Workshop that sat at the top of the tower, the temporary workshop they now occupied was underground. Beyond just the obvious implications in magecraft that placement had of trying to avoid the mixing of magical energy and mana between the two groups, it also served as an accurate metaphor of their compatibility.

Of course, just as it was in the Clock Tower, being underground was an advantage when it came to drawing out magical energy, but with the way Isehma's magecraft relied on the movements of celestial bodies, there were greater advantages elsewhere.

The two sat a fair distance away from each other.

The stone walled Workshop contained not only the standard fair one might expect, like stills and Philosopher's Eggs, but also pharmacist tools like mortars and pestles, along with craftsman's tools like spindles and a loom.

Of course, these were for the sake of Maio and Islo. They could also be said to be a historical record of the magi that had been brought in to aid in the construction of the Princesses of Gold and Silver.

...the ultimate beauty which had been revealed last night, of which only fragments now remained.

"...what are we...supposed to do?"

Islo spoke almost unconsciously.

His intricately braided hair began to sway.

As far as he was concerned, there was nothing interesting to see in people or in society. In actuality, even the magecraft he had suffered tremendously to obtain was something he didn't feel strongly about.

All he wanted was to see something beautiful. No doubt he wasn't alone in his family in that regard, as for generations they had aided Iselma in their craft. As far as Islo was concerned, the only ones worthy enough to wear his dresses were those two Princesses.

No, even he could feel that his attempts to draw out the beauty of those two in his weaving had made a striking improvement in his own skills. Far beyond just a growing skill as a fashion designer, it also included his growing ability as a magus, to prepare clothes that functioned as a kind of Mystic Code in their own right.

Mystic Codes, belonging to the Princesses of Gold and Silver.

They weren't what you would normally expect from a Mystic Code - a simple object meant to expend magical energy in the process of actualizing a supernatural phenomenon. They were simply tools used to draw out ever more of the beauty from within those two, the essence of which Reines had strangely managed to notice.

*-In seeing something beautiful, one becomes more beautiful themselves.*

Just as the Iselma family had spent generations modifying the Princesses of Gold and Silver both magically and physically, so too had the Sebunan family been advancing in their craft. Islo Sebunan was the man who stood at the end, as the result of those efforts.

In comparison,

"...I...I..."

The pharmacist Maio held a somewhat different inspiration.

With a decidedly unhealthy pallor to his face, Maio was pinching the area around his mouth. Struggling to get by his incessant stammer, he forced his throat to spit out his inner feelings.

"I...Dia-I mean, the Princess of Gold..."

Islo's eyes narrowed.

Covering the gloom in his own eyes, he spoke hoarsely.

"...you and Diadra...played a lot together, didn't you?"

Maio's face immediately darkened.

That was true. From the time she had just been a young candidate for becoming the Princess of Gold, from the time Estella was just a young candidate for becoming the Princess of Silver, he had been as a playmate to them. Though it was somewhat rare for magi of differing families to spend so much time together when young, in this case there was the practical necessity of needing to learn about the nature of their bodies as soon as possible. After all, the doctor needed to know far more about the patient's body than even the patient themselves. Maio's family - the Clynelles family had long served as pharmacists for the Iselma family, and since then a high amount of contact between their families had become critical.

From Maio's perspective, the purpose of his skills had been to support those two even since before they had been born.

"W-why do you say that, a-all of the sudden?"

"...Caleena and her sister...were also often around, weren't they?"

"The ones who k-knew the games were t-those two, after all..." Maio's reply was quiet, subdued.

Originally from a Celtic background, the twin maids knew all sorts of unique games. Not only Diadra and Estella, but even Maio was often brought along to participate.

"D-Diadra really loved, hopscotch. S-she was so much better at it than I was."

"...ahh..." he sighed, remaining seated. "I...liked that too..."

"Huh?"

Surprised by the unexpected confession, Maio turned around.

"Y-you almost, never j-joined in though, right?"

"...Estella and Rejina aside...whenever I tried to play with Diadra...you always got angry, didn't you?"

Maio gulped, at a loss for words.

There was no use trying to deceive an old friend. No matter how much they were magi, their likes and dislikes were no different than those of ordinary people, especially at such a young age. His small feelings, his small jealousies, he remembered all of them. And together with them he grew up, simply adding the nature of a magus on top of what was already there.

"I-I..."

He was unable to continue from there. Even though it felt like the overflowing feelings might gush up out of his throat of their own accord, he couldn't form them into words. Just like it had always been.

"I-I don't...dislike, you."

"....ahh." Islo nodded, his face decidedly pale.

As if to allow time for their words to settle, he waited a short while before speaking again.

"Maio...do you think those attackers...are the ones who killed the Princess?"

"I don't know."

Maio weakly shook his head. To be honest, he didn't really want to think about anything. All he wanted to do was curl up on the floor and sleep like mud. How much happier would he be, eyes closed to the world? While it was said that among magi there were those who were capable of using self-hypnosis to perform Field Stripping, a mental deconstruction and cleaning to completely erase their own stress, what Maio wished for was a far more complete form of self-destruction. Completely dismantling

the psyche to the point each minute piece became meaningless, and then never putting them back together. No, from the start it would just be better if he had never been born. Then, he wouldn't have to have experienced the loss of someone so close to him.

How much time passed?

The door opened.

Maio and Islo held their breath.

Though it was someone they both knew well, she seemed somehow even more beautiful, that personification of heaven and her maid.

"E-Estella, Rejina..."

Maio called their names.

Though she was supposed to be the Princess of Silver he had been close friends with since they were young, the face she wore now was unfamiliar to him.

...no, even that face was the result of their own work. Just as they had with the late Princess of Gold, they had offered up everything to give birth to the greatest beauty in her.

"So you two were in here? I'm glad."

Even her voice rang out with a beauty greater than that of any musical instrument.

Would one call returning to the small vestiges of her younger self cruel? In order to create that perfect, isolated beauty, everything else was stripped away from her. Just as with the Princess of Gold, rather than Estella Valueleta Iselma, Princess of Silver seemed like a much more appropriate name now.

"What, do you need, Estella?"

Even so, Maio stubbornly continued to call her that.

"The Princess..." As her maid began to speak, the Princess stopped her. She then opened her mouth to speak herself.

"Could I ask for your help?"

Maio and Islo both shared a silent look. Before they could reply though, she continued.

"I believe Lord Valueleta is the one who killed my sister."

A choked sound erupted from Maio's throat, matched by perfect silence from Islo.

But in the end, the pharmacist spoke first.

"W-why?"

"Iselma is originally a branch family of Valueleta. If we were to grow too successful, that would certainly be disadvantageous to the head family."

If the subordinate becomes too successful, the boss is in danger. It was a truth that was accepted all over the world. If the Princess of Gold's request for asylum had been successful, then of course Lord Byron would have lost standing, but management of the branch families inevitably fell to Lord Valueleta.

That was why she presumed the old woman was the true culprit.

It was a rational hypothesis. Considering the techniques employed by Valueleta, slicing the Princess of Gold apart inside her own room would be child's play, and if Caleena had found some sort of clue, it wasn't that unreasonable to expect her to kill the witness and frame that independant action type Mystic Code for the crime.

...and so.

After sitting stiffly for a while, Maio raised his head.

Gathering what one might call his resolve, he asked.

"W-what's the plan?"

**~Part 2~**

The sun had finally lost in its battle against the pursuing storm clouds.

In a forest that was already quite dark at the best of times, a heavy rain fell on a darkness that was impenetrable to all but the enhanced eyes of a magus.

Within that darkness, a dark-skinned young man surveyed the field of battle.

Heedless of the rain pouring down on him, he gave an exasperated sigh.

"You were supposed to have reached Iselma's twin towers by now, but...it seems there have been some unforeseen developments."

"...my apologies."

The hooded attackers knelt before the newly arrived man.

Paying no mind to their apologies, the man himself advanced slowly.

"Atram Galiasta," he said. As if making that introduction itself was some sort of disgrace, his face twisted in a melancholic scowl as he spoke. No doubt he had intended to make his introduction before the towers themselves.

"That's my name. It looks like you've taken on some interesting kids here, Lord Byron. Though I must admit they seem somewhat lacking in character."

"They are students of...one of my guests, after all."

Byron spoke while shaking his head, as if he hadn't quite fully accepted the fact that reinforcements had come.

"You don't say? I'm quite envious. To be so popular that even people you don't know have come running to your rescue. As expected, the veterans of Europe are on a whole different level. Where I come from, it was common for even disagreements among family members to be settled with bloodshed, you know."

Atram sighed. Putting on a face of feigned heartache, he continued.

"So, how about it, then? My friends here should have asked you earlier, but would you consider surrendering that Talisman to us?"

"...even if you ask, you have to know how I will answer."

As expected, there was no way Lord Byron would bend. After all, if he had intended on surrendering, there would have been no need for him to intercept the attackers out here in the forest. He could have just waited calmly in his tower, and handed over the Talisman once they arrived.

As the tension mounted between the two of them, the younger man was the first to change it into something else.

Stepping forward on the sodden ground, he spread his arms wide.

"Then, war it is," he spoke with a theatrical flair. "War, War, War...ah, what a savage sound. That the Iselma family would resort to such a choice is, without a doubt, a most lamentable truth."

Atram shook his head, as if overcome by regret at the situation.

Even so, he didn't even attempt to hide the vulgar smile splayed across his face. A smile that confessed that, no matter what he said, that savagery was one of his greatest pleasures in life.

Almost any magus was prepared to risk their life in such a battle. Even if the battlefield was a poor medium for the exercise of their specific magecraft, the honing of instinct, the drawing forth of the will to fight, the situation that forced the individual to push themselves to the limit of their own life and strength were fertile ground for the development of magecraft.

But even so, the number of magi who truly enjoyed fighting was unexpectedly small. At most, it was simply a means to an end. Of course, there was generally no need to risk the Mysteries discovered and Magic Crests forged by their ancestors in such an all or nothing gambit.

Atram Galiasta fell in neither camp, though.

A beautifully simple process - overwhelming victory itself was what he sought.

"But if that is your will, then there is no avoiding it. Inexperienced as I am, I, Atram Galiasta, shall endeavour to be your opponent."

"-Hold on."

A voice called out from another direction.

Atram's eyes snapped to the side, where Svin was now speaking.

"Lord Byron, I have a request to make."

"A request?"

"If we repel these intruders, I would like you to return our professor's...Lady Reines' Volumen Hydrargyrum."

"...I see," Lord Byron became quiet. Unable to answer immediately, Atram immediately jumped into the gap.

"Could you stay out of this, please? At best you are just costing us valuable time. I'm not interested in playing out all your petty problems here."

Reaching a hand into his suit, he withdrew a small pot-shaped object.

"Primeval Batteries...is that a term you are familiar with?"

The oldest batteries in the world were discovered in the outskirts of the Middle East.

Rather than being used as storage space of electricity, it was thought they were developed in an attempt to create tools used in the process of gilding. But the method of creating them remained unchanged among magi, passed down for an entirely different purpose than the ones concocted by the scientific community.

And when one such family of magi had fallen to ruin, the Galiasta family had put its incredible wealth into motion to secure its history for themselves.

Having already been involved in Mineral and Compensation-type magecraft, these Primeval Batteries were a perfect fit. In the end, they were able to lace the electricity they held with their own magical energy.

And so they gained control of a power considered to be entirely within the realms of the gods in any number of ancient lands. Utilizing that power, they accrued tremendous prosperity. And of course, in having access to that power, spells that manipulated the weather came only a few steps later.

"Rage (*Gush Out*)."

With those words, the electricity became an enormous hand.

The speed with which it attacked was on par with that of lightning. Powering through the resistance in the air as if it was nothing, in the blink of an eye it struck out at the boy.

In answer, the phantasmal wolf roared.

Both were techniques overflowing with magical energy. Lightning and Sound - though the medium was different, the motive force behind both Mysteries remained unchanged. In short, the greater Mystery would no doubt overwhelm its opponent.

As the lightning and the howl made contact, they threw off invisible sparks that deflected the rain around them, whirling together into a mess of magical energy that rapidly broke down.

It appeared to be a tie.

Though in terms of power Atram's lightning was certainly the stronger of the two, once the rain and wind washed away the ensuing cloud of dust, the phantasmal wolf Svin had become still stood defiant.

"That's rather impressive," a voice leaked out from between the fangs. "As far as magecraft goes, it's only second rate. But in an actual combat situation, it's doubtless a high-grade skill."

"Second rate, huh? That's rich, coming from a kid like you," Atram replied with a cruel sneer.

Unflinching at the bloodthirst dripping from Atram's voice, the phantasmal wolf continued.

"You understand that yourself, don't you? My professor could see through a technique like that in a flash. Your magecraft is definitely polished. As a tool used to hurt people, for use in combat, it's more than perfect. But that's not what magecraft is for." Svin snorted. "Rather than a magus, you're more like a Spellcaster."

How deeply must those words have struck home? Atram's eyes were wide, boiling over with rage. Drawing forth many times the amount of magical energy he had used earlier through his Magic Circuits, he activated his Crest while pouring it into the Battery. The spell bought by the Galiasta family converted that magical energy into lightning with the utmost efficiency.

It was like a dragon.

Anyone looking at that scene would surely be able to envision the jaws of that terrible creature opening wide before him.

Brooking no attempts at flight, the lightning-born dragon soared forward to swallow Svin - who disappeared a moment before contact.

With a speed no human's eyes could follow, Svin leapt away.

Scattering branches and trunks like pinball, the gathered magi cried out in surprise as Svin fell like a shooting star, claws aiming straight for Atram's head.



In the opposite direction of the attackers.

The wind and rain sent waves through the grass, reminiscent of the ocean. Among those waves, the narrow path cutting through it seemed like it might be swallowed up. That path, which was walked only by magi, seemed to appear and disappear over and over as if by magecraft itself.

Now, in that ephemeral path, a large figure rose.

A horse drawn carriage stood waiting.

In front of the open door to the carriage, a burly, servant-looking man held an open umbrella out for an old woman.

A moment before boarding that carriage, a stunningly beautiful voice rang out like a bell.

"Wait!"

The beauty it held seemed enough to rob the word of meaning. Though the scene of the grass battered by the raging storm was nothing of note, the addition of that one woman standing in the middle of it made it look like a masterpiece of art, one that would remain forever etched in the memories of any who gazed upon it. Whether being witness to what one could clearly see was the most beautiful sight they would ever witness in their lives was a good thing or not was left to be decided.

The old woman turned at the voice.

Lord Valueleta.

Her full name, Inorai Valueleta Atroholm.

"Oh, if it isn't the Princess of Silver," she spoke with a full-faced smile.

Coming up on the path behind them was the Princess and her maid, Rejina.

"And how may I help you? Maybe I'm just losing my hearing thanks to my age, but that seemed like an odd way to address me."

"I told you to wait," the Princess repeated.

Inorai whistled. "Giving me commands, huh? While I'm fine with dispensing superficial politeness, I don't remember going out of my way to be so rude before."

"You are the one who killed the Princess of Gold, aren't you?" Without hesitation, she cut straight to the heart of the issue.

No meandering, no euphemism. Just a direct, straight-bladed question. Rejina stood watching her intently, as if that was the only way she could support her.

"Oh?" Inorai's eyes widened. "I see. That's what you think. Interesting. Of course, I must also be one of the suspects. Ah, I guess it was pretty suspicious of me to stay present for the inspection of the body, wasn't it? I had intended it as a kindness, but you could also take it as me trying to destroy the evidence, can't you?"

"You were in on it from the beginning too, weren't you Mick?"

"No, not at all," he answered, scratching his head.

The man who had declared himself to be a spy to Reines - Mick Grajilie stood boldly by Inorai's side, acting like her personal servant. He should have been a magus associated with the Faculty of Curses (*Jigmarie*).

"While I used my outside connections a bit, I certainly didn't do enough to warrant being called an accomplice. I haven't done anything so fancy."

"How shameless. And I imagine you called the magi attacking us now as well?"

"That's not entirely accurate." Her lips curling up slightly, Inorai added her own comment.

Her smile looked the same as ever, but that only added to the impression of the unspeakable darkness hiding behind it.

"Galiasta managed to accurately observe that I was present, and reached out to us. Asking that Valueleta didn't get involved, and while I agreed to that, I certainly didn't ask them to do anything. The only thing Mick did was act as our go-between."

"Are you saying you came to the Social Assembly without even knowing that Galiasta was planning on making their move?"

"Hey hey, no matter how skilled you think I am, I can't be the mastermind behind every crime out there. Leave that for the conspiracy theorists. Well, I guess the existence of a secret society of magi itself is something for the conspiracy theorists. How rude of me." Inorai laughed softly as she spoke.

Unable to completely hide under the umbrella, the rain striking her shawl made it waver.

"Alright, let's say I am the culprit. What would you do about it? You going to ask the Clock Tower to hold a trial? I'm not sure you can expect that to be exactly fair. The justice system barely works as it is in the rest of the world, so expecting it to accomplish anything in the world of magi is naive at best. And if what that Lord El-Melloi II said is true, then she was already plotting defection. As the head of the Faculty of Creation (*Value*), I'm well within my right to exact punishment. No matter how hard you try, the best result you can expect is shifting the balance of powers slightly in the Clock Tower's internal struggle."

"In that case, then kill me now." The Princess responded, her voice barely above a whisper.

Mick's eyes went wide, while Rejina just stood silently.

Stroking her temple for a few moments, Inorai spoke again.

"...I see. So that's your trump card, is it?"

"Yes. If it's you, you shouldn't have any difficulty killing me at all. But if you do that, the knowledge will spread far and wide. The one who called in Galiasta, the one who took the lives of both the Princesses of Iselma, was none other than Lord Valueleta. Your reputation will be as dust."

So saying, she turned to face a hill a small distance away. Thanks to the Strengthened senses of the magi, they could easily make out the two figures standing there.

"I'm sure you understand. Maio and Islo are both watching us. While they are certainly deeply involved with the Iselma family, they are no less members of Meluastea's Neutralist faction. Not even you have the power to keep them quiet."

Valueleta was aligned with the Democratic faction.

In short, those who believed that even the New Agers should be appointed to positions of power, a faction that sought to restructure the Clock Tower. No matter how much of a big shot one was, separating oneself from that factional dispute was anything but easy. While it was certainly within the realm of possibility for one within the Three Great Families of the Clock Tower, doing so would be accompanied by its own risks.

"So you're putting your own life on the line. Things really can't be easy with you these days, can they Princess? Under different circumstances I might have even taken a liking to such behavior." Exasperated, Inorai spoke with one eye closed.

"If you don't want that to happen, then why don't you call off these invaders?"

"Hey hey. Were you listening at all? My only connection to those guys is that they told me not to interfere. Just being a Lord or a member of the Three Great Families doesn't carry much weight out here in the woods, you know."

Her voice wasn't especially cold, nor was it particularly indifferent. That was just the way things were. That's what her words seemed to say.

Just as with her proclivity to enjoy the fruits of modern science, this old woman was very much a realist.

The Princess' shoulders began to tremble.

Even if it was out of anger, even that reaction was beautiful. If she was the end result of Iselma's efforts to create the ultimate beauty, then of course even her feelings and disposition would reflect that.

"Then...I..." As if attempting to strengthen her resolve, she made to speak.

"...w...wait!"

A shout rang out.

From the opposite direction the Princess of Silver had come from, a man in a black suit appeared from within the rain, struggling and out of breath.

"I-if possible, both of you, please wait!"

"Are you okay? Why don't you have a seat there, brother?" From beside him, a venomously exasperated voice called out. Behind it, face placid while she adjusted her hat, was Reines El-Melloi Archisorte.

"Lord El-Melloi II..." Rejina whispered.

Standing there, heaving deep breaths in the pouring rain with his hands on his knees, was none other than that young Lord.

### ~Part 3~

If we can look for a moment from the perspective of a magus, let us have a rather common-sense conversation.

Aside from a few outliers, when speaking about Strengthening of a magus' own body, practically speaking that means the enhancing of muscle strength and agility, but that doesn't necessarily include an improved stamina. Rather, since physically exerting oneself while performing magecraft exhausts both physical and mental energy, one could say it would more likely have a negative effect.

Of course, that all depends on the skills and talent of the caster, and there were plenty enough examples of those who were talented enough in Strengthening to be able to perform with little to no impact on their overall stamina.

In short, the fact that he was out of breath here at all was as a failing mark for a Lord.

"...I...made it!" Struggling to catch his breath, Lord El-Melloi II looked up at the two standing before him. Turning to one of them, he continued. "You were planning on fleeing, weren't you, Lord Valueleta?"

"Hey now, have some respect," the old woman bit back, her well-kept teeth flashing into a smile. "Iselma may be a branch family of Valueleta, but that doesn't mean they have our unconditional protection. If Galiasta is coming in with such a flashy show of force, there must be something deeper at play here. It seems the smarter play is to figure everything out once the dust has settled."

"Right. That's what I figured you would say," El-Melloi II replied with a meek nod. He then turned his attention to the Princess of Silver. "And so the Princess of Silver came to try and stop you. Because if Lord Valueleta leaves the picture, there's no way to stop Galiasta from going on a rampage."

Seeing the Princess maintain her silence, he continued.

"And so, you accused Lord Valueleta of being the culprit, did you not?"

"...so you heard us?"

"No, unfortunately it was all I could do just to get here in time."

Using Strengthened perception to locate the carriage in the storm, and then running at a full tilt to reach it before it left was possible for him, but that alone put him at his limit. To be able to Strengthen his hearing in order to eavesdrop on their conversation was beyond his talents anyway, but just listening to his ragged breathing was enough to prove that just getting here took all the strength he had.

"I just realized the true nature of this case, is all."

Yes, his recognition of what was happening had only occurred moments prior. The thought that the Princess of Silver was the culprit - or rather, that it would be most convenient for the Princess if Lord Valueleta was the culprit. This incident wasn't about searching for the culprit of some crime, but rather it was just a single face of the Clock Tower's interaction war.

"And I do believe I mentioned I would take on the investigation of this case."

"Hey now," Mick spoke up. The dark-skinned man looked as if he wasn't even aware he was being drenched by rain. "Are you seriously planning on playing detective even now? Even you have to realize it's a lost cause at this point." Still holding the umbrella out for Inorai, he scratched roughly at his chin.

But,

"...if he's going through the trouble of bringing that up now, there must be some significance to it. Isn't that right, Lord?" Inorai spoke.

"Yes. Just like the Princess of Silver here, it would be problematic for me if you were to run away."

"Say that all you like. But like I already said, there's no reason for me to stick around, is there?" As Inorai replied with a snort, the Princess glared at her from beneath her veil.

Caught between the two of them, El-Melloi II frowned deeply. Finally, he spoke again.

"In that case, let's strike a deal."

"A deal?"

"In short, it would at least be in both Lord Valueleta and the Princess' interest if the intruders were stopped, would it not?"

"Easy to say. But if they're willing to risk their lives by launching an attack on Iselma, they must be pretty determined. With what we have here, there's no guarantee we can stop them. Before that even, I doubt we could even get them to stop and talk."

What Inorai said was beyond obvious.

In that distant forest, Atram Galiasta had already declared war. Bringing such an all-out conflict to an end was far more difficult than putting it into motion in the first place. Even if the players involved were magi, fighting against human psychology like that was often a losing battle.

"I have an idea."

In response to her unspoken question, Lord El-Melloi II offered his own plan.

Not only the old woman herself, but the Princess, Mick, and even the maid Rejina reacted strongly to the weight of that plan.

After a long wait, Inorai finally gave a small nod.

"I see. And who exactly is going to pull that off? Certainly not you, Lord El-Melloi II?"

"-in that case, I'll take care of it," the girl who had as of yet only been spectating spoke up.

Inorai and the Princess both spun at those words.

One more person was standing there. The true successor of the El-Melloi title. The one who had set up a third grade lecturer in the seat of Lord - when she herself was only seven or eight years old.

"If it's for my own brother's plan, then I'll take on the intruders. Of course, I'll be borrowing a bit of strength to do it."

Reines El-Melloi Archisorte declared.

As everyone but El-Melloi II himself shared a look, an entirely different voice called out.

"W-what are you doing?!" Pushing through a stammer, Maio shouted at them.

Behind him stood Islo, warily watching his back. Though their original purpose had been to stand by and witness should Inorai decide to kill the Princess of Silver, they had descended from their vantage point after seeing the situation change upon the arrival of El-Melloi II. Though he still stood with a weak, timid posture, Maio nevertheless positioned himself to defend his childhood friend, concealing some sort of Mystic Code within his jacket.

In response,

"Perfect timing," El-Melloi II said, the corners of his lips turning upwards. "There's something I'd like to ask of you two as well."

"That is a rather unsuitable expression, good brother," Reines took a jab at her brother, causing him to clear his throat with a cough. "I won't go into the details, but my brother here has quite a difficult background. We must stay vigilant on keeping him on the straight and narrow, or who knows how much more twisted he'll get?"

"Am I the only one who feels some malice in the word 'more' there?"

"Yes, well," Reines replied with a small chuckle, a pleased smile rising to her face. "I've just been full of malice from the start. I'm afraid an accusation like that won't stir me in the least."

Beside Islo and Maio, who were now shifting their gazes back and forth between the others present, the next to speak up was Inorai.

"...by the way, what happened to that one student of yours?"



Svin's eyes took in little more than Atram's twisted smile.

At the same time, his nose was at work.

(Triangular, a gaudy yellow...)

With a single sniff, he understood the character of his opponent's magecraft.

Raindrops evaporated mid-air. A net of invisible electricity hung in the air above Atram's head. A trap he must have set earlier, meaning his outrage at being called a Spellcaster was a feint attempting to lure him into it. A realization that made Svin shudder.

...speaking from the perspective of an ordinary magus, Atram's pure strength was nothing out of the ordinary. That may have been a limit of the Primeval Batteries themselves, but any of the old guard of the El-Melloi classroom would have been able to polish that spell up some more. However, when it came to real combat ability, which expanded well past the realm of magecraft itself, Atram was considerably superior.

In an instant, Svin reached out with the back leg of his illusion, leaping back to a nearby tree, slightly changing his posture in the air.

Having avoided the electric net Atram had put in place for him, he cycled his magical energy around to prepare to tear him apart. Even if he was going to use a thin layer of electricity to defend himself, all he had to do was tear through it. And so he had swung down with all his might.

But at that moment, a powerful impact hit him from the side, blowing him away entirely. Wrenching himself free of his illusionary body, Svin had just barely managed to land upright.

It wasn't something Atram had done. The proof of that was that the electric net was torn apart yet again, prompting a shocked reaction from the dark skinned man himself.

(...what was that?!)

Though obscured by the rain and darkness, from the middle of the forest emerged a bright scarlet.

As that lone figure approached, everything went immediately quiet.

"...hey now," the figure spoke. "Aren't you guys going a bit overboard with the magecraft here?" As if that was some trouble for her, the woman smiled.

Just as her hair, Svin got the clear image of a vivid scarlet from the woman's scent. For some reason, though, he felt like he should never say that out loud.

Though he didn't know it, right now she had taken her glasses off. As if deeply interested in what was happening, she stared at him.

"...n-no way..."

He knew that name.

Atram, as well, was aware of her existence.

Both of them felt a shudder at her appearance. There was no way they could have predicted her intervening in a situation like this.

"My apologies, El-Melloi classroom." Advancing over the soaked ground, she stepped alongside a certain person.

Beside Atram.

Turning to face Svin, Touko Aozaki - the one heralded as having achieved the highest rank of Grand in the Clock Tower - smiled gently.

"Unfortunately, I've been asked to become your enemy."

Touko's foot snapped forward.

The first to realize what she was drawing there was Flat.

"Le Chien!"

Behind his back, Flat's hands began to move in the same spell he had used to interfere with the lightning magecraft from earlier. However, before he could complete the spell, Flat was blown away.

"And you, blondie. Trying to take me by surprise is fine, but you're way too obvious about it."

At Touko's words, Flat dumbfoundedly lifted his face out of the mud.

"...w-why?"

"Is there a way I wouldn't notice? You've been going off over and over against Galiasta's men, haven't you? Obviously, you've found some method to read the flow of their magical energy. A common enough talent, but your application of it is rather spectacular. No proper lecturer at the Clock Tower would teach you how to interfere and reverse the effects of another's spell. You then force a boomerang effect and make them take themselves out."

As if truly admiring what she had seen, Touko had become quite talkative.

She had given special emphasis to that part about a proper lecturer, too.

"But, well, in my case at least, by the time magical energy is running through, the spell is already over."

In a smooth motion, Touko drew a certain shape with her finger in the air.

Rune Magecraft.

Now, the Rune carved at her feet was Fehu. To either side of it were written two Algiz runes, one to blow away Svin and Atram's magecrafts earlier, and another to attack Flat just now.

The characteristic feature of Rune Magecraft was these symbols. While it took time to engrave them in the first place, once they were done, they could be released as a Single Action spell by simply passing magical energy through them. The time lag between activating the spell and its completion was vanishingly small. While that made the effects that could be drawn out of them limited, it left no room for Flat to intervene.

...no.

Of course, that was hardly the first time Flat had seen a Single Action spell. At the Clock Tower, those could be witnessed any number of times. And the Rune Magecraft itself was something Touko had sold to the Clock Tower too, becoming widespread enough that even Flat was capable of using it.

The problem was the beauty of her weaving.

Beyond obvious things such as with the Princesses of Gold and Silver, the composition of a spell had an element of aesthetic beauty to other magi. In the same way a programmer might admire another's code, the way she was connected to her magical foundation was just too ideal.

It was a dream anyone who had dabbled in magecraft had no doubt entertained at some point.

Her raw magical energy was not particularly overwhelming. Neither was she using some sort of terrifying Mystic Code, as high-ranking members of the Clock Tower were often wont to do. But the way her magical energy flowed had an air of perfected beauty to it, as if flowing through a Möbius Strip. To Flat, who was more sensitive to the magical energy of others than average, the aesthetic quality of it was even more staggering.

So this is the ability of one who brought an entire field of magecraft - no, possibly more than one, back from ruin.

And by simply witnessing that, Flat's mind was made up in an instant.

"Right, we've got no chance against her. Le Chien, let's get out of here!"

"Wha-? Don't mess-"

As Svin turned to look at him, his eyes went wide.

"Le Chien, let's get out of here!"

"Le Chien, let's get out of here!"

The one shouting that wasn't Flat at all.

Though it did indeed look just like him, the ones speaking stood frozen in posture and expression - like dolls of paper painted black.

"Le Chien, let's get out of here!" "Le Chien, let's get out of here!" "Le Chien, let's get out of here!"

"Le Chien, let's get out of here!" "Le Chien, let's get out of here!" "Le Chien, let's get out of here!"

"Le Chien, let's get out of here!" "Le Chien, let's get out of here!" "Le Chien, let's get out of here!"

The way they constantly repeated that one line was like a broken music box.

Shrugging, Touko spoke.

"So the original has already run, huh? He's a quick one, splitting with just one touch. Hmm...it looks like he's transcribed his own image onto shadows, and used that to make a copy of himself. What school of magecraft did he learn that from, I wonder? Maybe the German countryside?"

Glancing between the shadow puppets, she soon frowned.

"No, hold on. This isn't working off of any existing Foundations, is it? He's using the spell itself to serve as an impromptu Foundation. That's like inventing a new CPU for every spell he wants to cast. So he's one of those idiots who does ridiculous things just because he doesn't know they're supposed to be impossible. Well, not that I should talk."

Touko gave an exasperated sigh.

Magecraft was the practice of running magical energy through a Foundation to draw out the illusion of a supernatural phenomenon.

But, at least theoretically speaking, there was no rule that prevented one from creating that Foundation on the fly. However in this case, the Foundation being improvised boasted an excessive range of parameters. From the classic variables of spiritual energy in the earth to the motions of celestial bodies, to things like a single breath of wind, a handful of sand, the thoughts of those present - all of these things needed to be taken into account, needed to be included in the calculations for preparing each individual spell.

Because it relied on so many parameters, a spell that functioned perfectly fine at the time of its inception might cease to work entirely the next day - or even a few seconds later. Foundations based outside of faith or the collective unconscious had to contend with that instability.

"Putting the necessity of it aside, being able to perform spells of that level at his age is on the level of a Brand. That El-Melloi sure has some interesting kids."

With a small smile, Touko drew a figure in the air with her finger. While it looked similar to the letter S of the Roman alphabet, its true nature was that of the Rune that served as its basis, Sowilo. Bearing the meaning of "Sun," the Rune's power rapidly scattered the lingering shadows of Flat's magecraft, like the morning sun melting the night's frost.

Even drawing the same Rune, differences in the method of writing it and the environment could greatly change the effect and strength of the output.

Touko herself had once used that same Rune in a certain park, stealing the attribute of Night itself from a particular place. Compared to what she had just done, her present magecraft seemed hopelessly sloppy. Magecraft itself was tenacity. The transforming of oneself into a single cog of that machine was the precondition to practice. As polished as her craft may have been after years at the Clock Tower, any number of her old friends would no doubt sigh in disappointment at that application of it, if they had been alive.

Even so, for now it was sufficient.

Keeping the various emotions that drew forth under wraps, Touko turned to the remaining boy.

"So, what will you do?"

"...that's obvious, isn't it?"

Saying so, Svin pitched forward.

Pushing off with the rear legs of his half-substantiated transformation, digging powerfully into the wet dirt. Fangs bared, as if thirsting for their opponent's throat.

"Ignoring your friend's warning?"

"If the other option is running away because that guy told me to, I'd rather die." Svin spoke with fangs still bared, the state of his phantasmal body having no obvious effect on his ability to converse.

"...I guess there are idiots like that out there, too," Touko said with a small smile and a shrug. She then turned to the man standing beside her. "Feel free to go on ahead."

Frowning for a moment, Atram hesitated at Touko's urging. "...is that alright?"

"I have no reason to call myself your enemy, this time."

Before he had time to even breathe after her response, Atram turned back, eyes wide.

Though they should have all been erased earlier, a single shadow puppet - that had perhaps been kept in reserve - sang out from a new place nearby.

"Umm, Miss Touko, was it? If it's money you want, you'd be better off knocking out that dark-skinned guy, making a puppet of him and then using it to take over his house. It'd be a lot more efficient, and make a whole lot more people happy, too!"

Atram ground his teeth angrily, while Touko glanced at him briefly, as if seriously considering the suggestion. In the end, however, she shook her head.

"Unfortunately, there's no aesthetic in that. I doubt I could motivate myself to make a puppet for such a boring reason."

Taking a deep breath to relieve the difficult expression he had been wearing earlier, Atram angrily set to kicking at his collapsed subordinates. Hitting them with just enough of an electric shock to forcibly awaken them, he turned to his original prey.

"Then, Lord Byron. Shall we continue the negotiations?"

"...negotiations regarding what, may I ask?" The gentleman replied, warily drawing his cane closer.

More than the sudden arrivals of Atram and Flat, he was more concerned by Touko Aozaki, the one whose strength he was far more familiar with. Even with just the ability she had showcased here, there was no way he would act carelessly.

With a big smile, Atram leisurely stepped forward-

"-Wait."

A voice stopped him.

"Who said I'd let you pass?"

Eyes burning with fighting spirit, Svin appeared even more intimidating than before. The magical energy feeding his phantasmal form, refined by the boy's powerful Magic Circuits, set the air of the forest to shivering.

"What a reliable knight you have there. Though perhaps he should think more about who exactly he's protecting," Touko muttered.

"...in any case, I'll have to deal with this first," Svin said, prompted by the startling truth his nose had already revealed.

Around him, at a radius of about ten meters, countless Runes had been engraved into the ground. It was absurd to think she had drawn them all since she had arrived a short time ago. At what should have been the origin point were the Runes Naudiz, Jera, and Uruz.

(...no way!)

The meaning behind that string of Runes was most likely "creation." Which meant Touko Aozaki's skill in Runes was so great, she could use Rune magecraft to draw the Runes themselves.

Feeling his hair stand on end, Svin leapt backwards. Thanks to his Bestial Magecraft, he had more than enough speed to outpace even the activation of a Single Action spell.

"Gah!"

Even so, his foot was caught.

One of the magi that had collapsed earlier was grabbing onto his leg. On top of the collapsed magus' body was a Mannaz Rune.

(Mannaz!)

The name was the extent of his knowledge of the Rune. But that Rune, whose meaning was "Man," was almost certainly being used to manipulate-

"Sorry. I don't like letting good tools go to waste," Touko's voice felt distant. Despite standing in the rain, at some point she had lit a cigarette which she now held in her mouth. "Ugh, tastes as bad as I thought."

Before she even finished speaking, the countless Runes surrounding Svin exploded, and dozens of impacts blew away both the Phantasmal Wolf and Svin's consciousness.



(Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa!)

Desperately, Flat tried to suppress his own voice.

While running through the forest, he was nevertheless maintaining a long distance spell. While it was a feat that reminded one of the Divided Thought Process signature of the magi of the Atlas Institute, he naturally had no such ability, accomplishing his multitasking with raw skill. As Touko had deduced, it was something almost entirely independent from his ability as a magus. But this kind of flashy performance, something that couldn't be replicated by any other magi of his age or experience, was Flat Escardos' calling card.

...perhaps it's a bit of a digression, but one could probably assume that the instruction of Lord El-Melloi II had something to do with his talents being expanded in that direction.

While he continued running, he used one of his shadow puppets to speak to the distant Touko.

*Umm, Miss Touko, was it? If it's money you want, you'd be better off knocking out that dark-skinned guy, making a puppet of him and then using it to take over his house. It'd be a lot more efficient, and make a whole lot more people happy, too!*

Through the puppet, he heard the reply come back.

*Unfortunately, there's no aesthetic in that. I doubt I could motivate myself to make a puppet for such a boring reason.*

*Of course*, both the shadow puppet and Flat said at the same time.

If the line was being drawn due to aesthetics, then there was no angle to really approach from. Even Flat himself would be pretty unhappy if told to make a puppet that looked like that guy. But of course, in the current situation, Flat couldn't really just let things stop at that.

"What should we do, Le Chien?" Flat muttered, his tone turning grave.

In response to his uncharacteristic weakness, a strong response came back.

*...you're not really in a position to be worrying about others though, are you?*

"Huh?!"

The sound that called out to him was obviously not a normal voice.

While the voice might have been an accurate description of it, it was obviously not a sound produced by any human vocal cords.

*You're not quite out of the woods yet.*

It was a cat.

Behind Flat, a single cat was pursuing him. But as it looked at him, it became clear - it had no eyes.

Entire body jet black, it seemed entirely flattened, as if it only existed in two dimensions.

"Whoa!"

With a shout, Flat picked up speed.

While his acceleration was aided both by magical Strengthening and Flat's own uncanny ability to dodge around the various bushes and shrubs of the forest, the two-dimensional animal had no issue keeping pace with him.

"Wait, wait wait! Fine, whatever!" With some sort of chant, Flat turned and unleashed his own magecraft at the pursuer.

The power, angle, and effect of the spells were numerous. From flames, to storms, to a rain of countless needles, not a single one was like another - just as Touko had concluded, perhaps even changing location made some spells unusable - and all of them struck out against the pursuing cat.

However, as those spells gouged into the trees and earth of the forest, the cat remained entirely unharmed.

The cat didn't laugh. But by making its mouth disappear, it appeared to be smiling.

"Not working?! Am I just exhausting myself for nothing here?!" Feeling a cold sweat break out on his face, Flat continued to push his feet to move faster. But no matter how fast he ran, the gap between them didn't grow - and now it was beginning to shrink.

"Come, ON!"

This time, the spell he threw back had more explosive power than anything he had used before. Nevermind the cat, even Flat himself was blown backwards by the shockwave. But as the wave threw him back, his body began to accelerate in the air.

"Whooooaaa!"

Without resisting, Flat activated a Mystic Code to reduce his own body weight. Covering only his face and vitals, he struck the ground unharmed, save for being covered in mud, rolling dozens of meters through the forest before coming to a stop.

But,

"....gah, that didn't help either?"

Still wearing a playful look, Flat looked back to see he had gained no ground on the pursuing cat at all. Without any response itself, the small animal seemed to reign supreme in the dark forest.

Except that besides the cat, there was one response.

"...are you okay?"

A voice called out from the tree in front of him.

Seeing the girl step out from the shadow of that tree, Flat's eyes went wide.

"Gray?!"



It was a particularly strange feeling, looking down at the wide-eyed Flat.

As my master had said, Flat had run off into the forest in this direction, and so at his instructions I left to follow him. Part way there, I had felt a large movement of magical energy, so it was not difficult to pinpoint his location and meet up with him.

However, seeing the always relaxed and happy-go-lucky Flat covered in mud, frazzled, and fleeing full tilt was enough to flip my switch.

I looked out at the shadow pursuing him.

"...a cat?"

No, there was no way it was something so mundane.

Ah, it was just something borrowing the 'frame' of a cat. Even for a Mystery, some sort of shape that at least approximated something real was necessary for it to be actualized. No matter if it was born from magecraft, the interference that would have to be dealt with if it took a completely unrelated shape would be considerable, if I was remembering my lectures correctly.

"Ihihihihi! What even *is* that?! Is that really something made by modern magecraft?!"

As if he just couldn't hold it in, Add broke out into laughter. Conveniently, that was just as Add was needed.

"Add!"

Releasing the hook, I rolled my right shoulder, releasing him. The cage, with Add already partially transformed inside of it, dropped from my cloak into open view.

The ghostly glow, the Will O' Wisp in a cage, immediately took on a new shape.

A shape anyone could recognize, a simple farmer's implement. In this case, a form for harvesting souls.

The Grim Reaper's Scythe.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

With a kick, I leapt off the ground. Sporting Strengthening no ordinary magus could hope to match, my leap sent mud splattering all around as I soared through the cramped forest, the scythe's blade heedless of the tight quarters.

The blade clearly slashed through the cat.

But.

The scythe, which could even cut through the spirits of the dead, caused only a light ripple as it passed through the paper-thin cat. Shaking as if to throw off the rain, it reached out to counter attack with its claws.

Flipping backwards through the air, the claws took a few strands of my hair with them as I evaded, ample proof that the cat's speed was on par with my own, or perhaps even higher.

(Even faster than me...?)

That fact struck hard.

Only half a day earlier, I had crossed blades with that Automata. Once again, the humiliation of that altercation was revived in my chest. Though I knew it was silly, coming up short in a contest of blades like that created a strange burning feeling in me.

"...Add."

"Iiiiiii! Getting all fired up, are we? That's not like you at all!" The numerous eyes decorating the scythe turned to look at me as it spoke.

"...because my master told me to."

"How moving!"

As that shrill laugh echoed, I gathered magical energy from the surroundings. In this form, the amount of magical energy that could be accumulated was limited, but this was nevertheless the territory of a magus. Especially with the effects of Galiasta's Weather Control in place, the swirling energy collected within us unchecked.

The collected magical energy ran through my Magic Circuits into my nerves and muscles. There was the threat of every blood vessel in my body exploding if I overdid it, but like someone who had ridden a bike since they were a child, I had no hesitation. In short, I was well-used to becoming a cog in the machine of this Mystery. Though I may not have been a magus, there was no doubt I was a denizen of that same world.

The image was that of a spark.

The gathered sparks became a ghostly flame, swirling, spinning, roaring in my chest. Across the world, legends of the spirits of the dead taking on the forms of flame abounded. My master had once proposed a theory as to why that form specifically was so common.

Don't you think it's because they've burned themselves out?

If you exist by burning your own spiritual body, won't you inevitably burn out too?

With a breath, I calmed myself.

Having transformed myself into a system for the sake of Mystery, I turned to the cat.

I knew how sharp it's claws were. Forget iron pipes, they could probably cut through steel plates like they were paper. Those claws, so thin as to be two-dimensional, could likely cut through any three-dimensional object with ease.

If the Mystery underlying it was weaker than Add's, then it should be sliced cleanly in two by that scythe.

This time, my body moved unconsciously.

Without mind for the cat's incoming claws, the scythe spun. As if it's outer edge were a top, it spun vertically in the space between the trees.

Seven times it sliced through the cat.

No damage was done. There was no surprise. The cat was unharmed, just as the blade passed through it smoother than it would through water.

But if it wanted to repeat the dance, I'd do it a dozen times. If that wasn't enough, then a hundred. Such a contest held no meaning to me. If it thought to wear down my body and mind, then it was fighting a losing battle. Honestly speaking, that kind of exhaustion was a somewhat pleasant sensation.

But,

"Gray, there!"

Suddenly, a voice called out.

Add understood before I did.

"-Gray!"

At those words alone, I leapt once more. The direction and distance were managed by Add, who by now was synchronized with my own body. As I landed with a splash, my scythe raced once more towards the night sky.

This time, I could feel the impact.

Invisible to my eyes - indeed, probably cloaked in some sort of magecraft to make it invisible and unnoticeable, at last it revealed itself as it fell to the ground.

It was a familiar, taking the shape of a bird. Its body and wings were made of brass, and its eyes were ruby. Within its body spun something like a reel of film, projecting a soft light through its jeweled eyes.

The moment that light stopped, I knew the two-dimensional cat was gone.

"...it was just an image," Flat muttered.

No wonder it couldn't be cut.

Even if you have a scythe that cuts spirits, there's no way you can slice apart a shadow projected onto the air. Or rather, no matter how many times you cut it, as long as the projector still functions, it will be reborn any number of times.

It was a Mystic Code far removed from the Modern Era. One certainly appropriate to be in the hands of a Grand.

With that, the strength left my limbs. I could feel my nerves had been pushed to their very limit. The sinews in my arms and legs were screaming under the weight of the magical energy coursing through them.

"But Gray, why...?"

"Master told me...to come and get you two..." I answered. "And, just in case that Grand-level magus-"

"...hmm, the contents of that box are going to be a problem, aren't they?"

At the sound of a very real voice, I jumped. Whether I liked it or not, I could clearly recognize its owner.

With stiff motions, I turned around to see exactly what I expected - that crimson hair, beautiful even when drenched by the rain.

She gave off the faint scent of tobacco. Perhaps because of the rain, we hadn't noticed that smell until just now. Scratching her head as if in frustration, the woman's icy gaze was locked on me.

"The Grand..."

...ah, now I understand.

That was why my master had seemed so conflicted when he gave me those instructions. He wasn't worried at all about the group Galiasta had brought with him. He didn't even have to stop to consider whether Flat and Svin would be able to overcome magi of that level.

But realizing the one thing he may have overlooked, he had begun to worry.

In short, that this magus - that Touko Aozaki might choose to enter the fray.

"...why?" I asked her, nervously holding my scythe between us. "Why are you on Galiasta's side?"

"What, are you going to make me lay everything out? You're here because that Lord sent you, right? I would have thought he would have at least explained this much."

Before her fearless demeanor, I remembered a story my master had told me. In the Clock Tower, those with special abilities were granted Colour titles. Those who bore the three primary colours were recognized clearly as the greatest of their generation. As such, it was clear to anyone that Touko Aozaki would be crowned with the title of pure Blue.

But she wasn't.

Rather than the primary colour of Blue, she was given a composite of red.

(Because she's...not the strongest...?)

For some reason, I felt like that was incorrect.

I didn't know a single magus approaching her level. Perhaps it was because she had shunned the factional warfare within the Clock Tower, but that didn't seem to be the case either. Was it because, like her hair, her soul itself burned a bright red? A colour whose beauty derived from the fact it could never reach purity.

A faint gulp.

As I faced off against her, I spoke again.

"My master...he told me that you might stand in our way."

A phrase bearing a subtle nuance.

Not Galiasta's allies, but this obstacle right here.

"Ah, I see," Touko nodded, speaking without a hint of guile. "Well, I was commissioned. Specifically, to become your enemy."

Hearing that, engraving that answer in my chest, I continued.

"...and...Svin...?"

"Hm? Oh, the wolf boy?" Touko paused a bit, as if it took her a moment to remember. "He brought out some good memories, so I left him as he was. Can't say the same for the Galiasta head, but that's not really in the realm of my responsibility."

I bit my lip.

I didn't feel the least bit of camaraderie. Even if I was part of the El-Melloi classroom, I wasn't even a magus. On top of that, even without considering the cat from earlier, this woman was an opponent of terrifying proportions. Even standing facing her had my fingers trembling, and my heart beating hard. Even so, I never felt the urge to back down. Because whenever that situation would arise, the face of that one person who never ran from anything would fill my mind.

I squeezed my fingers tight around the scythe in my hand.

"Ah, that thing is quite interesting," Touko said, pointing at the scythe. "It's the first time I've seen it, but it's got a history of more than a thousand years, doesn't it? I bet it's not even something meant for human hands, is it? It certainly isn't something any modern magus could handle."

A Mystery bows to a greater Mystery.

Of course, there were certainly situations where compatibility and execution could turn the tide, but that was the foundational law. And in many cases, the strength of a Mystery was tied to its age. Touko had perceived, however dimly, the Noble Phantasm at the core of this scythe.

"...so, will you please retreat?" I asked earnestly.

"Sorry, but a job is a job. Circumstances don't allow me to just kindly step out of the way on this one."

Nonchalantly, Touko drew the shape of a Rune with her finger.

A Rune. I couldn't read them, a live chastisement against my laziness when it came to studying magecraft.

But even so, the sight of it sent a wave of fear through me.

The time it would take to swing my scythe was only a single breath. But even faster was the movement of Touko's magical energy.

The overwhelming speed of a Single Action spell wasn't something that could be matched by physical motion.

(-then!)

I jumped.

Thorns of ice sprouted from the Rune and tried to entrap me, but I simply punched through them. It seemed her intent was to restrain me, but the spell couldn't compare to the latent Mystery within Add and myself. Just by releasing the magical energy held within me, the ice was vaporized like frost under sunlight.

"As expected, you're impressive. I guess modern Futhark Runes can't do much against you. If it's a contest of strength, then this is the best I have. Without a chance to measure the compatibility of the Mysteries involved, the stronger Mystery will always overwhelm the weaker. That was a trick I used to use, too."

Speaking cautiously, Touko continued drawing Runes.

One, a burst of flame.

One, an invisible impact.

The scythe tore the phenomenon and its attendant magical energy to shreds, but Touko didn't seem the least bit concerned. Rather, a small smile rose to her rain-drenched face, as if she was just a scientist watching over her experiment.

"-so, what bizarre bit of magecraft will you show me next, little genius?" Without turning her face, she began to move.

Without looking, she executed a flawless high kick, knocking away Flat who had been attempting to sneak up on her from behind. Sent tumbling backwards, he struck hard against a tree, droplets of water scattering from his head as it impacted into the wood.

Looking back at the boy who had been so cleanly knocked out, Touko sighed.

"...that was only supposed to be an opening move for the battle of magecraft...did that really just knock you out? How one-sided is this?"

Frankly, I agreed with her.

Even though I had experienced those classes in the Clock Tower well enough.

Strengthening didn't just affect raw muscle power, but it also enhanced reaction time and the sense of balance. It didn't, however, provide any augmentation to one's experience or judgment. No matter how much it may have enhanced Flat's physical attributes, it did nothing for his lack of skill in close-quarters combat. His running record of failing marks in his self defense classes, enough even to get my master to chew him out, was something he only tried to compensate for with raw strength.

At any rate, thanks to that, our options had thinned.

(At this rate, even buying time-)

A drawn-out fight would put us at a disadvantage. Someone like her would probably have any number of trump cards, but I only had one or two secrets left. On top of that, this wasn't a situation where I could fully exercise those secrets. As such, the only thing I could do was press the advantage I should have in physical ability.

"-tch!"

My legs spun.

Keeping my eyes on Touko, I used the force of my spin to bring a diagonal slash down. Add had already absorbed all the magical energy he needed from the atmosphere. Compared to when I was fighting that cat, I was many levels higher - at this point, the amount of magical energy circulating through my body had reached critical levels.

Though I didn't have the slightest intention of mercy, the scythe stopped just before making contact.

It wasn't a Rune. At this point, I had expected some sort of Runes to be used as part of her defense. But that bizarre impact...

"It seems the magi gathered here, you included, have misunderstood something," Touko whispered. Among the sounds of rain, that voice seemed to creep along the ground. "If you want to be the strongest magus, there is no need to get your hands dirty yourself. Ah, perhaps that Lord El-Melloi II understands after all. It was probably the greatest reason why he survived his previous war."

Even though we were basically in contact with each other, her voice seemed incredibly far away.

At some point, Touko had taken out a bag, and was now holding it in her right hand. The bag, which seemed even too large to effectively be used for traveling, opened to reveal nothing but empty blackness. Even my Strengthened perception couldn't pierce through that darkness, like the black itself had become something solid within the bag.

Within that darkness, there were two.

"One must simply call forth the strongest, or make them."

Within the bag, those two shined.

Eyes.

I was frozen.

At last, I understood why my scythe had stopped. Touko hadn't done anything. I was just afraid. Somewhere deep inside, I understood the monster that was hidden within that bag. That's right. Doesn't the shape of that bag remind you of something?

Too large to really be called a bag, it was a cube.

Just like Add - it was a box, within which was hiding some sort of mythical creature, wasn't it?

"-Touko Aozaki. You are..."

My voice wouldn't leave my throat.

The name for what reached out from that bag...perhaps tentacle would be appropriate. With a pressure and softness that even Add couldn't cut easily, it wrapped itself around the blade and grip of the scythe, and even my hands.

At last, a pure, physical terror erupted from my throat.



Suddenly, a body was thrown out from the forest.

Sliding across the rain-soaked dirt, the filthy, British-styled suit belonged to Lord Byron.

"Why hello there, Miss Aozaki," the young man responsible spoke, scratching his hair.

"Everything's finished on your end then, Atram?"

"Well. I guess you could say a winner has been decided." Lightly clapping his hands as if to clean the dust from them, Atram looked down on Lord Byron. No matter how skilled Lord Byron was as a magus, he just didn't have the combat ability to compete with someone like him.

To the dark-skinned young man, who had become well experienced in fierce combat, the musty magi caught up from morning till night in their disputes over authority were nothing special.

Behind Atram, the henchmen of the Galiasta family appeared.

Svin was being held, captured. Being held by the neck by one of Atram's subordinates, he was being dragged like a heavy bag. No matter how thin he appeared, if he was capable of Strengthening himself, dragging someone along like that was an easy endeavor. At least when it came to the handling of magical energy, the skill of these subordinates could be established as competent.

"How do you feel now, Lord Byron? It has taken some time, but perhaps you've decided to reconsider."

"...reconsider, what?" Pressing a hand to his wound, Byron looked up at the young man.

"Hmph. Just as stubborn as those Clock Tower dignitaries. Geez. Do all of you have mold growing in your heads or something?"

At any rate, he understood that Atram had the freedom to grill him at his leisure, and that the interrogation would begin whenever the mood struck him.

As if bored at the sight of the proud British gentleman struck down, Atram called out to Touko again.

"Well, that's fine. More important is you, Miss Aozaki. As expected of a Grand, you have no mercy even for a beautiful young girl like this. Did you cripple her permanently?"

"Hey now, let's not go there - there's no way I'd do something so bad for my reputation. Who could do that to such a pretty girl? All I did was hijack her sense of the supernatural," Touko answered, displeasure clear on her face.

Standing immediately in front of her, still gripping my scythe tightly, I was completely frozen.

In reality, the bag that Touko had brought with her was closed tight. She hadn't opened the bag at all, only giving me the slightest whiff of what it contained.

"This girl is abnormally sensitive to the supernatural. Enough that she could probably be some sort of spirit medium. Unfortunately, her excellence in that area is also a fatal weak point. It's starting to look like a common pattern among the students of that classroom."

"S...vi...n...Flat..."

Two names spilled out from my throat.

My body wouldn't move.

Not that I was simply trembling in fear, but I was paralyzed from the very core of my mind. Knowing that even a single careless move could cause the contents of that bag to be released, and knowing that perceiving it would complete my self-destruction, my own instincts had frozen my body solid.

I was powerless.

After all was said and done, I was completely useless.

*-You are the one who should destroy.*

*-You are the one who should be most proud.*

*-After all, you are the closest to a hero.*

In the back of my head, a voice echoed.

A voice from my home. Good people. People celebrating my change. My parents and relatives, who had been brought honor.

(.....ahh...)

That's right.

I can just surrender it all.

After all, I was made for the sake of this spear. Reaching for that spear, I just had to wield my strength fully. From the start, there was no need for me to think. From the start, there was no meaning to me running away. I just had to accept the truth as it was.

I just had to change.

Become not myself, but that hero from ages past.

"Gray (*Dark*)... Rave (*Unsteady*)... Crave (*Desire*)... Deprave (*Degradation*)..."

My lips began to move, giving voice to a poem.

Not just Touko, who was immediately beside me, but even Atram and Lord Byron snapped to attention, immediately turning to face me.

"I see," Touko gave a small nod. "So that's your secret?"

"Engrave (*Carve into*)...Me..."

The words came from my mouth, but my head still hung low. My consciousness had already entirely been extinguished. It had been erased long ago. So this was not my voice. It was someone else's - from another me, that hid deep within myself.

A monster that was created in my old home.

Something began to shake.

"Hm. This doesn't look good. He's starting to show an interest himself." A bitter smile spread across Touko's face.

As if to put a lie to the fact that the contents were under her control, the bag in her hands began to shake.

With a loud squeal, the bag burst open of its own accord - this time, not an illusion, but for real.

"Miss Aozaki..."

Perhaps in response to the faint quiver in Atram's voice, or perhaps for reasons all her own, Touko muttered softly.

"-Looks like this whole area might be done for."

Was that because of the contents of the bag?

Or...

"A Grave (*Dig one*) ...For you..."

Magical energy began to spin.

In accordance with the contract sworn between Add and my own body, the process had begun. Reconstruct the environment. Flesh and bone reborn through magical energy. Simulate the factor of the Phantasmal Species that hero claimed in their heritage.

Touko's eyes flashed to the side.

"Hey, stay out of this."

"You think this is something we can just ignore?!" A small pot appeared in Atram's hand as he shouted. Magical energy and electricity combined, and from his fingers leapt the lightning born of that union-

-but my body, and the spear it held, were already reacting to that aggressive will, and a pulse of magical energy resounded.

My lips moved.

As if uttering the words of a horrible curse, my voice rose.

"Holy Spear, come forth..."

An instant.

And a different voice spoke.

"...Ecce Homo (*Behold the Man*)"

As expected, I couldn't move my body at all.

Nevertheless, all that stood in that place witnessed her.

**~Part 4~**

That ritual was caused by three people.

Pivoting on that trinity was a certain girl with Mystic Eyes.

"Reines, focus your Mystic Eyes."

At the sound of her teacher's voice, she brought the spell to fruition.

The reason her eyes overheated so quickly was thanks to the immaturity of her brain and Magic Circuits. In short, the development of her brain and Magic Circuits hadn't caught up to that of her Mystic Eyes, causing them to overreact in response to their use.

Right now, however, that was something to be thankful for.

Due to that overreaction, the girl's precision in magecraft had become prominent.

With each touch from Islo, the dress was reconstructed.

With each word from Maio, the concentration of various substances within the blood and the presence of neurotransmitters was altered, bringing it back to life.

And when those things had reached a perfect harmony, the girl activated the ritual, calling out in a loud voice.



**~Part 5~**

"...Ecce Homo (*Behold the Man*)."

-Time stopped.

Position lost all meaning.

It appeared as if the rigorous certainty of space and time itself had been lost.

Nevermind the magi gathered, even the animals and insects of the forest - no, even the earth and rain felt the impact of that essence. If evolution meant the optimal adaptation of one to their environment, then it was a conclusion of form and measure that threatened the end of the world itself.

It was \_\_\_\_\_. The word didn't even come to mind.

Among the imperfect languages allowed to man, one had to admit there was nothing that could contain what they saw. It was said there was once a Sealing Designated magus who used the Unified Language (*Master of Babel*), words which allowed no mistake, to which the entire world - living or not - could not but obey. Her \_\_\_\_\_ was much the same, a purity that reached into the depths of the Root itself.

The Princess of Gold, who was supposed to have died, stood now in the middle of the forest.

**~Part 6~**

It wasn't a simple loss for words.

To those magi who had been moments earlier pushing themselves to their absolute limit, engaging in a contest of souls that overshadowed any other kind of conflict, it was all they could do to just remain standing.

It wasn't just that.

"Add...is..." I said, looking at my own hands.

Though the scythe had been about to reveal the spear that was its true form, it had instead reverted to the shape of a small box in a cage.

"Got me too, huh?" Touko said, shaking her head in disappointment with one eye shut. Once again, the bag in her hand was shut tight.

"What, was that..."

Nevermind the lightning Atram had attempted to unleash, even the storm clouds that had choked out the night sky had been driven away. The Weather Manipulation Magecraft brought about by dozens of magi working in concert was stripped away like it was no more than a thin sheet of paper.

That which belongs, to where it belongs.

When that ultimate \_\_\_\_\_ had appeared, all unnatural, imperfect magecraft returned to nothing.

It was an act that rivaled the parting of the sea by a certain prophet in his efforts to lead thousands of people out of Egypt.

At the same time, it was a repeat of the same event that had occurred the day before.

After a short few seconds, the miracle was over.

Standing before them was not the slain Princess of Gold, but the Princess of Silver.

"...I see. Projection, is it?" Touko murmured.

In order to accomplish greater acts of magecraft, it was the transforming of magical energy into a perfect image to use as a substitute for materials that could not be obtained - a simple magecraft that only persisted for a few minutes at best. At higher levels, the amount of magical energy it consumed became enormous, so it was a skill few magi dabbled in.

But, just now.

My master, who had appeared alongside us, gave a small nod as he spoke.

"Good catch. On top of the canvas that was the Princess of Silver, the image of the Princess of Gold was Projected - by my student, Reines."

"Hmph. With you devising the spell, and preparation all done by the two Meluastea magi, I feel like there's not much for me to be proud of," Reines said, her lips twisting as she pressed a hand to her eyes.

Appropriate for having just accomplished an act of Great Magic, Maio and Islo stood behind them with haggard faces.

Under normal circumstances, reproducing the end result of Iselma's magecraft - the Princess of Gold herself - by something like Projection was absurd. However, when her twin born of the same magecraft was added to the mix, the act became barely possible. Of course, without the precise maneuvering allowed by Reines' Mystic Eyes and the assistance of Maio and Islo in reproducing the inner and outer forms of the Princess of Gold, it still would have been well beyond them.

Grinding his teeth, Atram spoke up in challenge.

"So? You think surprising us for a moment is enough to make us stop?"

"Oh, stop bluffing," Touko waved Atram off, a bitter smile on her face. "Magecraft is made up of the belief one can enact change in the world, and concentration sufficient to actualize that change. Even closing my eyes makes the image of that face reappear in

my mind. I doubt I'd be up to using anything above Cause level magecraft for two or three hours."

Touko bluntly explained her own situation. Though it felt like the kind of thing that should have been fatal just to hear, this woman just dropped it like it was nothing, without even a hint of bravado.

As for me...my body still just felt heavy.

"...master..."

Just as I felt myself collapse forward, I also felt someone grab me. The scent of cigar smoke and the sensation of his leather coat filled me with relief.

"I'm sorry. I only asked you to buy us some time, but even that was unreasonable, wasn't it? Really, I'm sorry." From right beside me, I heard the repeated apologies of my master. "I'm also prepared. It's time to reward you for your actions."

Holding me up with one arm, he turned his gaze to that woman.

"Miss Aozaki," he spoke. "It seems your will to continue this is gone, but what will you do now?"

"I guess that means I'm open to negotiation," she said plainly, prompting my master to continue.

"...anyways, now that you've seen that, you understand, right?"

For a moment, Touko remained silent.

"I was wondering, but it's true, isn't it? Your performance just now was also an answer to me."

"I believe it's just as you imagine," my master nodded.

I didn't understand at all. My master asking if she understood, Touko declaring that she did, I just couldn't keep up with what they were talking about at all. Though they were

speaking the same language I knew, it was like they were talking in a code that only the two of them understood.

However, I did recognize that some sort of accord had been reached between the two of them.

"And, this is just my guess, but I suspect the reward you were offered for this was-"

"-right. I get what you want to say, so don't ruin it for me. Though at this rate, it looks like I've been tricked. Well, it's not like I was lied to, maybe I was just jumping to conclusions," Touko answered, shaking her head with a shrug.

For some reason, her words seemed somehow strangely energetic. As if she was caught wonderfully off guard by the twist in a movie she was watching, her expression was bright with admiration.

Once again, my master's gaze shifted.

"Atram Galiasta, I presume?"

"What do you want, Lord?" The dark skinned young man bit back, his tone bearing not a single trace of the respect present in the title.

Ignoring the disrespect, my master spoke.

"Would you kindly return my students?"

"What? Who do you think you are? This boy tried to kill me, you know. Even if you're a Lord, do you think I'm just going to kindly forget that for you?"

Both Svin and Flat were unconscious, and currently being held by Atram's subordinates. While most of them were still awestruck by the Projection of the Princess of Gold, that didn't mean we could so easily overpower them.

"I know what you want here."

"...it's not like I'm particularly hiding it. Rather, it would be strange if you didn't know," the young man flashed his teeth in an obvious bluff.

Unlike with Touko, Atram was showing a bizarre kind of emotion when faced with my master. Though it should have been the first time they had ever met, in some small way, the air between them seemed strangely antagonistic.

After waiting a breath, my master continued.

"Last month, you and Iselma competed at an auction over the relic of a certain Heroic Spirit."

At those words, my breath caught.

I remembered. Shortly after being invited to come to the Twin Towers of Iselma, Raines had said something similar to my master.

*-Come on, you haven't given up on joining the Fifth Holy Grail War as the Association's representative, have you?*

*-There seems to be one spot already taken, given to some newcomer who forked over a lot of money for the privilege.*

What if that newcomer was Atram Galiasta?

In that case, the fact he was after a relic was to be expected. The Holy Grail War was a Great Ritual in the Far East, where magi summoned a Heroic Spirit to fight for them. Of course, acquiring a relic for their desired Heroic Spirit was all but necessary. For example, if one wanted to summon a Heroic Spirit that wielded a particular holy sword, one could use that sword's sheathe as a relic...

...or so I was told.

"...so?" Atram snapped again.

In response, my master spoke slowly.

"If my suspicions are correct, threatening Lord Byron won't accomplish anything for you. After all, he doesn't know the location of the relic."

"What?!" Atram glanced toward Lord Byron, who was lying in pain among the trees.

Lord Byron said nothing. Denied nothing.

In his place, my master continued.

"However, I can tell you where that relic is."

"Haha. So, in exchange for letting your students go, you'll tell me your clever little deductions, and I'll just listen quietly and respectfully? Perhaps I should remind you, I have the combat strength here to choke the life out of you and your students here without breaking a sweat. It won't be that hard for me to force it out of you regardless."

"I can promise you at least that much," my master responded to Atram's overt hostility with a straight nod. "On top of that, if my deductions are incorrect, I can promise you a relic even greater than the one you are aiming for."

"...what?" For a moment, Atram was stunned. As that passed though, he began to laugh. "What are you talking about? I know the situation of the El-Melloi family quite well. There's no way you could prepare a relic greater than this one. Not unless...wait."

At that, his words stopped.

The words my master had said, and the possibility they opened, finally got through to him. No, it wasn't just him. Even I felt the meaning of those words suddenly press down on me like a heavy weight. A meaning so full of despair, even imagining it threatened to break my heart.

"Master!"

But, as if he didn't hear my voice, he only looked over to his sister.

"...that's alright with you, right Reines?"

"Do as you like. At the very least, that thing is your personal possession, not the property of the El-Melloi family," Reines sighed. Perhaps the projection from earlier had taken a lot out of her, as her expression was pale and weak.

And so, my master continued.

"As the Lord of El-Melloi, I vow." Taking a brief pause, he declared. "I'll bet the relic I currently possess on my promise."

My master's relic.

"No way...from the Fourth Holy Grail War...?" Atram's eyes went wide.

Well within Atram's view, my master slowly pulled out his cigar case. Retrieving a cigar and a match, he struck the match and lit the cigar, bringing it to his lips. After completing the ritual, he spoke.

"Combat proven. The reason I survived the Holy Grail War was because of that Great Heroic Spirit, because of the relic that allowed me to summon him. That's what I'm offering you."

Everyone fell silent.

It felt like that silence would last forever, mixed in with the fear my throat would entirely dry up. Though I had only spent a few months with my master, I knew that the Fourth Holy Grail War, and the memories of it, are what had given shape to his personality. Beyond that, I knew that within his memories at the heart of that battle, he spent time with the Heroic Spirit he had summoned.

As the smell of smoke spread, the dark-skinned young man's face lit up in a bright smile.

"-who would have thought. To think you would go so far for such profitless students." Within his mutterings was a deep sigh...and something like a strange kind of goodwill. I had no idea what prompted such a positive change in his disposition towards my master.

As if now he was enjoying himself, Atram Galiasta ran his fingers through his hair.

"However, I'm not so uncouth as to step on the beliefs of others. If you are willing to pay above and beyond that value, I can't just step away from the negotiating table. With the greatest hospitality, I will endeavor to grant your request, Lord El-Melloi II."

Atram gave a bright smile, like he had just caught up a good friend in a great con.

◆ 第三章 ◆  
-Chapter 3-



## ~Part 1~

What really is beauty?

Before we had come to the Twin Towers, Reines had asked my master something like that.

Put simply, if beauty is 'that which makes people feel pleasant,' I think that what the Princess of Gold had at that time was different. What she had was so far beyond what we could recognize that it wasn't something that could be described with easy words like 'pleasant' or 'unpleasant.' To put it extremely simply, it was like it drew out all of the emotion from the vessel that was 'us,' in a way that we couldn't contain, a way we couldn't even comprehend. The recreated form of the Princess of Gold was so transcendental, even Touko could only face it with a bitter smile.

Maybe that was something like Hell.

It certainly wasn't Heaven. If what the priests at the church said were correct, then Heaven should be a place that enraptures people in a much gentler way. Beyond understanding, shocking, impulsive, destructive, even murderous...that felt like it should be much closer to Hell. From the beginning, magi were the kind of people who turned their back on God and pointed their hearts towards Hell, but that was still far from trying to recreate that Hell here on Earth. If you experienced that for real, you would have your view of the world irrevocably changed. To experience that concept that should only be witnessed after death while you were still alive...most religion and ideology would lose all meaning.

How one should live their life and how one should seek to die would become the same thing. Heaven and Hell were just goals that people desperately wished existed at the end of their struggle. To experience a happiness or suffering that exceeds the limits of human possibility once that human life has been discarded, that's all people were crying for. In order to spread that ineffable idea, all kinds of religion and art were developed, and Heaven and Hell were vividly drawn up.

A paradox, in that they were depicted in great detail by thousands, tens of thousands of hands, yet at the same time it was always understood that those depictions could never come close to the actual truth. No matter how beautifully you drew, or how far your art

was from the concept of beauty, that paradox was fitting. The window was only barely open, so the ignorant believer could only imagine. A Heaven that would grant us the greatest possible happiness, or a Hell that would engender the greatest possible despair, both were free for us to draw as we liked. The freedom to see, to dream as we liked within the cage that was our own brain, was the first sin of humanity - and the first punishment.

And yet.

Ah, the question only occurred to me after.

For the Princess of Gold, who had arrived at that Truth (*Origin*) by mistake, who had become that Hell in the flesh...

...how did that make her feel?



"-that's quite the impressive bit of Magic."

Having returned to the lobby of the Tower of the Moon, we were greeted by Lord Valueleta - Inorai, sitting on a couch holding a whiskey glass. Not knowing how my master's negotiations had gone, she sat here waiting in the Tower of the Moon as if it didn't matter to her which way the pieces fell.

The open form chandelier threw a brilliant light on the gathered magi.

Beneath that light, my master's brow furrowed slightly.

"As a magus, I don't think you should be throwing that word around so lightly."

"No really, what you've done here is definitely Magic. Rather than innovating a new method to do something, you made something that was impossible possible." Spinning a wrinkled finger in the air, she downed the rest of her drink. She narrowed her eyes as she shifted her gaze to the dark-skinned man on the sofa behind her. "I bet you didn't see this coming at all either, did you, Galiasta?"

"I can't deny that. I ended up jumping at the chance for a bigger profit. Of course, I was a bit taken aback that a Lord of the Clock Tower would make such an absurd gamble," Atram replied, his voice mixed with sarcasm.

Actually, I felt the same way. I had never imagined that he would have put up that relic on a bet. Even two hours after hearing it, and for that entire time spent helping my master and Reines with the preparations, I couldn't settle down at all.

"As for me, having seen something so beautiful...well, I'm satisfied for now." Touko, glasses nowhere in sight, gave a faint smile.

My master leisurely turned his gaze to his side.

"Are there any lingering problems from the Projection?"

"No...strictly speaking, my body was just the starting point after all," the Princess of Silver said, nodding slightly.

Projection was a magecraft that created a temporary object using ether. It wouldn't be inaccurate to say it was like laying a thin veil over the Princess of Silver. While the similarity between the Princesses increased the chance of success, it wasn't like the magecraft would have any impact on her actual body at all. In that sense, she matched the scientific definition of a catalyst quite well.

While Rejina stood close to the Princess, Maio and Islo were watching my master suspiciously.

Though they worked together to achieve the common goal of halting Galiasta's attack, once that goal was accomplished, naturally their relationship went back to what it was before.

That is, that they viewed him as an investigator and suspect in the case of the murders of the Princess of Gold and her maid.

"...first, let's hear your proposal," Lord Byron said.

Though he was far from satisfied, the fact was that if he refused to come to the table, Atram would become an enemy once again. For that reason alone, Lord Byron had agreed to at least hear my master out.

Within the lobby, all of those related to the current incident had been gathered.

Inorai, and Mick Grajilie.

Atram Galiasta.

The Princess of Silver.

Regina.

Maio and Islo.

Lord Byron.

Along with my master, Reines, and myself, that made eleven people in total.

About an hour ago, Svin and Flat had regained consciousness, and heeding my master's wishes, left us for the time being.

On top of that, a select number of the men Galiasta had brought in their attack were now surrounding the area on watch. Those outside the tower were waiting on standby, no doubt ready to break in without hesitation should things turn out poorly.

"...so, Lord El-Melloi II. You said you would grace us with your great deductions once we had everyone gathered, did you not?"

"I never said it was a deduction. Just speculation. At any rate, there's no logic to follow." As always, my master spoke with a kind of bored tone, adding such comments as if they were nothing.

For him, though, that should have been quite important. The ironclad rule of incidents involving magi that he would often espouse - there is no meaning in the whodunnit or howdunnit, the only thing you could rely on is finding the whydunnit.

(...but...)

If we were unable to solve the case this time, the loss wasn't something that could just be described with words like 'great.' As far as the authority of the El-Melloi family, my master couldn't have cared less, but the relic he had put up to gamble with this time was different. No, thinking about the attack from Galiasta, what was needed here wasn't something as simple as solving a mystery.

With as bitter an expression as ever, my master dropped his gaze from the ceiling and shifted it to the master of the Twin Towers.

"First, about my previous request, Lord Byron."

"...of course." Reluctantly, he nodded, snapping his fingers.

In response to his signal, servants came forward with a box. Cutting the sealing Magic Circle on top of it with a knife in just a single place, it disappeared. As soon as it had done so, liquid mercury spilled forth from the box, eventually taking the form of a maid.

"Trim."

Immediately, I noticed Reines' face loosen. From her perspective, Trim was a companion that had been at her side without fail for years, after all.

For example that was - for me, it was similar to Add.

"Of course, if you do anything untoward, I will be forced to confiscate it again."

"Naturally. Please feel free to watch over her. Your concentration should have recovered by now, yes?" Reines bit back as she inspected Trimmau from head to toe.

"-does that about do it for preparations, then?" Atram sat leisurely, arms crossed. In this place with complicated undercurrents flowing every direction, he was the only one who stood outside everything. The only one who had lost nothing, the one who had come to do nothing but take. His ease showed plainly in his ability to smile in this situation.

"No, two more." As my master said that, he turned to the door. In short order, noisy footsteps sounded from the hallway beyond, and the door swung open.

"We're here!"

"...my apologies. Please excuse us."

"-Flat, Svin."

My breath caught the moment I saw what the frizzy haired boy was holding.

Wrapped in a blanket, held with the utmost care and respect, was the body of Caleena.

"...Caleena..." The living maid's pained voice filled the lobby.

Svin then gently lowered the body to the floor, where my master crouched down to inspect it.

Taking out a magnifying glass and a penlight, he began his inspection. More than a magus, he looked like a police officer or a forensics expert. Come to think of it, the famous detective Sherlock Holmes was also renowned for using cutting edge forensic technology of his time to investigate his crimes. Such unnecessary thoughts found their way into my head.

Before this scene which was so unsightly for a magus, whispers began to circulate the room. However, my master wasn't about to start caring about the opinions of others now. Heedless of their covert comments, he touched the face of the body, so calm it looked like she could have just been sleeping.

Absorbed in his task, he seemed entirely unaware of the fact he had begun sweating, and that I had wiped it from his face a few times for him.

He continued for a while, before finally,

"As I thought," he whispered in a strained voice. "The tympanic membranes are torn. A clear injury showing her hearing had been lost. If one were to be thorough, then that would be a matter of course. As she said herself, she lived in an environment where magecraft could make up for that weakness, so there would be no problem."

To those listening, they must have thought he was talking about the methods of the culprit.

But I remembered a certain fact. A confession from the Princess of Gold when she had come to Reines' room. That her deafness was a result of a genetic fault.

Frowning, Islo asked.

"What...does that...mean?"

"Right." Slowly, my master stood up. Lightly massaging his stomach, he took a deep breath. "Then, let's start from the conclusion."

Standing in front of Caleena's body, he spoke boldly, without reservation.

"This is the Princess of Gold."

Silence struck the room.

Like the room had been struck by some kind of magecraft - a silence settled over the lobby like all sound had been robbed from the world.

## ~Part 2~

From time to time, my master would do this in his classroom lectures.

While he typically gave the air of someone who was well-grounded, every once in a while he would throw out some crazy conclusion out of the blue leaving his students completely dumbfounded. Normally, Flat would get overly excited, Svin would do his best to keep him restrained, and chaos and tragedy would ensue. This time, however, things went differently.

Sputtering uncontrollably, the self-styled spy Mick Grajilie was the first to complain.

"...whoa whoa, what do you mean by that?"

"I meant exactly what I said. This girl is the Princess of Gold, the one who Iselma called their Social Assembly to show off."

'Have you gone mad?' As much as we all wanted to say it, no one did.

After all, the words my master was speaking went far beyond madness.

Of course, she was the maid that was always alongside the Princess of Gold. But what possible train of thought could have led him to the conclusion that she herself was the Princess of Gold?

Atram spoke up for the rest of us.

"...you mean like that Jack in the Box Projection trick? But that only worked because it was working off of the Princess of Silver, because she resembled her so closely, right?"

Right.

Using the unique catalyst that was the Princess of Silver, Reines, Maio, and Islo combining their talents could only manage to create the illusion for a few seconds, but that was the Princess of Gold. There was no way the maid, who was so completely different, could have been used to accomplish the same thing. And though it hadn't

been for especially long, the Princess of Gold had certainly appeared for longer than just a few seconds.

My master gave a small nod.

"Of course, the method is different. Rather, I didn't understand it for the longest time. After all, for the completion of the Princess of Gold, the timing was just all wrong...Flat."

"Yes yes, I wrote it all down here!" Raising a hand in the air, Flat held up a diagram.

Looking at that diagram, Reines blew onto Trimmau's arm. The arm dissipated under the magically-charged breath, becoming a faint mist covering the surroundings. After a short time, the mist took on a glow, lighting up to reproduce the pattern on that diagram in the air.

It was a horoscope.

A map of the heavens, showing the sun and moon that refused to meet.

One by one the orbits of the planets were drawn in, and in reaction to them, the ground plane changed. The fact the map didn't take into account the veracity of the heliocentric model - the fact it didn't draw the orbits of the planets strictly accurately was because what was important for magecraft was not the scientific understanding of the planets' movements, but the data recorded by observations of those movements.

"Considering the caliber of those gathered here, I'm sure you all already know the current state of the constellations." my master began, "Iselma's magecraft, the building of the Towers of the Sun and Moon, has been modeled with great precision after a spell built on the sun and moon. But if the Talisman Iselma and Galiasta were fighting over was used to perfect the Princess of Gold, then the timing just doesn't make sense. While Iselma acquired the Talisman roughly a month ago, the sun and moon haven't been in an auspicious alignment for several months."

So saying, he pointed to the sun and moon in the floating image.

In the first diagram, two stars were in the same place, while in the next they stood opposite each other.

"The best possible would be an eclipse at noon. A conjunction of the sun and moon, resting in the same place. Second best would be the sun and moon standing opposite, with Saturn - the star governing the art of creation - standing at 120 degrees. But neither of those have occurred in the past month."

"You..." Having long surpassed rage, Lord Byron's face had started turning sickly dark.

Right now, my master's explanation was akin to a polite dismantling of the Iselma magecraft. However, recklessly protesting now would just be confessing the truth of my master's words, making him an accomplice in its destruction. Nevermind Galiasta's violence, my master's words alone were sufficient torment.

"But, if something else stood in the place of the sun in the formula, there would be no problems."

"Oh? And what could have taken that place?" Completely absorbed, Atram leaned forward as he spoke. My master responded with the utmost politeness.

"In the exercise of magecraft, it is sometimes possible to exchange the position of the sun for one of the other planets. Venus is probably the most popular choice. After all, it is the brightest star in the sky. For this reason, Venus was feared as a god of ill luck in the Far East, and was even associated with the fallen angel Lucifer in the Bible. The Morning Star. The Evening Star. And the name Venus itself has roots leading back to the goddess Ishtar of Mesopotamia. As the star presiding over the concept of beauty, it would serve as a perfect replacement in this case, wouldn't it?"

"Lord El-Melloi II." From behind, the Princess of Silver softly asked from within her veil. "I don't understand how the issue of the Talisman and this are connected, but if this is the Princess of Gold, what was the corpse of my sister that we all saw? I believe it's even still in her room."

Though of course magecraft was laid over the room to preserve both the scene and the remains that lay within it, the Princess of Gold's body had been basically left as it was.

My master's response was calm and collected.

"Of course, that's the real Princess of Gold. But it wasn't the one that was shown at the Social Assembly."

Even I tilted my head to the side, confused.

The more he spoke, the less I understood. He wasn't revealing the whole picture to us, only giving us a single clue at a time. So far, I was completely unable to assemble those clues into something that made sense.

But of course, not everyone was as incompetent as I was.

"I see, I see..." Inorai's lips curled into a smile as she listened, lifting her freshly filled whisky glass to her lips. The one who was the same as my master - or rather, a true Lord unlike my master, had her face light up as she understood what my master was putting forth. "It was just cut up at random, wasn't it? Well, I can't say I'd do anything differently in their shoes."

"Precisely my thought," my master replied with a polite nod. "The actual Princess of Gold died long before the Social Assembly. That fact only came out after the display, when the preserved remains were discovered by accident."

"Wha...what on earth are you talking about?!" Lord Byron shouted, but my master's response was frigid.

"There's no point in keeping it hidden even now, is there, Lord Byron? Your chance at keeping it a secret was gone once Galiasta intervened. Even without a forensic analysis, anyone versed in that field of study could at least tell you that it's clear the time of death doesn't match up."

"...there's no way you could prove that," Byron, at a loss for words, still desperately hung on. "As such, I would request you refrain from impinging on our honor with your wild delusions."

"Shall we ask for some testimony, then?" Saying so, my master turned around.

He turned to one in particular - a certain magus, one who stood out above all others, he pointed to the tobacco-wielding redhead.

"Wait, me? What's this about?" As if excited by the idea, Touko took a step forward.

Gently, my master touched the body at his feet. "I would like you to take a look at her."

"Hm. So according to you, this is the Princess of Gold that was displayed in the Social Assembly?" Touko asked, seeking confirmation.

To which my master gave a small nod. "Right. The Princess of Gold that made her debut here was this girl. The maid Caleena, who you gave plastic surgery to. Isn't that right, Touko Aozaki?"

Silence descended over the lobby.

Perhaps everyone was gauging the meaning of those words.

Plastic surgery. If you had said that the Princesses of Gold and Silver had undergone all sorts of procedures over generations, carving into their minds and bodies with various techniques in order to grasp that ultimate body, I could have understood it no problem. But the moment you switched that word out for 'plastic surgery,' it made an impact that was hard to describe.

"Well well," Touko laughed, clearly enjoying herself. "You think I used plastic surgery to turn her into the Princess of Gold? While I'm flattered, unfortunately I have no memory of doing so. Granted I don't have the best memory. Maybe I should get checked for Alzheimer's," she said, tapping her temple with a finger.

My master took a half step back, opening a space beside Caleena's body.

"At any rate, please take a look."

"Alright, don't mind me then." Kneeling down by the body, Touko began her inspection, looking around the lines of the cheeks and the back of the ears. "...hmm. Though minimal, there certainly does appear to be traces of surgery. If it was done by magical means, though it depends on the precise method used, there should only have been indirect signs of the procedure. After all, if healing magecraft was also involved, there would be no need for even a needle and thread. In any case, there wouldn't be enough traces to be noticed in your everyday life."

She had no need for tools like my master did. With the air of a master who could see an error of a single micron in the grinding of a telescope's mirrors with the naked eye, she continued to trace various parts of the body with her finger.

After a while, she spoke again.

"Ah, seems I was mistaken. This is definitely my work."

At that, the whispers started up again.

As her expression became darker and darker, Touko spoke again. "But how did I forget something so important?"

"You didn't forget it at all, did you?" my master declared. "You just didn't remember doing it from the start."

"...oh?" Touko frowned. Not that she didn't understand, but in a way that showed she understood quite well.

Following that, my master continued by turning to another individual.

"Maio," he called to the pharmacist.

"Y-y-yes?"

"When you first met Reines, you were using some sort of medicine to feign drunkenness, is that right?"

At the time of the presentation of the Princesses.

Two magi from different factions in the Clock Tower got into a fight, and the atmosphere was getting bad. The dead drunk Maio stumbled in between them, 'accidentally' breaking up the fight before it could get any worse. In fact, that drunkenness was a result of medicine he had taken, and by taking a sobering medicine immediately after, he had returned to normal in no time.

"...y-yes..." As Maio confirmed this, my master relentlessly struck.

"...in that case, you are more than capable of making a medicine that prevents memories from sticking, aren't you?"

Even for those foreign to the world of magecraft, the idea of memory loss due to excessive intoxication was a common one. When a person recognizes something, their experience is preserved by moving it from short term memory, an area of memory only concerned with what happened moments before, to mid-term memory, a stage of memory that holds information for anywhere from half a day to a month. However, certain alcohols can serve to inhibit this transfer of information, preventing those events from being recorded in more permanent form. As memory was just as important in magecraft as it was in science, it was something my master - as a lecturer in the Faculty of Modern Magecraft - had spoken about in his courses before.

What he was talking about now was someone artificially recreating that phenomenon through magecraft.

Not just that, but if it was possible to inhibit the transfer of information between short and mid-term memory, it was likely also possible he could create medicine that would serve the same function between mid and long-term memory. Also, within the field of preventing memories from sticking, he could potentially select for certain keywords to be forgotten.

Lifting her head, Touko's expression was curious.

"Hm. Are you saying I took some sort of memory-inhibiting medicine without noticing?"

"No, I can't imagine you being so careless. But if taking that medicine was a condition for a job offered to you, you would still consider taking the request, wouldn't you?"

"I see. That would depend on how interesting the job was, of course," she confirmed.

Depending on how interesting it was.

If it was enough to capture the interest of the Clock Tower's greatest, one who had risen to the rank of Grand.

My master continued.

"Why did they ask for plastic surgery?" He raised one finger. "Why did they need to erase Touko Aozaki's memories of the event?" A second finger.

Pinching those fingers together, he pressed them into his forehead, as if struggling to understand some irrational premise as he continued speaking.

"It's not that complicated an issue. There was no way he could let news of the Princess of Gold's death get out. In that case, I'm sure he'd offer any reward to get her back. Even if that method only produced a fake."

Lord Byron seemed to have given up his protests.

Atram, Mick, and the other accomplished magi were completely absorbed in my master's speech.

In the middle of talking, my master pulled his cigar case from his chest pocket. Taking out and lighting a cigar with a match, he continued.

"I can even take a guess as to what kind of magecraft they used to accomplish the feat."

The cigar held in his mouth burned slowly, giving off a faint purplish smoke. Staring at the burning tip, he muttered.

"It was probably this, wasn't it?"

"Ha!" Suddenly, Touko burst out laughing. As if she just couldn't take it anymore, the woman held her hands to her stomach, laughing uproariously. "Haha,ahaha! Hahahahahaha! Ashes?! A Cinderella spell?! How could it be so simple?!"

My master nodded. "Yes, once you've seen it, it's quite simple."

Of course, I didn't understand at all.

The only thing it brought to mind was the story of Cinderella. Perhaps the Perrault and Basile that my master had been muttering about before were the authors of that fairy tale. Though there were many different versions of the story, the most famous being

that published by the Brothers Grimm, the original could be traced back to Charles Perrault, and before him the Italian Basile.

No.

(...ashes?)

Hadn't I heard about them somewhere before?

"Byron Valueleta Iselma, Atram Galiasta," my master turned to the two. Still not understanding the reason for Touko's laughter, they regarded him with puzzled expressions. "I said as much before, but allow me to repeat. Would you mind if I spoke a little more about the Talisman you were arguing over?"

"Do what you like."

"...if you must."

Lord Byron's composed reply was contrasted by Atram's lack of patience.

Having their permission, my master continued.

"The Talisman you were struggling over was the leaf of a Linden tree."

The European Sacred Fig was known as a symbol of holiness, connected to the Holy Virgin Mary and various other saints. It was often planted near churches or courthouses that functioned as town centers, and thanks to its medicinal properties, it was also secretly used by magi and alchemists.

"However, this one was connected to a certain Heroic Spirit, through the blood of a dragon that had touched it."

Suddenly, everyone went stiff.

Every one of them knew the legend that that image called to. Even if one wasn't a magus, it was hard to believe there was a person who didn't know of the great Heroic Spirit of Northern Europe. Wielding the legendary sword Balmung, he slew the evil

dragon Fafnir, a knight who possessed an immortal body that could be harmed by neither claw nor tooth nor weapon.

Siegfried.

From the enchanting tale of the Nibelungenlied, a hero among heroes. As he bathed in the blood of the dragon, a single linden leaf stuck to his back, the source of the one exception to his immortal body. The Talisman my master spoke of was none other than that leaf.

"...wait." Atram shot to his feet.

There was a faint tremor in his voice. It seemed whatever meaning was hidden in my master's words had finally got through to him.

"What is it? Is speaking of the Talisman off limits after all?"

"No. You mentioned ashes before, didn't you? You don't mean..."

"...right. Even if only once, a leaf drenched in the blood of a dragon would never wither or rot. However, there are magi who could use unconventional means to burn it, making it into a single-use catalyst."

The silence that followed his words felt different from those before.

It was like the silence of hearing someone had wantonly destroyed a precious treasure. Not that they didn't understand the value of the thing they were destroying, but like someone with particular authority in that field had, knowing full well what he was doing, proactively incinerated an object of unspeakable worth to the world.

With an expression like he was choking, Atram turned to Touko.

But not just him.

A sharp sound rang throughout the room. Eyes wide in shock, Lord Byron had let his cane fall to the ground.

"I-impossible...Miss Aozaki...Even if it was you, there's no way..."

If Atram was choking, then Byron looked as if he was begging. For a man who had devoted his entire life to art, seeing that art smashed to pieces before him, perhaps there was no other expression possible.

"Nah, if it was me I would." In contrast, Touko was perfectly composed. "I see. Using a leaf soaked in dragon's blood in a Cinderella spell. It's the perfect affinity, don't you think? The myth of Siegfried is less of a man becoming immortal, and more of him being reborn as an immortal hero. The comparison to Cinderella is even better. Makeup and dressup are definitely their own kinds of magecraft. From there, plastic surgery is just another step along the path. A Linden leaf connected to the rebirth of a person into a hero is a Talisman that's almost too perfect. The fact I don't remember this at all is driving me crazy."

At that, as if suppressing more laughter, she pressed a hand to her mouth as her shoulders began to shake.

The arrayed magi - even Reines and Flat - stared at her in astonishment. Even for him, a magus well outside the realm of normal, Touko's actions seemed unprecedented. Even I, who was a complete outsider to the ways of magi, couldn't avoid the shock of that revelation. Because even I had been born alongside this box and chained to the past from the beginning. Even I had been taught that blind obedience to the past was a given.

Maybe because I guessed her answer correctly.

Or maybe, there was some other reason.

"W...why..." Lord Byron at last swallowed loudly, turning to Touko. "Why?! Miss Aozaki, that was what you demanded as your payment! Why would you use that yourself to fulfill my request?! That's just going too far...!"

"Oh, is that how it was? Thanks for getting me something so valuable, then." In reply to Lord Byron's wailing, Touko shrugged nonchalantly. "I don't remember it at all, but if the Lord's speculation is correct then I can understand why I did it. I took the job because it sounded interesting. But if the level of materials and funds provided is lacking, that will show clearly in the finished product. So it only makes sense to use my reward to ensure a result that satisfied me. Pretty logical, don't you think?"

"Wha-?! No one asked you to go so far! All we wanted was a way to get through that one night...!"

"Please, let it go. That's just who I am." Touko smiled, an earnest apology from the bottom of her heart.

Aside from the bitter smile on Lord Valueleta's face, the rest of us stood in shock.

As a magus, what she was saying was definitely not wrong.

That will to reach ever deeper into the abyss of magecraft couldn't be denied by any magus. But even if they couldn't deny it, I had to wonder how many could stomach Touko's barbarism. At the very least, for those magi gathered here, each and every one of them was staring at Touko as if she was some sort of incomprehensible monster.

The one magus who wasn't taken in by the shock continued to speak.

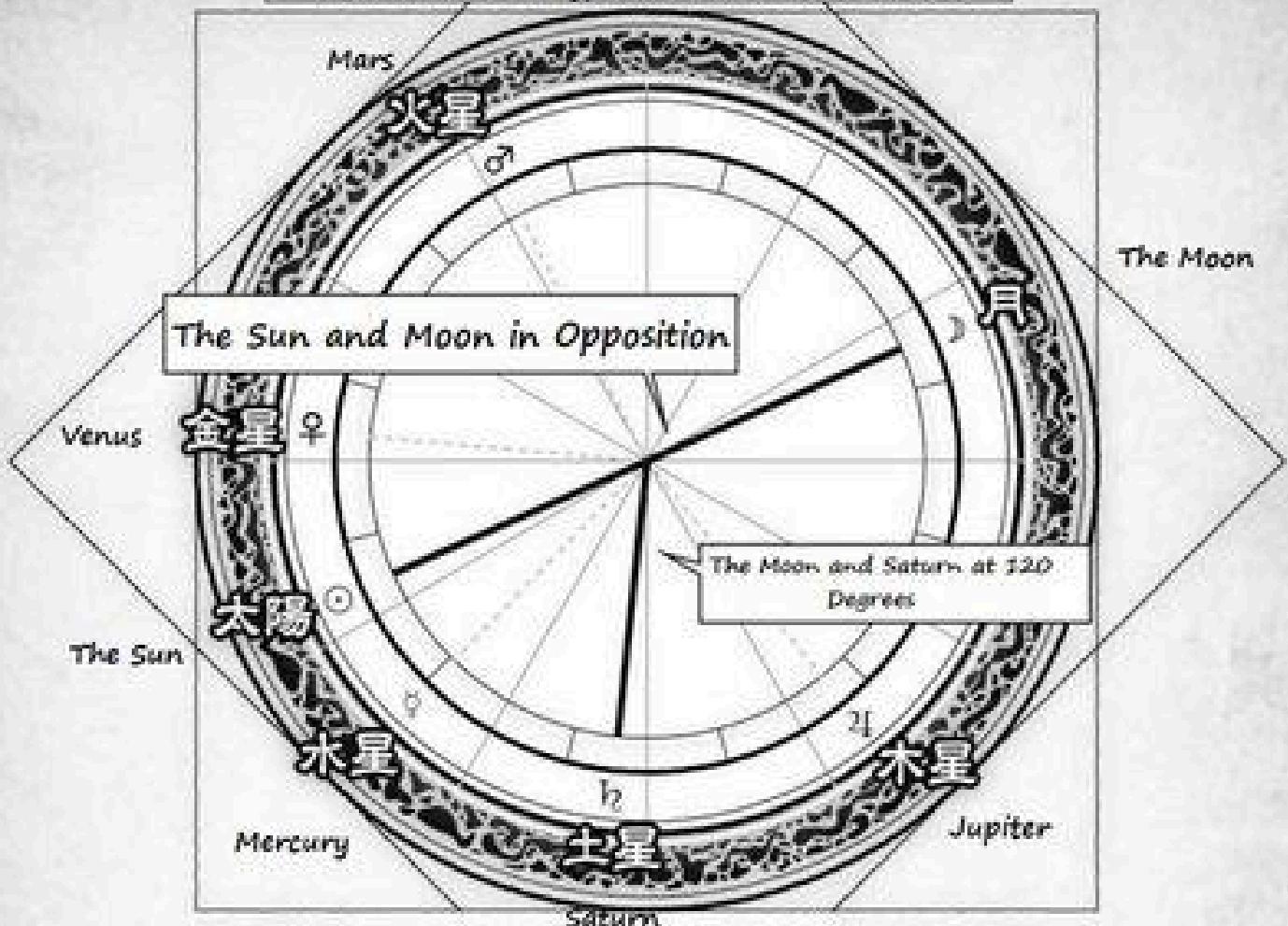
"And with this, the stand-in we were talking about earlier has been found," my master said.

Before, he had said that Venus was used as a stand-in for the sun.

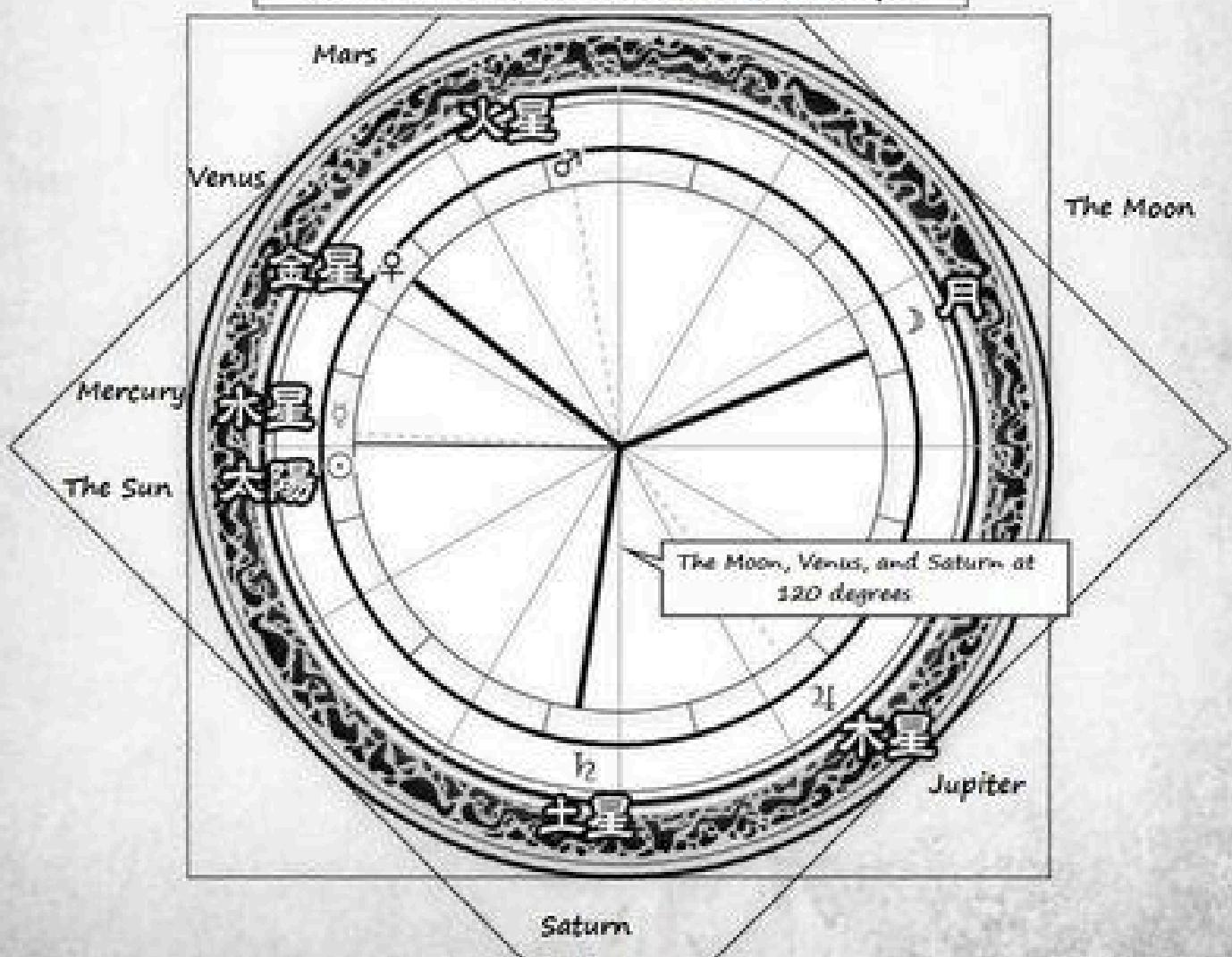
But that wasn't just some word game. At the cost of such an important Talisman, a Grand-level magus had performed a Great Ritual that pushed even beyond her own skill, as a stand-in.

"For a spell to make the Princess of Gold more beautiful, the positions of the stars were wrong. But if the purpose of the spell was to turn another woman into the Princess of Gold - if Venus stood in place for the sun, the magecraft would function. The sun and moon in opposition, and Saturn, that governs creation, at the Trine. But, if Venus was standing in for the sun, the story changes. Even if it's standing in for the sun, the fact that it's actually a planet doesn't change. In short, you want the moon, Venus, and Saturn to all be on a Trine - each 120 degrees apart."

### El-Melloi II's Hypothesized Star Chart



### Positions of the Stars Used in the Actual Spell



At a signal from my master, Reines moved a hand, causing the projected image of the stars to shift.

From the horoscope we saw earlier, to a map showing the positions and movements of various stars.

Seeing the new map, a number of magi in the room gasped as the meaning clicked.

A Trine. The moon, Venus, and Saturn all lined up perfectly at 120 degrees from each other.

"This point in time was approximately one month ago. Lining up quite well with the time of the auction that saw Iselma acquiring the Talisman," my master spoke, his voice cold and hard.

It was the other way around though, wasn't it? Because of the positions of the stars, that's why Touko asked for that Linden leaf. That map hovering in between us all was the only proof the other magi needed to support my master's words.

"Wait, wait, was that maid actually the Princess of Gold that we saw...?" Mick groaned, staring at the body of Caleena lying on the floor of the lobby. Then, he lobbed a new question. "Then, why did we see Caleena together with the Princess of Gold at the party? And even when we found the body of the Princess of Gold-"

"At the time of the party, they were only being shown off from the balcony. A homunculus or a puppet would have more than sufficed. Even if magecraft wasn't involved, putting another servant of similar height and build in her clothes would have been sufficient to create the illusion. It would have been too suspicious if there was only one maid at the party, so it only makes sense Lord Byron would have that much covered."

I remembered when Reines and I first arrived at the tower.

Once the carriage had arrived at the tower, the servants leading it had melted like mud. I didn't know whether that was the same as a homunculus, or some other type of magecraft, but something like that could have acted as the maid from a distance without any problems.

"As for when the Princess of Gold's body was found, that's even simpler. Though the spell is effective, it doesn't persist for long. It's called a Cinderella spell, after all."

According to the fairy tale, the spell cast over Cinderella faded after a single night.

At twelve midnight, the magic was gone, and all that remained was a single glass slipper - though the details changed depending on the version of the story you read, they all followed that general theme.

"Regardless of which rendition of the story you read, the result is always the same. The magic cast over the main character vanishes immediately after the party. No doubt, shortly after the true Princess of Gold's body was cut apart and the Mystic Lock was placed over that room, Touko Aozaki's spell also vanished. Whether you want to believe a Grand class magus' ability in plastic surgery is capable of replicating the original Princess' magic wavelength or that the Mystic Lock was retuned to Caleena in the first place, she should have had no problem getting into the room."

"The magic...disappears..."

I remembered a certain fact.

At the party, when the Princess of Gold was being shown, just by looking at her for a mere moment, her beauty was enough that I forgot even to breathe.

However, when she came to speak to us in Reines' room, while her beauty was incredible, we had no issue speaking with her. We had thought it was because we had gotten a little bit used to her, having seen her once before already. But what if that was for an entirely different reason?

What if it was because the spell that transformed Caleena into the Princess of Gold had already started to dissolve?

No, it wasn't just that.

At that time, Caleena was with the Princess of Gold.

If that was the case, then it wasn't Caleena with her, but her twin Rejina-

(...how much?)

How much exactly did we overlook?

Instead of just sitting around waiting for my master to arrive, there should have been something we could do. As if she was thinking the same thing, I saw Reines biting her lip.

"...may I ask something?" Beside Lord Byron furiously shaking his head, Inorai raised her whisky glass. "The purpose of the surgery was to reproduce the Princess of Gold, right? But, my idiot student's procedure resulted in a fake Princess of Gold that was leagues above the real one. Why? Because my idiot student was just that good? Or was it the fault of the Talisman?"

"Certainly, Touko and the Talisman had some influence," my master granted, "but there is another reason as well. As far as magecraft is concerned, beauty has a purpose beyond just aesthetics, as I'm sure you well know. 'Those who see beauty become more beautiful themselves,' or something like that."

I had heard that story from Reines as well.

Art is a kind of sympathetic magecraft, the purification of one's soul and spirit as they appreciate something beautiful is the true nature of beauty. That if there existed something that could be called the ultimate in beauty, witnessing it might draw the observer into a higher level of existence.

"This is one part of what beauty means in magecraft. By presenting the Princesses of Gold and Silver in concert, both of them became even more beautiful. Complementary Beauty, you could call it. But the Princess of Gold could never be allowed to see her own face. The same goes for the Princess of Silver. If their faces were to be even reflected in a mirror, the level of their beauty would decrease."

My master's words filled the lobby along with the smoke from his cigar.

"...that's why, for a spell like this, a third person is necessary."

"Wha-?!" Lord Byron groaned as he stumbled backwards.

Yes, the Princess of Gold had said so.

-But, my father's methods have become inefficient. No, rather the stage at which his methods were efficient has passed.

If that was more than just expediency, but the actual truth, then - Iselma's magecraft held a fatal flaw, and if that flaw led to their stagnation, it was only a matter of course that my master would discover it.

(...after all, that's my master's...)

Seeing through the magecraft of others and guiding it to its proper form was the very skill that made Lord El-Melloi II an unparalleled lecturer of the Clock Tower.

Svin snorted triumphantly, as if taking pride in his teacher.

"Of course, even when it was decided to perform the surgery on Caleena, Lord Byron hadn't even entertained that idea. Flustered at the loss of the Princess of Gold, he just desperately sought to fill that gaping hole."

In contrast to him, my master's expression remained displeased. As if being made to say all of this out loud was painful for him.

"Even so, the third person was acquired, and so the spell was perfected. The one who had spent her life gazing upon the beauty of the Princesses of Gold and Silver - when Caleena was gifted with that same beauty, she was propelled to a beauty of an even higher level."

A trinity - three as one.

In Christianity, it referred to the idea that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all manifestations of a single God, but it was more than just that.

When you are connecting points on a surface, an image begins to take shape starting from three points.

When a symbol has two faces, their opposition creates stability. If it possesses three faces, they each influence the others, and a kind of energy cycles between them.

While the Princesses of Gold and Silver were alone, they stood in a state of stable opposition, equals to each other - but, when a third, who had witnessed those two from the inside was made to wear their beauty, a definitive change was forced upon her.

In a way, the loss of the true Princess of Gold may have also spurred that change on.

The spell that was supposed to be in a state of stability had lost something, and an enormous energy was born from that void. Just like the idea of Potential Energy, once subjected to that slope, it had an effect even on magecraft. A \_\_\_\_\_ even greater than that possessed by the Princess of Gold was bestowed on Caleena.

Something so powerful, even a Grand like Touko Aozaki could be pressured by it-

"Wait, professor," Svin raised his hand. He was full of energy, like he was back in the classroom in the Clock Tower. "If what you're saying is right, shouldn't the Princess of Silver have ascended in her own beauty due to witnessing the new Princess of Gold?"

"That's simple," my master moved his gaze. Looking at the Princess of Silver, he continued. "...Miss Estella, you're blind, aren't you?"

"...what, makes you say that?" the Princess replied in a low voice.

"It appears the Princess of Gold was deaf. It's a common pattern in magecraft for one of the five senses to be sealed in order to sharpen one's magecraft. Iselma's own magecraft was built up by engraving that loss into their own genetic code. It was so important that Touko's surgery needed to replicate that effect, robbing Caleena of her tympanic membranes. Come to think of it, the lack of mirrors in the Princess of Gold's room was done to match yours, wasn't it? Your daily lives were matched to the point of sleeping and eating, so it goes without saying that something as impactful on magecraft as the presence or lack of mirrors would also have to match. And if they were going to have to match one way or another, it's a lot easier to have no mirrors in either room than to add them to both."

He removed the cigar from his mouth.

The sound of teeth grinding filled the room. That manner of existence, of a magecraft that had reached the edge of its limits, that had become so stifling, was taken for

granted in the world of magi. No matter how hard it was to breathe, there was nowhere for them to escape to, so there was no reason for regret.

Even so, that must have been unbearable for my master.

Even though he was one of the only twelve Lords of the Clock Tower, he had yet to adopt a life like that.

"Of course, there are any number of ways to overcome that obstacle in your daily life. For example, magecraft that emulates the echolocation of bats, among many other possibilities...but, that doesn't change the fact that you can't see. As such, you weren't able to enter the same circulation of beauty that the Princess of Gold inhabited."

Not just being unable to see, the circulation of magecraft itself was unable to reach her.

"Though...considering the one in charge was Miss Aozaki, I can't imagine the possibility of this result was something she just overlooked."

"Hm. I don't remember, but I probably would have figured out as much." Touko narrowed her eyes slightly in response to her name being called. "Oh and by the way, the one who had asked me to eliminate the members of the El-Melloi classroom was Rejina," she said, pointing at the maid.

The maid no longer showed an air of confusion.

Perhaps she had had the time to resolve herself, having spent all that time listening to my master's explanation. She stood with her hands clasped in front of her apron, her gaze unwavering.

"What she offered in exchange was the secret behind the beauty of the Princess of Gold. So it was something like this, was it? I see. I guess you weren't lying, though. You probably could have told me easily. You just never mentioned that it was a beauty that I would never have been able to take for myself. However, if that's how it's going to be, then I have no obligation to keep your identity a secret either, right?"

Suddenly, Touko nodded.

Everyone's gazes were focused on Rejina.

"Then, you-" Reines was the first to speak. "You are the one responsible for blaming the Princess of Gold's murder on me?"

### ~Part 3~

In response to Reines' question, the maid said nothing.

Next to her, the Princess of Silver also had her mouth shut tight. Whether he had been taken completely by surprise by the situation, or he was still rattled from learning of the fate of the Talisman, all Lord Byron could do was blearily look between them.

"Well?" Reines asked again. "The Caleena that visited my room with the Princess of Gold must have been you as well, no? Go ahead and deny it, or even acknowledge it, just say something. Or your master could say it for you, I don't really mind."

As expected, the maid said nothing. With a cold expression, she stood unfazed by Reines' attack.

Atram snorted with a sneer.

"Has our brilliant Lord El-Melloi II come up with some conjecture for this as well?"

"I was wondering if I should just come out and say it."

"Of course. You're the one who made a big deal about taking on this case. It's the job of the detective to tear apart even the smallest mystery involved, isn't it?" Perhaps still angry from learning the fate of the Talisman, Atram Galiasta's previous eloquence had turned sharp.

In response to that sharpness, my master's brow furrowed.

As if shedding light on this case was a punishment for himself, he just took a drag on his cigar. With a puff of strongly scented smoke, he spoke slowly.

"...the real Princess of Gold was likely killed as a by-product of Iselma's research. Progress in Iselma's magecraft was already eating into the test subjects' genetic nature, so if that was to be pushed far enough, death of some sort is more or less inevitable."

As the Princess of Gold had said before, Iselma's magecraft had already failed. At this point, it was hardly a surprise that the result of that failure was death.

"However, Lord Byron didn't stop there. At least, not until the end of his display party. Though the original Princess of Gold Diadra had died, he invited Touko Aozaki in, and through her efforts Caleena was made into an even more successful case. As a result, the Princess of Silver and her maid Rejina must have had to steel themselves as well."

"Because...the Princess of Silver...would eventually die as well...?" Islo said, his speech faltering.

But my master shook his head. "No. There's a bigger issue than that. After that party, many magi must have thought - with her, they could possibly reach the Root. If the Magic Association heard that, then?"

"Ah..." I unintentionally blurted out.

Because we had heard a similar story just recently.

With a bitter smile, Touko whispered. "...a Sealing Designation, huh?"

A talent recognized in a magus limited to only a single generation, unmatched and unmatchable in both their past and future. The answer, to preserve them forever alive. The greatest honor possible for a magus. So Lord Byron should have had no worries. So Estella should have had no reason to refuse.

"Strictly speaking, the Princesses of Gold and Silver aren't actually magi, so they may not qualify for a Sealing Designation. And even regardless of that, Iselma's research isn't something bound only to this generation, so it wouldn't apply anyways. But, if the Clock Tower thought there was a possibility for the Root to be reached, there's no way it could just leave it be."

Touko nodded. "-So, before running away, the Princess of Gold's body needed to be destroyed. I see, so after doing so, the Princess of Silver and her maid planned on fleeing. Is that right?"

That possibility had already been taken from them. No doubt, Iselma needed to make that clear.

Before news got back to the Clock Tower from the Assembly and a judgment was reached, there was a need to show Iselma's research had had a crippling setback.

"Most likely. The false accusations against Reines were likely for the same reason. If someone from another faction - ideally, someone famous from the Aristocratic Faction, could be roped into it, then everything could be resolved within Iselma and Valueleta. For that role, Reines was perfect."

"...thanks to a certain someone, my name's gotten pretty famous in the Clock Tower, hasn't it?" Reines remarked sarcastically, glaring at my master. Though her gaze was full of enmity, I felt it was of a completely different nature than that shown by Atram.

My master continued.

"In short, the fact the Princess of Gold had requested asylum wasn't entirely a lie."

"Most likely, they had seriously considered it. But, they didn't trust Reines enough to actually bet on that."

Naturally.

Entrusting your life to a magus you had never even truly spoken to before was insane. It was no wonder Reines herself had been suspicious when she was asked. You couldn't trust a magus to act with common sense, let alone morals or ethics. While it was likely a plan they considered, there was no way they would have actually attempted it.

As a result, rather than abandoning the idea entirely, they used it as a roundabout lure to draw Reines and myself into finding the body of the Princess of Gold.

"In general, the moment Lord Byron saw the body of the Princess of Gold, he should have known it was the true Princess of Gold. After all, none other than he could have cut her to pieces like that. Oh, and I feel like I shouldn't have to explain the need for the body to be cut apart. As a magus, it is a matter of course to retrieve as much data as possible for the sake of the next test subject."

Lord Byron's mouth was firmly shut.

Neither did any of the magi gathered around him cast him any blame. After all, that was the ethics and common sense of a magus - the natural course for someone so immersed in that world.

"So, Lord Byron must have struggled to pick a culprit to blame. At that stage, there were any number of possible choices. After all, it made sense even for his supposed friends in the Valueleta faction to take action to trip him up. As far as he was concerned, virtually everyone had sufficient motive."

Factional Warfare.

The magi that would struggle with each other even within those factions.

The world in which my master and Reines had been ensnared since long ago.

"However, the second incident is different."

Suddenly, his tone changed.

"...master?"

"The first incident was entirely a farce, a front to cover up for the death of the Princess of Gold. During the chaos that ensued, the Princess of Silver and the maids should have made their escape. As such, the death of Caleena was entirely unnecessary."

"...what do you mean?"

"Of course, there is an actual murder here. One is Lord Byron's accidental killing of the original Princess of Gold. And second was Caleena, who was killed by -"

At that point, he stopped.

A silence so thick settled over the room, even the sound of someone swallowing could be clearly heard.

Faintly, the Princess of Silver and her maid began to shake.

"-by you," my master finished, pointing.

At the other end of his finger was standing only one person.

From the Neutralist Faction.

The young, pale man from the Faculty of Folklore (*Brishisan*).

The pharmacist Maio Brishisan Clynelles' eyes went wide.

**~Part 4~**

In the center of the lobby, Maio shook his head in a daze.

With a thump, he fell on his backside, scrabbling away from my master as his head moved from side to side.

"N-no...I...I..."

"Perhaps I should explain a bit further," my master's voice was terrifyingly cold.

As before, I felt a kind of self-recrimination in his tone.

"Flat."

"Yes!" As if he had been waiting just for this moment his hand shot up, showing off some clothes and a bag he had been carrying. "Like the Professor said, these were hidden near that spring!"

A travel bag, and the Princess of Gold's clothes.

By seeing those, I somehow understood what had happened. Once the magecraft had dissolved, Caleena went to that spring to change clothes. And in order to escape Lord Byron, she had prepared a travel bag and hidden it near that spring so she could make her escape right away.

"In many of the legends of Siegfried, he also spent time near such springs. For example, washing off the blood of the dragon, and also when he went out to meet his death. Of course, that has meaning too when it comes to Magecraft...but no, it's not so difficult. I was about eighty or ninety percent sure before, but it was just now that I became absolutely sure that you are the culprit."

The whodunnit was meaningless, my master had said.

Even the howdunnit was meaningless, my master had said.

If the culprit was a magus, there were any number of ways they could obfuscate those things. There were more tricks than you could count. Walk through a wall to make a closed room if you felt like it. Throw a single curse, and your job is done.

But.

Whydunnit, however meager a finding, is the one exception to the rule.

"The only ones who could cover for Rejina and the Princess of Gold are you and Islo, correct?" my master whispered.

For the first time, at those words, the Princess of Silver and her maid began to waver.

"And the reason it couldn't be Islo is Trimmau. If it was the Grand Touko Aozaki or Lord Valueleta, then putting a stop to Trimmau would be possible. Even Atram Galiasta might be able to accomplish that."

"...no need to say 'might,'" Atram spat.

The fact that he left it at that was ample evidence that he had no confidence he could stop the mercury maid standing right in front of him.

"However, you two are far too specialized. For a weaver or a pharmacist, forget stopping her, they could hardly defend themselves. Stopping her completely would require an intimate knowledge of the formulas and construction of the Mystic Code. While my student Flat is particularly skilled at that I guess, in reality it's a rather difficult thing to accomplish. At the very least, I certainly couldn't. For you, it would require a chance to see and inspect Trimmau from up close. And as I heard from my sister here, apparently she did in fact let her guard down for a certain someone."

"...I was nervous from being in enemy territory. Don't be so harsh, dearest brother."

Ignoring Reines' pleading, my master continued.

"On top of that, adding the blood to Trimmau's hand was a step too far. There was just no need for it. Reines was already cornered, a suspect for the murder of the Princess of Gold. That made me think the culprit behind the Princess of Gold's incident and Caleena's murder were different people."

"...then, actually..." Islo said, pain clear in his voice as he turned around.

Looking at his childhood friend, his eyes seemed only to see a monster wearing an old friend's clothes.

This time, the pharmacist denied nothing.

Still sitting on the floor, he began to smile. His shaking stopping completely, his mouth spread in a wide, crescent grin as he sat there perfectly calm.

"...but..."

Finally, Maio spoke.

"...why...why is what I did wrong?"

His voice echoed in the lobby, painfully hollow.

There was no doubting our ears. In Maio's eyes we could see a conviction greater than that of a man who had received a direct revelation from God, his question a sincere plea.

No, that wasn't right.

Because even I felt that he was correct.

"I-I knew her, since l-long ago. S-since forever. I-I knew her b-better than anyone! B-but I didn't know that woman at all!"

Which woman did he mean, I wonder?

The true Princess of Gold, Diadra?

The maid Caleena that had always been at her side?

Or...

"...s-so, I thought I'd gather a little bit of her, f-from before she died..."

Probably, it was before Reines found those footprints, and sent Trimmau off to track them.

Just like us, Maio had tried to figure out who had killed the Princess of Gold. Or maybe he hadn't even thought of finding the culprit. Maybe just like he had said, he was just trying to gather up some of the lingering essence of her life. If he was capable of Strengthening his senses, then he would have no problem following the footsteps just as Trimmau had done.

And when he came across Caleena at that spring, she had likely been making her preparations to flee from Lord Byron.

"W-when I asked her, I was surprised. After all, she said Caleena was the P-princess of Gold. I-I couldn't b-believe her at first, b-but, could you imagine how happy I was? Because! Because! D-Diadra may have been dead, but the Princess of Gold was alive! T-that beauty was, even if it was just a piece, was still there!"

Maio shouted.

Pushing through his stammer, he poured out everything in his heart. After being enchanted by the results of the Cinderella Spell, he was like an evangelist spreading the greatest gospel.

"B-but! She said she was running away! S-She was going to run away from Lord Byron, she was going to take the Princess of Silver and Rejina away from the Towers! S-so, she asked me to help!"

As far as she thought, Maio was a reliable childhood friend.

Even if he found out the truth, he would no doubt help them. That's why she told him everything.

But they weren't thinking along the same lines.

No, their thoughts were running in the exact opposite directions.

"That...that, would be, unforgivable, right?! She was dead, so, that beauty should have been reclaimed! E-Even if she died, I had to stop her! The research for the Princess of Silver, had to continue! I mean, we s-saw! We saw the end! We had already t-tasted it, so we needed to keep, moving, forward! That's what a m-magus has to do!"

...he was right.

There was absolutely nothing wrong with what he was saying.

In the face of that \_\_\_\_\_, a single person's life, a single person's freedom was worth as much as dirt.

If you could recreate that, you would gladly offer up dozens, hundreds of lives.

That's why I had decided to become that hero. I accepted my changed self, because I thought I should make the people of my home happy. No, even now it wasn't too late. Add was still with me.

"-h-hey! Gray! Gray, keep it together!"

The voice coming from the box in my right hand seemed ever so far away.

Why did I need to hesitate? All I had to do was take that path. The one who had to confess their failure to do the right thing was me. The time to get on the floor and ask for forgiveness was now.

But, the back of someone wearing a black suit stepped in front of me.

"...you weren't wrong." The one who spoke was my master. "As a magus, you weren't wrong at all."

"...Lord El-Melloi II," Inorai muttered softly, her hand on her chest.

Ignoring her, my master continued.

"As a magus, sacrificing your childhood friend for the sake of achieving your dreams is a natural course."

In the darkness of the lobby, Maio's eyes began to waver.

Like a lost child who had found salvation, a cruelly innocent smile lit his face.

"T-t-then..."

"But-if that's the case, why didn't you ask her to die?"

My master's strike was straight, true, and sharp.

Even the other magi watching stared wide-eyed, wondering what he was getting at.

"W-what-"

"Rather than jumping straight to murder, why didn't you just ask your childhood friend to die for you? 'I want to see the ultimate beauty one more time, so please let me tear you apart!' Why didn't you ask? If that was your dream, why didn't you ask the Princess of Silver, or Rejina to do the same? Why didn't you declare it openly and proudly?"

At my master's words, Maio's mouth flapped open and closed soundlessly, as if he was trying to blow bubbles.

"-I-I-I, would never..."

"I would never ask for something ridiculous like that,' right? Is that the best you can do?" My master spat, his distaste as sincere as I'd ever seen.

Those harsh words were enough to snap my brain out of its fuzzy state.

For some reason, I smelled iron.

The black suit that wrapped his tall frame seemed like an impervious suit of armor. The wavering smoke rising from his cigar seemed like a silver spear. As if he had come from a distant land, posing that question in front of me.

"You didn't have the will to trample any number of countries under foot, lacking any sort of divine will or moral cause, just to sate your desires. 'I want to see the farthest sea.' For a single desire like that, you couldn't squander the glory and pride of armies

and Maharaja, you couldn't array armies to drive you forward. You have so little faith in your own purpose, and you think you can make your dreams come true?"

In my master's voice was something, something that said he would never waver on this one point.

A voice as if he had seen the very end of the world with his own eyes.

Even if that was something he had never seen himself, even if it was just a lingering shadow over his heart from seeing another person's world, that deep-seated dream was something no one could ridicule.

"Whether you call yourself a magus or you don't, for a person the Ego is absolute. No matter what good you accomplish or what evil you sow, no matter how many people you save or how many people you hurt, none of that is relevant. Even if it's just a misunderstanding or a misconception, if that's the way of life you've chosen, stick out your chest and be proud of it. If you are willing to fight for your own sake, then at least spill some of that self-righteousness on those around you. If that's what you think, then say it with pride before we get caught up in these stupid games. 'I saw Caleena trying to run away, so I killed her!'"

Because you didn't do that, you lost.

Because you couldn't do that, you're here crawling on the ground.

The meaning of his words cut deep into me. I didn't think that his morals were anything so great. For a normal person, let them be normal. For a magus (*monster*), a magus' (*monster's*) ethics and common sense were fine. But both of those lived in him.

In a way, perhaps it was to be expected. Magecraft itself was history, was ideology. For my master, who had dismantled all kinds of magecraft, his knowledge of the architecture of ideology had to be greater than anyone else's.

Lord.

Regardless of bloodline or talent, one of the twelve magi crowned as kings of the Clock Tower.

To Maio's blank stare, my master spoke.

"-Your ambition is nothing more than greed."

The sentence was passed.

Somehow, I felt I heard the sound of the blade of a guillotine falling.

Now that a sort of calm had settled on the lobby of the Tower of the Moon, with an expression like the taste of his cigar had just turned sour, my master's gaze turned to the side.

"Why did you cover for him?"

As always, the Princess of Silver's face was unreadable behind her veil.

But this time, she finally spoke.

"...actually, we had intended to run away that night. We would have, had Maio not killed Caleena."

"So, why?"

"You understand, don't you? You said yourself that you only understood the reason.  
-Rejina?"

In a beautiful voice, Rejina answered.

"As her twin, though limited, I was able to feel her thoughts and feelings."

Among magi, it was common enough. After all, urban legends of twins having a telepathic link were a dime a dozen.

"But, I was able to clearly perceive her thoughts before she died...her desire to save Maio."

"From a young age, Maio had eyes only for my sister Diadra. In the same way, Caleena had eyes only for Maio."

What was the best name for a relationship of that sort?

Could you call it love? But, did Maio see anything past Diadra' beauty? After all, he so innocently rejoiced in the Princess of Gold's return when he heard of Caleena's transformation.

Even so, did Caleena still have feelings for him?

I couldn't understand.

...no.

That had to be a lie.

I did understand. After all, even for all those people in my old home who wished for nothing more than for me to become that ancient hero, I never could bring myself to hate them. I would lose to the rejoicing of the people there at some point, wouldn't I? At least so I thought.

"That's why we decided to cover for Maio. That was all."

Almost as if relieved, Touko muttered.

"-in the end, if you had asked her to die, she might have just done it."

## ~Part 5~

"I would also like to ask you, Lord Valueleta," my master whispered. "Regardless of the plastic surgery, you should have known something was up with the Iselma family. At the very least, you knew that the Princess of Gold shown at the party was a fake, no?"

"...did I know?" she answered with a small shrug. Looking around the room, as if deciding she couldn't quite deceive everyone, she let out a small sigh. "Well, I had my suspicions. The Iselma family was doing quite well, but they shouldn't have produced any results for another few generations. Then rumors started sprouting up about how they had skipped right to the end, to the point even my idiot student started poking her face into things."

"And so you let Atram Galiasta go wild in an attempt to flush that out."

"Something like that," as if she had given up, the old woman confessed.

From her perspective, the sudden contact from Atram must have been a surprise blessing. Perhaps it was the presentation of the Princess at the Social Assembly, or maybe Iselma's participation in that black market auction. Maybe even earlier than that, but regardless, something happened that necessitated a deeper look into Iselma's work. Her taking on Mick Grajilie must have been for that reason as well.

"-and from me, one more thing," Touko Aozaki said, turning to Inorai. "I've always wanted to ask, but how did you react to the news of my Sealing Designation?"

"I thought it was a good idea. You are one of the best possible choices to be selected for a Sealing Designation in this era. When asking others around me, they all supported it too. That Touko Aozaki and her Magic Circuits should be preserved for eternity in the depths of the Secret Judgment Division."

Inorai replied without a hint of hesitation.

As if to say, it's your own fault if you asked the question without thinking it through.

That was Lord Valueleta.

The very human, large-hearted smile that she showed at the Social Assembly was definitely not a lie. But at her core, she was the ideal magus. If she believed it would lead to the development of magecraft, she would sell out one of her students to a Sealing Designation without the least bit of hesitation. The ideal Lord.

That was no doubt the ideal way of being for a Lord of the Clock Tower.

"I figured as much," Touko replied gently.

-in the next moment, Touko looked down at her chest.

Sprouting there was now a green blade. Looking at it as if confused, Touko tilted her head to the side.

From inside Touko's body, the root of some strange plant was now protruding.

"-I-I-I, I d-did it!" A voice stammered out from its place on the floor.

As if he had suddenly grown old, over the past few minutes Maio had grown to look extremely exhausted. Now, he held a bottle of medicine in his fingers.

"...ah, the drug, is it?" As if it was no more than a nuisance, Touko muttered.

Did the memory blocking drug Touko was forced to take have something else mixed in? Most likely, some sort of plant that responded to some chemical in the air with sudden, explosive growth.

"Hahahahahaha!" The pharmacist laughed. "W-what good is a Grand? That title is meaningless! She's the only one that has meaning! The end of Iselma's...the end of my dream! Isn't that right, Lord Byron?!"

"M-Maio..." Lord Byron said, still having difficulty keeping up with the current situation. The despairing, grief-stricken gentleman could only shake his head from side to side dumbly, as the bone-thin face of the pharmacist roared with laughter.

"O-one more time! You just n-need to create it, one more time!" As he screamed, he turned to face his two childhood friends. "P-please, for my sake! O-one more time, do

the plastic surgery on her! O-on the Princess of Silver, or Rejina! Whichever you like, j-just cut them up!"

It was like he had gone mad.

In contrast, Touko was deathly calm.

"Or else, you'll kill me here?"

"Yes! T-that root is wrapped around your h-heart! Around all your internal, organs! I-if you try to break that spell, it'll t-take all your insides with it! N-no matter what kind of amazing, Magic Crest, you have, you'll just die..."

"Well that doesn't mean much. I don't have a Magic Crest in the first place, so I guess that's that." Touko drew some sort of symbol on the root protruding from her chest. In the next moment, it withered and crumbled away.

However, she did nothing to close the hole it left. With a hole now in her chest the size of a fist, she spoke lazily.

"I see, I see. It was sloppy of me to let my memories get erased like that, but since it would let me start fresh all over again, I figured it would let me enjoy it even more. Man, I have a terrible personality. Thanks to that, the ending is going to turn out a little disappointing. I have nothing against you, Maio, but at this point there's nothing I can do to stop it." Touko looked up at the ceiling. "Recently, I've been dividing things up. Though there recently haven't been so many attempts on my life around the Clock Tower...I see, I didn't tell you, did I?"

A strange cracking sound filled the air.

Not like one that sends waves through the air, perceived by the ear.

Something more fundamental - a kind of friction that didn't belong in this dimension.

A sharp, scraping sound, that felt like it was being perceived directly by the soul.

"Sorry, but I'll have to ask you to hold this for me for a bit," Touko said, throwing a small paper box to my master.

A box of cigarettes.

Inorai's expression shifted. "Touko, you-"

"Haha, of course you figured it out," Touko said with a smile, the bizarre otherworldly sound increasing in volume as she did so.

No, I was the only one who understood.

(...when we were fighting, in that forest...)

At that time, I felt a bizarre presence from the too-large bag Touko carried with her.

An extreme, despair inducing magical energy that made me wonder if it could even stand up to Rhongomyniad.

Now, that same feeling was leaking out of Touko's own body.

This was the true form of the contents of that bag.

"Long ago, I got done in by surprise, so I've learned to take some countermeasures. Now, it's in here - oh, and don't worry. It is restricted to acting as a Counter. As long as you don't get in its way, it won't hurt anyone but the person who attacked me. Lord El-Melloi II, I'll be dropping by later to pick up those cigarettes."

With another crack, Touko's stomach broke open. Clothes, bone, and flesh alike split apart as if she was no more than a statue - and inside the open wound, a kind of 'door' awaited.

An oppressive darkness.

Not endless, but without dimensions altogether - an eternal, infinite hell.

I learned later from my master that that monster had no name. Since its existence was only known through Touko's magecraft, no one had managed to discern the nature of the Mystery that lay behind it. There was the possibility that even Touko was unaware of the truth behind that beast.

It was like a horror movie.

Unspeakably silent.

Understood by no one.

And more than anything...immortal.

Within the depths of that ceaseless darkness, where no magecraft could ever hope to reach it, two lights shined.

-the two eyes I saw at that time!

To the sound of Lord Byron's strangled scream, Touko's body completely broke apart, the shadow within her bursting forth.

Like a thorned plant, a clawed tentacle shot forward, taking hold of the pharmacist that had hurt its master.

"Maio!"

In response to Rejina's scream, Maio could only give a muffled grunt.

It appeared like he had already given up.

In less than a moment, he would be dragged into the 'door' that was Touko Aozaki, where he would be devoured by thousands of sets of jaws.

Ah, that's right. There's no way to respond to that.

In a way, it was on the same level as that temporary Princess of Gold. Though thoroughly its opposite, that monster's existence was enough to completely crush the soul of a human being. Even had it only been big enough to devour you one fingertip at a time, terror would overwhelm all other sensations.

The end. The end.

The incident, everything, everything was over.

Like some sort of Deus Ex Machina, everything would be concluded here, bit by bit.

(...is that okay?)

Someone asked.

A question posed to me, from myself.

I was afraid of that hero of the past that tried to overtake me.

This person had just been overwhelmed by that absolute \_\_\_\_\_.

Really, the difference between us was small. The difference between offering up oneself, or another. Whether we had a chance afterwards or not.

Thanks to that small difference alone, I was going to stay here, and Maio was being taken away.

"Hey, Gray!"

A voice called from my right hand.

Before, when that voice called out to me, and I was snapped out of it by my master's bold proclamation.

But this time? Was this just a trick of the imagination? Was this just a selfish illusion, forcing myself on someone whose circumstances were similar to mine?

".....I...."

My voice spilled out.

At that moment, while still broken completely apart, Touko's eyes turned to me.

It seemed to me like she was smiling.

Like she was telling me to do as I liked. To live as I wanted to.

Up until this point, she must have been the freest person I had ever seen. And that was her assurance.

"---aaaaaaaaaaaaAAAH!"

My body moved.

In one leap, I crossed the five meters between us. Before anyone could move to stop me, Add had deployed, and the latent magical energy in the air had already been absorbed. With one powerful stroke, the thorned tentacle was severed.

Though Maio had already lost part of his legs to the beast, he was still alive.

"Maio!"

Rejina and the Princess of Silver ran up to him.

Even after hearing him attempt to offer their lives up for the sake of magecraft, their feelings for him had not disappeared. No doubt, their relationship was unbreakable. Though it had little to do with me, the thought that such a bond existed somewhere in the world was not unpleasant in the least.

"Gray!"

"...sorry."

With one more slash at the tentacled creature, I apologized.

I could feel the movement of magical energy. Touko's - no, the beast within the box that had once been Touko had turned to view us as enemies, and seemed to be changing its approach for that fight.

"He is the same as me. Just me, but a little bit braver."

If I had completely given up, then I would have been entirely overtaken by that past hero.

Even if I could use Add, I would become someone more worthy.

The people of my home would no doubt rejoice. After all, the clumsy person I was now would have ceased to exist.

But how was one to express that feeling?

Despite my obviously insufficient explanation,

"...good grief." My master nodded. He turned to look at that darkness, that box where a shapeless blackness was all that could be seen. "Seems like there's nothing I can do. But, the time and space within which it can act here should both be limited. I see, the perfect disposition for a horror movie. Vampires are loved because they are only unstoppable at night, zombies are feared because they can't speak at all. What a fitting creature for her to have made."

Muttering in admiration, he turned to the curly-haired youth beside him. "Svin, how much do you think you can handle?"

"I should be able to do seventy percent."

"Please."

In response to my master's quick request, Flat jumped in.

"W-wait, Professor! Aren't you going to ask me?!"

"Quiet. All you're going to do is get hit in the head and pass out again, right?"

"Well, yes, but! But hey, looking lightly on concussions is a big mistake! I might end up developing a snore or something terrible like that! Actually, I heard near-death experiences can bring up flashes from your previous lives. What do you think, Professor?"

"Svin, help Gray fight off that tentacle thing."

"Yes sir!"

Plainly ignoring Flat, he gave Svin instructions before turning to the other boy.

"Flat, see if you can interfere with the spell realizing that space."

"On it, Professor!"

With a carefree nod towards me, Flat drew some sort of magical sign with his fingers before touching the ground.

Beside him, Svin had wrapped himself in the form of the Phantasmal Wolf.

"Reines, support please."

"Yes yes, I figured you'd say something like that." As if satisfied by something, Reines dropped the hand that was covering her right eye. Reclaiming the part of her that had turned into the star map, the mercury maid moved into a battle ready formation.

Then, my master called out from behind us.

"Lord Valueleta, Mick Grajilie. We will deal with that. Could we ask you to take care of Lord Byron and the Princess of Silver?"

"Well, I guess they are supposed to be my allies," Inorai accepted.

Lord Byron was still stuck in a daze.

No doubt, it was because he had looked directly into those eyes. Even to a magus who was well accustomed to the supernatural, after his life had been taken apart right in front of him, it was more than enough to drive him into abject despair. Even in this situation where he might die at any moment, he seemed completely unaware.

"If the boss says so, not much I can do," Mick said with a shrug.

At any rate, coloured sand had already spread to make a sort of Boundary field, showing the two of them were more than ready to do what was needed the moment that monster had appeared.

Finally, my master turned to the last person.

"I thought you would have run by now."

"Of course, that is my intention. However, since the chance is here, I figured I'd take the opportunity to measure your abilities." Atram replied, in a surprisingly good mood. Whatever had caught his interest, his eyes shone like they were watching over the work of a good friend.

"Spectating isn't free of charge, you know."

"Naturally," Atram replied with an exaggerated bow.

Apparently, that was sufficient for my master, as he then turned to me once more.

"Gray."

"...yes?"

"Well done."

Surprised, I lifted my face.

"This is an incident I said I would take responsibility for. Leaving the culprit to that monster would be a mark against the El-Melloi family's honor. Let's end things, by ourselves."

There was no way that was true. All he was doing was trying to make a lame excuse to make up for my selfishness.

How ridiculous. It was a gesture sweet enough to make my heart hurt.

"Here it comes."

Suddenly, the monster seemed to have made its choice.

From within that dark 'box,' the thorned tentacles were released all at once.

But by that point, the impulse driving me had already found its course, too.

"-here I go."

With an explosive speed, I leapt straight towards it. Making use of the magical energy spilling from it, I strengthened myself. Then, relying on my sharpened senses and reflexes, I slipped through the gaps between the thorns, modifying the form of my scythe slightly to deliver a powerful strike.

Altogether, seven tentacles were cut apart.

Spinning again, I brought the scythe down once more.

The magical energy pouring out of that creature was so vast I almost hesitated to take it in. But even as I felt my Magic Circuits and nerves begin to corrode at the contact, I didn't. There was no reason to hesitate. This was as a desperate last stand - I couldn't afford to leave room for regrets.

Svin also grabbed a nearby tentacle, using his strength of his phantom body to tear it apart.

"Don't think you can just finish it," my master called out from behind. "If you try to wield too much magical energy at once, you'll just stimulate the main body to further action. Wait for Flat's analysis."

In short, Rhongomyniad was off limits. Even if that weren't the case, there was no way I could show that spear in front of a Lord who was, at least in name, an enemy.

As if in response to our attack, the thorns multiplied.

Would Svin and I alone be able to hold them back? Overcome by a sudden nervousness, I swallowed.

When suddenly, my body was wrapped in silver.

"-huh?"

"I really didn't want to have to debut it in a place like this," her voice was legitimately upset.

My arms and legs glowed with silver. Wrapping about my entire body - Volumen Hydrargyrum had transformed itself into a beautiful suit of armor.

"Allow me to lend you my dress. Steel yourself," Reines said with a smile.





Enduring the pain in her eyes, Reines focused on operating Volumen Hydrargyrum.

It took careful effort to align the Mystic Code's movement with Gray's, in a way that would disrupt neither her movements nor the Mystic Code itself.

From the beginning, Reines' magical energy was far and away inferior to her predecessor's - the previous Lord El-Melloi, Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald. She just didn't have the reserves to throw Volumen Hydrargyrum around on a whim like he could.

However, Lord El-Melloi II had discerned a different talent in her.

Precision control.

Her Mystic Eyes that reacted to excess magical energy were an expression of that.

As such, the incredibly difficult task of "layering magecraft on top of another's magecraft" was an ability she grasped at the age of eleven. Her ability to add a human personality to Trimmau, or her Projection of the Princess of Gold from a few hours earlier were both applications of that ability. When she first succeeded in that, her brother had made an expression so mixed with joy and misery that she remembered it clearly even now.

(...geez, how sad can you be?)

It was almost like he raised students of his own just to reinforce his own mediocrity.

Watching that man who couldn't stop raising those students, nor could he remove himself from a life entwined with magecraft, was one of Reines' greatest pleasures.

That was something she wanted to enjoy with all her heart.

For that reason,

(...it's all up to you.)

Thinking that, she focused on Gray's back.



Svin Glascheit kept fighting, taking the role of covering Gray's blindspot.

Truth be told, it was a situation that made him overflow with joy.

Having the chance to protect her was enough to make him want to break out in dance. The pleasure ran up his back in a shiver, and his brain was flooded with the sensation of pure delight.

It had been three months since he had fallen for her.

Was that really love? Even Svin himself didn't know.

The Bestial Magecraft was a school of magecraft that was practiced widely across the world, but as if in inverse proportion to its geographical distribution, the number of actual practitioners was surprisingly small. As a form of magecraft that appropriated the nature of beasts, it inevitably led to the complete loss of humanity in many. For that reason, families that were able to continue a stable bloodline while practicing it were rare.

The Glascheit family was one of those rare exceptions, but that wasn't because they had conquered that weakness.

Within their line, even if the heir were to be lost to madness, the family's Magic Crest was nevertheless pressed upon them.

At times, Svin felt a sense of animosity towards that crystallized Mystery, that forced inheritance. As an example of phenomenal success within their family, he was sent off to the Clock Tower, and since their family had no strong connections to any of the Clock Tower factions, he was taken in by the El-Melloi classroom.

Lord El-Melloi II saw through to his true potential, and through his help Svin was able to reclaim a number of lost arts from his family's history in Bestial Magecraft...but, he was never able to overcome that feeling of alienation.

Not a magus, neither a human, not even a beast.

He felt just like a drain, a gutter that could never be filled.

Until he caught Gray's scent for the first time. For the first time, that feeling was drowned out by something else.

(...probably.)

Probably, it was because like him, she wasn't used to dealing with people.

Uncomfortable among the living, too weak to embrace death, and deathly afraid of ghosts.

Maybe, all he wanted was to be with her, to lick their wounds together.

That's why he thought, maybe that emotion wasn't love at all. A hunch he just couldn't ignore.

(Ahhhh...!)

Embracing that impulse, Svin howled.

As he did, his body split.

The thorned monstrosity shook as if bewildered, causing the sudden group of Svins to smile.

"This is what a Phantasmal Body can do."

In short, he split his magical energy down the middle to make copies of himself.

He hadn't used the technique against Touko because he was sure she could see through to the original, and in short order neutralize the spell. Against this tentacled monster though, there was no fear of that.

All at once, the six Svin charged.



El-Melloi II quietly watched Svin and Gray's actions.

It was an incredible sight to behold.

Despite the avalanche of thorned tentacles contesting them, the two managed to not only repel, but also drive back the monster. Thanks to their efforts, he was able to find what he was looking for. And while it moved slowly, Flat was also making progress on his analysis of that space.

However, in that gap, a single thorn broke through. Unseen by any of his students, the limb struck straight for the Lord's brow.

At that moment, an Automata shaped like a spider dropped down from the ceiling. Throwing itself in front of the Lord, the tentacle punched through its shell with ease. But as expected of such a machine, it still had no problem twisting and wrenching the tentacle apart.

"One of the Automata my idiot student gave to Lord Byron, huh?" Inorai muttered.

It was the same Automata that had accosted Gray and Reines earlier.

"Thank you," El-Melloi II said, turning to the Princess of Silver.

Once she had decided to cover for Maio, she had probably used it as a method of buying time. It wouldn't be strange, after all, for her to be taught the method of utilizing the Automata from Lord Byron.

"At the end, I was prepared to die along with my father," the Princess muttered.

Rejina was now looking after Maio's injuries silently. The two of them likely felt the same way, though. It was then no wonder they were so calm despite El-Melloi II's indictment of their activities.

"...but, why...why are you...?" Her beautiful voice wavered.

Why did you choose to save him? Her voice shook as if she wanted to ask.

There was no reason at all for you to help us, after all.

"It wasn't me," he answered. Turning his back on the wide-eyed Princess of Silver, he continued. "However, my student decided to put her life on the line. Why would I not help?"

So saying, Lord El-Melloi II began to stroke the thing he had found just earlier.

**~Part 6~**

With Volumen Hydrargyrum wrapped around my body, my movements were close to double the speed that they had before.

In a manner of speaking, it was like a magically enhanced exoskeleton. Though I never saw it personally, perhaps it was the same logic behind the 'soft stone' armor of Heine Istari, who we met in Adra.

Twice, three times, I repeated my attack.

Distract the thorned monster, just until Flat could successfully interfere with the spell manifesting it.

Svin seemed to be working along the same lines. Though he should have been injured from his battle with Touko earlier, without so much as a hint of being hurt, he tore the tentacles apart one after another.

I thought as my blade swung.

I had already met all kinds of people.

The number of people I had made contact with since I came to London was already many tens of times greater than when I was in my old home.

Both the incident here, and the incident at the Castle Adra had created that kind of ripple in my life.

As a result of that contact, I sometimes compromised, and sometimes stood firm. That was a part of me now. A past that was hard to deny. A history I could only accept.

The thorned tentacles took on a new shape. Tangling together into a complicated form, it seemed somehow to resemble a person.

Like a knight, holding a thorned blade. It appeared the monster within the 'box' had decided this was the most effective way to fight us. Though perhaps thinking of it as

'thinking' was already a mistake. After all, it was a foreign being, beyond the understanding of humans, relying on otherworldly instincts.

Ignoring the change, I charged in again.

With a shout, I drove the blade of my scythe into the creature. This time, however, I failed to cut through the denser collection of thorns.

With a gurgle, the creature's body began to rotate.

(-w-what?!)

Reacting entirely on instinct, I caught the diagonal slash with my own weapon.

It moved the same way I did.

After only a few minutes of fighting, it had perfectly replicated my style of fighting.

But the thorned monster wasn't restricted to a single body, it seemed.

Wrapping around each other again, the thorned tentacles attempted to create another familiar.

The thorned blade swung again, taking strands of my hair with it.

Had it not been for Volumen Hydrargyrum acting as my armor, it likely would have taken my carotid artery as well.

"-Gray?!"

Flat called out to me as I rolled across the floor. At the same time, I whispered to Add.

"Add, release the first stage limiter."

"Hahahahaha! Going with that, huh?! What a rare choice!" As magical energy surged into him once more, Add gave his characteristic piercing laugh.

Add was a Mystic Code whose purpose was to seal Rhongomyniad.

By using the magical energy sealed within it, though only in part, the scythe could replicate the abilities of that Noble Phantasm.

However, it's shape was not restricted to that of a scythe.

For a split second, Add returned to the shape of a box, spinning its face like a rubix cube, before deploying once more to cover the right side of my body.

A Great Shield.

All I had to do was survive the creature's attacks, to ward off that thorned blade.

Each time the blade struck, the shield shook painfully.

The scythe form of the Mystic Code ranked second in attack power among the forms available to it. In contrast, the shield now deployed wasn't restricted to just pure defensive power, but held another secret. Though it took some time, in order to buy that time, it took the form of a shield.

Once the blade struck for the sixth time, a wooshing noise accompanied a burst of countless flames erupting from the face of the shield.

"-Reverse!"

Together with my voice, magical energy burst forth from the flames. Though it was of course nothing compared to Rhongomyniad, it was nevertheless a burst of concentrated, high density magical energy. For some types of creatures, like the thorned monster in front of me, it carried a powerful offensive force.

Blasted apart, the complicated network of thorned tentacles fell to pieces, losing its shape.

"Analysis complete! I'm ready any time, Professor!" Flat declared with a daring smile.

Holding a cigar in his fingers, my master plainly replied.

"Go for it." He then turned to face backwards. "Atram Galiasta. There will likely be quite a reaction, so I'm going to have to ask you for defense."

"Heh, me? I'm not sure I'm quite the person you should be relying on here."

"I told you I'd charge a fee for spectating. After showing you all this, I'm not willing to take complaints."

"...I see. I thought so before, but you're not so bad at negotiating after all."

With a jerk of his chin, Atram's subordinates jumped into action.

As if impressed with his leadership, even Inorai gave a faint exclamation of surprise at the cooperative magecraft they used.

As they did so, Flat hummed his own incantation.

"Intervention Start (*Game Select*)"

I had heard in class earlier that depending on the situation, whether he was reactively altering or proactively attacking another's magecraft, the incantation Flat used was different.

"Tantata, Tantata, Tantatatan ♪"

As he continued singing something, his fingers moved as if striking a rhythm into a piano.

As he did so, I could feel magical energy begin creeping across the floor. This space was now completely under the control of the genius magus Flat. With his expanded consciousness, it was like we were all sucked into the palm of his hand.

The result of that soon became clear.

The remaining tentacles slowed in their movements, and were soon sucked back into the 'box' they came from.

-But.

For a brief moment, I saw it.

From the depths of that darkness within the box, in place of the tentacles, those two eyes were now approaching.

It's jaws opened wide, large enough to swallow me whole, dripping with viscous drool.

"It's no good!" I heard Svin say, as he swallowed nervously. "We did, too well."

That's right. Even though I didn't release the Noble Phantasm, we still were strong enough to attract the interest of the contents of that 'box.'

Against that, the only hope we had was Rhongomyniad.

But at this point, I had neither the time nor the magical energy to activate it.

The only thing I could do now was-

"First Stage Limited Form - Scythe"

The shield reassembled itself into a scythe. Launching myself between the retreating tentacles, I swung hard at a point-blank range.

"Gray?!"

With a shout, I smashed it with all my might.

The enormous amount of magical energy there exploded.

As the tremendous magical energy protecting the 'box' came into contact with that of Add, it exploded outwards.

In the face of that wave of pressure, even Volumen Hydrargyrum was thrown off of me.

"Hey! Gray! I know it's me we're talking about, but this is still too much!"

Though I felt somewhat sorry, I ignored Add's voice.

Well over the safe amount of magical energy I could absorb, the overflow tore through my nerves and Magic Circuits. That pain flooded my brain, as if I was being torn apart from the inside. It was like red hot spikes were driven all throughout my body, spinning through it. Turning into a sack of meat that remembered only pain, it felt like my consciousness had died a hundred years ago.

But the circulation of magical energy didn't stop.

Just as it had been instructed from the beginning, it automatically smashed its way into the 'box.'

"...ah....a...."

Groans, turn to power.

Pain, turn to strength.

Though my consciousness should have long since been wiped out, it still whispered.

It hurts.

But even then, I felt a suffering far greater than that pain up until now.

I was always rejecting the world - no, that was wrong. My body was the one rejecting this world. I knew that. I knew, but there was nothing I could do about it. No amount of screaming would make that better. So all I could do was kill my voice, and curl up in the corner of my room, right?

But even so.

Even so, now...

I was being watched.

I was being protected.

Even now, I could feel the eyes on my back.

With just that, I could take one more step forward.

"...g....o.....ba....ck.....!!"

But, feelings couldn't be turned into magical energy.

The pressure from within accelerated in its growth.

The two small lights were joined by many more.

From inside the darkness, a tremendous howl that overwhelmed both rage and hunger filled my ears. Was there more than one of these beasts? Or was this the form of a single monster?

Just as that despair flooded my chest, just as it drowned my heart in black,

"-That's enough."

A calm voice called out.

I wasn't able to turn around. But with my enhanced senses, I could tell my master had placed a large object on the ground beside him.

(-that was, Touko Aozaki's...!)

The bag, from when I first felt the presence of this monster.

It appeared my master had found the bag while we had been fighting. Probably, when Touko had died, the spell concealing it had broken.

"I took the liberty of giving this bag a quick inspection," he said, stroking the surface of it. "In short, the bag is a Mystic Code that is only capable of keeping a connection open between 'there' and 'here' while magical energy is running through it. If the magus supplying it were to become unable to provide that energy, it would close all on its own. As such, it was the perfect fit for a rampaging monster like you. It certainly seems like a thing she would think of."

With equal parts admiration and exasperation, he shrugged.

"So if the magical energy supply was to come from within that 'box,' what would happen? It would create a möbius strip effect, of course, but the result? Will another copy of you appear? Or will you be torn apart by the paradox? What an interesting question. Please, by all means, let me see."

With what must have been a Strengthened hand, he threw the bag.

As the bag flew in an arc, I saw a cigar stuck to it. With its faint magical energy, I realized that it was a simple type of Mystic Code for the first time.

The thorned tentacles moved in a blind rush to stop it.

Whether it had understood my master's words, or was just acting on instinct, I couldn't tell.

With a spin of my scythe, those tentacles were each cut down.

Even so, before the crowd of appendages, I shouted.

"Add!"

"Ihihihihi! It's time for that, right! I love it!"

Four times, Add laughed as he transformed.

The form revealed of the Mystery within that Noble Phantasm was this time - a large hammer.

In one smooth motion, I spun my whole body. Releasing magical energy from the back of the hammer for an instant like a jet, it accelerated in a display of its full power.

For a Heroic Spirit, it was equivalent to a D Rank, Limited Form - Battering Ram.

"-aaaaaaAAHHHH!"

With all my strength, I smashed that bag.

Accelerated by the impact with the hammer, the bag fired off like a shooting star through the tentacles that were now unable to even slow its movement, into the depths of that 'box' of darkness.

Perhaps within that abyss there was in fact a sense of distance. Or maybe it was just time.

"Well then," my master flipped his palm at it.

"Eat yourself, you fucking nameless monster."

With a sharp, clean sound, he snapped his fingers.

The bag opened.

I don't know what happened next.

Something blew past, something even my heightened senses couldn't quite catch.

Was it a scream? In contrast to the spewing forth of thorned tentacles from before, the space that had become void began to consume all matter.

All I felt was that devouring presence.

The chandelier, the sofa, the spiral stairs, all were sucked in.

Everything. Bottomless. Greedily. Hungrily. Arrogantly. Lasciviously. Vividly. Cruelly.

As if all was but a dream. As if once consumed by that maw of hellfire, it would be the same as if the material world had never even existed at all.

-At that point, my consciousness snapped off.

◆ 終章 ◆  
-Epilogue-



The name "Clock Tower" has two meanings.

One is, of course, the headquarters of the world of magecraft, the enormous organization.

The second meaning was the school in London - consisting of the Faculty of Fundamentals (*Mystile*), five Major Classrooms and seventy or so Minor Classrooms, it was the highest institute of learning in the world of magi.

To those on the outside, the mass of students just seemed to be attending an old university. And of course, utilizing both mystical and psychological barriers, it was precisely constructed and strictly monitored so that passers-by wouldn't carelessly walk in.

Once you entered the school for real, everything changed.

According to my master, "while the school has its own rules, the laws of Human Society no longer apply." So while it at first appeared to simply be an illustrious university, with just a small change in direction, rampaging mystical beasts and unchecked Elemental Magecraft would become everyday sights. Even now, in a great labyrinth beneath the ground, one could find the ruins of all sorts of Mysteries, or the remains of any number of phantasmal creatures. Carelessly walk into that, and even a high-ranking magus had no guarantees of a safe return. So I was warned when I first came to London.

In addition to the main school that was the Clock Tower, the remaining eleven Faculties had their own independent college towns scattered throughout the London suburbs, though that was as much due to the geopolitical situation of the Magic Association.

Now, my master was sitting in his private room within the Clock Tower.

Compared to the city of the Faculty of Modern Magecraft (*Norwich*)- compared to the accommodations on Slur Street, this room was much better equipped, and was as spacious as a hotel suite.. The official looking desk and single sofa gave the air of well storied pieces of furniture, antiques in their own right. The gentle autumn sunlight pouring through the unconventional window over the delicate granite fireplace strengthened that image.

In the end though, that was all insufficient for the guest now sitting before my master.

"-So, how did it go?"

The question came from lips as beautiful as flower petals.

Her eyes stared straight at my master, like jewels of amber. The ringlets of her blonde hair were tied up in a blue ribbon, giving her the impression of a work of art made by the hand of heaven itself.

While her raw beauty may have fallen behind that of the Princesses of Gold and Silver, the gold-like pride she exuded from her entire body more than made up for the gap. The fact that beauty was not dependent on form, but on the way one lived, was vibrantly expressed by that girl as if it was a matter of course.

No matter how large the Clock Tower may have been, it would be a challenge to find another girl like her.

Luvigelita Edelfelt.

Having become rather involved during the events that transpired at the Castle Adra, she had now come to pay him a visit.

They had, after all, agreed that he would tutor her, so it was only natural she would visit, was her excuse. He said he would think about it and definitely didn't make any promises, or so was his reply. But just looking at them I could tell which of them would get their way.

"How did it go?' That's it, there's nothing more. That was the end of the story." With a frustrated air, my master sat behind his desk shaking his head.

Cigar smoke rose into the air, wavering around the ceiling as if pushed by a false wind.

Within the Clock Tower, depending on where you were, air conditioning was managed by different magecraft based on wind, or by your more conventional ceiling fans. My master's private room was an example of the latter.

"Well, there's no way that's the case. After all, you haven't told me the most important part. Even if you and Gray passed out, you still returned home alive, did you not?"

"With his lower body devoured, Maio became thoroughly and permanently crippled. Lord Byron returned to his senses, only to immediately begin complaining that we didn't just kill him."

Maybe that was the obvious result.

His entire life had come to an end.

After the pursuit of ultimate beauty for untold generations, their goal had been forever stolen from them.

"Due to the killings and all around fraud at the Assembly, Iselma's holdings were entirely frozen by the Clock Tower. The Princess of Silver, Rejina, and Islo Sebunan are all to be investigated along with Lord Byron, but I doubt much more information will come out. Even Maio's act of murder was written off by the Brishisan family as an individual's act of violence, unrelated to them."

While I cleaned the room, I watched the two of them out of the corner of my eye.

Though my master had attempted to stop me since I was still recovering, I felt better to be doing something. As I was often in charge of cleaning the church of my old home, it was something I was good at. If I had to put it in words, it was something I could do without thinking. And the feeling of wiping that last bit of dust off of the window sill, or getting the polish of the floor done so it shined just right, was work I found pleasant.

Sitting deeply in the sofa, Luvia was enjoying the tea prepared by her Mohican butler behind her.

It appeared she was here to experience the Clock Tower before officially applying as a student.

Though it was entirely unexpected, it appeared she was considering taking up accommodations in the Norwich dormitory. Though I had overheard she was planning on taking the entire top floor of the dormitory for herself, so in the end it still ended up sounding a lot like her and the extravagant lifestyle she must lead.

By the way, Norwich was famous in the Clock Tower for being the Daddy Long Legs clan. The Faculty of Modern Magecraft had taken that as a second name, as since even before my master had become its Lord and Dean, it was the Faculty that doled out the most in student loans and financing. For a similar reason, the name of Norwich had come to be associated with adopting in students around the Clock Tower.

Putting down her porcelain cup, she fiddled with her hair a bit as if thinking before speaking.

"Since the Edelfelts are a member of the Democratic Faction, we've been hearing all sorts of rumors. It is the most disturbing event to have happened these days."

"One of Valueleta's strongest families has just suddenly been extinguished, after all." My master's reply was melancholic as his fountain pen continued moving.

Speaking only of the results, as part of the Aristocratic faction, the El-Melloi family scored quite well thanks to this event. After delivering a crushing blow to the Valueleta family of the Democratic faction, they had returned to the Clock Tower triumphant. Praised roundly by the nobles of the Clock Tower, even a great deal of assistance towards handling the El-Melloi family's debt had come pouring in.

But for someone who was in the middle of that incident, such a result was far from what we had all wished for.

Who on earth would celebrate such an ending?

The sound of his pen scratching on paper highlighted the empty feeling in the room.

"Actually, I heard Miss Touko's body was a puppet, and that it contained some sort of monster," Luvia said, causing my master to look up from his writing.

"She said she has recently been spreading herself out, right? Even when she was under a Sealing Designation, she was able to escape capture numerous times. Apparently the losses had become so severe, they had to put a temporary hold on the Enforcers chasing her."

A story that sounded very appropriate for her.

At the same time, pressing him for that much information was also appropriate for one belonging to the Edelfelt family, "the most beautiful hyenas in the world."

My master gave a deep sigh.

"I wonder if she always operates using a remote-controlled puppet for a body."

"I find that hard to believe. If it was just a puppet, there's no reason the memory-blocking drug would have worked on her. And after spending a month with Iselma, surely she would have been discovered at some point."

"...then, why?" I blurted out by accident.

Slowly, Luvia turned her gaze to me, opening her mouth after a short pause.

"Though it may just be a fake rumor, it's always circled around that she is a puppet user who has lost the Concept of an actual body."

"No...actual body?"

"Yes. If you make a perfect replica, one that perfectly copies the ability of the original in every respect, there's no real distinction between that and the original."

A shiver ran up my spine.

Logically speaking, that seemed correct. If there was a puppet that was a perfect copy of me, maybe there wouldn't be much need for me anymore. But, how do you come to that decision? No matter how much a puppet resembled yourself, you would always see it as someone else, wouldn't you? To let a puppet take over your life, to let a puppet take the glory for your successes...what kind of person would ever find that acceptable?

"...if it was her, then I suppose it's not impossible," my master said.

"Though it's a lifestyle I find hard to imagine," Luvia added. Passing her now empty cup to her butler, he replaced it with a dish carrying a scone. It appeared he was perfectly in sync with his master's pace. If one ignored his height approaching two meters and his garish hairstyle, he'd look to anyone like the perfect manservant.

"Would you like one, Professor?" Luvia said, offering him another scone.

"I'm not in the mood for sweets. Also, don't call me that."

"Oh? Would you prefer I called you Tutor, then? Instructor El-Melloi? Or perhaps you've picked up a liking for the term Great Teacher in Asia?"

"...Professor is fine." With a bitter expression, he set down his fountain pen.

It appeared he had completed whatever he had been writing. Luvia had ignored it, but suddenly I had become curious.

"...master, is that a letter you're writing?"

"Yes, to Caleena's little sister. I couldn't give them precise information, so I thought I should at least return their family charm to them."

"...so, she had another sister."

"It appears there were three of them, of which two were employed by Iselma. Well, I had figured as much."

"As always, sticking your nose in to take care of others," Luvia said, looking at the broken, whorl-engraved stone in her hands.

"It was probably broken into three," my master said. "The Celtic whirl is threefold, after all. Since each of the twins had one of them, I predicted there was likely a third somewhere. Actually, the reason I realized the Princess of Gold at the party was a result of plastic surgery was because of that."

The idea that there were three of them.

The realization that the Princess of Gold was a forgery made by plastic surgery was only a single step from there.

Since the Princess of Gold and Silver were twins - maybe there was one more.

Luvia's eyes closed slightly.

"Twins...seems like a story close to my own, then."

"I heard the Edelfelt family had two heirs each generation, called Scales," my master said, pulling out more stationery.

Normally, a Magic Crest could only be passed down to a single heir. Not that it was impossible to do, but that splitting the crest was pointless. As such, the number of heirs of a typical family was limited to one, so even among rather powerful families it was normal not to teach magecraft to any other children in the family.

But there is no rule without exceptions.

The Edelfelts were one of those, it appeared.

The presence of two heirs in one family, which in any other case would have been abhorred, came instead to be known as Scales.

"Though I can't say I've heard of anyone except you who will take up the position for the next generation."

"My little sister is rather quiet, so she stays at home," she said with a faint smile.

Judging from that smile alone, it appeared the relationship between the two sisters was good.

Raising her fingers, she wrapped them around each other. With her two index fingers touching as if kissing, her hands looked like mirrored images.

"Magecraft developed around the concept of twins is like, for example, uniting with your own reflection. In exchange for being perfect in power while working in concert, they must never forget that they each have a dagger at the other's throat. Once you lose sight of that, the mirror breaks."

Luvia spoke quietly.

Was she speaking of the Princesses of Gold and Silver?

Or was she talking about herself and her sister?

After a pause,

"There's one question I still have, then," Luvia said. "Who on Earth was willing to give Iselma such a sum of money that they could even repel Atram Galiasta in that black-market auction?"

Right.

That was something I had never figured out.

"Though the Clock Tower pursued that first in their cross examination, it appears Lord Byron has no memory of the events surrounding the auction."

"No...memory..." Luvia's eyes went wide.

On top of that, a significant number of magi acquired their funds by illicit means, and kept the true extent of their wealth hidden in various forms. Even if one were to pin down how he had paid for the auction, it would still be difficult even for one well-versed in the world of business to accurately predict his total wealth.

"And I also have one remaining question," my master added. "Was it really a coincidence that the Princess of Gold's spell was completed with the addition of a third person?"

In the case of the Castle of Separation, the Faculty of Law had been behind the scenes, pulling the strings. Though it had been my master who, having seen through the secret of the Castle, worked together with Luvia to defeat it, that all lined up perfectly with the schemes of the Faculty of Law - with the goals of that Hishiri Adashino. I still remember the bitter, resentful expression my master showed when he discovered he had been dancing to her tune all along.

But, this time?

Was it just a coincidence that Lord Byron acquired the services of a Grand to make up for the loss of the Princess of Gold?

And was it a coincidence that Caleena reached an even higher level than the Princess of Gold after the procedure?

Both of them fell silent.

From somewhere far, far away, I thought I heard the faint sound of laughter.



At that moment, the door to my master's private room burst open.

"Professor! Is it true that Luvia came here?!"

Of course, the blonde-haired blue-eyed boy poking his head into the room was none other than Flat.

"You-!" With the way Luvia immediately rose to her feet, it appeared as if this wasn't the first time they had met.

As the Mohican butler nonchalantly caught the precariously jostled dish, the boy clapped his hands together.

"But I heard you were coming for a viewing of the Clock Tower, so of course I have to come say hello! And you've decided to apply for the El-Melloi classroom, right? In that case I'm your upperclassman, and strong greetings are the basis of humanity!"

"First of all, I have no intention of allowing you to refer to me so flippantly!"

Despite Luvia's scathing tone, Flat's smile remained unflinching, causing her to flush red.

Perhaps Flat was good at seeing through his partners in conversation...though for me, who was so thoroughly inept in these kinds of social settings, I had no way of really telling. Ah, even Flat's intervention into the Gandr shot she just fired was probably just a link in the chain called communication.

"Flat! What is wrong with you?! Why can't you greet our new junior properly?!" This time, the one yelling was Svin.

Perfectly groomed, Svin's face showed no signs of the injuries he had sustained. While he had been hurt to the same degree I had been in the incident prior, perhaps thanks to his Bestial Magecraft, it took him only three days of the week that had passed since then to reach a full recovery.

My master's brow furrowed.

"...you guys..."

"No, seriously I was just here thinking about our new classmate- ah, Gray! Ahhhh, a pink aroma today! With just a little bit of that melancholic, square blue flavor..."

As Svin descended into a sniffing, ecstatic trance, I instinctively stepped behind my master.

The strong scent of cigar smoke coming off of his shoulders made me feel a moment of dizziness.

"I told you to stay away from Gray, didn't I?"

"...r-right..."

At my master's reprimand, Svin's head sank. The way his curly hair moved back and forth made it look like the ears of a dog.

"Call!"

"Begin Interference (*Play Ball*)! Ahaha Luvia, there's no need to get so excited!"

As Flat mixed incantations into his speech, the conflict between him and Luvia continued to escalate.

Being the private room of a Lord, it had a reasonably solid mystical security, and Flat was already specialized in receiving enemy magecraft without harm, so nothing had

been destroyed yet, but...if someone with the same nature as Luvia became her opponent, I wouldn't be surprised to see a classroom or a lecture hall or two destroyed.

In the middle of that escalating conflict,

"...my my, how noisy things are today."

Stepping calmly through the room's door, Reines entered with an amused turn to her lips.

My master, on the other hand, returned her look with much less pleasure.

"Then I would be grateful if you said something to them as well."

"If I did that, then everyone would lose respect for you. As your humble sister, I am of course obliged to take pains to protect your dignity in the workplace."

"All you care about is seeing me suffer, don't you?"

"Hey, revealing such a truth so quickly isn't very tasteful now is it?" Reines smiled, completely unperturbed by admitting to the accusation.

Watching the battling Luvia and Flat - and Svin, who had somehow got himself tangled into the mess as well - out of the corner of her eye, Reines cut across the room with Trimmau to stand at her brother's side.

"...you were hoping for a better solution, weren't you?"

"...an odd thing to bring up now," he replied, turning away.

The Twin Towers incident.

The obvious case of Maio aside, the fact of the matter was the Princess of Silver and her maid had also tried to embroil us in their mess. Even if it was to escape the control of Lord Byron, there was no arguing that they had tried to abuse the El-Melloi name and Reines herself to do so.

But, beyond that.

There was no way my master would be satisfied with this situation, where everyone loses.

The acceptance of the logic of a magus (*monster*) did not necessarily mean discarding the logic of a human. Because my master hoped to cling to both of them, his suffering was more than double that of other magi.

Reines, who understood that better than anyone, had said that.

I'll just choose to ignore that saying so had made her smile.

"I said don't call me Le Chien!"

"If you are supposed to be my upperclassmen, could you two at least act like it?!"

"Ahaha, no way! You won't find any upperclassmen as good as Le Chien and I! So if you have any questions about the Clock Tower, please feel free to ask- oh, I forgot! I needed to tell Atram how to improve his Weather Manipulation!"

No matter how big my master's private room was, it had begun to shake with all the commotion going on.

It was like the melancholy air left by the aftermath of the incident had never existed - like we were in the midst of a warm dream.

"Ihihihihi! What, you're not crying, are you?!"

"...shut up."

Snapping my right hand in a way no one else would hear it, I stepped forward.

After an impressed hum from Reines, my master tilted his head to the side slightly.

"Gray?"

"As your apprentice, I'll scold them a little."

So saying, while still just acting on a whim, I stepped into the middle of the three of them.



-Let us clear up one last thing that was left to be discussed.

In truth, the way things developed after that incident was thus.

When we had returned to consciousness, the Tower of the Moon was halfway destroyed.

Rather than appearing as if the monster in the "box" had devoured it, it looked more like the tower had just decided to sit down. The fact that we had survived the process seemed a little hard to believe.

"...Lord Valueleta took Lord Byron, the Princess, and the others out already."

As I looked up at the night sky through the collapsed walls of the tower, Reines' words didn't quite reach me.

No doubt, Lord Valueleta had collected up the members of her faction in order to deal with the results of this incident, she explained. Doing at least that much was the bare minimum to survive in the factional warfare of the Clock Tower.

"Rejina and the Princess of Silver wanted to thank you. For saving Maio, apparently."

"I...see."

Of course, the fact I was able to save someone made me happy.

But even so, there still remained a vaguely empty feeling. Seeing that level of \_\_\_\_\_ disappear, the efforts of untold generations all erased, created a sense of loss in my chest that came close to physical pain. Though I only witnessed it for a moment, I

nevertheless felt like they should have had a brighter future, that they should have achieved a more brilliant glory.

"...dammit. This is nothing but a complete loss." From a bit farther away, Atram was grinding his teeth in open frustration.

At the same time, my master called out in a calm voice.

"I'm glad to see you're safe."

"Of course I'm safe! Though thanks to the backlash from that defense, many of my elites have been knocked out."

Even so, the fact that he himself was completely unharmed spoke volumes of his power as a magus.

"...heh. Serves you right," Reines whispered.

The fact she couldn't quite hide the smile twisting her face was ample proof that she was enjoying this from the bottom of her heart. Though we had been pushed to the utmost limits of our physical bodies as well, it seemed our composure was suffering more than our bodies were.

"-well, whatever. This trifling contest is now over. The true battle is yet to come," Atram said, turning around.

Giving my master a heavy look, he continued.

"As you said, the Linden leaf I sought is no more. As your conjecture was correct, it's my loss. But it's not like I'm completely incapable of finding another relic. I have another plan already lined up. The previous Lord El-Melloi may have treated this Holy Grail War as no more than a game, but I-"

"Allow me to give you one warning, sir," my master said, cutting him off.

Looking directly at Atram, he spoke shortly.

"Don't take the Holy Grail War lightly."

How heavy were those words with feeling? Atram, who had been looking down at my master since the beginning, for a single moment went stiff.

As if forcing his stopped heart to start moving again, he took a deep breath.

"Well well, it seems I've struck a nerve. Hahaha, perhaps rather than your predecessor, it was you who was blessed throughout that Holy Grail War? Well, I won't deny the cleverness you showed in dealing with that box, but there is no way you can join the Fifth Holy Grail War. The Association decided on their spots long ago."

Atram's voice held a mockery that was hard to miss.

"You...!"

"It's okay, Gray."

As I stepped forward, my master reached out to stop me.

"It's as he said. As a representative of the Clock Tower, there is no chance for me to join."

"Ha. It seems you know your position well."

"However, that only means 'as a representative of the Clock Tower.' There is no reason for you to worry. There is nothing more for you to gain here. I suggest you return home and begin your preparations as soon as possible."

"I don't need to hear that from you. I'll show you, and I'll show all the other magi. A battle is decided long before it starts."

With an exaggerated flourish, Atram straightened his suit before turning his back on them.

"...ah, that's fine," he muttered as he took his leave. "...if I can't get the dragon slayer, I'll just take the dragon user. Though I'm not thrilled with the class choice..."



Now, that dark-skinned magus must have been preparing for his next battle.

Rejina and the Princess of Silver were also likely locked in a battle of sorts.

As time marches onwards, so do our lives. No matter what incident, it never truly ended. Whether explicitly or not, the repercussions of those events created an ever expanding chain reaction. After throwing a stone into a pool of water, even once the ripples became invisible, that energy was nevertheless spreading throughout the water.

That was more than obvious.

I didn't know how this incident would affect the various people involved in it. Maybe people like Luvia and my master could see a little further ahead, but even they could hardly view the whole picture.

What a complex tapestry time weaves.

While still entranced by that thought, I finished a number of classes and returned to my master's private room.

On my way, I suddenly remembered I had forgotten my tools for shoe polishing. Though there were some left both here in the Clock Tower and at our place on Slur street, they occasionally needed replacing.

Luckily, like our place on Slur Street, the room here was divided into a study and a greeting room, and because I had a duplicate key for the latter, I could come and go as I pleased.

(...did I go too far?)

After chastising the three of them earlier, I was still feeling angry at myself.

Maybe they weren't that big of a problem. Maybe I had just made them hate me for no reason.

Such a storm of regrets raged in my head.

At least as far as Flat and Svin were concerned, I knew in my head that they wouldn't hold it against me, but that understanding hadn't reached my heart yet.

And so before I fell into dark thoughts, I needed to continue with my task.

"Umm...."

Opening the shoebox in the room, I found what I was looking for.

While there was still plenty of cream and remover, the brush I was using was one that Mr. Krishna from the dorms was just about to throw away, so I would need to get a new one soon. I also wanted to get a new cloth. Though the quality of the tools didn't impact the end result all that much when it came to polishing shoes, it certainly affected how I felt about it.

"...maybe I should get a part time job."

I remembered the dormitory's request for workers.

Though my master of course provided me with enough for my usual expenses, I felt like using a bit of my own money to get those new supplies wasn't uncalled for. Not that I knew how much he actually cared about me polishing his shoes.

Just as I put them back in the paper bag, I heard a sound from inside the room.

(...Master?)

Normally, he should have moved on to the Faculty of Modern Magecraft's own town at this time of day, but it seemed like today he was still here.

I opened the door to his room just a fraction.

If I were to make excuses, it wasn't that I was trying to speak.

Before I could call out to him, I saw him utter a short incantation as he turned the key on a cupboard in the back of the room. It seemed it was a cupboard with both a physical and magical lock on it.

From inside the cupboard, he took out an oaken case, opening it and took out the contents.

Though I couldn't see clearly from this distance, it appeared to be a kind of antique red cloth.

(Is that...?)

A certain word jumped to the front of my mind.

Relic. The thing my master had gambled with Atram.

Holding that scrap of red cloth carefully in his hands, my master looked down on it with a terribly complicated expression.

He didn't squeeze it. It was as if he was hesitating to do anything that might wrinkle it even slightly. Though all I saw were the faint trembling in his brow and lips, it was like viewing a kaleidoscope of emotion.

Anger.

Grief.

Pain.

Happiness.

Sadness.

Affection.

"...I feel like you'd just laugh and call me a novice again, wouldn't you?"

How long did he stare at that cloth before those words leaked out?

Instinctively, I spun around, leaning up against the wall. Pushing my hands onto my mouth, I desperately tried to suppress my voice. This time, right now, I definitely couldn't interrupt. That's how I felt. Slowly I slid down the wall, falling to sit down on the floor, still holding my hands over my mouth.

Just, my heartbeat was too loud.

I felt like I had just seen something very important. As if I had just carelessly snuck a look at someone else's treasure. No, not just a treasure - more like I saw his heart, the core of his being.

If that was the relic he used during the Fourth Holy Grail War...

If that was the reason he wanted to participate in the Fifth Holy Grail War...

I let out a quiet sigh.

(-I hope they can meet again...)

That one thought pushed painfully through.

Since I had come to London, that was probably the first "wish" I had ever had.

## -Commentary-

Ryohgo Narita

"Hey Ryogo, *Fake* is in a completely parallel world, so just do whatever you like. Oh, Makoto's *El-Melloi II's Case Files* is in exactly the same world as *Stay Night* though."

-So saying, Mr. Kinoko Nasu clearly divided Mr. Makoto Sanda's work and my own.

I thought "Dammit, I played too much with the setting, so he shunted me off into a parallel world!" For Mr. Sanda, it was more like, "hey wait a second, doesn't that look like an awful lot of work?"

...well, we were supposed to be so clearly divided, but both of us wore rather dark expressions. Why is that, I wonder?

After that, as we came to learn about the general setting of *Fate/GO*, I began to rejoice. "So it's okay to go that crazy! Then it's fine I'm in a parallel world! Praise the parallels! I can go as crazy as *Fate/GO* does!"

Mr. Sanda, on the other hand, had things become even more difficult. "Wait, how much of the *FGO* setting can I even use?" There, now we were clearly divided!

With that preamble out of the way, for those who are curious why I was chosen to write the commentary for as awe-inspiring a work as these "*Lord El-Melloi II's Case Files*," I was granted the honor of becoming the author of a parallel work in the *Fate* series, *Fate/Strange Fake*. Though I was asked to write the commentary for this volume, the *Case Files* series itself serves as a supplemental commentary to my own *Fake* series.

No, not just that. Makoto Sanda's works are like a lecture, explaining the viewpoint of the truth of a single person in real time, shedding light on the overarching *Fate* world as a whole.

If we liken the presence of the Clock Tower in *Fate* to Schrodinger's box, then the story of *Case Files* is a spell to throw that box wide open and bring the dead cat inside back to an energetic life.

The world of Fate, created by Mr. Kinoko Nasu, Mr. Takeuchi, and the others of the original Type Moon, is now being expanded by the hands of many. Or maybe it's better to say, certain parts of it are having depth added to them. In that chaotic world, Mr. Sanda has used the life of a magus known as El-Melloi II to set up clear guideposts for the rest of us.

At first, I thought the character "Flat Escardos" that I wrote would only be suitable for the world of Strange Fake. But then Mr. Sanda came, describing Flat's combat with magecraft before it had even been described in Fake (and up against one of the setting's greatest magi, no less!). Thanks to him, Flat was led into the El-Melloi Classroom across the entire Fate world.

And while I am deeply grateful for that, I am somewhat fearful of the tremendous latent potential within the character of El-Melloi II that Mr. Sanda has beautifully crafted.

El-Melloi II is a character who has spread his roots and branches deep into every corner of the world of Fate, someone who could really be called a World Tree. But without realizing any of that, I had an attitude like he was just another tree, one that could be burned down like any other. All the while in my mind I just hoped he would reach that sea at the end of the world, a sea that doesn't even begin to reach the edges of that great World Tree.

As I said at the beginning, though it seemed like a terribly unpleasant task, because Mr. Sanda was able to approach the Clock Tower seriously from every angle, maybe he could tell that story from the position of El-Melloi II.

While the Fate series is enormous in and of itself, it is also a many-faced beast. If you think of it like a phantasmal beast that is hard to touch, it is also like the cat sitting on the fence that is easily within reach. Of course, if you carelessly try to touch it, you'll get bitten. In the same way, if you just do whatever you want with it, everyone around you will just shout "That's not how that is supposed to work!"

If my "Strange Fake" is the kind of animal that says "Today is Halloween! Let's go all out YEAH!" and wear all sorts of outlandish costumes, then "Lord El-Melloi II's Case Files" is like a ceremonial dress, perfectly tailored by a master seamstress to match the wearer's growth.

Yes...because in some parts of the unconventional world laid out by Mr. Kinoko Nasu there exist people like Mr. Sanda, the Rhongomyniads that pierce through everything and tie it all down, people like me can go crazy.

When Mr. Kinoko Nasu said "Caster's Master from the Fifth Holy Grail War is this new character now to fit in with the anime, thanks in advance!" Mr. Sanda's response had been "Wasn't Caster's Master supposed to be a middle aged man...?" with a groan. To which Mr. Nasu strongly replied, "Hahaha! The world marches ever onward!" Seeing that discussion, I couldn't help but see a different pair of faces overlap their own.

The wild, overpowering king, and the young Master being dragged along for the ride.

Where will this work, this collaboration between Mr. Kinoko Nasu and Mr. Makoto Sanda head? I hope we can all see this lecture through to the end as fellow readers.

All the while believing that someday, that professor's eyes will take in the Sea at the End of the World (Okeanos).

## -Afterword-

Makoto Sanda

Thus, the curtains close on the story of the Twin Towers.

The dream of reaching that \_\_\_\_\_ was as a mirage.

Even as it slipped through their fingers, they never stopped walking forward.

Thank you for waiting. This is the end of the third volume of "Lord El-Melloi II's Case Files."

The main character, Lord El-Melloi II, is a rare character. Though I am only borrowing him for a short time, I feel like I've become quite accustomed to writing about him. As if by including just a single line, I could return to the state of writing "Case Files." His gloomy, distorted, inferiority complex driven character, that nevertheless occasionally shows that shining, rear-facing assertiveness.

That is all no doubt in the palm of my hand.

And probably, in the hearts of most of us.

That's why this old, moldy story about magecraft and Mystery can resonate with anyone. That's what I thought.



I'm writing this in the middle of working on the novel, but even in real life history there is a strong connection between beauty and magic.

Maybe I should say between beauty, mathematics, and magic. Especially in the West, beauty itself was converted into numbers and ratios, and thus by using the correct numbers and ratios, an influence as strong as magic could be made.

First on the list are of course the golden ratio and the magic square, and even the majority of the many kinds of magic circles that exist are founded on a utilization of precise, delicate mathematics. This math and magic were then mixed together with the complicated states of the stars as found by astronomy, and this had a tremendous impact on our culture.

So, if the essence of all that was combined and condensed into the form of a person, then?

In short, Iselma's magecraft is something like that. The Princess of Gold and of Silver. The Tower of the Sun and the Moon. They believed that over a long, long period of time, the supremacy of those celestial bodies would come to be reflected little by little in the form of a person. Live like a star, eat like a star, sleep like a star, they did all this to try and acquire that beauty.

And so, following that logic, they achieved a kind of result in the present age...the conclusion of which being the one described in this story. Were there screams just simple delusion, or an inevitable impulse? What do you think?



Though not directly connected to this story, allow me to speak about a few silly stories.

When it was decided to turn this into a series, I was prepared for a number of things. One of those was that I couldn't escape from the Clock Tower. Even if the stage itself didn't necessarily have to be the Clock Tower, if that was what made the story more interesting, then I couldn't hesitate to take a scalpel to one of the most enchanting black boxes in the world of Type Moon.

Fate/Stay Night, released in 2003, is no longer in the same form it was back then either. It became a form of mixed media with its anime adaptation, and now boasts a large number of derivative works. With each of these, Mr. Kinoko Nasu is bit by bit updating that world by his own hand. Since "Lord El-Melloi II's Case Files" takes place at almost the same time chronologically as the original "Fate/Stay Night," I aimed to compensate for those updates.

The reason I introduced Touko Aozaki's teacher Inorai, and the magus introduced through UBW Atram into this story was for that reason. If I've helped to connect the past and present of this ever expanding world together, then I'll be satisfied.

Finally, I'd like to give thanks to Mineji Sakamoto, for bringing each and every character into brilliant life with his designs; Kiyomune Miwa for helping with research into the history of beauty and magecraft and horoscopes; Ryogo Narita for providing precise direction as to Flat's incantations and combat style; and of course all of the people at Type-Moon that Kinoko Nasu helped to start.

I hope to see you again this summer.

November 2015,  
While playing "Fate/Grand Order."