

◆◆ ロード・エルメロイⅡ世の冒険 ◆◆

The adventures of Lord El-Melloi Ⅱ

2

「彷徨海の魔人(上)」 三田 誠

イラスト 坂本みねぢ



ロード・エルメロイⅡ世の冒険

…2…

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三田 誠

イラスト 坂本みねち

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「いいね。そのまま掴んでろよ」

ルオロン

若龍が囁き、アキラをより強く抱き寄せると、ロケットのような勢いで、三人は路地裏の上空へと吹き飛んだ。

◆◆◆ The Adventures of Lord El-Melloi 33 ◆◆◆

The adventures of Lord El-Melloi 33

…2…

“The Demon of the Wandering Sea (Upper)”



The adventures of
Lord El-Melloi 33



…2…

“The Demon of the Wandering Sea (Upper)”

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◆序章◆
-Prologue-



—I could hear a spirited, resounding drumming in the distance.

It was a sound I had never heard before accompanying a landscape I had never seen. Even so, as I watched a flock of birds fly over the sunset-drenched mountains, I was overcome by a sudden feeling of nostalgia for the Welsh countryside.

We were at a Shinto shrine surrounded by dense trees, what the people here called Chinju no Mori.

The shrine grounds were lined with stalls lit by old-looking bare light bulbs. It was a night market, after all. They emitted a hazy, warm light, just like the ones at the food stalls and flea markets near my mentor's apartment.

The stalls were surprisingly diverse. There were stalls for catching goldfish, archery, lottery, okonomiyaki, among many others. The entire place was bustling with life, to the point where it took me a while to take in what I was seeing. It felt strange that so many vendors and visitors came to the top of such a tall mountain. Though their faith was quite different from the one I was used to, I could tell that this country was very devout.

It made me a little sad to think that this country welcomed its gods with such lively atmospheres and brilliant smiles.

Ropes made of straw decorated the eaves and gateway of the shrine. The pieces of paper tied to them fluttered in the wind.

(...It's almost like...)

I suddenly felt as if *the other side* was right there.

The air we breathed and the stones we tread upon belonged without a doubt to the mortal world. Yet, I felt like we were floating, unfettered. The beauty and vibrancy of it all were overwhelming, and that was why I felt sad and somewhat scared.

(...Like I'm going to be sucked in.)

“Would you like one, miss with the hood over there?” Someone called out, jolting me back into reality.

I turned around, startled, to see a man with a headband behind one of the food stalls.

“Oh? Are you a foreigner?”

“Y-yes. I’m sorry.”

“No, no, there’s nothing to apologize for! Your Japanese is pretty good, too.”

“...It really isn’t...”

In fact, I couldn’t speak Japanese at all.

Just like the Chinese characters I saw in Singapore, it all seemed like a jumble of mysterious symbols. Though, many of the signs there were in English, so I wasn’t too concerned.

This time, however, there was a different trick at play. I felt a little guilty for being praised for my cheating, but I had no other way of communicating with them.

I spotted something interesting as my gaze wandered.

“That white thing over there... is it edible?”

The headband-wearing man looked up. “Oh, you don’t know what this is?”

He wiped his wrinkled face with his equally old-looking gloves and laughed. Beside him was a display of what looked like pieces of clouds.

“Candy floss...?”

It resembled British candy floss, but it was much lighter and more delicate than what I was used to. My attention was also drawn to some bags behind them that resembled a game that my mentor occasionally played.

“Of course it’s edible. It’s called *wataame*.”

“It’s sweet, right?”

“Yeah. It melts on your tongue, like... like an angel’s wings.”

I was a little surprised by the peculiar metaphor. Perhaps he thought it would make more sense to me after seeing my face. He might have assumed that my hood and strange combination of clothes was usual for foreigners.

I heard the pounding of drums again. Every time they sounded, it was as if the shrine was transformed into a different realm. I supposed the sound was also a sort of

Bounded Field. Everything here, whether it was the straw ropes or the paper, were all a part of this festival that I could not understand.

Maybe this strange, white candy was a part of it too.

“Can I have three, no, four, please?”

“Of course. That’ll be two hundred yen.”

They were alarmingly cheap, but perhaps that was also part of the fun of a festival.

Taking the coins I handed him, the man plunged a stick into the metal pan beside him. As it spun, thin strands of a white substance clung to it and gradually grew as if by magic.

In no time at all, it took the shape of the others on display.

“Do you need a bag?” Asked the man.

“Oh, um, could you put three of them in bags? You can eat these as is, right?”

“Yep, they’re best that way.”

The man laughed, and then asked a question as if he had just noticed something.

“Are you here to sightsee?”

“Yes, I just arrived two days ago.”

“The festival here’s been going on for three days,” replied the man, his eyes narrowing as if he was thinking back to the past couple of days. “The fireworks at the end are nothing compared to the ones in the capital, but they’re still pretty impressive. If you’re staying around here, you’ve got to see them. It’d be a huge shame to miss out.”

“I’ll make sure to. Thank you.”

I bowed, sensing the sincerity in his words.

With the candy in hand, I strolled through the shrine grounds. Paper lanterns cast a faint red light over the noise and excitement. I took a bite of the one without the bag as I walked.

“...It’s so sweet.”

Just as the vendor had said, it melted on my tongue like a dream I couldn't remember once I woke up.

"Pa-i-na-pu-ru!" Came a voice near the steps we had planned to meet up at.

Then, there was the sound of feet hitting the ground.

A girl raised her hands and turned around proudly.

"Yeah! You've lost again, big brother!"

"You're too good at this!"

The girl was chatting with someone I recognized.

"Oh, um..."

Just like before, the children all seemed to like him.

A red-haired young man sat on the some stone steps, scratching his head with a troubled smile. He reminded me somewhat of a large dog. Another dog-like person I knew from the Clock Tower had a hidden air of sharpness reminiscent of a wolf, but Ergo was soft-hearted to the core like a large, fluffy, indoor dog. That's probably why the children back on the island and in this shrine all loved being with him.

"Ergo!" I called out.

The young man bowed his head to the children. "Sorry. The person I was waiting for is here."

"Awwwww!"

"Goodbye!"

He leaped nobly down the stone steps and landed beside me.

Though he seemed almost twice my height, he absorbed the impact of the jump like he was on a bed of feathers. The children's eyes widened in astonishment, but before they could flock to us again, we quickly retreated beyond the slope.

"What were the kids saying just then?"

"Did the mystic code not translate that? They said 'pineapple'."

“...Oh, I see, it’s pronounced like that.”

Unlike the cotton candy from earlier, I couldn’t understand what they were saying because they didn’t say its full name. I supposed that was one of this trick’s weaknesses.

Several paths branched out ahead of us as we walked up the slope. Each one had a red [Torii](#).

Though we could still hear the faint sound of drums and flutes a distance away from the center of the festival, our surroundings were enveloped in an indescribable solemnity.

“I heard that this shrine enshrines several deities. Like Yasaka shrine in Kyoto, every path here is dedicated to a different one.”

“Did the professor tell you that?”

“No, I heard the children talking about it earlier. I also read the sign.”

I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of jealousy at the thought that he might be a better student than me. Of course, there was no way I was the better student, so I was only ever so slightly jealous.

...Or, perhaps I was trying to act the part of an upperclassman. It was all too childish of me to think this way as someone who was nearly the most senior member of the El-Melloi classroom and used to be the most junior. Maybe the children who wanted to stop him from going felt the same way. The atmosphere about him seemed even to influence something as gloomy as myself.

I turned to him, suddenly noticing something.

“Ergo, have you gotten taller? Your hair’s longer too.”

“Well, it’s been a week since we last met,” the young replied, laughing.

Though what he said was true, I felt like he changed so much in such a short period of time that I hardly recognized him. After losing his memories and possessions, the young man was now establishing a brand new identity as if he was in a hurry.

His short red hair swayed in the air. Gray eyes, pale in color, seemed to sparkle with a certain personality at everything in sight. Perhaps with every moment that filled his heart with excitement, he became more of an adult.

Just as I wanted to take a better look at him, a piece of wrapping paper carried on the wind veered unnaturally right before it hit my face. The transparent hands growing from Ergo's back had brushed it away.

"Is there something on your mind?"

"No, it's nothing."

Just as I was trying to play it off, I caught sight of a tall black shadow that fell from the other side of the road.

I recalled that, in legends, beings that stood at crossroads were either gods or demons. Was that the belief of the cult of Hecate, the origin of witches in Greece? Regardless, the person with flowing black hair darker than the night was not a woman this time.

"Sir."

My mentor was frowning today, though it was more out of confusion than displeasure. I immediately guessed that it was because of his attire. After all, it was the same for me.

"This just doesn't feel right," my mentor said, closing his eyes and touching the sleeve of his kimono.

I couldn't help but smile at his uncomfortable expression.

"I think it suits you."

"You must be joking. With a few exceptions, I haven't worn anything but shirts and suits for the past decade."

"It really does suit you," I said again.

Perhaps realizing that I would not make that sort of joke, my mentor muttered his thanks and adjusted his collar.

"I've only ever seen Ms. Adashino in this sort of national costume."

"Our clothes and hers may look similar, but they're not exactly the same."

"The two of us are wearing *kasuri* kimonos," Ergo added. "If I remember correctly, *kasuri* refers to the technique used to weave these clothes. I think there's a similar technique in Malaysia, so I guess it could have come from continental Asia."

My mentor sank into thought, possibly thinking about the interesting things he had seen on this trip.

Both of them were tall, so the crisp garb suited them. The patterns that emerged from the fabric looked slightly different from every angle, giving them a fantastical feeling. I wondered what Reines would say about them after teasing my mentor if she were here.

I looked down, feeling a bit unsettled.

“...It suits you, too.”

My face immediately flushed at the remark. Thankfully, I was wearing a thin hooded cape over my kimono.



“It’s not actually as bad as I thought,” my mentor continued. “The person who sent us these clothes knew our respective physiques. Compared to Western clothing, these are relatively flexible, practical, and well-suited to the climate.”

“...Right.”

Both my mentor and Ergo were taller than average height in this country.

I wondered about the intention of the person who had sent us these clothes. My mentor and Reines had mentioned that every gift in the Clock Tower conveys some sort of message. Not only can they express the relationship between the giver and the receiver, they can also express subtle differences in status and plans for the future. Even more impressively, they said that the meaning of the same gift could change drastically with a different wax seal.

My mentor’s lips quirked as he saw my expression stiffen.

“I’m not sure if the sender cares about such things, but I’ve heard that traditional Japanese clothing is quite expensive...”

“I-Is that so?”

“Rest assured. Judging from the fabric, these are relatively casual. I don’t think they were handmade by craftsmen.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Ihihihihi! There’s no way someone like you’d ever wear something that fancy!”

Laughter emanated from the hook at my right shoulder.

I wanted to give him a good hard shake, but it would be too much trouble to remove the birdcage... Besides, what Add said was true. I had nothing to say in response.

“Does my kimono also have a name?” I asked, instead.

“Well...” Ergo stammered.

“—It’s a classic yukata, a staple of summer festivals.”

A voice came from the street that my mentor had come from. Though I had noticed someone approaching, I was still startled when I looked up.

“Rin!”

“Whoa, you look great!” Rin exclaimed as she looked me up and down. “Hey, Professor, how come there are no rumors about you two when you have such a cute disciple? Oh, right, she usually keeps her face hidden. That explains it, though a cover-up is pretty Clock Tower-esque.”

“Thanks to a certain someone, the Department of Modern Magecraft has no shortage of shocking stories. No one has time for those rumors.”

“So you don’t deny that she’s cute?”

Rin smiled smugly, my mentor frowned, and I felt my face get hotter and hotter. Japan’s summer was almost as hot as Singapore’s, but I could no longer feel it now.

Naturally, Rin was also dressed in a kimono.

Being from this country, the outfit suited her even more. The red fabric matched well with her hair, and though it was a little embarrassing to admit, I was momentarily entranced by her charming appearance.

It was then that I finally remembered something.

“This is for you all.”

My mentor’s eyes narrowed as he inspected the candy I offered him.

“Is this wataame?”

“Have you eaten it before?”

“No, I just never thought that I would have a chance to taste the food at this country’s festivals... Oh, it’s so sweet.”

It made me a little glad to hear that my mentor shared my opinion.

“It tastes amazing!” Ergo exclaimed, laughing.

My mentor glanced over and pointed at him.

“There’s some sauce by your mouth.”

“Oh, that’s from the takoyaki the children shared with me earlier.”

Blushing, Ergo wiped at it with the back of his hand. It didn’t really work, so I took out a handkerchief and wiped it for him.

“Hmm?”

His nose wrinkled slightly.

“What’s the matter?”

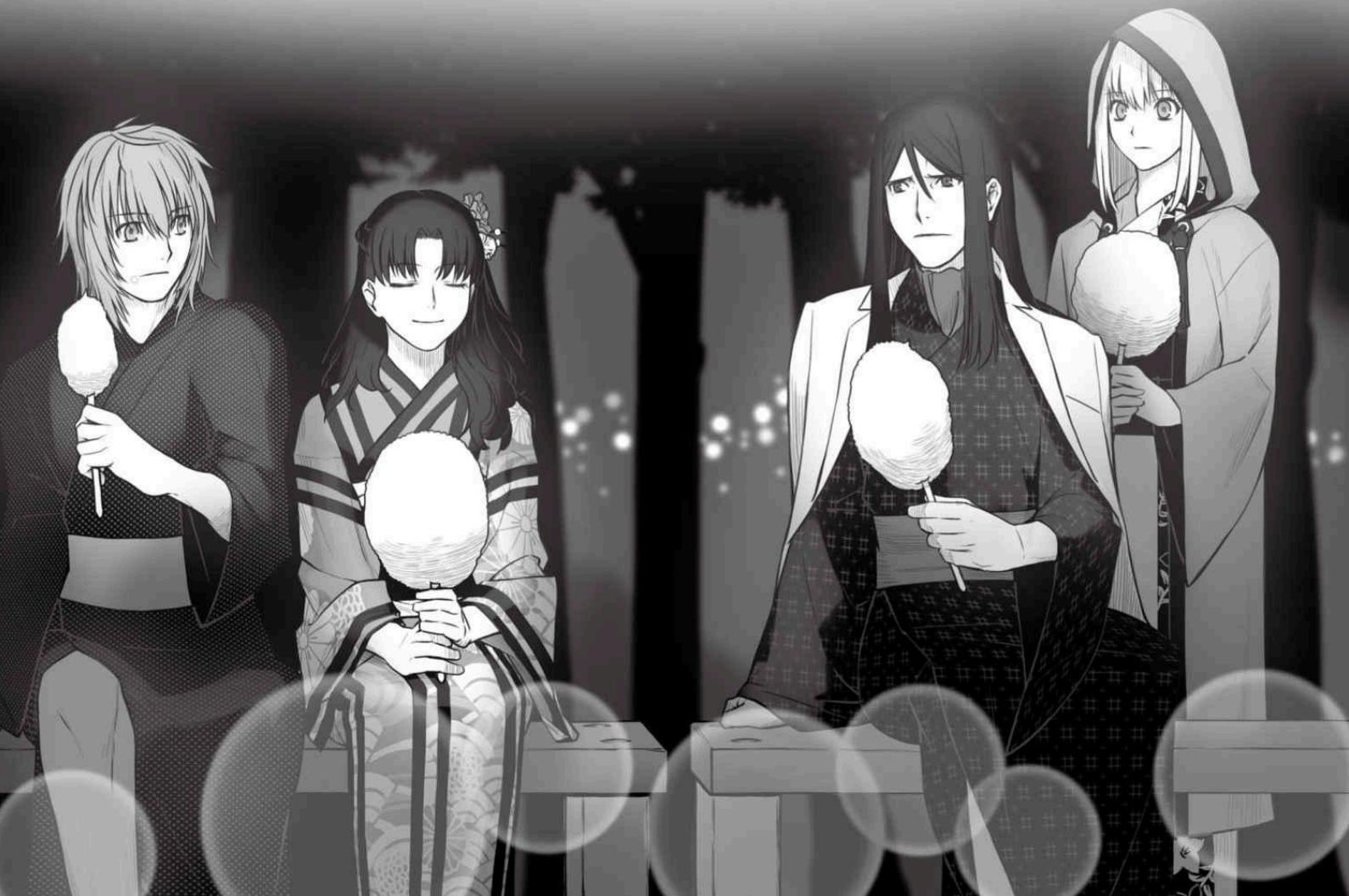
I turned to see a surprised expression on my mentor’s face.

“Well, now that I think about it, I receive similar care from you when I’m half-asleep.”

“It’s much easier because Ergo’s not clutching a game controller,” I responded honestly.

My mentor coughed awkwardly in response.

Rin giggled as she ate the wataame with one hand pressing her obi, which was patterned with pretty flowers. As Ergo looked around, confused, and laughter poured out from Add at my shoulder, my mentor’s expression grew more and more awkward.



(...Why is that, I wonder?)

It had only been a week since we started traveling in this group. What was more, I was doubtlessly terrible at befriending others. And yet, I had the illusion that we had been together for a long time.

Come to think of it, it had been a tempestuous couple of days.

It had begun in Singapore when we met Rin, the pirate consultant. From then, all sorts of events took place surrounding Ergo, the god-devourer. We had fought with two out of the three mages who claimed to have created him: Latio, the alchemist of the Atlas Institute, and Mushiki, a Xian.

All of these events were nothing short of ridiculous, even for someone as used to the mysteries of the Clock Tower as I was. If we had made one more mistake, we would probably not have made it to Japan.

The situation is no better now. However, for some reason, I found myself enjoying this trip.

Even though these foreign mountains harbored many mysteries and perhaps even enemies, I couldn't help but relax and laugh freely, as if I were taking physical snapshots of each person I cared for and storing it in the photo album of my heart, never to fade.

"It is nearing the time we agreed upon."

A raven took flight after we finished our wataame, probably to reach its nest before nightfall.

I heard the sound of footsteps soon afterward.

Footsteps could reveal a lot about a person's character. There was a slight difference between arrogant, elegant, or nervous footsteps that my enhanced ears could detect.

(...*They're so...normal...*)

These gave an impression that I had never had before, something indistinct to the point that it surprised me. But it was indeed what I heard.

I heard the sound of drums again in the distance.

A figure walked clumsily up the stairs in the evening light and bowed his head in greeting.

"Pleased to meet you."

It was an extremely ordinary-looking man.

I found it hard to guess the age of people in this country, but he looked roughly in his late twenties. He wore a pitch-black suit and black-rimmed glasses. If I had to point out something special about him, it would be the hair on the left side of his face that covered his eye. Even so, if he turned around, you could easily lose sight of him among a crowd.

His build and gentle-looking face were both attractive enough, but taken as a whole, he could only be described as ordinary.

I blinked, perplexed, trying to reconcile this contradiction.

“My name is Mikiya Ryougi. Ms. Touko Aozaki introduced you to me,” said the man dressed in black.

And thus, our unforgettable journey began.

◆ 第一章 ◆
-Chapter 1-



~Part 1~

Warm sunlight illuminated the spacious park.

It was five thirty a.m.

The air was thick, as if it, too, had just awoken. Wood sorrel and foxtails grew freely among the grass, dew dripping from the tips of their leaves. If it were a little hotter, maybe the plants would start to steam.

A few dirty, triangular tents stood out among the green, forming an independent community within the bounds of the park. It was, in other words, a congregation of homeless people.

“...Ruo?”

A child of around seven years old peered out of one. She had puffy, shoulder-length hair. Rubbing her eyes still heavy with sleep, she looked around as if she expected someone else to be here.

“Ruo?” She called out again, crawling out of the orange tent.

There was a trace of unease in her voice, as if that name could erase an inevitable future.

“What’s the matter, Akira?” Came the voice of a middle-aged homeless man from behind her, but Akira paid him no mind.

Starting from a light jog and gradually getting faster, she raced out of the park in sneakers that looked like they were about to fall apart. Her gaze never stopped moving, as if she would not allow any change to slip her notice.

Eventually, she stopped and breathed a sigh of relief.

There was a young man washing by the park’s fountain.

He was tall, with rich-colored dark skin. Not from the sun, but because it was his natural skin color.

He walked without shame into the fountain and was cleaning his shoulder. His body was muscular yet lithe, like a wild beast, or a Greek statue. He seemed to be enjoying his shower, so the child looked on as if she could watch him forever.

“Good morning, Akira,” said the man, his back still facing Akira, wiping his face as he looked up at the sky.

Akira pouted. “Please don’t sneak out while I’m asleep, Ruo.”

“I didn’t want to wake you up,” replied the young man being referred to as Ruo in a gentle voice. He then tossed Akira something, which she found to be a toothbrush.

“Remember to brush your teeth properly,” he said, then added, “I told you to comb your hair every day, didn’t I? It’s such a shame to hide your face.”

At that, the child suddenly froze.

“Is it because I’m a girl?” She stammered.

Ruo turned, revealing a face with shockingly chiseled, handsome features. Though he looked Asian, judging from the color of his skin, he was probably also of Middle Eastern descent. He seemed barely twenty years old, with one distinguishing feature apart from his overflowing vitality— his shining eyes, flecked with blue, like fragments of stars.

It was as if everything he laid eyes on became cheerful, and as if nothing but joy reached his ears.

Stepping out from the fountain, he put a hand on the child’s head.

“What’s that got to do with it? Not everyone is as pretty as you are. It’d make me glad if you could take a little more care of your appearance,” he said, bending down so their eyes were on the same level.

“Okay. I’ll comb my hair.”

With that, the girl took out a brush from her bag and started to comb her hair. Meanwhile, Ruo wiped himself dry, put on some jeans and a t-shirt hanging nearby, and sat next to the girl.

Neither one spoke after that.

The young man looked up at the sky in the light breeze, humming a tune that did not belong to this country. Perhaps it was a melody from a faraway land of sand. Perhaps it was ad-libbed to the rhythm of the girl brushing her hair.

The cicadas began to drone louder and louder, as if they were trying to fill the entire park with their cacophony. Just their sound alone made it more humid, making one wish they'd brought a fan.

A raspy voice came out of the blue.

“Ruo! Akira!”

“Good morning, Mr. Sano.”

The young man turned to see a wiry man in his forties.

“Hahaha, you two are up early.”

The whistle of air accompanied his voice.

Three teeth were missing beneath his thick beard. Even though it was summer, he wore a grimy jacket that stank of sweat. A cap whose original shape could no longer be discerned sat atop his head alongside a pair of crooked glasses. His chapped lips parted in a smile as he held up a package.

“We’re in for a treat today. I found some discarded hamburgers.”

“Wow, that’s great!”

Ruo laughed, and Akira jumped up in excitement.

They decided to have their meal at a nearby open space. Sano moved some rocks underneath a gingko tree so they could sit on the ground.

“Wouldn’t it be better if we sat on that bench over there?”

“This place is pretty good. I prefer sitting in the corner, anyway,” replied Sano unconvincingly. “We have to be considerate of others.”

“That’s not true,” Ruo countered, and Sano laughed weakly.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. But I can’t stand it. Just thinking that people might think that way about me makes my stomach clench and everything in front of me go dark. Haha, I used to think that was just a metaphor, but that really happens.”

Sano scratched his head, scattering dandruff.

Looking at his greasy fingers, he continued to speak.

“You two have been here for a week now, right?”

“Six days,” corrected Ruo, taking a bite of the hamburger. “Thanks for telling us where to get food, Mr. Sano.”

“It’s our only lifeline. There’s a soup kitchen, but you can’t rely on it. As long as you keep your eyes peeled, you can find perks like this.”

Sano chuckled and took out an old beer bottle from his worn out bag.

“‘Sano Blend’, was it?”

“Hehe.”

He laughed as if congested.

It was a mixture made of drops of alcohol scraped from the bottoms of discarded bottles. There was no actual blending involved in the process, of course, but Sano loved to boast about his special method. He had no cup, so he simply pressed his lips to the bottle and took a tiny sip.

“Even so, you can’t live like this forever, you know? I know I’m hardly the one to say that, but it’s true,” Sano said seriously, or, as seriously as possible considering his missing front teeth and all. “You two are still young. If you go to the government, I’m sure they will recommend you to some decent places. They won’t do anything for me.”

“Why not?”

“I ran away too many times, that’s why...” he muttered, gazing at the bottle in his hand.

“Sano, you’re frowning,” Akira pointed out.

“Oh, sorry.”

Sano touched his forehead, but the troubled expression on his face had no sign of dissipating.

“You sound like you’re well-educated, Mr. Sano,” said Ruo.

“Haha, I did graduate from college... but that doesn’t matter. I guess I couldn’t handle all the stress. That’s the most important skill you need when you enter society,” Sano replied with a sigh, then changed the subject. “If you’re deliberately hiding your gender, Akira, you must be running away from someone too.”

Ruo's expression didn't change, but Akira's gaze wavered for a moment.

"I see. I wonder if I would have fared better had I not been so sensitive. Possibly. Yes, probably."

"I don't think we'll be living like this for much longer."

Sano nodded at that. "Good, good. With the way you two bother to wash yourselves and your clothes, you can totally begin a new life. I think it's too much of a hassle."

Akira frowned. "I also think this will be a hassle, though."

"That's another reason to leave before it gets more annoying," Sano said, pausing a moment before adding, "Oh, by the way, there's a festival starting at the shrine tonight. It might be nice to check it out before you leave this place and never come back."

Ruo raised his eyebrow at Sano's obviousness.

"Is that really why you brought that up?"

"Fine! Why don't we all go together?" Sano admitted, trying to conceal his embarrassment. "I'll go wash my clothes and everything. It won't hurt to enjoy the atmosphere once in a while, right?"



After Sano left, the two of them sat on the grass for a while, lost in thought. The cicadas continued their drone.

The time for commuting to school and work had begun, so the street outside the park was full of people carrying backpacks and briefcases, quiet or chatting lively as they passed.

"People in this country always seem so busy," Ruo muttered, sitting cross-legged with his chin propped on his arm.

(His arms are so long...) thought Akira.

Though Ruo's limbs were thin and long, they didn't give the impression of being fragile. The contours of his well-toned body could be seen through his thin T-shirt. He looked like he could do the work of several people with his strong physique. Coupled with his tan skin, it felt as if the young man was not fully real, something that could only exist on the silver screen.

“Hm?”

He suddenly turned toward Akira.

“Aah!”

“Oh, sorry, did I startle you?”

“N-no, it’s fine, I just wasn’t expecting it,” Akira said, trying to calm her racing heart.

Ruo narrowed his eyes slightly and spoke slightly slower than before.

“So, do you want to go to the festival?”

“Yeah,” Akira said, nodding. “I’ve always liked festivals.”

“Really?”

“It’s not my shrine, so it’s okay.” Akira reassured. “Besides, you’re the one who wants to go, right?”

“Ah, my cover’s been blown!” Ruo slapped his own cheek. “I mean, I’ve never been to a Japanese festival before.”

Akira sighed at the sight of Ruo’s shining grin.

“It looks like even adults are excited for the festival,” she muttered.



The festival was surprisingly large, with almost a hundred stalls and an according amount of people. Any more crowded and walking around would be difficult.

The shrine grounds were filled with lively music. Though some of it was traditional, each stall was playing its own music, from rock to anime theme songs to classical music.

With bright lights in the summer air, it almost felt like an outdoor concert.

“Wow!” Exclaimed Akira.

Ruo walked next to her, while Sano followed anxiously behind them.

“Sorry for making you two come along,” said Sano apologetically. “There’s no way I could have come alone, not to a place as lively as this.”

The forty-something-year-old looked as timid as a grade-schooler. One could almost imagine that permanent teeth would emerge where his front teeth were missing.

For the next while, the three of them enjoyed their time at the festival.

They didn’t buy anything. Simply being able to share the excitement and noise of the festival satisfied them. Though reproachful glances were occasionally cast at them, they were soon forgotten about amid the festival’s cheerful atmosphere.

Eventually, they decided to rest by the forest, where there were fewer people.

Sano sat weakly down on a stone.

“For some reason, just being around so many people makes me exhausted.”

His breath flowed into the night sky, where only a few stars could be seen because of the festival’s bright lights. For him, though, these lonely pinpricks of light seemed just right.

“Do you have a favorite stall, Sano?”

“I like the one where you shoot at a target that never seems to fall no matter how many times I hit it...Anyway, I don’t have the money for that.”

“If you had the money, would you go now?” Akira asked at that, reaching for her pocket.

“No, no!” Sano frantically stopped her. “Don’t spend your money on people like me. Got it?”

“I’m only joking,” Akira giggled, as Sano scowled.

“Speaking of which,” Ruo brought up as he looked at the two of them. “The old man selling okonomiyaki by the shrine entrance... is he your father, by any chance?”

Sano froze immediately.

“...How do you know?” He said after a while, in a small voice.

“You have the exact same cheekbones and nose. They’re both easily inherited traits.”

“Yeah... I can’t face him like this,” said Sano, covering his face with his hands, which were still covered with grime even though he must have washed them carefully before coming here. In stark contrast to earlier, he looked much older than he really was.

“Not in this state.”

He touched his shirt. Though it, too, had been carefully washed, the sleeves were horribly frayed, and the buttons had been torn off. Away from the stalls, there was nothing to hide the lingering smell of rotten food and drink. No one knew what he had lost up until now better than himself.

“Everyone looks so happy.”

Sano turned toward the music blasting from within the temple’s precincts.

“I can’t be a part of them. I shouldn’t intrude.”

“In that case,” Ruo said, standing up, “I’ll go buy some okonomiyaki.”

“Ruo!? Have you been listening to anything I said?!”

The young man sped off towards the torii gate before Sano could stop him. His figure quickly blended into the crowd, and Sano’s hand fell back into his lap.

“What should I do?”

“Do you hate your father, Sano?”

“No, I just wasn’t prepared for it, that’s all.”

Sano’s shoulders slumped, and he looked as if he had become several sizes smaller. It was as if he wanted to curl into a ball and disappear from the world for fear that the thing he had been running from would appear before him again.

“But... if...” He stuttered, slowly loosening his grip around his knees and letting his gaze fall. He stared at his wrinkled, darkened hands with enough intensity to burn a hole into them.

“...If I could talk to my dad again...”

“—Hey, you!” A sudden voice came.

Akira gasped, more at the hostility in the voice than the words themselves.

“So it is Sano.”

Three silhouettes stood in a row against the festival’s lights. From their burly builds and thick, sneering lips, anyone could tell they were up to no good.

The man in the middle who appeared to be the leader grabbed Sano by the collar.

“I thought you’d show up because it’s your dad’s birthday, and sure enough,” he said, pulling Sano toward him.

“Sano!” Akira cried out.

“It’s okay,” Sano called, “I just borrowed a lot of money from the wrong place.”

His face twisted as if he was crying and laughing at the same time.

A fist dug into his cheek with a sickening sound. He fell to the ground, carefully-washed shirt becoming covered in dirt again. Unable to stand up immediately, he writhed on the ground, clutching his face.

“Come on, bro, let’s get out of here. The cops’ve been such a pain in the ass. The wakagashira’s been annoying too.”

“Haha, you think this kind of guy’s gonna run to the cops?”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right.”

With the affirmation of his cronies, the man who looked like the leader gave Sano another kick, straight in his chest as he lay on his side. The man dodged what Sano spat out, gagging.

“Ah, that feels so good, especially after dealing with the Ryougis.”

As he laughed, he continued to kick Sano around like a ball.

“Stop!” Akira cried, clutching one of the men’s sports pants.

“Eh?”

The man’s brow furrowed, swung his leg, and sent the girl flying.

Her light body bounced a little once it hit the ground.

“Stop...stop it...”

Before Sano could say more, he was kicked again.

Despite his best efforts, every single part of his body was kicked from top to bottom, until his attackers stopped suddenly mid-kick.

“What’s that?” A man asked, tilting his head.

“...A rope?”

It was, indeed, a back rope that was long, thin, and appeared weightless.

“Oh, it’s just an old shimenawa that fell off.”

His words had hardly left his mouth before his expression distorted. With a sound, the rope wrapped around the man’s leg, and he let out a cry of agony.

“Aaaaargh!”

He collapsed to the ground, convulsing, but the pain continued. The man began to froth at the mouth. With a sizzle, his pants began to dissolve as if they were being corroded by acid. Some of the man’s flesh began to dissolve too.

He was not alone. Everyone else surrounding Sano was struck by the same mysterious force.

“Aaah! What the hell is this!?”

Their tortured screams echoed through the forest.

Clearly, something was off.

The strangeness of the rope aside, even among the music and noise, their screams should have reached the festival. Even if most people were afraid, some must have approached by now.

It was almost as if this area had been split off into a different dimension.

“No! No! Noooooo!”

The rope tightened around the man’s ankles as he tried to escape, pulling him to the ground.

“Stop!”

As if it were a tsunami, the rope sucked in the man's screams.

"Agh...!" Sano moaned.

The rope edged closer to him, too.

Sano eyed his assailants, who were either half-melted or being strangled by the rope. They couldn't even scream anymore. He wondered whether he would turn out that way, too.

"Don't...don't come here..."

He picked up a nearby branch, knowing full well that it was useless. He was too weak to run. What else could he do?

"Don't come here...!"

Mustering all of his might, he swung the branch, but it was sucked out of his hand into the darkness.

The black rope continued to approach like a snake on the hunt, utterly undeterred...until it suddenly stopped.

Sano felt something warm, as if countless tiny floating things had surrounded him.

"...Feathers?" He muttered.

As he had expected, someone responded.

"These are phantasmal wings."

Sano found Ruo standing there, holding three paper boxes of okonomiyaki. He wiped a bit of sauce that had seeped out with his thumb and licked it.

"The old man told me to wait behind the shrine after the festival. I got a little carried away chatting with him. He sold me these for a great price."

Sano thought he could see a pair of translucent wings sprouting from Ruo's back as he continued to talk, but no matter how he strained his eyes, nothing was there. At the same time, he was certain that they were indeed wings, and that they had blocked the black rope. The thought hurt his brain.

Though Sano had no way of knowing it, those wings were very similar to the abilities of another young man.

“Sorry for making you wait, Akira,” said Ruo in a gentle voice, kneeling.

“...Ruo.”

The girl looked up.

Sano noticed that the rope had not reached her. It was almost as if it was trying to protect her.

“...You’re late.”

“That’s why I’m apologizing. Let’s eat the okonomiyaki later.”

Ruo gently embraced the girl. Sano’s vision was beginning to swim as the last vestiges of his consciousness began to slip away.

“Thank you, Mr. Sano.”

He could no longer see Ruo’s face clearly, but he could still hear his voice.

“Bai Ruolong(*TN: Translates to White Like a dragon*).”

“Ruo...long...?”

The young man nodded.

“It’s my name. It may bring you bad luck, but let’s hope it’ll protect you instead.”

What a gentle voice, Sano thought. Gentle, and sad.

Thinking back, perhaps it was because of the impression this voice had on me that I so readily wanted to take care of him.

“Ruo...long... Akira...!”

Sano fainted before he could finish.

He met his father again when he awoke in the hospital, where he learned that he had apparently been carrying enough cash to pay off his debts, and that the people who attacked him had sent a letter vowing never to touch him again.

For the rest of his life, he would occasionally think wistfully back to the eccentric young man and girl, who he never met again.

~Part 2~

—The previous stage returns.

I looked down at the photo of the girl.

As a foreigner, I couldn't tell how old the people of this country were. The children here reminded me somewhat of fairies, even more so because the characteristics of their genders were not yet clearly defined.

“...Akira, right?” I muttered, my fingers brushing against the photograph.

My voice echoed between the walls of the cheap hotel room.

My mentor had booked it. Though Ryougi Mikiya had offered to make arrangements for us, he had been adamant about staying at the place of our choice.

“Yakou Akira,” Rin repeated. “The Yakou family, huh? So they really exist.”

“As a fellow Japanese mage, did you not know?”

“There aren’t any practical mages around Fuyuki, so our paths never crossed.”

Fuyuki was the name of Rin’s hometown. She and my mentor talked about it when we landed at the airport in Japan. It was apparently a long way from Tokyo. I heard my mentor mutter about wanting to visit the elderly couple that had taken care of him in the past.

(...*The place where the Grail War took place...*)

That was the only impression I had of the town. My mentor had participated in the Fourth Holy Grail War. Rin had participated in the Fifth. The ritual where seven mages and Servants battled to grant their wishes had its roots deeply planted in that town. It was also not unrelated to what was happening to my body.

Regardless, that was not the most important thing now.

“How do you feel, Ergo?”

“...I don’t know,” the young man replied, shaking his head. He was staring unblinkingly at the photo. “I just think there’s something strange about it.”

Of course, we were discussing the photo we received during the meeting yesterday.



After the festival, we decided to follow the man.

Our group consisted of my mentor, Rin, me, and Ergo, along with the man who introduced himself as Ryougi Mikiya.

We walked out of the shrine grounds and along a path in the mountains. The sound of drums receded into the distance, replaced by the ever-growing scent of greenery. Although I was wearing an unfamiliar pair of sandals, I loved the softness of the soil sinking beneath my feet.

“Um, Professor,” Rin whispered as we walked. “It can’t be *that* Aozaki Touko, can it?”

“What do you mean, ‘it can’t be’? It *is* that Aozaki Touko.”

“Whaaaaa?!”

Something that sounded like a shriek, which I had never heard from Rin before, escaped her.

“What’s the matter?” Ergo asked from in front of her, turning around. Though Rin hadn’t been loud, he had no trouble hearing it.

“Uh...let’s just say that she’s an extremely bad-tempered mage, unparalleled even in the Clock Tower. I don’t like saying bad things about people behind their backs, but even half, or a tenth of the rumors are enough to make me question her sanity.”

I could not completely deny Rin’s feelings. My mentor and I had run into her several times.

“Whoa... a Sealing Designated mage... oh, but the designation was lifted, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but she did something else, so she has been designated again.”

“That must make her the first mage in the Clock Tower to have a Sealing Designation twice.”

Sealing Designations—orders for mages whose abilities had been judged by the Clock Tower to be so singularly special they were to be forever preserved within its walls. Though it was the highest honor for a mage, preserved mages could not continue their research, so many chose to run from it.

The female mage who received it twice could not be simply described as an ally or an enemy. The Grand Puppeteer who stood near the Clock Tower's peak always leaped casually over our expectations, intervening in incidents with her strange set of values. That was why we had no idea what to make of Ryougi Mikiya, whom Touko had introduced to us.

(...Nothing seems suspicious about him, though.)

Mikiya spoke just as I stole a glance at him.

“Touko-san wrote to me that this would resolve your problem perfectly.”

“Our problem?” I blinked, taking a while to understand what he meant.

“Aozaki Touko also contacted us,” said my mentor. “We have been exchanging opinions on the incident at hand for a while now. Two weeks ago, she sent a letter to me saying that this might give me a hint.”

Two weeks ago. That was before we came to Singapore, which meant that my mentor had always planned to come here. Come to think of it, he may have mentioned it before.

“So what is this assignment?” Mikiya asked as he walked ahead of us.

“I suppose you could say we are trying to undo a curse.”

My heart began to pound. For that reason, my mentor was even willing to resign his position as a lecturer, even if teaching was his calling.

“To be more precise, we are trying to find a way to return gods.”

Ergo looked to my mentor. Supposedly, he had devoured three gods. My mentor had determined that he would be overwhelmed by the amount of information and lose his personality and memories if the gods were not returned. Strangely enough, Ergo and I required the same kind of mystery.

“Gods,” said Mikiya, looking somewhat nostalgically up at the sky, where the stars shone brighter than usual. Perhaps it was because we were on a mountain. “We used to talk about things like that. ...Right, you are a mage like Touko-san, after all.”

“Are you from a family of mages too, Mr. Mikiya?” I asked, curious because regular families were rare in this line of work.

“My parents have nothing to do with it, but my wife is from the Ryougi family.”

“...We looked into the Ryougi name before we came here,” my mentor followed up. “Rather than mages...Well, to put it in a way that you can understand, Gray, they’re something like the Japanese Mafia.”

As he spoke, he watched Mikiya’s expression.

“Don’t worry, you’re right.”

(The Mafia!)

I was taken aback by the word. Upon second thought, I couldn’t tell you how the Clock Tower was different from it. Besides, we had just worked alongside Rin’s pirates. Even so, it was shocking to hear it described that way.

“The festival just now was organized by the Ryougi family,” Mikiya explained with a gentle expression. “I thought it would be easier to understand if you experienced it firsthand.”

“...Hm. Are Japanese festivals often run by the Mafia?”

“A long time ago, yes. It’s still the case here.”

“I see.” My mentor nodded. “Did you prepare these traditional costumes to ensure that we would blend in smoothly?”

“Touko-san once told me that both sides need to prepare in order for someone to fully experience something. The other reason is that I’ll be able to recognize you if you wear the clothes we sent.”

His reasoning was easy to understand. Though he looked polite and unassuming, his actions were bold, or rather, direct, in a way that inexplicably reminded me of my mentor.

I furtively touched my hood, a little concerned.

“This doesn’t look...strange, does it?”

“Of course not. Someone in my family likes to wear a jacket over a kimono.”

Mikiya laughed softly. For him to laugh like that, he must really value his family.

Despite my nervousness, I also smiled. Anyone would want to be close with someone like him.

“Incidentally, do all four of you know how to speak Japanese? Part of the reason why I sent you the clothing was because I wasn’t sure if you all could speak Japanese well.”

“Gray and I used a bit of a cheat. When it comes to my field I can read and write a bit, but I can’t make everyday conversation. Could you show it to him, Gray?”

“We borrowed Mystic Codes from the Clock Tower that translate in real time.”

I took a pendant from its hiding place inside my hood. The Mystic Code had a gem in its center that had been inscribed with impossibly intricate patterns. Through it, even non-mages could make use of mystery, albeit to a limited extent.

“Strictly speaking, they only strengthen our ability to communicate. Its effect on the person making conversation is not great, but considering the wealth of English information in Japan, and the fact that English is part of your curriculum, it isn’t difficult for you to understand us with a little help. On the other hand, when we receive information in Japanese, we have to rely completely on the Mystic Code’s effects. Communication is also difficult if we are not face-to-face, as it can only strengthen our communication skills.”

“In other words, I hear Japanese, but you’re actually speaking English?”

“You understood that quickly. Essentially, yes. People who have mastered a foreign language to a certain degree might unconsciously speak or think in that language, right? You can think of it as something like that. ...If only I had the connections to borrow something like this when I was younger.”

My mentor frowned as if he suddenly thought of something. His position as Lord had been a great help on this trip, both with these Mystic Codes and with the entry procedures for us, Ergo included.

Mikiya nodded several times as if impressed.

After walking for another while, he looked up.

“We’ll take the stairs here.”

“Whoa!” Ergo exclaimed.

The wind picked up.

The bamboo surrounding us swayed and rustled. Long, layered leaves rubbing against each other in a complex melody that seemed to make the heat of summer fade away. The moonlight spilling from between the leaves was also beautiful.

Beyond the light sat an elegant Japanese mansion.

“Mm... That feels nice.”

“For some reason, the Ryougi family’s mansions are always next to bamboo forests,” Mikiya replied.

After a little while, we heard the pit-pattering of light footsteps. A girl appeared from the gazebo.

“Welcome back, Kokutou!”

She looked about seven years old. She wore a white dress that suited her long, black hair. The brilliance of life seemed to be condensed in her.

“Please don’t call me that,” Mikiya chided gently.

I didn’t know if the girl was listening to him or not. She turned around and bowed gracefully.

“I’m his daughter, Ryougi Mana. Nice to meet you.”

“Huh?”



I was momentarily stunned because Mikiya didn't look old enough to be a seven-year-old's father at all. Of course, I always thought Asian people were younger than they really were, but either way, Mikiya could not be older than my mentor.

"Is Kokutou your original surname, by any chance?"

"Ah, yes. The characters mean 'black paulownia'. For whatever reason, Mana keeps calling me that."

"...Hmmm, I guess I can see why," Rin pondered, closing one eye. "It reminds me of a French poet."

"'Black paulownia'. Hm. I thought it would be 'black winter'."

"'Black winter'?" Rin repeated my mentor's musing.

"Green/blue spring(青春), red summer(朱夏), white autumn(白秋), and black winter(黒冬). They are called the order of life."

It was said that these words originated from China and captured the essence of each stage of life.

Green spring was the time of budding leaves, red summer was the time of full bloom, white autumn was the time of steady decline, and black winter was the time of quietly accepting the end.

Indeed, aside from having a daughter, the man gave off a peculiar wisdom that didn't match his age.

"How about we have some tea? I'm a bit thirsty. Mana, could you lead our guests inside?"

"Got it, dad!"

With an elegant nod, the girl led us into the mansion.

Tea for several people had been prepared in an adjoining Japanese-styled room. Its warm fragrance rushed forth. The candy that accompanied it crumbled on my tongue and disappeared, leaving behind a luscious sweetness that reminded me of the fudge my mother used to make at me. Of course, this tasted much more sophisticated than anything I remembered.

The breeze picked up again, and I heard the bamboo forest's whisper.

"There must be a river near here. I can hear the water," Rin said quietly, holding her bowl of tea.

"What a beautiful sound," said Ergo.

The young man closed his eyes and moved his head as if to the rhythm of the silent rhythm of nature.

"Even though it's my first time visiting this country, it makes me feel...nostalgic."

"Remember that feeling. It might be related to the memories you lost, or the memories of someone inside you," my mentor, sitting cross-legged on the cushion, pointed out.

I wondered if Ergo could be Japanese.

Of course, his hair color was different from most in this country, but people involved in magecraft were already a minority. We had no way of ruling out the possibility that Ergo was originally from this country.

The same applies for the gods that he devoured.

“We were just talking about the kanji of Kokutou,” Rin said, looking in the direction of the sliding door which the girl had closed upon leaving, after leading us here.

“Professor, you said that you’ve already looked into the Ryougi family, right? It’s quite the conspicuous name, isn’t it?”

“You could say that. It’s roughly what you think.”

“Huh?” Ergo and I said at the same time, both not able to keep up with the conversation.

Rin chuckled and took a piece of paper from her kimono. There was a proper name for this: *kaishi*.

When she tapped her finger on it, the paper changed color. It took me a while to realize that she had altered its properties with magecraft. It must have taken an amazing degree of control to only affect part of it. How many others in the El-Melloi classroom could do the same?

Rin split the circle in half with a straight line.

“The concept of Ryougi came from Continental Asia. The Taiji is a symbol of the world itself divided into two. The character that means bamboo, ‘竹’, can also be divided into two. There’s even a saying based on how bamboo splits straight down the middle.”

She wrote the character “竹” with her pale fingers, converting what she just said into words.

“The character is made of two of the same symbol arranged side by side, see? The Ryougi family has a deep connection to bamboo, which is probably why their houses are in bamboo forests.”

“...That’s a lot of meanings for a single character to have.”

Rin smiled, probably because I looked weird muttering to myself in a daze.

“Exactly. That’s how the language here works. Other than that, even though the land could be better maintained, this place is proper sacred grounds. So, the Ryougi family used to be involved with Mystery in some way.”

“In other words, they have abandoned the magecraft unique to this region,” my mentor clarified.

“Abandoned...? Do people really do that?” I couldn’t help but ask, taken aback.

“Yes, some do. Furthermore, magecraft isn't as common in this part of the world as in England. There must be countless families who once had a hand in mystery but were forced to give up because they could not control the decline of their Magic Circuits.”

My mentor looked a little dejected as he said that. I only really realized then that the Clock Tower was not only the home of magecraft, but also a sort of sacred place. It was only natural that the farther one went, the dimmer the glory of magecraft.

“...However, that has its own meaning. The decline of mystery doesn't necessarily mean the eradication of magic. In fact, separating from it...”

Just as my mentor was about to say something, Mikiya appeared from the sliding door from which Mana had gone.

“Sorry for making you wait.”

He had not changed his clothes. He sat down slowly in front of us. Though his movements could not be described as graceful, they gave off a soft, polite feeling.

“Did you give us time to rest?” Asked my mentor.

“I didn't mean...well, perhaps a little,” Mikiya replied, scratching his nose.

“Are you the Ryougi family's accountant?”

“Yes, though I have no formal qualifications.”

“But you married the Ryougis' daughter, so you're considered the de facto successor.”

“Can you find out that much from overseas?”

“I happen to have a scumbag of an acquaintance who knows all sorts of strange things. Touko Aozaki is either too terse or too long-winded, so I tried to investigate as much as I could. My apologies.”

“No, I don't mind... It is Touko-san, after all.”

Mikiya smiled with something that wasn't so much nostalgia as it was confirmation from a family member not far away.

“Was Aozaki Touko the same kind of person when she was in Japan, too?”

“Yes. This letter came out of the blue along with a request to borrow money, which I turned down.”

“It does sound like her.”

I couldn’t help but smile, covering my mouth. She was a great mage who sometimes stood in our way, but for whatever reason, I liked seeing the humanity she sometimes showed.

‘Like’ wasn’t the right word.

She was free and unfettered, and never betrayed her own principles. Maybe I admired her. I didn’t want to become that way, but hers was the most beautiful way of life I knew of.

“I have already told you about our problem,” my mentor said, taking a sip of tea. “I would like to ask about the problem you are facing. Judging from Touko’s letter, your problem should be related to ours.”

“Before I answer your question, may I ask you something else?”

“What is it?”

“Touko-san once said to me that mages hold their disciples and family members in high regard.”

That was true.

Mages did not value people, the world, or themselves. They sought only the Root, but it could not be achieved in one generation. They had to entrust it to later generations, which was why they protected their disciples and family members. Mages did not value them the same way most people do.

“If that is the case, do you think that people who are separated from their families are unhappy?”

“Everyone’s idea of happiness is different,” my mentor replied immediately. “Some people consider it the ultimate misfortune. Others think the exact opposite. That applies even for people who are not mages.”

“I agree,” said Mikiya. “Slight differences in culture, environment, values, and so on can completely change the nature of someone’s desires. Some people find happiness in conformity, others in being distinct. Everyone desires something different, so everyone has a different idea of happiness.”

Those words struck deep into my heart.

It was like a jigsaw puzzle—because the shapes of people's hearts varied, the shape of happiness that fit them also differed. Only when the two happened to fit together could someone attain happiness. Perhaps searching for this shape was the path of life.

"All right. Now I can tell you about it."

Mikiya breathed a sigh of relief and handed us a picture of a short-haired child around the same age as Mana, looking down. I could not tell whether they were a boy or a girl.

"Who is this child?"

"Yakou," replied Mikiya.

"Yakou?" Rin raised an eyebrow. "You mean, the family of sorcerers?"

There was something unusual in her voice, like a faint nervousness mixed with the unmistakable curiosity of a cat. Her expression was the same as it had been when we fought Latio of the Atlas Institute and Mushiki of the Summit Court, though it seemed to contain something else.

"I want you to help this child," Mikiya continued.

"....."

My mentor did not reply immediately.

Rin seemed to be waiting for him to say something.

Ergo stared at the photo with interest.

...I, meanwhile, was desperately trying to stop my heart from pounding.

"How, exactly, are we to help?"

"This child was kidnapped."

I saw my mentor's eyebrows twitch.

It was a kidnapping case.

Kidnappings could happen anywhere, but according to what Rin just said, the Yakou family was some mage family. What sort of kidnapping case would happen to a child of that sort of family?

I could hear the sound of drums in the distance again. In contrast to the festival's lively atmosphere, the mood here felt ominous.

“Touko-san said that contact with this child will bring your problem closer to resolution.”

◆ 第二章 ◆
-Chapter 2-



~Part 1~

“The child of the Yakou family...”

Those words pulled me out of my thoughts and back into the hotel room.

We had changed out of our kimono and back into our regular clothes. Our summer clothing had been arranged to arrive at the hotel upon our arrival.

I thought for a little while before speaking up.

“Mikiya said that the Yakous are distant relatives of the Ryougis.”

“That’s why he asked us to solve the kidnapping case. As a mage family, they naturally didn’t report it to the police.”

That was because of a rule called the concealment of mystery. Mages could not reveal the existence of mystery to the wider world. Asking the police to intervene would violate the rule, so it was customary for mages to handle such matters amongst themselves or ask higher organizations in the Clock Tower. This meant that such cases often fell into my mentor’s hands. At the time, it had been the most profitable thing my mentor could do to alleviate the El-Melloi family’s immense debt.

However, I never imagined he would be doing the same thing on almost the other side of the Earth.

“If it was that straightforward, surely he would be able to do it on his own,” said Rin.

Ryougi Mikiya had apparently searched for people many times in the past. That was the rumor that led to the Yakou family reaching out to him, but it seemed that not everybody in the Ryougi family agreed to take on this job.

“Didn’t he say that his wife was especially against it, declared that it was up to him to do whatever he wanted, and told him to take care of Mana while she went away for a while?”

This time, it was Ergo who spoke.

It was his father-in-law who had brought in the request, so it was quite the complicated situation. After all, marriage meant tying everyone’s complicated interpersonal relations into one tangled knot. In Japan, the concept of family seemed even more important.

(...Marriage.)

The idea was somewhat foreign to me, a little hard to comprehend.

It was why Reines, my mentor's sister, would one day marry someone. As long as she was part of the El-Melloi family, her marriage would be extremely politically meaningful. Her marriage was a bargaining chip, and she would be married whether she liked it or not. Reines complained about it often.

I wondered how I would congratulate her when that eventually happened.

For some reason, that thought brought a terrible tightness in my chest. I was sure she wouldn't like it if I fretted about these things at my own discretion.

(...Everyone has a different idea of happiness.)

I recalled what Mikiya had said earlier.

So, what was happiness to Reines?

“...I wonder if Mikiya is the sort of person who would take on a case just because his family asked him to.”

My mentor nodded. “I see, so you want to know what he meant by saying that he hoped we could help Yakou Akira.”

That was just about all he said, which meant that, regardless of whether we would accept the commission, he hoped we could witness the case ourselves and make our own judgment.

In a sense, he was asking us to ignore his stance on the matter.

My mentor sighed and took a sip of the tea in front of him. I had brewed it from the hotel's teabags, but he didn't seem to mind. Then again, I hardly ever heard him complain about food.

“Ryougi Mikiya, huh.” My mentor muttered, looking down at the surface of the tea.

“It's rare to see you so interested in someone who isn't even a mage,” commented Rin.

My mentor turned to her.

“I suppose you're right. We didn't talk for long, but he may be the most well-balanced

person I have ever met. Although he said that he doesn't know much about mages, he summarized our nature without passing judgment. In his case, it probably reflects his way of life. It's surprising for someone of his age."

I suppose I understood.

There were people who didn't have the deduction of a detective or the insight of a researcher, but arrived at an answer simply by simply accepting the obvious. It was just like how praying for someone else's happiness would eventually lead you to realize what shape happiness takes on.

"I can't know when he started thinking this way. It must just be how he lives— not treating anyone differently, including himself. Even mages are no exception. Hm, it feels like the exact opposite of how I live my life."

"So, you don't like him because you're a curmudgeon?"

"Gah."

For a moment, my mentor, who looked about ready to spray tea out of his mouth, beat his chest.

"Who do you think I am?"

"I was just giving my honest opinion," replied Rin casually.

My mentor was quiet. It took him about twice as long as before to think of something to say.

"...I just think it would be difficult, treating everyone the same way," my mentor muttered to himself, before continuing. "In any case, our next step is to meet with the Yakou family. I was just considering establishing relations with Japanese Magecraft organizations. It does make me feel like I'm dancing in that damn puppeteer's hands."

My mentor shrugged and then abruptly switched the topic.

"Ergo, you didn't use your Mystic Code during our conversation with Ryougi Mikiya."

"Oh, yes. I understood most of what he said," replied Ergo, who had been reading all the pamphlets we had been given. Despite only having watched a movie on the plane and reading a guidebook, he had already gained a good understanding of Japanese. He had even started reading a Japanese novel half a day after we arrived, much to our amazement.

“Rin said that your language skills surpass even Schliemann’s.”

“He’s impressive, isn’t he?” Said Rin, who looked proud for some reason.

“Some mages use their magic circuits to compute translations. Your skills are different. That might just be a talent of yours.”

“I’d be happy if it is,” Ergo smiled like a dog who had been praised.

It was a smile that made other people want to smile too. If only I could learn how to do that too, I thought, touching my own face.

“So, do we go to the Yakou house now?” Rin asked, returning to our original subject.

“...Only Gray and I will go,” my mentor said, shaking his head, “Rin is Fuyuki’s manager(second owner), and I can’t explain Ergo’s presence. This situation doesn’t need any more complication.”

“...Right, that makes sense.”

After all, we didn’t even know what Ergo was.

He might even have had some strange connection to the Yakou family. Since we had already made enemies of the Atlas Institute and the Wandering Sea, we wanted to avoid any further incidents. Over the years, I had realized how prone my mentor was to getting involved in situations like this.

“In that case, let’s go out for a bit, shall we?” Rin nodded, then took Ergo’s hand.

“Where are you going?”

She picked up a small bag, walked a few steps, and then looked back.

“We’re going sightseeing. Why not, since we’ve come this far?”

“Could you tell me where you plan on going? I should be able to reach you by phone, but I’d like to have a sense of where you are.”

“Of course. First, I want to visit an antique bookstore in Kanda Jimbocho that my father used to frequent.”

“I see. Secondhand bookstores are closely connected to the region. It’s a good choice.”

“I thought you would say that!”

With a wink, the genius of the El-Melloi classroom put her hand to the doorknob. Before she walked out, however, she looked back with the gaze of a cat watching a rat caught in a trap.

“Ah, yes. After that, I plan on going to Akihabara, since it’s so close.”

The result was even more dramatic than I expected.

My mentor stiffened, silent, and stayed perfectly still until Rin and Ergo left the room, with the face of a child whose toy had been snatched away right before their eyes.

~Part 2~

Willow branches swayed in the humid summer breeze, slender leaves brushing up against a sagging sign.

Stepping out of the entranceway, they were met with sunlight glittering off the buildings on the other side of the street.

Rin squinted, shading her eyes with her hand.

“Agh, it’s so hot. Summer in Japan is unbearable.”

Many of the people around them carried handkerchiefs and were constantly wiping at their sweat. Japan’s summers were even comparable to the hot, humid summers of Singapore. Considering that Singapore was often cloudy, perhaps it was even hotter.

They were in Kanda Jinbocho, a region that had been littered with samurai residences before being transformed into a world-famous literary district in the Meiji period.

Several universities, starting with the University of Tokyo, opened bookstores in Jinbocho. It began with students selling their old textbooks and developed from there.

Eventually, the number of customers and genres grew, expanding to include not only classics, but also all manner of books on literature, art, travel, and architecture. Today, more than two hundred old bookstores lined the street. Most of them faced north to avoid direct sunlight. The bookstore that Rin and Ergo had just stepped out of was one such store.

“Did you find anything nice?”

“Nothing bad at all. In London, there are mages on the hunt everywhere. Here, you can find all sorts of things passed down through generations. I found a two hundred-year-old one at a bargain and secured it for now.”

Rin showed Ergo the paper bag she was holding.

“I also heard some local stories, which I’ll discuss with the professor later. Let’s go to Akihabara now, we should ransack the place for the rare items Flat told me about to trade in exchange for private lessons.”

“Trade?”

“Exactly. You should know from the case in Singapore that the professor has all sorts of ideas about his students’ techniques. This is a great chance to wring them out from him. I could also get him to talk about the magecraft he plundered from prestigious families, or about the previous Lord El-Melloi’s magecraft, so long as it doesn’t offend Reines.”

Rin chuckled calculatingly like a stereotypical evil bureaucrat from ancient times. It was a look of blatant self-interest that her acquaintances probably didn’t see often. Considering she had gone insofar to ask Flat, it was clear she had come prepared far in advance.

“I think I finally understand why you can discuss the Clock Tower so cheerfully,” said Ergo, seeing her expression.

“What do you mean?”

“With him as my teacher, I’m sure I’d feel fulfilled, even if he’s strict. I would be able to believe that all the time I spend learning will amount to something.”

Rin looked at him and smiled wryly.

“That kind of naiveté is like poison to people like us. Once you join the El-Melloi classroom, I’m sure you’ll have to struggle in all sorts of regards.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Gray’s closer to a mage in terms of temperament. You’re a little too...cheerful. But it’ll be fun regardless. As you struggle, everyone else around you struggles too,” Rin concluded as she walked.

The smell of curry drifted between the bookstores, a classic scene in the area. Perhaps students who sold their textbooks in the past may have used that money to buy curry.

“Is it the same with your Japanese assistant in London?” Ergo asked as if suddenly remembering something.

“Huh?”

Rin covered her face with her hands. After a pause, she turned around.

“...Could you tell from my expression?”

“Somewhat. Does coming to Japan remind you of him?”

At Ergo's words, the female mage who had led the pirates in Singapore smiled softly.

"My hometown is a little far away, but it's the same country, after all. This heat makes me nostalgic. Fuyuki's summers are just as dreadful."

She looked up to the blue summer sky peeking between the buildings, the same sky above Fuyuki and London.

"I don't know if he's enjoying London quite as much as I do. You two'll get along well, I'm sure, since both of you don't fit the mold of mages. In a sense, you two are the complete opposite of the professor."

Her profile was dyed in many colors by the sun.

She was a woman of many faces, at times defiantly strong, at times obscenely greedy, and other times as endearing as a flower by the roadside. All of these were as genuine as the last. Ergo admired how she was able to accept all of these aspects of herself. He believed that was why her world was beautiful.

(What about me, then?) He quietly wondered.

His memory of what happened before being picked up by Rin had not yet recovered. According to Lord El-Melloi II, this was not amnesia but memory saturation, caused by devouring gods. He had also been warned that if left unchecked, his memory would be pushed aside and disappear. He had embarked on this journey to survive.

However.

The thought of regaining his past memories and personality bothered him.

Who could guarantee that he was even a decent human being before he devoured the gods? Considering the likes of Mushiki from the Summit Court and Latio from the Atlas Institute, there was a good chance he would wind up opposing Rin and Lord El-Melloi II. What if it even came to killing Gray?

"....."

His breathing grew difficult.

Simply thinking about that kind of future made his chest tighten.

Gray, who tried her very hardest to live, who hid her face in a hood, yet even the young man could see the softness of her heart. Perhaps it was a sort of camaraderie between two people who were desperately resisting people from ancient times.

(I want to hear Lana's voice...)

He thought back to the girl they had parted with a few days ago on the pirate island. "Homesick" didn't quite feel like the right word to describe what he was feeling.

Rin and Ergo walked to the eastern corner of Jinbocho accompanied by the chirping of cicadas. Dark shadows were cast onto the asphalt, and their feet followed them. In the sweltering summer heat, Rin's steps remained as graceful as ever, while Ergo's were pure and innocent.

Rin spoke up as they walked.

"Have you noticed something?"

"There are shrines everywhere along this road."

Ergo directed his gaze to where Rin was looking, where a small shrine sat. There was a cheap cup of sake placed in front of it alongside a cute paper doll. It had probably been put there by a resident of the neighborhood.

"This country has many gods. Or, I guess you could say the gods are a bit...closer," Rin continued, still walking. "They're called the Yaoyorozu."

"That means... eight million, right?"

Watching Ergo count it out on his fingers, Rin smiled. "It just means a lot. In this country, you find gods in everything: the wind, the waves, fire, even when you clap your hands together. It's a kind of animism, except they don't actually believe that there are spirits in everything. It's more about treating things as if the gods actually reside inside them."

"So they don't believe gods exist, but they act like they do?"

"It only sounds strange if you put it that way. But that's how this country is. Even though they aren't fully aware of their faith, they offer money on New Year's, pray for success in exams, and pour sake for road gods and guardian deities as we just saw. I think it's more about confirming something within themselves rather than believing in a god."

For some reason, her words resonated with Ergo.

He placed his hand to his chest. There was actually a god there, one that he had devoured. He then moved his hand to his mouth. It was also there.

Even though he had lost his memory, the taste of gods had never left his tongue.



My mentor gripped the steering wheel, biting his lip.

The car was a rental, and he seemed to get used to it quickly, since people also drove on the right side of the road in Japan. He was a little unhappy that he couldn't rent the same type of car he was used to, but that was a car meant for a Lord. It was only natural that there wouldn't be a luxury vehicle readily available. Sitting in the passenger seat, I could feel a slight difference in the smoothness of the acceleration, but it was far from being a problem.

In this case, however, my mentor's thoughts were elsewhere.

“...This kind of opportunity is rare, even for me...but I'd need three days to visit all the holy sites around Akihabara... I would need a week to dig up rare items and build the minimum necessary connections... Damn it, shopping in Akihabara is a serious matter...”

He muttered with an intensity I had never witnessed before.

It seemed that the impact of Rin's words were quite deep. Truly, it gave me renewed understanding of the title of the new nuclear bomb of the El-Melloi Classroom. In a sense, it was a curse stronger than magecraft.

“Do you really want to visit that place so badly?”

“Well, no, not really... of course, I wouldn't mind going if we have the time, just to relax,” he tried to explain as he glared at the road.

“If you want to go, Sir, I'd go with you.”

I don't know what I was thinking then to have blurted out something so unnecessary.

“That's not a bad idea.”

“Besides...” I started, before a thought struck me.

It would surely be wonderful if a certain hero were walking beside him down this street. Though the hero I knew was no more than a fleeting glimpse into the past, the bond between them still glowed with a serene light... What was more, my mentor had become calmer since then, so I had become more aware of his slight changes in expressions.

“What?”

“...It’s nothing.”

Seeing me stumble over my words, my mentor chuckled quietly.

“I only started playing video games because of that guy, after all.”

I looked up in shock. My ears grew hot; he had seen straight through me.

My mentor’s eyes narrowed as if he was looking into the past. Perhaps it was because he had taken part in the battle in this country when he was younger.

The Fourth Holy Grail War— the burning moment that had made my mentor who he was now.

Perhaps that was one of the moments that divided the four stages of his life, ending “green spring”, or youth.

My mentor stepped on the gas, and the car accelerated.

Soon, we arrived in the mountains. Lush greenery covered our heads in a canopy, and the sound of cicadas grew louder, almost drowning out the sound of the car’s engine. Even the air felt different through the windows, as if the color and temperature had changed.

Driving up a slope for around ten minutes brought us to a large mansion, so dark it looked painted black.

“Is this the Yakou’s mansion?”

It was incomparable to the elegant mansion Mikiya had brought us to yesterday, with its imposing gate and endless plaster walls. It harmonized with the atmosphere of the mountains, creating something that seemed to crush me.

“No. This is only the entrance,” replied my mentor.

“The entrance? What do you mean?”

“There are many buildings inside. This Yakou house is the mountain itself.”

Swallowing my fear, I looked to the building again. There were indeed many more buildings beyond the gate, all of which had undoubtedly been built a long time ago.

"I might add that we've been on private territory since we drove onto the road just then. It doesn't even seem to be marked on this country's maps. This much land and history would certainly make for an outstanding bounded field."

My mentor often said that there were many types of bounded fields. Some were of magecraft, some were of science, and others appealed to the human mind.

The one on this mountain seemed to be a ward against history and law. In other words, it distinguished the mountain from the surrounding area and kept others away.

At this scale, it was almost like the border of a small country.

"The Yakou family is likely a descendant of a powerful clan."

"By clan, do you mean a powerful local faction?"

My mentor nodded. We drove through the gate, where the road continued.

"All around the world, mountains are considered a sort of extraterritorial region. Just as they are pirates(lit. sea robbers) on the sea, there are bandits(lit. mountain robbers) on the mountains. In Japan, even after the reign of the national hero Tokugawa Ieyasu, the mountains retained their unique set of laws. You could almost consider them separate countries."

"So the entire mountain is like a bounded field?"

"Exactly. Similar concepts exist in Buddhism as well (*TN: couldn't find out what he's talking about here*). Borders, cultures, languages... all of them can be elements in the construction of a bounded field. We human beings are creatures that cannot live without separating something."

For some reason, what he said reminded me of the Root, which could be considered the end goal of every mage.

According to my mentor, everything that exists today branched off the Root. Couldn't it be said a branching root was the same as living a separate life? If we could not live without separating things, the Root must have been separated too.

I felt like I was on the cusp of realizing something important.

As I pondered this thought, which was as fleeting as an illusion, another building appeared into view. Just like the gate, it was painted entirely black.

"...they're pretty thorough."

There was no end to the black wherever I looked, from the walls, to the doors, pillars, and even the roof tiles. It was as if a shadow cast on the ground had risen up and transformed itself into a mansion. Under the dazzling summer sun, it was quite a strange sight to behold.

There were three mud-brick storehouses to our side, also black. Several cars were parked in a gravel lot a little distance away.

The unbearable heat and humidity assaulted us as soon as we got out of the air-conditioned car. The smell of earth and greenery-- the smell of the mountains surrounded us. It was a smell and feeling different from the ever-chilly mountains of Wales.

We stood in front of the second gate. Without knocking or ringing a doorbell, the gate slowly opened, revealing something unexpected.

Several dozen men dressed in black stood on either side of the road ahead. Apart from their hairstyles, they were dressed identically in black suits and ties. Despite it being the middle of a summer day, they didn't seem affected by the heat at all.

(...The Japanese Mafia!)

I thought back to something my mentor had said. If they were the Ryougis' relatives, the same must have applied to them.

My mentor also mentioned that they were descended from a powerful local clan, which could eventually have become the yakuza. Though I didn't know much about this country, it made sense that powerful people who weren't absorbed into the government would turn themselves into anti-establishment organizations.

They were the unsavory, created through a quirk of history.

But that was not what surprised us.

All of the men's faces were covered by masks. They were probably traditional Japanese masks, like the ones I had seen on the actors of the Noh play I had gone with my mentor to see in London.

Even though they all should have had the same expression, their shadows were cast differently, making them look different shades of sad, happy, and angry.

The black-clad men turned to face us like clockwork and bowed in perfect unison.

“...!”

It was such a strange sight that I was genuinely baffled. I was used to magecraft, mystery, and the way the nobles of the Clock Tower treated their subordinates. However, the scene I was witnessing here in a foreign country was completely outside my realm of understanding.

One person stepped out from the crowd of people as still as statues. He was the only one not wearing a mask. A plaster cast covered his right hand, which was in a triangular sling.

“We have been expecting you, Lord El-Melloi.”

“Apologies, could you please add the ‘II’? That name is too heavy for my shoulders to bear.”

“Of course, Lord El-Melloi II.”

His words were genuine and polite, but there was a sort of pressure hidden at the bottom of his voice. It was a pressure particular to people with a background of violence. Over the past few years, I had come into contact with enough of these people to recognize its presence.

He looked around my mentor’s age, which was to say, in his early thirties. His close-cropped hair, pursed lips, and muscular body evident even beneath his suit were all notable, but his most striking feature was the scar between his eyebrows. It was quite old, having become a stroke of paler skin.

“What is your name?”

“My name is Yakou Yukinobu.”

My mentor’s eyes widened a touch.

“It is an honor to be welcomed by the direct successor to the Yakou family.”

“Unfortunately, that assessment is no longer correct.”

“How so? From what I have heard, you have virtually been running the organization for the past several years.”

“In that case, surely you should also have heard that our family’s successor cannot be decided by something as trivial as the management of the organization.”

The man said that plainly, as if it was just an obvious fact.

As he spoke, another voice came from the mansion.

“Please wait, Lady Akane.”

“No, I won’t wait. Our guest came all this way. I can’t just wait around inside, can I? I never expected the Ryougis to contact the Clock Tower, much less find a Lord. Haha, maybe that son-in-law’s got a bit more up his sleeve than I thought.”

This person was not wearing a mask.

She was dressed in a garment that resembled mourning clothes, made of a lustrous fabric that seemed to be silk. Apart from a silver obi, it was so black it seemed to absorb the sunlight, much like the mansion.

She looked to be in her late fifties, and was currently pushing away the people around her trying to hold her back and heading straight in our direction.

“She is the head of the household,” said Yakou Yukinobu, bowing his head.

My mentor turned to her and raised an eyebrow.

“You are...”

“Precisely,” said the woman, eyes shining. Though her wrinkles were prominent, and half of her hair had grayed, the indomitable will in her eyes seemed to have remained unchanged since her younger days.

“I am Yakou Akane. Greetings, Lord El-Melloi II--or, perhaps I should call you ‘the Plunderer’, like everyone else seems to nowadays,” she said mischievously.

~Part 3~

“Akihabara starts around here,” Rin said in a low voice where the landscape changed drastically.

Stylized characters danced about in an array of advertisements for games and anime that hung from the buildings. The streets had been turned into a pedestrian paradise, where many performers expressed themselves in all manner of unique ways. Some were dancing in maid cosplay, while others were strumming rock tunes on worn-out guitars. There were also duos performing self-written skits, magical girls performing pantomimes, with passersby eagerly joining in.

It was a chaotic space that was just trying to beat the intense heat. It was as if all sorts of things that left strong enough of an impression on their own had been thrown into a melting pot and left to simmer.

“...Wow, Akihabara is amazing,” marveled Ergo, looking around with wide eyes.

Even Rin was a little surprised by the district’s free spirit as she led the way.

“To think this place is in the same country as my corner of Japan... No wonder the professor starts muttering about how there should be a branch of the Clock Tower here every now and again.”

“Isn’t there one?”

“If there were, he wouldn’t look so miserable all the time.”

Rin chuckled, probably thinking back to Lord El-Melloi II’s expression when they had parted and wishing she could have taken a photo.

“Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves,” the red-haired young man said dreamily, as if walking on clouds.

This was how he had been at the festival the day before, too. Some people might look at the same expression on someone else and criticize them for not having their feet on the ground, but in the case of this young man, he had a strangely calming effect on

those around him. Indeed, he was more like a dog than a cat, specifically a large one sleeping by the fireplace, or on a walk with a child.

“It’s like they have a festival here every day.”

“Yep. Pedestrian paradises are a type of festival. Though, it’s also the Urabon festival.”

“The Urabon Festival... Is that another summer festival?”

“They have it in Singapore too. It’s held in the seventh month of the lunar calendar, also called the Hungry Ghost Festival.”

“Ah, Lana and the others explained that to me. They said that deceased ancestors and friends visit from the other world in the summer.”

“They’re essentially the same festival,” said Rin. Her eyes narrowed as she thought back to her time as a pirate consultant in the Strait of Malacca. She had been there a long time— as she had even been sending instructions while enrolled in the Clock Tower, somewhere she knew where her heart belonged, and must have been holding her hand out to the sea and the sun.

“The Hungry Ghost Festival is exactly what it sounds like: a festival where you offer food and entertainment to comfort the hungry dead. It suits Akihabara, in a sense. The ghosts of East Asia have an affinity for water, and this area used to be ocean. If you asked the professor, he’d probably say that games are a type of festival.”

They walked down the bustling midsummer street. The newly-completed UDX skyscrapers glowered down at the flow of people. Flashy advertisements for the latest games played from the billboards.

“Digital games in particular separate the two-dimensional world from the three-dimensional world and envision a single world on the other side of the screen. Of course, the same is also true for books and movies, but games are more direct because our actions can directly influence what happens beyond the screen.”

“That applies to the mobile games that our professor plays, right?” Ergo chimed in.

He spotted a group of what looked like students sitting across the street, each holding a small console. To his surprise, the whole group was playing together. It seemed that they were playing the same fantasy monster hunting game Lord El-Melloi II played.

“Is that why he likes them?” He muttered, which made Rin stop abruptly and look up at him with a sigh.

“Ergo, are you really that close-minded?” she said, pointing at his chest. “I don’t recommend it.”

“Why not?”

“Why? You have it the wrong way. By your logic, people like things because they should like them. But that’s not why people like things.”

Confused, Ergo tried his best to keep a strange expression from creeping onto his face.

“...That doesn’t seem wrong to me.”

“We live because we love. We don’t love in order to live. It doesn’t necessarily hurt to do it the other way around, but you’ll make mistakes when the time comes to uphold your own beliefs.”

“.....”

At that, Ergo groaned and held his head in his hands.

“What’s wrong?”

“No, it’s just that... if what you say is true, we’ll end up liking things we shouldn’t.”

“Exactly.”

“But won’t that result in conflict?”

“Of course. When that happens, we have no choice but to fight. Look back through history and you’ll see that it’s all we’ve been doing for thousands of years, whether as mages or not. Remember, Ergo: there will always be a time where we must fight. We can debate, discuss, and even accept defeat. But we must know that we have the choice to fight. If that choice no longer crosses our minds, our existence loses its purpose.”

After she finished, she let out a small gasp as they realized they were making a scene. Rin tugged at Ergo's sleeve and quickly slipped away.

"Goodness. I got carried away, didn't I?" She said, fanning herself with her hand and taking out a small notebook. "Now, let's see, the store Flat told me about is..."

Her pale fingers stopped just as she was about to flip through the pages.

"What's the matter, Ergo?"

"Um, it's..."

Rin followed Ergo's hesitant gaze and frowned.

"Do your phantasmal arms feel something?"

"Yes. The area around my back feels...tingly." Said Ergo, putting a hand on his shoulder. His six phantasmal arms remained intangible and invisible, but he could feel their presence.

"Right, our professor did say that those arms of yours are more like sensory organs that can withstand immense amounts of information."

Lord El-Melloi II's hypothesis formed the basis for the possibility of Ergo's personality falling apart if things continued as they were. His amnesia was the result of memory saturation, because the information contained in a human personality was nothing compared to that of a god.

"Do you know why?" Rin asked as casually as possible, though her face betrayed a trace of tension.

"No," Ergo replied, shaking his head, "But it's strong, and it's scary."

He closed his eyes, hesitated for a moment, then added: "It's also...dark."

It was an odd choice of words. How could something he couldn't see be dark? Several speculations flashed across Rin's mind, and she put away the notepad and took something else from her bag.

“What is that?”

“A mana gauge.”

The item she held resembled a compass. It was, indeed, a compass of sorts, though the needle swaying inside its intricate case did not point north.

“My father gave me one of these as a birthday present a long time ago. This particular one I made from scratch.”

“Did you use it in the Holy Grail War?”

Rin smiled a fearless smile at Ergo’s remark.

“It’s standard practice in Grail Wars to wander around the city and look for other participants. Since Tokyo is a large city, we might need to use a different strategy...Combined with your senses, Ergo, we should be able to pull it off.”



We followed the man in the mask into the mansion.

The inside of the mansion was also terribly black. Though the walls and pillars were the same as the outside, as we walked further, it felt as if we were diving into the depths of a giant’s bowels. The mysterious smell of the incense only strengthened that impression.

The color and smell seemed to eat slowly away at me, and the masked men dressed in black that surrounded us certainly didn’t help, either.

“Do you...always wear masks...?”

“Haha, of course not!” The woman laughed heartily at my tentative question. “This is a kind of ritual. Yours are just more formal and logical than ours, but that’s because everything from the water, air, and dirt are different on this side of the globe. Naturally, our magecraft is different too, though we don’t call it magecraft in these parts.”

The woman in the kimono chuckled softly.

Yakou Akane, the head of this magecraft organization.

As I followed her, my sense of distance and balance seemed to gradually distort. It may sound strange, but it felt as if I was walking inside a pitch-black kaleidoscope. Though it seemed completely black, the imperceptible changes in hue and shade seemed to be twisting our inner selves.

The corridors were illuminated by candles in the absence of sunlight.

In the flickering light, there seemed to be skulls smiling down at us from the ceiling.

(...It's an illusion.)

I closed my eyes and quietly adjusted my breathing.

This was a defensive meditation technique I had learned from my mentor. It guarded my heart within a set of firm walls so that I would not be hurt by my imagination and sensitivity. Though I had barely learned any magecraft in my years at the Clock Tower, I managed to earn a passing grade in this skill.

Eventually, we arrived at a spacious room.

(.....!)

This time, there really were faces on the walls.

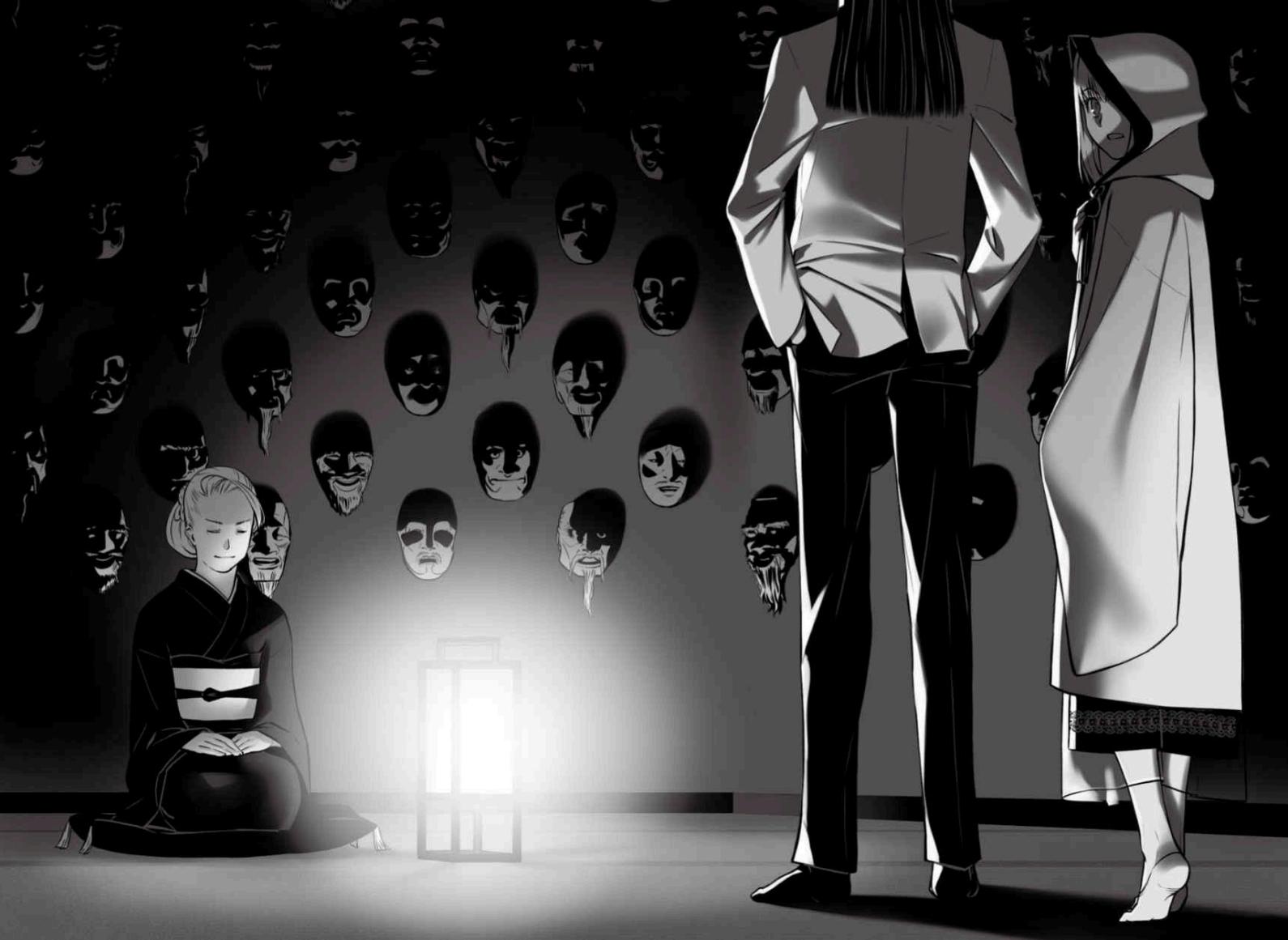
Dozens, if not hundreds of masks covered the pitch-black walls, similar to the ones worn by the black-clad figures.

“I hope you’ll permit my gaudiness. To be fair, it’s impossible for mages to have good taste.”

The black-clad figures that had accompanied us this far left. Akane sat at the back of the room, and gestured for us to sit as well.

“*Noh* masks... It seems they’re all men’s masks,” said my mentor, looking at the walls.

“Oh, you recognize them?”



“I went to a Noh play in London. It was wonderful.”

“So the Lords of the Clock Tower are treated well in mainstream society as well. In this country, we like to stay in the shadows.”

“Even so, our priority of concealing mystery does not change.”

Their conversation was calm, but I could not help but feel uneasy.

It felt like two cultures were clashing blades. I was reminded of a scene in a Japanese movie I had watched where two samurai slowly closed in on each other.

My mentor glanced briefly behind the woman, to something covered in black cloth atop a raised platform. From its shape, it seemed to be a mirror.

“I’ve heard that the yakuza has three origins.”

“Oh?”

“In my understanding, there were the underprivileged classes unrecognized by the government, the gamblers running illegal gambling dens, and the street vendors and performers that set up around shrines, known as ‘tekiya’. These groups that were never separate interacted and intertwined, eventually becoming the yakuza. I read that the *tekiya* in particular dealt in a wide range of businesses, from drugs and prostitution to sumo wrestling and Noh plays, and even curses and prayer.”

“No wonder they call you the plunderer,” replied the woman, amused.

My mentor’s eyebrow twitched. At the same time, I felt my heart pound. Though he seemed to be discussing the yakuza in general, he was clearly discussing the Yakou family. Of course, the details were probably a lot more complicated, but the general direction was correct.

I was reminded of festivals.

Whether in the West or the East, festivals were mystical ceremonies, which meant that they were necessarily tinged with the dark aura of mystery.

My mentor narrowed his eyes and paused for a moment before posing a question.

“I heard that someone from your clan was abducted.”

“Indeed. Ryougis’ son-in-law, who I’m rather fond of, specializes in missing people...or so I’ve heard. I was ashamed to ask him about it.”

Mikiya had said the same thing.

“Excuse me for saying this, but we are outsiders here. I don’t believe we can be of much help searching for someone.”

“Oh, but you are mistaken,” said Akane with a wry smile. “We only asked the Ryogi family because we knew they would have exactly the right connections to help us.”

“...What do you mean?”

“The abduction had a foreign air to it.” Her words seemed to send a faint bolt of lightning flashing across my skin. “Magecraft organizations in Japan may have tight

bonds, but we're really quite small compared to the Clock Tower and the Spiral Manor. We are, of course, trying to find the abducted child, but we need to find some way of dealing with the tigers if we step on their tails at some point, don't you agree?"

It was an intensely political statement.

Though I heard many such statements in my time at the Clock Tower, this felt different.

Maybe because of the room we were in, something about it felt dark. Or maybe it was the fault of the countless masks on the walls. Each of them seemed to possess a will and was gazing at me. The Clock Tower was a place where plots and ambitions intertwined, creating an impossibly complex web. However, in this case, I felt as if the ambitions were converging into one and tightening around my neck.

"...In other words, if we recklessly retrieve the abducted child, we might end up in conflict with the opposing organization."

"Careful there. We don't like to put things so bluntly in our country," Akane said, her lips twisting playfully. "As I said earlier, everything, from the air to the water, is different here. Naturally, our chosen methods also differ, but we also want to handle things as smoothly as possible. Surely that is not too much to expect from a Lord of the renowned Clock Tower."

She emphasized the last part of that sentence.

So she wanted someone to fill the role of mediator and insurance. It was a mindset that truly resembled that of the mafia, as if she was making preparations before a war.

"Mrs. Yakou," said my mentor. "Surely you must understand the implications of indebteding yourself to others."

"Of course," Akane replied with a nod. "You must have something you want to learn from us too, don't you? Lord El-Melloi II."

"....."

She was right. Even before we had come here, my mentor had expressed an interest in establishing contact with Japanese mages. It was most likely to save Ergo and I.

My mentor closed his eyes and slowly took a deep breath.

“There’s something I would like to confirm. You wouldn’t be so wary as to contact me if the abductor is just any foreign mage. You must know something about the magecraft organization that abducted that child, don’t you?” He asked, after opening his eyes again.

“Haha, of course you would ask that. You’re right.”

Without further ado, Yakou Akane revealed the organization’s name. It was a name that both of us were familiar with.

“The Wandering Sea (*Baldanders*).”

~Part 2~

Rin and Ergo walked toward the north. The lively atmosphere of Akihabara gradually calmed. The buildings they passed first became quaint electronics shops, then stores that sold mechanical parts, then finally became high-rise office buildings.

“Feel anything?”

“I think we’re getting closer, little by little.”

“That lines up with the direction of magical energy,” Rin said, checking the mana gauge in her hand.

“Did you expect this to happen?”

“No, I was just being prepared. Have you forgotten you’re being chased by a bunch of mages?”

It was clear what Rin was referring to.

Latio of the Atlas Institute, Wuzhiqi of the Summit Court, and the Wandering Sea(Baldanders). All three were mages who had made Ergo devour gods. Though they didn’t know much about the third mage, Rin anticipated that they would show up soon enough.

“Simply reacting when things happen doesn’t suit me. It’s always best to go on the offensive, if possible. Why wouldn’t I surprise my enemy by attacking them first?”

“Classic Rin,” Ergo smiled earnestly.

Rin, who, as far as he could remember, was the person he had known the longest, was always pragmatic without relent. She didn't give off the unworldly air that came with being a mage. Perhaps that was because she ardently pursued her dreams.

(Maybe the professor is the same,) thought Ergo.

The Lord who kept belittling his own lack of talent yet never stopped moving forward bore a striking resemblance to his student. If he said that aloud, though, both of them would deny it.

“Here.”

Drawn by a mysterious sensation, Ergo stopped in front of an alley.

“Ergo.”

Rin stopped a few steps in.

She only tilted her chin up, but Ergo got the message. He held onto her waist, and the two of them lifted unnaturally off the ground. His phantasmal arms grabbed onto the edge of the buildings and hoisted them up.

Silently landing on a rooftop, they peered down into the alley, where several figures stood shrouded in shadow among the trash bags. They were all black-suited men with sunglasses that concealed their faces and the demeanor of people whose jobs were far from legal. They surrounded a child that looked around eight years old, who wore an anime-patterned shirt and tattered jeans. Although the child's hair looked combed, the character on the shirt was pitifully dirty and faded. Through Rin's enhanced eyes, she saw that the child was glaring at the men with pursed lips.

Even from a distance of several tens of meters, they could hear the black-suited men.

“We humbly ask you to return, Akira-sama(*TN: Leaving this as is because these are people speaking Japanese to people who understand Japanese and I see no reason to localize it. Also I wouldn't know what to translate it into anyway.*)”

(—Akira-sama?!)

Ergo stiffened from his place on the rooftops.

It was the name of the very child they had been asked to find.

“Rin—”

Just as he was about to call out, the child twisted away and screamed, “I don’t want to!”

However, it was impossible to escape from the circle of black-clad men. One of them grabbed the wrist of the child, who tried to bite his arm. Before that could happen, though, the men suddenly fell to the ground as if pinned down by an unseen force.

“I don’t want to be too rough, but I’ve been permitted to make you feel pain as I see fit. You’ll recover just fine from a few broken bones. Please prepare yourselves for that to happen,” came a chillingly calm voice.

It was the voice of someone who Ergo knew would act without hesitation if his hand was forced. Though he had encountered this sort of person before in the Strait of Malacca, it still shocked him to discover such violence in a foreign metropolis.

“...We have to stop him.”

“Wait.”

Rin held Ergo back as he was about to step forward. Almost simultaneously, a tall figure cast a shadow in the alley.

“Well, well. It seems they found us quickly after I settled down to get a job, as I guessed.”

It was hard to see his face from the rooftop, but Ergo could tell he was tall. He wore the sort of vest bartenders wore, and was glaring down at the three men.

“You’re...”

“Do you know how long it took me to find this job? If I don’t finish the preparations by evening, I’ll never hear the end of my boss’ nagging. Well, it is my fault for giving all of my cash to Mr. Sano without making sure we had enough,” the young man who looked like a bartender said with a wry smile, scratching his head.

As he said that, he slowly made his way toward the black-clad men—or rather, the child. The men looked terrified for a moment by his unwavering gait, but quickly shifted their gazes away.

“Wakagashira.”

“...Ah.” After exchanging a nod, the *wakagashira*, or boss of the henchmen, faced the young man and ordered him to stop. “We have heard about the mage who kidnapped Akira-sama. The head of our family has told us to avoid causing too much harm. If you leave, we will let you go.”

“Well, that’s nice of you. It warms my heart to see how considerate you are.” The young man did not stop.

However, before he could reach the child, the three black-clad men put their hands out in front of them. They each clapped their hands together, sending a sound down the alley.

This was called *kashiwade*. Hands clasped in prayer.

Ergo felt the sound transform into magical energy. For a moment, the young man’s back swelled, as if a gust of wind had gone through his body. After it passed, everything seemed to return to normal.

“Classifying a person as a fiend? Japanese magecraft is way too aggressive.”

“Don’t be so presumptuous,” said one of the men in black. “This is just a warning. Mind what you speak of the Yakou family’s austerity.”

“Ah, right. Calling it black magic(magecraft) is distasteful to you guys. Well, whatever you may call it, the core of its power detests fiends.”

“...You’ve got to be kidding,” muttered Rin, tensing in contrast to the young man’s cheerful demeanor.

“Rin?” Ergo turned to her.

“Putting aside the strength of that for now, that spell takes effect directly inside your opponent’s body. It resonates with them. If you find the right wavelength, it’s like detonating a bomb inside them that completely bypasses most spiritual defenses and tears their insides to shreds.”

Rin’s description perfectly captured the gist of the black-clad men’s technique. Originally used to summon gods with the purity of its sound, the *kashiwade* summoned the Od that dwelled within all living beings. That was how she realized that something to resonate with one’s inner self could be repurposed to blow people up.

“That sort of thing doesn’t work with the Clock Tower’s Western magecraft. It’s unique to Japan. Here, the order is different. Though the scale is massively reduced, it exists in the same dimension as the magecraft of the Age of the Gods. What we think of as cheating is the norm here, and I’m sure the opposite is also true.”

Ergo was reminded of something Lord El-Melloi II had said.

According to him, the Western magecraft that was based in the Clock Tower was like an illusion cast over the world. While there were various schools and styles, the essence of magecraft was temporarily distorting the shape of the world through spells and magical energy. The depth of the distortion depended on the spell. A spell with more than ten Counts, also called an Instant Contract, could even interfere with the order of the world. For that reason, Reality Marbles, which created another world inside the world, was considered the pinnacle of magecraft.

However, the magecraft of the Yakous was probably different.

—“*The magic of the Age of the Gods and the authority of those gods is simply like that.*”

—“*It doesn't require the same procedures as modern magecraft. The hand using magecraft is closer to the power of the gods.*”

Ergo thought of the ancient prayer, amen, and the Lord who said “let there be light” and brought light into the world. Though he couldn't understand how it worked, he felt that the Yakous' magecraft was similar.

“...And yet, this guy...”

Another clap rang out. Perhaps “sent out a shockwave” would be a better description.

Other than making Ergo tremble, it didn't make much of a difference.

“Can you stop? It's making my ears ring,” said the young man with a cheery smile, rubbing his ear.

“You...”

“It's a matter of density. You can blow up a sandcastle with a toy firecracker, but a solid concrete one wouldn't budge. You should keep that in mind if you think of me as demonic.”

Then, he seemed to kick the ground with a motion Ergo and Rin, with her enhanced vision, could only barely follow. It appeared to them a blur, accompanied by three sharp sounds. Two of the men collapsed almost simultaneously, having been punched in the jaw. Only the man they called the *wakagashira* remained standing. He leaped back and made a sword hand seal by raising two fingers in order to cast a new spell.

“Oh, impressive!”

The young man who looked like a bartender rolled up his sleeve, revealing a pattern that looked like a key tattooed into his skin. He clacked his teeth together thrice as he traced it.

“*Tian di xuan zong, wan qi ben gen*¹”

His whispers seemed to overflow. As if appearing by sleight of hand, yellow talismans slid from his fingers and onto the faces and hands of the *wakagashira*, until he became a mummy bound by yellow paper.

“*Ji ji ru luling*(This charm shall be executed swiftly)...Done. Sorry, old man, this is the easiest way.”

“Philosophy magecraft...!” Rin gasped in realization.

Ergo also knew that was the general term for the magecraft of Continental Asia. The storm summoned by Wuzhiqi of the Summit Court also seemed to fall under that category. However, it was the first time he had seen talismans like those or engravings resembling keys.

(Maybe...)

Maybe this was what philosophy magecraft usually looked like.

“Ruo!”

“You’re tougher than you look,” said the young man, ruffling the child’s hair.

“...I would’ve been fine even if you hadn’t showed up!”

“Haha, exactly. Sorry for interfering, Little Miss Akira.”

The young man gave the girl an exaggerated bow. Then, he looked up to the rooftops.

“Now, it’s your turn.”

After exchanging glances, Ergo and Rin jumped down. Ergo leaped straight onto the ground, while Rin kicked off the sides of the buildings. Like cats, neither made a sound as they landed.

¹ 天地玄宗, 万炁本根 is a line from a Taoist incantation called the Golden Light Incantation. It’s used to protect and purify, and it means something like “the Heaven and Earth are the origin of Taoism, everything in the world originates from the Tao”. Maybe. I have no idea.

“Who are they?” Akira asked, taking a step back. The young man stepped forward slightly to protect her. He looked slightly older than Ergo, around eighteen or nineteen. From here, Ergo could see that he had beautiful tan skin. His sculptured features reminded Ergo of a gust of dry wind from a distant country. He saw before his eyes a sea of grass that stretched beyond the horizon, a lone rider on a horse galloping into the sunset.

(...What is this feeling?)

A strange sense of *deja vu* stirred in Ergo’s chest. It was familiar yet unknown, and suffocating.

“Are you the people the Yakous asked for help?”

“Wait,” Rin held up her hand. “We’ve heard about their situation, and they do want our help, but that doesn’t mean we agreed to help them.”

“I see. And why should I believe you?”

“If we were their helpers, why wouldn’t we have ambushed you earlier?”

Recalling that Rin had just endorsed ambushing him, Ergo could only nod in agreement.

The young man who seemed to be called Ruo gave a wry smile.

“How practical. Your way of thinking reminds me of the continent. There aren’t many people like you in this country.”

“Uh, no? It’s got nothing to do with my nationality. Borders are just lines on a map. People are only bound by those things if they think they are.”

“Great answer!” Ruo exclaimed, clapping his hands together. “You’ve found yourself quite the interesting companion, Ergo!”

“...Huh?”

Startled at suddenly becoming the target of conversation, Ergo could only shake his head as Rin gave him a look. This didn’t make any sense. What was this nostalgia, this impossible sense of *deja vu* welling up inside him?

"It's alright, I expected you to forget. It's a bit sad, but hardly surprising, considering you've eaten three of them."

There was no need to ask what he was referring to.

Rin tensed as she wondered what the young man knew.

"I thought it'd be over by Wuzhiqi's turn," said the man. "The Atlas Institute can be dealt with. If their ability to estimate the future was enough to finish things on their turn, they wouldn't even need to feed you a god. Wuzhiqi, on the other hand, is a bigger problem than your everyday god. The old man said Wuzhiqi is unable to take his main body out in the open even though he didn't explain why, but he's still a challenge to overcome even with this handicap."

The air in the alley seemed to grow colder.

Even when faced with bizarre mysteries, Ergo had always felt a sense of detachment, as if it was someone else's business, like a traveler walking by strange sights on a journey from a faraway land.

This time, it was different.

"Ruo?"

"Oh, sorry. Don't worry about it," the young man explained to Akira, looking up at him.

Still guarded, Rin shifted a portion of her consciousness into her magic circuits.

"Who are you?"

"Bai Ruolong,"

Then, he added somewhat shyly:

"Ergo's best friend— and the disciple of the mage of the Wandering Sea who made him devour a god."



Ergo did not know which he should react to: the fact that he called himself Ergo's best friend, or that he was a disciple of the mage that made him devour gods.

"Bai Ruolong...!" The words tumbled from Ergo's lips with a squeak.

“That’s right. I hope you won’t forget it again,” replied Ruolong with a gentle smile.

It was a smile dazzling enough to adorn the silver screen, that could draw many people into the abyss.

“Ruo’s friend...?” Asked Akira.

“We used to be friends, yes.”

“I also want to know more,” inquired Rin. “You were using continental magecraft just then, right? So how come you’re from the Wandering Sea?”

“Well, that shows a lack of understanding on your part. The Wandering Sea doesn’t care if the magecraft it uses is Western or Eastern. Mage from the Clock Tower... Tohsaka Rin, was it?”

“Seems you did your research,” Rin said as she examined the fallen Yakou mages. They were injured, though not gravely. Ruolong had clearly been capable of killing them if he wanted.

“So, are you also after Ergo?”

“I guess,” the young man replied, shrugging. “Like I said, I thought you would have been captured by Wuzhiqi. We’re the last of the three. I never expected to run into you here.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“Well,” Ruolong said, clapping the back of his neck, “I was told to capture Ergo if I see him, so...”

Magical energy of an intensity far beyond a person’s Od surged from Ruolong’s body. Even Rin, whose number of sub-magic circuits surpassed those of regular mages, this was unimaginable.

It reminded Ergo of Wuzhiqi.

(I have to strike first—!)

“Ergo!”

“Got it!”

At Rin's command, Ergo's translucent arms burst forth from Ergo's back. Activated by Ergo's magical energy, they surged toward Ruolong, only to stop dead in front of him.

"Right, you've forgotten," said Ruolong, looking down at the phantasmal hands and sounding somewhat lonely.

Rin sensed that something warm was spreading from his back. Much like Ergo's arms, they were translucent and ethereal, like something out of a religious painting.

"These are phantasmal wings (Huan Yi)."

"Who are..."

"Didn't I say I was your best friend? How else could we have been equal friends?"

Equal. That meant this was not just a psychological condition, but a physical one, and perhaps even a mystical one.

"Oh, right, that reminds me. Just to confirm, you don't want these people to bring you back to the Yakous, right?"

"Of course not!"

"Alright, then there's no other choice," the young man nodded. "Be prepared to endure some pain, Ergo."

Behind him, the translucent wings stood tall. If what he said was to be believed, they were phantasmal wings.

However, their power was more akin to enchanted swords than wings.

Feathers flew through the alley, tearing through reinforced concrete as easily as paper and sending blue sparks flying wherever they collided with Ergo's phantasmal arms.

"Agh...!"

Feeling pain in his phantasmal arms for the first time, Ergo grimaced.

Nevertheless, he kicked off the ground, extending a different arm from the one that stopped the feathers and propelling himself into the air above the narrow alley.

"Aaaaaaah!"

Ergo thrust his arms out with a roar. To Rin's surprise, he was going all out from the very beginning, even though he was essentially a pacifist. The same person who had opted for a gentle restraint when Lord El-Melloi II and Gray infiltrated the pirate island now charged toward Ruolong without reserve or regard for Rin's instructions.

“Ergo...”?

An attack with the force of a tank seemed to send a hurricane barreling across the alley. It was a punch with a power that modern magecraft could not even be compared to. The winds made Rin wonder if the fallen Yakou mages had been blown away.

And yet, the translucent wings that covered Ruolong remained like a coat of snow-white down. Akira was also unharmed behind him. This time, though, he looked somewhat surprised.

“Ah...” Ergo groaned. He had calmed down and remembered that the girl was still there. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep you safe,” Ruolong said, smiling.

“...Even though you’re always a little late.”

“Haha, I’ve got nothing to say to that.” Raising an eyebrow at the girl’s remark, he pulled the girl closer to him. “It might be a bit tight.”

With Akira in his arms, Ruolong began to flap his wings. They rose into the air like angels ascending into the sky, as if gravity no longer held them down.

From the air above the alley, the tan-skinned angel looked down at Ergo and Rin—except, Rin wasn’t beneath him.

“Don’t you underestimate me!”

Immediately after Ergo’s whirlwind had passed, she had already transitioned into her next attack. Lowering her stance, she slipped past Ruolong and aimed for his back.

“Anfang!”

Without holding back, she fired a Gandr shot.

It was a Scandinavian curse. Even in modern times, pointing at someone could be considered rude, but in other regions it was a witch’s curse.

Rin released several rounds of the semi-materialized curses in an instant. The young man deflected all of them as he turned around, only for the Gandr bullets to explode.

“—!”

He staggered, finally shaken. It took him the blink of an eye to realize that the last two attacks were only distractions. In that instant, Rin kicked off the alley walls and performed a somersault in the air like a gymnast. Two jewels sparkled in her hand. Ruolong’s wry smile was reflected in her brilliant blue eyes.

“...I’ll admit, you’re pretty impressive.”

“I won’t hurt the child,” she replied, with a wicked smile befitting the leader of a group of pirates. The jewels in her hand pulsed with magical energy like a beating heart. “*Neun! Acht! Dornendes Siegels!*”

Rin activated a new spell at point-blank range. The ruby and sapphire turned into thorny vines that ensnared her opponent.

“I’m sure you have your reasons, but you can tell me about them later!”

“Trying to restrain both my movement and my magecraft? You Western mages are so practical.”

Ruolong moved his wings, sending a flicker of lighting crackling through the air. Though they were in midair, he didn’t seem to need to flap his wings. When Rin looked up, she saw no sign of them falling, either.

(...*But I should have restricted his magecraft!*) Rin thought, looking up and swallowing.

She had been developing the spell she had just cast since before they came to Japan, made especially to counter the mages hunting Ergo down. She had used her favorite jewels: a sapphire that used thorns to extract the magical energy inside mages, and a ruby that used the energy extracted in a binding spell. Combined, they should have been able to neutralize enemies much stronger than herself.

“I see you’ve prepared countermeasures against both the Atlas Institute and Wuzhiqi. You must be serious about making a stand if you prepared new spells in such a short timeframe,” the young man said, floating as if in a fantasy world. “Oh right, and I guess I should thank you for promising not to hurt Akira.”

There was a creaking sound.

Nothing in Rin’s magecraft could have produced it.

“You’ve got to be kidding...”

“You’ve done well enough. Honestly. I won’t underestimate modern mages from now on. It’s not your fault you can’t defeat me.”

The entwined blue and red thorns began to turn black, as if they were rotting. But that should have been impossible. The thorns she had created were shaped from magecraft, temporary tricks to deceive the rest of the world. The concept of rotting did not apply to such things.

(Phantasmal wings and phantasmal arms...)

“Phantasmal arms” was just a throwaway name that Lord El-Melloi II had come up with. However, it captured the essence of them exactly, which was to be expected of the mage they called the Plunderer, the dissector of mages’ secrets.

For that reason, Rin could not help but make a connection between the two. (...*What if...*)

What if Ergo’s arms were truly similar to Ruolong’s wings? If that was true, they would have the same power to destroy spells.

—No.

There was a more fundamental problem than that.

If Ruolong had the same abilities as Ergo, surely he had also—

“—!”

Before the fear could take hold, Rin picked up a new jewel. But even before that, the thorns shattered into blackened shards that melted away before they could hit the ground.

“Wait!” Ergo shouted.

In all the time she had known him, Rin had never heard him shout with such intensity. He reached out with his phantom hands and grabbed at Ruolong.

“Alright, hold on!” Ruolong whispered, and Akira held onto him even tighter.

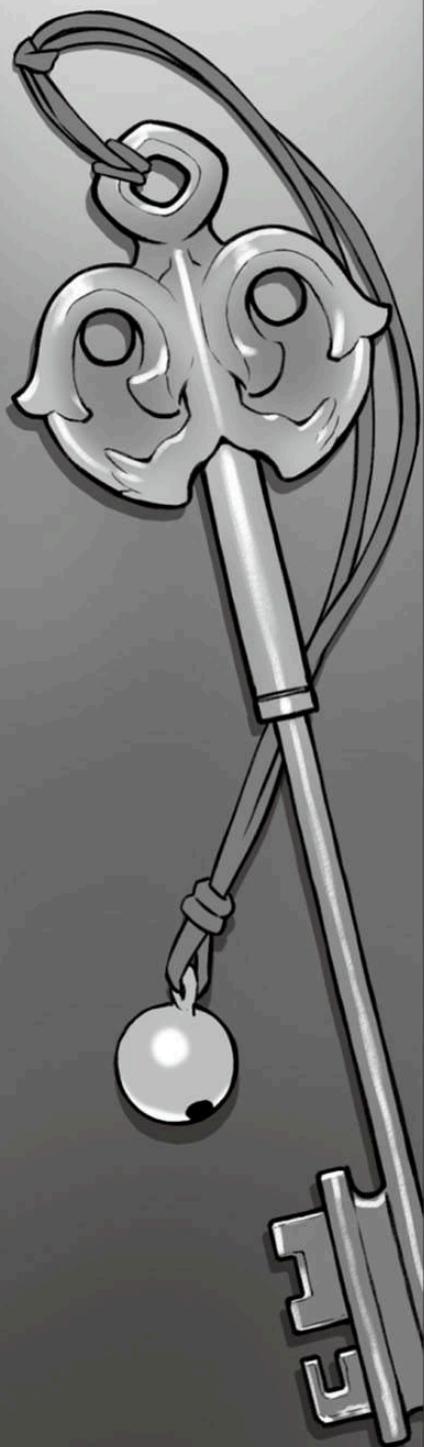
Then, the three shot up into the sky above the alleyway like rockets, so fast that not even Rin’s enhanced vision could keep up. By the time she looked up, they had already shrunk into fist-sized figures floating in the vast blue of the sky.

“...Dammit, how? It’s not like they’re Servants!”

After a few stunned seconds, Rin cast a spell to prevent onlookers from gathering. She decided to ignore the fallen Yakou mages for now. Though she wanted their information, it would be too much for her alone to handle.

Gritting her teeth, Rin took out her cell phone.

◆ 第三章 ◆
-Chapter 3-



~Part 1~

“...What?”

Holding his phone to his ear, my mentor’s expression suddenly changed.

We were at the Yakou mansion. My mentor’s phone had started to ring in the middle of our conversation with the mansion’s owner, Yakou Akane. At first, he had ignored it, but he eventually picked up at Akane’s urging.

“Mrs. Yakou,” said my mentor, looking up without hanging up.

“What’s the matter?”

“It seems that my students have entered combat with the mage from the Wandering Sea. Yakou Akira is with them.”

“...!”

I was at a loss for words. The old woman’s face also stiffened in the candlelight.

Akane had just told us that the Wandering Sea was responsible. What an incredible coincidence that Rin and Ergo just came across them.

(...*It can’t be...*)

Unbidden, the thought that it was more than just a coincidence rose like a bubble inside me. It was said among the mages of the Clock Tower that no true coincidences existed. Even though it felt that way when humans perceived it, all things flowed toward a predestined end, like panning for gold in the sand. And so, they claimed, they must reach the Root.

Though I didn’t understand half of what all those lecturers were talking about, by now, I had experienced firsthand the ridiculous frequency with which improbable things happened to mages. Perhaps that was what the Atlas Institute’s predictions of the future were based on.

“The location is Suehirocho,” said my mentor. “According to Rin, their opponent is as powerful as a Servant— sorry, Ghost Liner. She reports that the Yakou family’s mages have already been defeated.”

The old woman clapped her hands together, and the panels behind her slid open instantly, revealing her son, Yakou Yukinobu, whose right arm was in a plaster cast.

“Did you call for me?”

“You heard him, right? Was anyone sent to Suehirocho today?”

“I sent Ikaru and two others.”

My mentor confirmed this with Rin and nodded. “They did see three of your men, yes.”

It was as if storm clouds had suddenly gathered.



The surface of the earth blurred together. Everything, from the pedestrians on the sidewalks to the cars crowded on the streets and the billboards hanging from the buildings melted in his vision, the colors running together as they flew by.

Above the Akihabara UDX building, Ergo’s face twisted in the gale-force winds, but he kept his phantasmal arms locked on Ruolong.

(How much longer does he plan on flying?)

His arms held steady for the moment, but he did not know how much more they could endure. If he tried to attack Ruolong in this state, he could end up hurting the girl. That was not his intention. Even though it could be a fatal weakness in a world dominated by mages, he would never consider hurting someone younger than himself.

However.

—“*I was told to capture Ergo if I see him, so...*”

If what Ruolong said was true, it was very possible that the mage from the Wandering Sea was lying in wait ahead. He couldn’t sit back and let things play out that way.

(What...)

In the moment it took for Ergo to have that thought, Ruolong’s speed increased to an unbelievable degree.

On the plane from Singapore, Lord El-Melloi II had told Ergo how it was difficult for modern mages to fly. While simple floating was possible, it was generally impossible to sustain long-distance flight on one’s own. Even the few exceptions could hardly be

called true flight, he had said, with a nostalgic tone that seemed to say that he had experienced it before. Although Ergo knew little of his past experiences, he found the sight of the Lord staring longingly from the plane's tiny window captivating.

Wasn't this the true flight that Lord El-Melloi II had spoken of? Flying as far as one wished in a way that was beyond the skill of modern mages?

Ergo struggled desperately to keep his eyes open in the extreme acceleration as some buildings appeared up ahead. Without thinking, he simply stretched his phantasmal arms as far as they could go. Four of the six remained holding onto Ruolong, while two reached for the roof of a building and pulled with all their might.

The result was an incredible force.

Up until now, Ergo's phantasmal arms had endured all manner of attacks, from the bone giant's punches, to the alchemist's slashes, to Rin's magecraft when they trained. However, being pulled at speeds of several hundred kilometers an hour was a different story.

He heard the sound of something tearing, but ignored it and continued to hold on. The sound grew gradually stronger with the excruciating pain running down his back as he poured all of his strength into his phantasmal arms.

At last, Ruolong seemed to slow down.

“Pretty impressive, Ergo.”

For whatever reason, Ruolong did not seem to resist. He changed the course of his flight, causing Ergo to swing upward. Nevertheless, his hands remained clenched, devoted to sending Ruolong toward the building. Guiding him in its direction, he only let go with his phantasmal arms at the last moment.

Using the phantasmal arm grabbing the building like a rope, Ergo swung sharply.

Just like a pendulum swinging, he was vectored straight upwards.

He twisted at the waist and fell to the roof of the building.

Although he defended himself with his free phantasmal arm, the impact damaged his internal organs.

After a slight delay, Ruolong glided down to the same rooftop.

“Are you okay?”

“...Yeah, just a little surprised,” Akira muttered as Ruolong gently lowered her to the ground. She seemed to have been protected from the acceleration by some otherworldly law while she was in his arms.

“Ruo, you’re still Ruo, right?”

“Huh? What do you mean? Who else do I look like?” Ruolong replied, furrowing his brows.

Watching them talk, Ergo finally let himself relax a little. The injuries he had sustained had not healed yet, but he clenched his teeth and slowly stood up.

A strong wind was blowing from where they were, high up atop the skyscrapers. Below them on the west was a wide expanse of green. Ergo knew it was not a park, but the Imperial Palace, a symbol of the country. According to what he recalled of the map at the airport, that meant they were several kilometers from Suehirocho. How could they have come this far in only twenty or thirty seconds of flight?

The building they stood on was the GranTokyo North Tower. At forty-three stories and over two hundred meters, it aimed to be the tallest building in Chioda once it was complete. It was not open to the public yet, but the construction was mostly complete. Currently, the interior was being finished while inspections were conducted.

“Rin always said that mystery should be hidden. Is it different for the Wandering Sea?” Ergo asked, brushing the dirt from his clothes.

“No, we do that as well. I sure hope no one saw us, or I’ll get laughed at again. Though, at that speed, I doubt anyone did.” Ruo scratched his cheek with a somewhat uncertain confidence.

“You said we were best friends, didn’t you?” Said Ergo. “What do you know about me?”

“Everything... That’s a lie, of course,” he said, sticking out his tongue. “I know more than you do, though. Especially since you’ve forgotten most of it.”

“My professor said that my memory is saturated.”

“Oh? That’s smart of him. It’s definitely different from regular amnesia.” Ruolong stroked his chin, impressed. “I’m starting to take an interest in Lord El-Melloi II. I can’t say I care much for modern magecraft, but he is a Lord of the Clock Tower after all.”

Ruolong had mentioned that the Wandering Sea focused on the magecraft of the Age of the Gods. If that was the case, then the modern mage might as well not exist in his eyes.

“Oh, just to clarify, my philosophical magecraft is more modern. I’m from the Wandering Sea, yes, but I’m only a student.”

“What do you know about me?” Ergo repeated.

“Do you like to sing?” Asked Ruo in response after narrowing his eyes.

“Probably?”

He had sung with Lana and the others back on the island. In times of fear, sadness, or joy, their songs had always accompanied him.

“That hasn’t changed, then. You’ve always loved to sing. I never joined in, though.”

“Even though you call yourself my best friend?”

“Would you call anyone willing to sing with you your friend?”

Ergo supposed that was true.

Ruolong sighed deeply and put a hand to his forehead. “Another habit that hasn’t changed is how you keep going missing. Do you have any idea how many times I’ve had to look for you after you disappeared into a random tree or cave? It almost feels natural for me to find you by now.” The tan-skinned young man pouted as if moping about it.

The memories unknown to Ergo, washed away by his condition.

“But you always found me right away, didn’t you, Ruo?”

The response slipped from his mouth, surprising even himself.

“Did you just call him Ruo?” Asked Akira, blinking in surprise from nearby.

It was too late to take it back. The face in front of him scrunched up in amusement as Ruolong laughed.

“Have you remembered anything new?”

“...I’m not sure,” answered Ergo, shaking his head. “I wasn’t even sure of my name when I woke up.”

“To be fair, it’s not exactly your name. We all called you that, but it’s more like a codename.”

“Codename?”

Ruolong did not answer his question and instead posed his own. “How’s your hunger?”

Ergo stiffened.

“Sometimes, it’s completely unbearable, isn’t it? It doesn’t matter if you’re asleep or in the middle of a meal, the hunger gets so intense you can’t make sense of it— your vision goes completely black, your sense of smell disappears, and you feel like there’s a fire raging inside your stomach. Meat can’t satisfy you, fruit can’t satisfy you... I guess pomegranates work a little, but even then, it’s like adding drops of water to a vat of lava. The hunger returns immediately, and it’s even worse than before.”

A shiver ran down his spine.

Even though the person in front of him seemed like a stranger, he knew Ergo’s deepest secrets and described his anguish in vivid detail.

“If things continue, you will die. Or, more accurately, your sense of self will disappear. Lord El-Melloi II discussed this with you already, right?”

“...He did.”

Memory saturation— that was his fate. He had embarked on this journey to survive.

“—*To find a way to return the gods.*”

That was what Lord El-Melloi II had said. In order to do so, they had to uncover the identities of the other two gods that Ergo had devoured.

“Come with me, Ergo,” beckoned the young man Ruolong. His voice was deeply sincere, tinged with a longing he seemed to know would go unfulfilled. “The Lord of Modern Magecraft may have made impressive deductions, but they’re nothing compared to what we know about your body. We are the ones who made you devour gods in the first place; he can only try his best to guess. It’s an easy choice which side would be better at saving you.”

“.....”

Ergo fell silent. He touched his hand to his lips, feeling the lingering strange, familiar warmth in calling that person “Ruo”. Along with the name Ergo, it was one of the first fragments of his forgotten past he had reclaimed.

The tan-skinned young man waited patiently for his response. For some reason, Ergo felt that he would be willing to wait forever. Maybe it had been this way whenever he went missing and Ruolong looked for him endlessly, like he had just described. The emotions entangled in the nickname were impossible to untie.

After a moment, Ergo began to speak.

“If you could really tell me everything, you would have explained to Rin earlier.” He continued, slowly and deliberately. “That means there must be something Rin and the professor can’t know. Something that I can’t know, either.”

“You’ve always had a good intuition for these things,” said Ruolong, clicking his tongue. “Even so, I wasn’t lying. You need to come with us if you want to survive.”

“...Huh?”

Suddenly, Akira stopped breathing.

It was as if a haze had risen between the two of them, making the air shimmer—a common summer phenomenon. Yet as the conversation progressed, the air began to change, becoming something different.

“That girl, what does she have to do with it?” Asked Ergo. “I was told we had to come to Japan to restore the gods I devoured.”

As he said this, the air continued to distort, the mirage becoming a palpable tension. Neither Ergo or Ruolong seemed different on the surface, nor were they more hostile to each other. It was as if something inside them refused to be confined any longer and began spilling into their surroundings. If Akira had been a trained mage, she would have recognized it as the effect of raw magical energy.

The air strained with a creaking noise. The very landscape became distorted around them.

“She has something to do with the gods, doesn’t she?”

“She does,” Ruolong replied matter-of-factly. Maybe he thought it was impossible to hide. Or, maybe he thought it wasn’t worth hiding.

The distortion slowly approached its limit. Even though the energy should not have been able to take effect without being harnessed through a spell, it exhibited a strange synergistic behavior between the two of them, gradually transforming reality. The summer air became corroded as if a powerful drug had been diffused into it.

“Have you also devoured...?”

Before he could finish, Ergo’s body began to tremble.

(I want to devour)

A voice echoed inside him, with an urge so strong it repainted his consciousness a different color. He fell to his knees, convulsing violently. The trembling came from every single one of his organs, and he felt a burning sensation from his stomach all the way up to his throat. He retched, again and again, but all that came out was saliva.

“Ergo?”

“...No...”

“Are you...”

His shining eyes were not pointed at Ruolong, but at Yakou Akira.

At the same time, his six phantasmal arms made a grab for her.

With a tsk, Ruolong leaped over and snatched Akira out of the way, shielding her as they both tumbled across the rooftop. Ergo’s hands sliced through empty air.

“Ranolong?”

“Sorry, Akira,” said Ruolong to the girl. “I wanted to get you out of here before this happened, but...”

Ergo tilted his head to look up at the other young man. He was on all fours, and his eyes were unfocused. His innocent expression had become twisted. He gnashed his teeth as white foam spilled from his lips. He was clearly not who he used to be.

(I want to devour her)

The only thing inside him now was a dim red impulse.

It was like a calamity, like a plague, like hell. It was the same sensation he had felt toward Gray.

At that time, though, he had still been able to control it. Though the urge left him unable to move, at least he hadn’t immediately attacked her with his phantasmal arms.

(I want to devour them)

The reason was obvious.

It was because Ergo no longer saw the people in front of him as human.

They now appeared to him as two meals, and no one— not Lord El-Melloi II, not Gray, not Rin, and not Lana— was there to stop him. He seemed finally to realize how irrationally the bonds of humanity had restrained him.

“Gahh!”

At the very least, he tried to divert his desire, biting down on his own arm.

Blood gushed out. Its scent was sweet. It seemed to melt into his mouth.

The feeling intoxicated him. As Ergo drank his own blood, he felt he could abandon anything for this, while some recess of his brain despaired that he was having such thoughts.

“...Ergo...”

Akira clutched tighter to Ruolong’s sleeve, reminded of a vampire. Only a second ago, the red-haired young man had seemed kind even though they had been fighting. Now, he had become a bloodthirsty demon from the legends, and she could not help but pity him.

Ergo slurped at his arm with a grotesque sound. After he was finished, his eyes rolled up to look up at Ruolong and Akira.

“No matter how hard you try, you’ll never be satisfied with just your own flesh and blood,” Ruolong said, sounding almost sad.

He spread his phantasmal wings behind him again. Feathers detached from them and momentarily moved with the slow grace of falling leaves, but that was only a ruse. The feathers suddenly changed direction and shot toward Ergo, grazing his shoulder. It took some time for the wound to bloom into a large gash. It was said that someone hit by the stroke of a master swordsman would not notice that they had been wounded right away, and these feathers were sharp enough to be worthy of that description, too.

As dozens of feathers flew wildly about, Ergo’s phantasmal arms moved to intercept them.

Each time they made contact, huge amounts of magical energy scattered like ripples or invisible fireworks in the air. The sheer amount of energy each burst contained could make any decent mage faint.

For a while, they seemed evenly matched, but the dreadful desire continued to grow within Ergo.

(I want to devour them)

By now, Ergo had become the voice. That roaring desire had become his entire being.

Even so, he continued to resist in vain, but a phantasmal feather grazed the side of his body, spilling copious blood. Searing pain lanced through Ergo as he looked up and screamed in agony.

“Aaaaaahh!”

The remaining feathers continued to slash at him as he clutched his side, until a violent wind suddenly whipped up.

“Whoa...”

Bursting with magical energy, the wind knocked all of Ruolong's feathers away.

At the center of the whirlwind stood Ergo with his phantasmal arms overlapping his two original ones.

“...Wait, those are...”

Ruolong gasped.

Ergo's eyes burned golden, and he uttered a name:

“Divine Core Loading: Great Sage Equal of Heaven”

—Loaded/Bullet by the name of god.

~Part 2~

Rin bolted across the streets, parkouring through the back alleys faster than any Olympic runner thanks to her enhancement magecraft.

(This is too slow!) She thought.

If this had been the Grail War, the Servant she contracted with would have been able to carry her as he leaped from building to building.

(...But it's no use thinking about that now.)

Pushing away the thought of the red Archer, she looked to the mana gauge that she had clenched in her hand.

The gemstones Ergo had were emitting some kind of signal that she could pick up. Even though she didn't know where the young man named Ergo would fly to, as long as they did not leave Tokyo, Rin was confident that she could track them down.

Now, however, her eyes went wide.

The needle on the gauge was spinning wildly, but that should not have been possible.

By the time she blinked again, she noticed that some of the pedestrians in the alley had stopped and were looking up at the sky.

“What’s that?” They whispered to each other.

Rin also looked up.

In the glittering sun of the summer sky, a strange blankness had descended.

“Wait, wait, what?!”

This wasn’t exactly concealing the mystics.

Even if the Clock Tower didn’t keep a close eye on the Far East, this was too much. Perhaps it could still be explained away as a freak weather event, but things could turn out badly if a sharp-eyed observer noticed the wrong things. Living in an age of information already hid too many fatal traps for mages, but this felt as drastic as having your heart squeezed.

“Has that Baldander mage lost his mind?!” Rin grumbled quietly, then kicked off the ground, running under the blank sheet of white in the sky and toward the GranTokyo North Tower.



The view before him was like the ocean, blanketing the world as far as he could see. He imagined it stretching out into infinity— into an endless expanse of red.

No matter which direction he looked in, all he could see was one color, an all-consuming anger and passion that burned everything in its path. That was where Ergo stood, feeling as if he could evaporate at any time into that smoldering red surface.

The waves in this sea were made of swirling vortexes of fire. The sea spray was made of dancing embers.

In the middle of this burning sea was a pillar, and atop it stood a howling humanoid figure.

“...Sun Xingzhe,” murmured Ergo.

The monkey deity that had counseled him so calmly before was now on a rampage. It was almost as if he was revealing his true, primal form— in fact, before he eventually attained Buddhahood upon reaching his destination, and before he became a disciple of Tripitaka, hadn’t he been a terrible demon that not even the Court of Heaven could contain?

“Sun Xingzhe!”

Ergo’s shouts went unheeded.

The red waves of fire surged with each howl, rising to swallow Ergo. His very soul scorched by the unbearable heat, the young man’s consciousness faded to nothing.



An unnatural blankness had appeared in the sky, as if a transparent giant had stuck his hand into the clouds.

Ergo felt a voice pour from his mouth against his own will.

“Divine Core Deployment: Sun Xingzhe.”

—*Deploying/Replacement Barrel Loaded*

Ergo's arms were being replaced, his tissue transforming to carry the sheer volume of information contained in a god. Just like how his memories had been replaced, this overwhelming surge of information blotted everything out and drained every scrap of Mana and Od in the surrounding area. Even Ruolong's phantom feathers disintegrated.

“Hey! No, you can’t, the density here isn’t high enough!”

Even Ruolong’s voice had become tinged with panic.

Holding tight onto Akira, he leapt back while unleashing as many feathers as possible. Dozens of feathers surrounded Ergo in a whirlwind.

This was when Ergo spoke again.

“Divine Shell Twining•Rúyì jīn gū bàng.”



—*Twining: My Hands Mimic the Gods.*



Ergo had gained two massive, pure white arms.

He casually swung them at the furious assault of feathers. Wherever his arms came near them, it seemed that time had stopped, and all the ethereal feathers froze in the air.

“The ability to solidify space!”

This was probably a power granted by the Noble Phantasm of the enlightened monkey Sun Wukong. Naturally, Ruolong also knew that this world-famous Noble Phantasm had always been used to anchor the sea.

In other words, he could not dodge attacks. Considering the tremendous amount of magical energy, blocking them was also essentially impossible. He could only hope to keep his distance from this absurdly powerful weapon, though the red-haired young man could not cross in an instant.

A dazzling golden light shone from his eyes, scorching a red line in the summer air.

In a single stride he closed over ten meters, rapidly catching up to the retreating Ruolong. His divine arms were raised, ready to deliver unavoidable destruction. Folding his phantasmal wings, Ruo poured his magical energy into shielding the girl in his arms.

“Ergo!”

The giant fists crashed right through the sound of his name— until they stopped abruptly only a few centimeters from Ruolong and Akira.

“Ruo...”

That tone of voice could only mean one thing.

Black ropes had sprouted from Akira, momentarily binding the divine arms.

However, they should not have been able to stop those arms. Ruolong knew what magic dwelled inside Akira, and it should have been far surpassed by Ergo’s divine arms. If that was not the case, three great magecraft organizations would not have had to come together to make Ergo.

“Gah!”

A strange sound burst from Ergo’s mouth.

“Guh! Agh!”

As these sounds continued, his body convulsed and careened forward.

Tremendous heat radiated from every part of his body, and drops of sweat trailing down his neck evaporated instantly with a hiss.

Tiny pairs of phantasmal hands like those of an unborn fetus began to sprout from the divine arms, they made little chirping noises, cries, and whines, before disappearing. New hands grew in their place, and then disappeared again, causing the divine arms to tremble slightly.

“...You must be in such pain,” Ruolong said with a wry smile. “You want to devour us, don’t you?”

He gently set Akira down behind him.

“Ruo...”

“It’s alright, just stay back,” said Ruolong, not taking his eyes off Ergo.

“Gaaahhh!”

An inhuman roar burst forth from Ergo. It was the roar of a beast, and it changed the divine arms into an ominous crimson. They had begun to transform to match Ergo’s inner world.

“I also want to devour you. I’ve said that before. Not that you would remember.”

Ruolong looked strangely childlike as he said that, perhaps reflecting how old he had been back then.

The crimson divine arms raised to strike again, absorbing magical energy until it was like a bow drawn to full tension. Then, the arms released in a furious blast.

As Akira ran, she could not help but imagine Ruolong being pulverized by that force, which could easily crush cars and buildings, much less a human being.

And yet, somehow, the fist ricocheted away at the last second.



It was a Chinese martial arts style known as Huajin.

He used the technique Bagua: Flower Hidden Under Leaf to change the vector of the force simply by using the backs of his hands.

(So the space-solidifying power has stopped working, as I predicted!) Ruolong thought as he dropped into a lower stance.

“Thought key, connect.”

With this incantation, he turned his right foot and planted it onto the ground. Energy transferred from the soles of his feet up into his legs and body, increasing as it did. He then twisted the magical energy running up his spine into a spiral, and the core physical principles of Baguaquan melded into his magecraft.

Ruolong aimed for the core of the divine arms. He knew that was the place he must strike.

“My old man taught me to use this technique in emergencies, so don’t blame me!”

At the same time, Ergo’s divine arms unfurled. Long claws extended from each fingertip, and Ruolong judged each one of them to be as powerful as a legendary sword. They were more than powerful enough to threaten his life as a being similar to Ergo.

(I refuse to be defeated here!) He thought, and using a move called the Great Bird Spreads Its Wings.

Alongside arcing motions, he sent the power of the spell and his phantasmal wings into the same point on the divine arms.

Their phantasmal wings and divine arms collided like a bolt of lightning lashing from the earth to the sky.

A tremendous wind rose from the blast, bursting across the roof of the GranTokyo North Tower. The opulent wooden terrace was obliterated by the force, and cracks spiderwebbed throughout the glass.

“...Ruo!” Akira cried out, raising her arms to shield her face.

Eventually, the winds subsided, leaving both figures fallen.

Ergo’s divine arms had returned to usual.

Ruolong’s right sleeve had been torn away, and half of his body was covered in blood.

“Ruo!”

Akira rushed over and shook him, but Ruolong did not stir. Ergo did not show any sign of regaining consciousness, either.

She had no idea what to do.

Such a commotion was bound to draw the attention of the construction crews below, possibly even the people sent by the Yakou family to hunt her down. She wasn't strong enough to carry Ruolong and run.

Akira heard a thump, and saw that a phone had tumbled out of Ergo's pocket. It vibrated from an incoming call.

Hesitantly, Akira picked up the device, and saw the caller's name displayed on the screen.

“...Ugh.” The injured Ruolong let out a faint groan.

It was the first time Akira had seen him in such a state. He clearly needed urgent medical attention.

“.....”

After a moment's indecision, the girl tapped the button and raised the phone to her ear.

~Part 3~

“They escaped?”

“Unfortunately,” replied my mentor as he put away his phone.

In front of us was Yakou Akane, surrounded by members of the group who periodically whispered updates in her ear.

We were in the Yakou mansion, hearing the events unfold surrounded by pitch black walls and Noh masks.

(...*Ergo has gone missing...*)

According to the report we received, by the time Rin had caught up to them on the roof of the GranTokyo tower, Ergo had disappeared along with the Wandering Sea mage Bai Ruolong and Yakou Akira.

I was terribly worried. In a sense, he was one of the first kindred spirits I had encountered. I thought back to when I came across him singing not to be afraid of ghosts under the stars on the roof of an apartment in Singapore, and I wondered where he was now.

“.....”

I could not read my mentor’s expression. His face was as devoid of emotion as the Noh masks gazing down at us. This was how he sometimes looked during negotiations at the Clock Tower, and his way of coping with thorny situations.

“...That mage from the Wandering Sea sure caused a scene,” said Akane after a long silence, making no attempt to conceal her bitterness. “It looks like I’ll have to meet with a few politicians again. Thankfully, the GranTokyo tower is still under construction, so there must be something that can be done.”

“I’ve heard that magecraft organizations in Japan do not associate much with the government.”

“On an organizational level, yes. But as the saying goes, it takes one to know one. While we may not be as privileged as the Clock Tower, we can still work with individual politicians, though it does require delicate handling.”

The old woman's gaze met my mentor's. Her eyes had the gleam of a serpent's, reminding me of a certain Japanese mage from the Clock Tower's Department of Law. Perhaps it was some kind of national characteristic.

"Such a shame I did not get to witness the talent of your famed students, Lord," said Akane, changing the subject. "Unless, of course, you were going easy on your fellow members of the Mage's Association."

Even I could understand the implications of that.

She was asking if they had truly escaped, insinuating that we might have been colluding with the Baldanders all along. Her jet-black eyes scrutinized my mentor, keen to catch even the slightest reaction.

My mentor gave a small cough, which was reflected in Akane's eyes.

"Though we are both members of the Western Mage's Association, the Clock Tower barely has any contact with the Wandering Sea."

"Well then, I'll take your word for it," Akane nodded plainly.

The air felt suffocating, as if it was slowly tightening around my throat.

Politics like this existed within the Clock Tower, too. As the largest magecraft organization in the world, power struggles were fierce and ever-present. Every statement had to be read between the lines, and everybody had their own web of intricate gambits to expand their territory inch by inch.

Politics across countries, however, carried a different kind of tension.

There were different dynamics, different circumstances, different cultures, and different magecraft. Simply thinking about the potential for disastrous outcomes made my stomach feel heavy. If Reines were here, though, she would probably have scoffed and said "But isn't that what makes it fun?"

"Do you know why the mages of the Wandering Sea decided to meddle in your family's affairs?" My mentor asked slowly, after a long while.

This was the most critical question in this case.

Though a warm smile remained on the old woman's face, she put two fingers to her crimson lips as if this question was so amusing she was struggling to hold in her laughter.

“Now, should I answer that?” Akane mused. “If I answer, you have no choice but to be entangled in this mess. This concerns the very core of our magecraft.”

“Is it not the other way around?” My mentor countered. “Why would you go out of your way to find a mediator, only to dismiss them without touching on the central issue? Wouldn’t that besmirch the reputation of your family?”

I looked to my mentor, surprised. By saying that, he threw a bomb into a powder keg, and the old woman’s expression changed instantly.

“Haha!” She burst out laughing. “Well, it seems the famed Plunderer has shown his face at last. I expected nothing less from a true leader of mages. Oh, but please excuse my rudeness, I don’t get many chances to meet Lords of the Clock Tower. Forgive the ramblings of this provincial old lady.”

It was impossible to know whether she was being sincere. She had probably been testing my mentor just then. The words of a mage could be just as complicated as their spells.

If I had to compare it to something, perhaps it was like chess. The pieces advanced one by one, but they did not necessarily take effect in order. Some pieces held back until they combined with other pieces far ahead to corner the opponent. Through this back-and-forth, both sides aimed for a victory.

It was often said at the Clock Tower that magecraft was just a form of deception. In that case, maybe this circuitous path to resolution was part of the essence of magecraft.

Akane spoke again. “First of all, how much do you know about our magecraft?”

“I know that the magecraft of Japan, including your family’s, establishes connections with fragments of gods. Is that correct?”

(—*Huh??*)

It took me a moment to react to that.

Fragments of gods? Have I heard correctly?

I knew that magecraft tended to differ across the world, but surely they could not be that different.

Is this why we had come to Japan? To find a way to remove the slumbering fragments of **King Arthur** (a hero) inside me, and to return the gods that Ergo had devoured? It seemed that the magecraft of Japan was intricately connected to both of these things.

As if sensing my alarm, my mentor's eyes briefly met mine. (*I'll explain later,*) his gaze seemed to say.

The old woman's smile deepened.

"Our magecraft is based on the fragments of ancient gods, which we call Divine Bodies," Akane said slowly, eyeing the pitch-black room.

Divine Bodies (Fragments of gods).

"But as you know, ancient mystery has been worn down in modern times. As forgotten remnants left behind by the times, no matter how powerful or precious, our inheritance will only rot away if we leave them be."

This was true. Modern magecraft was very different from the magecraft of the Age of the Gods. There were many reasons why the magecraft of ancient times could not adapt to the modern day, and this was a fact that mages simply had to accept.

"...Heh, well those are certainly familiar principles," said a voice so quiet only I could hear.

It came from Add, who was hidden on a hook on my right shoulder, a mystic code made to preserve the mystery of an ancient Noble Phantasm, Rhongomyniad.

Hearing something so closely related to me in a country halfway across the globe made my heart begin to beat faster, and I felt my palms become sweaty.

"For that reason, we needed to preserve those Divine Bodies in a special way, and each organization has its own. There are eight Divine Bodies in Japan... though I'm sure the Clock Tower is already aware of that."

Little by little, Akane unraveled the depths of magecraft distinct from the West.

"We use a talisman called a Black Chest."

"Does that refer to a person?" My mentor interjected.

Akane's eyes widened very slightly.

My mentor continued. "Each life is its own microcosmos, which is why the movements of the macrocosmos do not easily take effect inside living things."

I had heard this idea in many lectures at the Clock Tower. This was also why self-enhancement was the easiest type of magecraft.

“Since antiquity, people have taken an interest in— or, one could say, been fascinated by — the inside of the human body. Aztec priests, for instance, carved out the hearts of sacrificial victims to offer to the gods. In Egyptian mythology, the heart was considered part of the soul, and was weighed against the feather of Maat to measure a person’s sin. In Greek mythology, there is a story where Zeus ate the heart of his son Zagreus, who was then reborn when he coupled with a human woman.”

I held my breath as my mentor listed off example after example.

Eating his son’s heart.

Wasn’t that uncannily similar to the impulse to devour gods that tormented Ergo?

“Everyone knows that. Though, I suppose that’s the reason why making the connection takes analytical skill. I can only say that your discerning eye befits your title. Particularly that last myth— how much research did you do before you came here?” Remarked Akane, scratching her head. “Our family’s method of preservation is precisely that. We transfer the Divine Bodies to people suited to the task. I’m sure I don’t need to explain what a chest is in this context, do I, Lord?”

“I’ve heard that, in this country, the word is also used to describe coffins. Additionally, the idea of death is more or less represented by the color black, and the stain of death is often called ‘black pollution’.”

Here, my mentor paused for a beat.

“In other words, you are saying from the very beginning that a Black Chest is a vessel to hold the remains of gods.”

“Exactly. And the next Black Chest is Akira.”

For a moment, there was silence.

Even my mentor took a few sentences to process her words.

Coffins and Black Chests.

A vessel to store the remains of gods.

My mentor let out a long breath.

“So, that means...”

“Exactly as I said.” Yakou Akane nodded, an enraptured smile appearing on her face. “We are in the process of gradually transplanting the Divine Body into Akira. The plan is to finish by the next Summer Festival. That is why we believe the **Wandering Sea** (Baldanders) targeted her.”

After a few seconds, Yakou Akane spoke again.

“So? Will you help us retrieve Akira, Lord El-Melloi II?”



After the meeting, my mentor and I walked out of the Yakou Manor.

The sun had moved considerably lower in the sky, and though it was still unbearably hot, a light breeze reawakened my sense of reality. I smelled the green fragrance of what might have been cogongrass and pine trees on the wind.

(...Ahh...)

I realized that my senses had been dulled inside the black room with the masks, including my sense of time. According to my mentor, this was also a kind of magecraft.

It felt like I had been swallowed by a black monster.

I took a few shallow breaths, trying to suppress my dizziness as I stood under the sun.

“Are you alright?”

I felt a long-fingered hand support my back. Though, it wasn’t doing a good job at supporting me, and we both nearly fell over.

I reached out and steadied his lower back in turn.

“And you, sir?”

“You can probably guess.”

I understood what he meant immediately. The back of his neck was beaded with sweat, not simply because of the summer heat. My mentor had probably been quite on edge during that discussion.

For some reason, that made me feel relieved.

“What?”

“I’m glad you haven’t changed, sir.”

“To my chagrin.” My mentor pursed his lips.

Some things had changed, some things hadn’t. Some things I wished would change, some things I wished wouldn’t. Even though my wishes could be different from others’, there was still a sense of comfort in staying together.

And even if my mentor considered it a shortcoming, that shortcoming was a source of relief for me. Though, if I had said that aloud, he would have only gotten more sullen.

My mentor looked up amidst the droning of cicadas and the crunch of our footsteps on gravel.

Just like when we had arrived, a crowd of masked men were lined up at the other side of the gate. They seemed to me like cogs that came together in the giant machine that was the Yakou family, where their identity as individuals was pushed aside in service of the greater flow. It didn’t seem like they were compelled to do so; more that this had always been their natural way of existence.

“.....”

My breath caught in my throat once again.

That sort of ‘natural’ feeling was familiar to me.

Right next to my mentor’s car, there stood a burly man, who was the only one whose face could be seen. It was Yakou Akane’s son, Yakou Yukinobu.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” said my mentor. Then, he looked at the cast on Yukinobu’s right arm. “Were you the last Black Chest?”

“...Yes, my duties were supposed to end soon,” answered Yukinobu.

I felt my throat tighten. What Yakou Akane had just been talking about flashed across my mind. A coffin to preserve the remains of gods.

“Why do you have a cast?”

“Similar to reactions to magic crests in western magecraft, my body rejects the Divine Body. Even though eighty percent of it has already been removed, my arm has not fully recovered, I’m ashamed to say.”

Mages and their families were bound by their magecraft.

The more distinguished the lineage, the more they became hopelessly entangled, and magic crests were a symbol of their bondage. They held the life’s work of generations upon generations of mages, painstakingly accumulated through the centuries.

Those who inherited these crests could use their abilities and benefit from the records. By linking themselves to their lineage with the crest, they effectively gave their own lives in exchange.

So the Yakous’ Black Chests were something similar, though they were far from identical.

I felt like these differences would become terribly damning down the line, though I didn’t know whether it was for them or for us.

“What is your relationship to Akira?” Asked my mentor.

“Akira is my daughter with my ex-wife,” Yukinobu replied simply. “My ex-wife retained custody of her, while I had custody of her older sister, Mei.”

“As your magecraft cannot pass to both, did you expect only one child to be necessary?”

“Yes,” Akira nodded, his square jaw moving up and down. “However, Mei died an unexpected death, so I had to take Akira back.”

“Did your wife approve?”

“Do you intend to play the morality card on me?” A thin crease formed between Yukinobu’s brows. Under the dazzling afternoon light, it looked almost like a camouflaged lizard.

“...No.” My mentor shook his head. “I have no right to speak of such things. Any mage with the average person’s morals is no more than a clown. I only ask because that information is crucial to solving this case.”

I sensed a faint bitterness in my mentor’s voice. I knew he was partial to children, and I wondered what it took to say something like that so calmly.

“Maybe she agreed, maybe she did not. She had gone missing by then,” said Yukinobu expressionlessly.

“Missing?”

“It seems my ex-wife had abandoned Akira. She did not know that the Yakou family is connected to magecraft. She only thought she married into a strangely religious family. Perhaps she could not bear all the strange phenomena happening around the child.”

“.....”

I swallowed.

Apart from general techniques, I also learned at the Clock Tower that magecraft could only be passed onto one child. For that reason, it was not unheard of for siblings who grew up with the heir of a mage family to be unaware of the existence of magecraft.

Perhaps it was the same in Japan. But as for the problem in this case...

“It seems they sought the help of mediums, but how could a common medium hope to deal with a Divine Body? After the divorce, she had no way of contacting us, so it appears she simply ran away. When our subordinates found Akira, she was malnourished, which is why the transplantation could not take place until close to the festival.”

“...Did... did you know things would turn out that way?”

Had they left the two to fend for themselves, knowing that it would end in tragedy?

My mentor stepped forward to stop me from further letting my indignation slip.

“How was Akira at the time she was abducted by the mage from the Wandering Sea?”

“Did you not already ask the head of the family?”

“She told me to ask you directly.”

This was true. Akane had said that Yukinobu had been entrusted with most of the hands-on work.

“Most of the transplantation was performed here,” said Yukinobu, looking at the manor we had just come out of. There was probably some sort of mage’s workshop there. “After each transplant, the Black Chest has to return to the mortal world to avoid excessive assimilation caused by the strength of the spiritual energy in the mountains. I have

heard that crests in western magecraft also have to be transplanted in different stages up until the end of puberty.”

“...That is usually the case,” confirmed my mentor.

Yukinobu continued from that point, speaking slowly in the bright sunlight.

“Akira was abducted following the second transplant. It seemed that a mage called Bai Ruolong from the Wandering Sea had contacted Akira before and lured her away. My subordinates and I fought with him during that encounter. That was the first time I had heard of the Wandering Sea.”

“.....”

I stayed silent.

Had she really been abducted, or had she escaped?

Despite the sweltering summer sun, I did not feel hot at all. Instead, there was a chill sitting at the bottom of my stomach, my throat was dry, and my fingertips felt numb. I desperately wanted to leave this place as soon as possible.

“Thank you.”

My mentor bowed his head with a perfectly serious expression.

He gestured for me to take the passenger seat and opened the car door.

“Lord El-Melloi II.” Just as he was about to get in, the burly man placed his hand on the roof of the car and called out. “What will you do about the request of my mother...no, the head of the family?”

“Give me a day or two to consider.”

With a curt response, my mentor shut the door a little more forcefully than usual.

◆ 第四章 ◆
-Chapter 4-



~Part 1~

The summer sky flowed past the car window.

If I remembered correctly, the fluffy patches of what looked like sloppy scoops soft serve in the sky were named after giants in this country's language. To people in ancient times, they must have felt like giants roaming through the open blue sky.

“.....”

For a while, a silence settled over the car. The weight of what had been revealed to us at the Yakou manor was heavy.

My gaze wandered restlessly from the window to my lap and back again.

(...No.)

I clenched my fists.

This was also about me. I could not push all the responsibility onto him. There were decisions I had made myself that I had to take responsibility for.

“About what happened earlier...” I began with renewed resolve even as I stuttered. “Is the Black Chest they mentioned a way to return the heroic spirit inside me, and the gods inside Ergo?”

“I assume so. I know that Japanese magecraft is based on connections to gods, which means there must be some way to sever the connection. What I discussed with Yakou Akane was based on a hypothesis I have had for a long time, though I never expected to be caught up in an incident like this,” replied my mentor, gripping the steering wheel.

That did indeed make sense.

If that was the case, though, did it mean that the heroic spirit King Arthur and the gods within Ergo would just be passed on to someone else? Someone else, such as the new Black Chest, Yakou Akira.

“Would that... be possible?”

“At the moment, it's hard to say. It's certainly a strong candidate, but the only way to know whether it will work on you and Ergo is to try. By the way, the Yakous' methods aren't particularly cruel.”

I could sense that my mentor was trying not to mislead me to a premature judgment.

He was telling me to consider what was right and what was wrong on my own instead of blindly following other people. Just like when he stood at a lectern, he was teaching me to make my own decisions.

“...I understand that the Yakou family aren’t particularly cruel,” I said with a nod.

The situation of the Yakou family could be found all over the Clock Tower.

The nature of a mage dictated this sort of thing. Their children were simply an extension of their single-minded pursuit of the Root. Just like the mages of the Clock Tower, it made sense for mages in Japan to be beyond normal ethics and values.

—“*Touko-san once said to me that mages hold their disciples and family members in high regard.*”

I recalled what Ryougi Mikiya had said not long ago.

While mages did indeed value their children, their way of doing so was different from most. It was not their disciples or family members themselves that they held in high regard, but rather the magecraft that could be passed down to them.

Just as life is, from a scientific standpoint, merely a way to pass down genetic material, life from a mage’s perspective is meant only for magecraft and the impossible journey to the Root. That was the nature of a mage.

“But it sounds distressing.”

“...I’d certainly be distressed. Not that I have any right to say that.”

My mentor’s hands tightened around the steering wheel.

I knew that he was more devoted to being a mage than anyone. He had a ruthless side as well, but that was not necessarily who he wanted to be.

There was an irreconcilable contradiction between the part of my mentor that strove to act like a mage and the part that could not. While this contradiction defined my mentor, I was constantly afraid that it would break him eventually. I was reminded of a glass sword that shattered as soon as it pierced someone’s heart.

At the same time, a question floated to the top of my mind.

“What about Ergo?”

The red-haired young man had gone missing along with the mage from the Wandering Sea. In order to find him, we would have to collaborate with the Yakous.

It was then that the car stopped.

“Sir?”

We were in front of a four-story building that looked as if it had been abandoned mid-construction, with the pillars of the unfinished fifth floor sticking awkwardly out from the top. It was between industrial and residential areas, and it had the serene air of a temple. That was probably why there were no pedestrians in sight.

“Where are we...?” I asked, mildly surprised as I thought we were going back to the hotel.

“...It’s almost like a Garan,” muttered my mentor as he stepped out of the car.

“Garan? That means a Buddhist temple, right?”

“I’m glad you remember. Originally, the word referred only to the monks’ living quarters, but over time, it shifted to the entire temple complex, and then even later to its atmosphere.”

I tried saying the word out loud a couple more times.

The bell-like resonance did fit this building, perhaps because of its somewhat forlorn presence.

Familiar figures appeared at the entrance.

“Professor! Gray!”

“Rin.”

Beside the waving Rin stood another person with long hair. She was about seven or eight, with a face like a blooming flower. I only just noticed in the daylight that she had striking blue eyes like Rin, which was rare in this country.

“Ryougi...Mana.”

“Thank goodness you didn’t get lost,” the girl said with a faint smile. “A lot of people do even when we give them a map.”

“An impressive bounded field. I use similar methods myself, but it's nowhere near as refined.”

I turned to my mentor. “A bounded field, like the one you have around your apartment?”

“Yes. This one keeps unrelated people away without using magecraft. It hasn't been maintained for a while, but it remains quite effective... unlike mine, which collapses if I don't check on it every week.”

He sounded quite disgruntled near the end.

Rin cocked her head, curious. “It caught my attention as well. It's rare to see you praise non-magecraft techniques so highly.”

“It can't be helped. I recognized the creator at a glance. It's a touch too eccentric, excessively perfect, neither conforming to the rules nor defying them, yet functions impeccably. No doubt Lord Valualeta enjoyed teaching her,” my mentor said with a sigh. “This is Aozaki Touko's handiwork.”

“....Ehh?” Rin made a strange sound. “I mean... Mr. Ryougi was recommended by her, so I should have guessed...”

“Yes. This used to be Miss Touko's office. Come on in, my dad's waiting for you.”

With a nod, Mana ushered us inside.



The office was on the fourth floor.

More precisely, there was a space that looked like it might have once been an office on the fourth floor.

The materials of the walls and floor were completely exposed, and there were only a couple of desks, chairs, and shelves thrown around the place. For whatever reason, there was a pile of old TVs piled up in one corner.

“...So this is Aozaki Touko's office...” my mentor remarked.

“Is this an important place?”

“For a modern mage, it’s a bit like visiting a legendary artist’s studio,” Rin said, pointing. “Not a lot of magecraft-related things were left behind, though. There was an ouija board left behind that had been processed, but it’s only about a hundred years old, so there’s not much worth to it. She probably worked on other things.”

“So you’ve looted the whole place, have you?”

“I-I think you would have done the same in my position, professor! I was trying to save the talismans and Mystic Codes from the fate of being buried forever! And besides, if I knew it was Aozaki Touko’s office, I would have been even more thorough. I wouldn’t have left a single piece of dust unturned!” Protested Rin, pivoting to appear perfectly reasonable, at least on the surface.

Though her excuse was a little tenuous, her natural charisma made it somewhat convincing.

“It’s been a long time since Touko-san left this office behind,” came a voice from inside the room.

Mana smiled and turned toward it.

“Hi, Kokutou!”

“‘Dad’, you mean.” Ryougi Mikiya gave a bemused reply and bowed in greeting.

“Are you this office’s current owner?” Asked my mentor, reluctantly shifting his gaze away from the room.

“No. It passed through a couple of different hands after Touko-san sold it, and I happen to know the person who owns it now. That person didn’t buy it either, they just like visiting every now and again. I thought this place would be suited to the occasion today.”

“The occasion today?”

Just as I began to speak, I smelled a wonderful scent wafting from the stairs, possibly because the wind from the window had shifted. All of a sudden, I became aware of the crackling sound of oil and the flavorful aroma of oyster sauce.

It came from the other side of a partition, along with a knocking sound that sounded like a wok being banged on with a ladle. It seemed to follow some kind of rhythm.

Behind the rhythm, I heard someone humming a song.

(...Ergo?)

The face of the young man flashed across my mind. I recalled him singing on the roof of the apartment in Singapore, though his singing had been tinged with loneliness then. The humming now was different.

Soon after, a young man with tan skin appeared. His right hand was covered in a bandage, and he was holding a large plate.

“Mr. Mikiya, I’ve made fried rice.”

Each grain of rice on the plate glistened, surrounded by finely chopped chilis and scallions. Apart from a few dried shrimp, it was an extremely simple dish, but the smell and appearance almost guaranteed that it would taste good.

However, that was not the problem here.

The young man with the plate looked to my mentor.

“Oh, so you’re the famous Lord El-Melloi II.”

“Is this...”

Rin frowned as I turned to look at her.

“Did you not explain the situation to Gray?”

“I planned on explaining, but I didn’t get the chance to. I thought it would be faster to explain here anyway.”

“...Professor, sometimes I can’t tell if you’re saving your energy or being lazy,” Rin said, then made a resigned motion with her hands as she made introductions. “This is Bai Ruolong from the Wandering Sea.”

“Huh?”

I’d like to ask for forgiveness for my sudden outburst.

“Technically, it’s my old man that’s from the Wandering Sea. I’m just his disciple,” said the young man named Ruolong as he portioned out the fried rice into smaller plates. His practiced movements made it seem like he was used to household chores like this. While it wasn’t as if students at the Clock Tower didn’t know how to cook, the way he moved seemed more natural than most.

Finally, he garnished each serving with a leaf of basil.

“There, all done.”

“I’ve also poured everyone some barley tea,” said a long-haired girl as she brought over a tray of glasses.

“Nice. Thanks (*Xie xie*), Akira.”

“Akira?”

I recognized the girl.

She was the one in the photo Ryougi Mikiya had shown us, the catalyst for this entire situation.

“Yakou...Akira...” I muttered in a daze. I then turned to my mentor. “What’s going on?”

“When we spoke with Yakou Akane, I received an email from Ryougi Mikiya that said that they had secured Yakou Akira and Bai Ruolong, though I certainly couldn’t have brought it up then. I didn’t know how they would react.”

With this development, the situation had gone in a completely new direction.

Even though my mentor already knew where Akira and Bai Ruolong were, he had asked the Yakous more questions to extract more information.

“The Yakous probably don’t think we know where Akira is, but they probably considered if such a situation was possible. That is why they were so careful in checking whether we are willing to help them.”

“...So...”

It turned out that the conversation I witnessed between my mentor and Yakou Akane had a completely different meaning. I supposed the principle that no conversation between mages was as it appeared on the surface held true even in a different country.

Hearing my mentor say her name, Akira glanced nervously at us.

“It’s alright,” Mana reassured her, noticing the other girl’s expression. “You can trust my dad to handle it. Of course, it also depends on what you want.”

“...Sure,” said Akira with a slight nod.

This felt like an unexpected exchange, though perhaps it was because the two were close in age.

After a while, Ryougi Mikiya also spoke up.

“I was monitoring Internet forums and social media sites when I saw reports of a strange light near the Grantokyo tower, so I called Ergo immediately.”

My mentor had given Ergo a phone upon landing in Japan. Since he couldn’t use a Mystic Code over the phone, he had given Mikiya both Rin and Ergo’s numbers.

“Akira was the one who answered. Thankfully, I have a friend who visits the site often.”

“You seem to have many friends.”

“To be honest, most of them just want my help,” Mikiya replied to my mentor with a faint smile. Though it sounded lighthearted, I sensed it was probably true.

“So, where is Ergo now?”

“Over here,” answered Rin, leading the way.

There was a bedroom adjacent to the office. The red-haired young man lay on the bed inside.

“Ergo!”

He did not appear to have any major injuries. It looked as if Ruolong had been injured more severely.

“His physical condition isn’t a problem. Though I’m a little worried about his extreme Od depletion, even that is recovering at an astonishing rate. The main issue is mental.”

“It’ll probably take him half a day to recover on that front. He did activate his divine arms after being starved, after all,” added Ruolong from behind me.

Divine arms. Those were his trump card, which he had activated during the battle in Singapore. They had allowed him to draw on the power of Sun Xingzhe and defeat a manifestation of Mushiki of the Summit Court.

“How about you...?”

“Fortunately, I’m pretty sturdy. Or, more accurately, I was made more sturdy,” said Ruolong, tapping his bandaged hand and wincing.

How he managed to emerge with only minor arm injuries was astonishing to me. Managing to survive Ergo's divine arms was already no small miracle.

“.....”

There were countless questions I wanted to ask.

About Ergo. About the Wandering Sea. About Yakou Akira. And most importantly, whether this young man was our ally or our enemy.

Instead, Ruolong smiled cheerily and handed me a small plate of fried rice.

“Either way, we should eat first. It also tastes good when it's cold, but it's much better hot.”

~Part 2~

There was a saying I had heard Reines use before, about people being in the same boat. It's a Chinese teaching that says that even if two peoples are enemies, when they're in the same boat, they'll cooperate and face any storms together.

"It works the same way in the Clock Tower. Only when two mages are sailing the same boat can you expect them not to stab each other," I remembered her saying with a wry smile.

That was our exact situation.

Here in this room were my mentor, myself, and Rin.

Then there was Bai Ruolong from the Wandering Sea, and the girl he had kidnapped, Yakou Akira.

Finally, there was Ryougi Mikiya and his daughter Mana.

Apart from Ergo, who was asleep in the bedroom, all of us were gathered together, having a meal.

"...It's delicious," said my mentor with a strange look on his face as he gazed down at the fried rice.

Even after all the strange incidents we had been through, I doubted he had imagined he would ever eat fried rice cooked by a mage from the Wandering Sea. I hadn't either.

The more tasty I found the dish, the more confused I became.

"I think it tastes like you added half a spoon too much pepper on purpose," said Rin, scrutinizing the grains of rice in the spoon, which she gripped firmly.

"I feel like everyone seated at this table has enough sense to fill up before they start nitpicking at the precise balance of flavors, don't you?"

"I can tell you washed the rice to improve the texture, and even put the basil in last to preserve the flavor. You clearly know how to cook."

"That trick was taught to me by my homeless friend Sano. Basil is a pretty common plant in the parks around here."

My eyebrows raised at this unexpected statement. I had not expected mages to associate with homeless people. The mages I knew constantly spent huge amounts of money on research and negotiations with the outside world, so they always seemed like aristocrats and billionaires. This was part of the reason why my mentor took requests like these—not only to repay his debts, but also to replenish the incredible sums of money involved in a Lord's most basic spending.

“That aside, I’m surprised you managed to find a wok,” said Mikiya.

“So am I. I found it sitting in a dust-covered corner of the room, and it didn’t look too rusty, so I washed it and used it. I’m also surprised there are three taps. Was this some sort of lab?”

“Perhaps. When I worked here, it was indeed a lab,” answered Mikiya, sounding a little nostalgic. “I remember cooking porridge for Touko-san when she had a cold once.”

“You cooked her porridge?” I asked, surprised that someone like Touko could even get sick.

“Unfortunately, I only really know how to boil pasta. It was one of the few times she ever complimented me, so she must have particularly enjoyed the porridge.”

A strange scene appeared in my mind of a perplexed-looking Mikiya caring for Touko, who had a wet towel on her forehead. I wondered what his job had been in this office—or rather, this building that looked like it had once been an office.

(And when had that been, I wonder?)

Had I been reminded that everyone that's lived has their own history?

Ryougi Mikiya’s aura was probably the reason why this strange meeting between opposing factions was able to take place. It was not necessarily charisma, but rather something more calm and reassuring that made people with different stances temporarily forget their differences.

I wondered how this man came to know the Grand Puppeteer Touko Aozaki, and how he became an accountant for the Japanese Mafia.

“...I think it’s about time we start talking business,” Rin began, after all of our plates had been cleared away. “I have many things to ask Mr. Ruolong (TN: Honorific consistency? Doesn’t exist. Aaaa).”

“Before that...” My mentor said, hesitating.

This matter did not concern the victim herself, Yakou Akira, or Ryougi Mana. Besides, no matter how mature they were for their age, they were both around seven and far too young to listen in on this sort of conversation.

Immediately, Mana jumped down from her chair and bowed.

“Since we’re both done eating, I’ll go read a book with Akira.”

She turned around, took Akira’s hand, and walked down the corridor.

“You have quite the considerate daughter,” said Ruolong with a look of admiration as he watched the two girls leave.

“I’m proud of her, though I’m not sure I’d call her considerate,” Mikiya replied as he cleared away the empty plates. Rin placed them in the kitchen sink and watched the water flow over them.

“Can I ask you a question, mage from the Wandering Sea?”

“Of course, anything you’d like, Miss Clock Tower.”

Their gazes crossed like blades clashing together.

“Why did you kidnap Akira?”

“As you may have guessed, we need a god.”

“So you wanted the Divine Body.”

Yakou Akane had introduced them to us as fragments of gods. It seemed that Rin also knew about them, which made sense, since she had spoken of the unique aspects of Japanese magecraft all the way back when we were in Singapore.

“Why? Does this have anything to do with Ergo? Why did you choose to act before the Divine Body could be completely transplanted onto Akira?”

“Well,” Ruolong said in response to the volley of questions, pursing his lips. He leaned back into the sofa and spread his hands. “Since this is such a special occasion, I’m happy to talk about some things, but I can’t just show you every card I have up my sleeve. Don’t you have more interesting questions?”

“...May I ask you a question, in that case?” My mentor cut in, raising a finger. “I’ve been curious about something ever since we were in Singapore.”

“Oh? What?”

My mentor spoke slowly. “The Atlas Institute has priority access to Ergo, followed by Wuzhiqi from the Summit Court, and then the Wandering Sea. That was the order determined by the three parties. We don’t have enough information on Wuzhiqi, but we know the Atlas Institute had kept a careful eye on him. Wuzhiqi only came to seize her share once Latio was defeated on Zheng He’s treasure ship.”

I recalled the events in Singapore.

Wuzhiqi’s timing had indeed been suspiciously good. Latio, the mage from the Atlas Institute, must have predicted that Wuzhiqi could have intervened.

“However, the Wandering Sea remained a mystery. Why would they invest so much time and effort with such a low chance of payoff? I expected you to act like Wuzhiqi, but that did not happen.”

It seemed that my mentor had been pondering the meaning of their absence for a long time.

I could not say that my mentor had the abilities befitting of his title as a Lord. However, he did have an eye for detail that surpassed ordinary mages, using extreme caution to deal with the plots and intrigue of the Clock Tower. It was a gift that sprung from cowardice, not necessarily from insight.

I could recognize the fear that he hid in the dignified way he spoke.

“Is it possible that the Wandering Sea no longer finds Ergo necessary?”

“Wait, Professor, what?” Rin asked, turning.

The realization also hit me after a few seconds.

Why hadn’t I considered this possibility?

“What if the Wandering Sea had already conducted a similar experiment on their own?”

My mentor’s solemn voice echoed throughout the office.

“You have demonstrated an ability similar to Ergo’s. I would not be surprised if the Wandering Sea used the data collected when Ergo devoured gods to create their own version. However, considering you still tried to kidnap him, it seems like he is not

entirely unnecessary. I suppose that makes you a substitute created by the Wandering Sea."

"...Substitute."

A sharp pain pierced my chest.

That word was too familiar to me. Too familiar for a spare copy of the legendary hero, King Arthur.

"...You teachers always notice the most annoying things," said Ruolong with a shrug. "You've basically got it. I'm the sequel to Ergo. You've got to make a spare for an important experiment. Besides, the Wandering Sea's motives for conducting the experiments don't really align with the other two's."

"Was that also why you needed Yakou Akira? To use the Divine Body in the experiment?"

"Yep. That's why my old man told me that we would meet if you managed to survive. It'd be great if we could get both Ergo and Akira together, but it isn't strictly necessary. That's pretty much it."

"So, your plan depends on how things go? I certainly didn't expect that," Rin said, tilting her head.

Compared to the Atlas Institute's Thought Acceleration that basically granted them the ability to see the future, the Wandering Sea's plan was almost like improvisation. Though, against the Atlas Institute's Thought Acceleration, perhaps making split-second decisions was the best strategy, both for them and for Wuzhiqi.

At this, my mentor's expression darkened even more.

"So you were not told about the plan, is that it?"

"Oh?" Ruolong said, raising an eyebrow.

"No attempt at control was made... and what if that was always the point?"

"What are you talking about, professor? How does that make sense?"

"The Six Sources of the Atlas Institute were involved in this experiment. From the incident in Singapore, we can tell that the Atlas Institute, the Summit Court, and the Wandering Sea have purposes that do not align. From the Wandering Sea's perspective,

the more sensible their plans are, the more likely it is for the Atlas Institute to decipher them with their Thought Acceleration and Memory Partition.”

Rin swallowed, her throat bobbing up and down delicately as she spoke.

“That means that if they don’t want other people to know about their plans—”

“Exactly. If the Wandering Sea wants to outmaneuver the Atlas Institute, they need to hide as many of the cards they have on hand as possible while creating false leads...In other words, that is what Bai Ruolong is doing here, giving us false information.”

“...you remind me of my old man,” Ruolong said with a wry smile.

“Strictly speaking, that 'old man' is the only one who's a mage of the Wandering Sea, correct?”

“Yeah. I can’t believe I’m comparing him to the Lord of the Clock Tower’s Department of Modern Magecraft... Both of you remind me so much of mages you don’t seem like mages at all.”

“What does that mean?”

It was another puzzling statement.

Ruolong continued without assuming any airs. “What would you do if you wanted to become the best mage in the world?”

I saw my mentor’s breath catch in his throat.

What Ruolong just said struck close to my mentor’s heart.

My mentor would not give up. Neither his natural lack of Magic Circuits or the fact that his Magic Crest had been taken as collateral could stop him from pursuing the path of a mage.

(...It's...)

It reminded me of hunger.

An impulse that was essential to his very being.

While there were also other reasons, his decision to quit his job as a lecturer also stemmed from this.

Ruolong continued.

“Normally, you would try to reach the pinnacle of magecraft. You would use money to alter your environment. But mages like my old man would say something like:’a mage doesn’t need to be strong on their own. You can leave those sorts of things to your familiars.’”

“I heard that Aozaki Touko said similar things when she was a student.”

“That does sound like something the Grand-ranked puppeteer would say.”

I rubbed my neck as I listened in on their conversations. Reines and I had fought Touko’s puppets before.

“Are you so different?” Ruolong narrowed his eyes, which were like pieces of black agate. “I’ve heard rumors that the El-Melloi Classroom has the power to change the Clock Tower if they set their minds to it.”

He was exactly right.

To put it bluntly, my mentor was too good at what he did.

Even a few years ago, other Lords were already taking notice of him. Even though he was just one Lord, one of his students had reached the rank of Brand, the only rank below Grand, and many had reached the rank of Pride.

Prodigies were only welcomed by everyone because they were extremely rare.

If the El-Melloi Classroom continued producing mages of such a high caliber that even the Clock Tower’s factions had a handful of, and if some of these successful mages were New Agers, it heralded nothing short of disaster for the established powers of the Clock Tower.

My mentor had reduced the number of classes he taught and the students in the classroom precisely due to this conflict of interest. It was also why my mentor’s decision to quit being a lecturer carried an undeniable significance.

“If you want to become a powerful mage, you should make better use of your excellent students, Lord El-Melloi II.”

“That is a rational argument,” agreed my mentor quietly with a smile tinged with bitterness.

Ruolong leaned forward, pleased.

“...However, I do not agree with it,” my mentor asserted. “I am not my students. My students are not myself, and they are certainly not my familiars. No matter how successful they become, it does not make me successful in turn.”

“Really?” Ruolong tilted his head. “Don’t all Clock Tower mages think that way? Why else would they entrust the lives of their offspring to that sort of system? Don’t you all think that it doesn’t matter who reaches the goal as long as someone gets there? Isn’t that why you put so many sour-faced mages in the same place and make them teach magecraft?”

“If only that were the case...” said my mentor, his expression growing ever more pained. “Unfortunately, it is not. I have relied on the help of my students in past incidents. Even though it is also a matter of convenience, Miss Tohsaka and Gray have lent me their assistance because of my own shortcomings. If I stopped being ashamed of my own incompetence, I would no longer be myself.”

Ruolong nodded several times as he took in my mentor’s statement.

“I see, I see. So that’s how it is,” he muttered. For some reason, he seemed a little surprised. “In that way, you remind me more of my old man.”

Even though he had said something similar just then, this time, his words seemed to carry a different meaning.

“Hand over Ergo, Lord El-Melloi II.” Before anyone could ask any further questions, Ruolong pressed his demand again. “He’s not like your disciple over there or Tohsaka Rin, or your other students at the Clock Tower. He is only your newest student, and he won’t be receptive to your philosophies. Why wouldn’t you let us have him? For Ergo, it would be like going home.”

“...Did you not just fight?”

“Only because Ergo doesn’t remember me. If he did, he would come with me willingly.”

“Perhaps. Returning to what we said earlier, your father has not told you his plan, or else it would be discovered by the Atlas Institute. You noticed this and made sure to change the subject whenever the conversation reached anything critical as to not allow your actions to be predicted.”

It was a bizarre standoff.

It seemed as if my mentor had been speaking not to Ruolong, but to the father he kept on mentioning.

There was also a strong indication that we were being watched.

The Six Sources of Atlas— that was to say, the person we had fought with in Singapore, Latio Crudelis Hiram.

She and her organization were the reason why this strange conversation was occurring, as they could deduce the Wandering Sea's plans through even the tiniest slivers of information. My mentor and Ruolong's conversation was weighed down by these considerations, and listening to it made my head hurt.

It reminded me of a poker game, layered with bluffs. Considering there were participants in this conversation that they did not know about, both sides chose to keep their cards hidden.

“Not giving in, Lord El-Melloi II?” Asked Ruolong, his gaze sharpening even though his smile remained friendly.

I was reminded of the fangs of a beast. I imagined the concrete office turning into a tropical jungle. Desk lights turned into lush ferns jutting from the ground. His eyes peered out from between the leaves like a jaguar that sat at the top of the food chain.

“My teacher’s orders are final. I have been told that I must bring Ergo with me if I see him.”

“This is a matter of policy. I refuse to sell out any of my students, even ones who have only been my students for a week. It does not matter if my opponent is the Atlas Institute or the Wandering Sea. If I was prepared to compromise my principles, I would not have been granted the title of Lord.”

“Once again. In the Wandering Sea, our teacher’s orders are final.”

I realized there was no room for negotiation here.

I did not sense that this young man was evil. Even so, he would never come to an agreement with us. Our principles and value systems were too different. I could feel his flash of animosity when he said the word “final”, and it sent cold drops of sweat down my collarbone.

Beside me, Rin slowly stood up. I reached for the hook that held Add, while Rin skimmed her fingers across the jewels in her pocket.

“Sorry to interrupt, but do you have a passport, Ruolong?”

A calm voice cut through the tense air, and everyone turned to where it came from. It was Ryougi Mikiya.

“If you don’t have a passport, a driver’s license or certificate of residence or any sort of identification would also work. Oh, and it doesn’t have to be legal. It’ll still work if it’s a little problematic.”

There was a saying in French used to describe a sudden silence in a conversation, *un ange passe*, which meant “an angel is passing”. His harmless interjection surprised everyone in the room.

After looking around for a moment, Ruolong flipped his pockets inside out to show that there was nothing inside.

“Do you think I’d carry identification on me?”

“I thought not. You did say you were homeless,” said Mikiya. He walked over to a nearby desk and pulled an old-looking metal thing from a drawer.

It was a key with a small, clanging bell attached, which he handed to Ruolong.

“This is the spare key to the office. It must be better for a child’s health to sleep with a roof over their head.”

“What?”

“I noticed that Akira was clearly following you willingly. Otherwise, she would have been crying to be taken home when she called me.”

“.....”

We had no choice but to keep quiet, as we had just heard how the Yakou family treated her.

“I don’t know much about the lives of mages. The Yakou family asked me to bring Akira back to them, and I really don’t care much either way...now that I’ve said that, I feel like I’ll be scolded for meddling in business that I don’t even care about.” Mikiya smiled a bashful smile. I wondered who he was thinking of. “Either way, the least I can do is lend you a roof. I’ve already spoken to the owner, so feel free to use the electricity, gas, and water. There are emergency rations in the kitchen cupboard, but some of it has probably expired, so keep an eye out for that.”

Ruolong was also rendered speechless by the offer.

The silence persisted for about ten seconds. If his abilities were anything like Ergo's he could probably kill a couple hundred people in that time.

"...That owner must be quite a kind person."

"I think so as well."

"You might not realize this, but in this world, I'm sort of like a missile."

"I might agree, if missiles could shelter children and communicate."

It was an exchange that didn't seem fitting for a gathering of mages. Just a little while ago, we had been on the brink of fierce combat. This relaxed moment felt like a true miracle, not the cause of any magecraft.

"You have me in a real fix..." Ruolong muttered, looking at the keys in his hand. "I've never received such a meaningful gift."

He gently covered them with his hands and pressed it to his forehead, in a pose reminiscent of a prayer. He then carefully tucked it into his pocket and patted it.

"Thank you. I'll never forget the debt I owe you," he said in an archaic manner, bowing his head.

My mentor stared for a while before he spoke again.

"What... are you..." he said to Mikiya, at a loss for words. He took his cigar case from his pocket. "May I smoke here?"

"Go ahead."

After he trimmed the end of the cigar with a cigar cutter and lit it with a match, purple smoke with a sweet, honey-like scent began wafting through the office.

"We will try not to involve this office in further disputes. We can make no promises, but we will do our best," he said, after watching the smoke for a while.

"That is plenty of help, Mr. El-Melloi."

"Please add the 'II'. That is not a name that I am fit to bear."

"Understood, Mr. El-Melloi II."

With that, Ruolong stood up and headed straight for the door at the end of the hallway.

“I’ve got one last thing to tell you,” he said without turning around as he put his hand on the doorknob. “Ergo won’t last a month at this rate.”

“...!”

Rin and I both froze.

We had suspected this. When he had been with Rin, he had never succumbed to his hunger. Even though he felt it constantly, he could still keep his impulses under control. However, it had now happened twice, once against Wuzhiqi, and once against Ruolong. If I counted the rampage that had happened after he was almost killed by Wuzhiqi on the pirate island, that made three times.

Perhaps that rampage had been the trigger. Being so frequently tormented by his hunger could be a sign that his condition— his impulse to devour gods— was worsening.

All we could do was listen to the sound of the door gently closing.

~Part 3~

The night grew darker.

Finishing up her daily adjustment of her jewels, Tohsaka Rin left her room.

The lingering smell of magecraft grew stronger as she walked down the stairs from the fourth floor. The now-defunct workshop had probably been situated on the third and second floor, and though only a husk of it remained, Rin could sense the magical energy, like sediment at the bottom of a barrel of wine.

(Was it used to seal up something?) she wondered.

This was a common function of a mage's workshop, though the aroma of magecraft was still remarkably potent given that everything had been moved away and it had sat unused for ten years. Her curiosity began to flare up as soon as she started imagining what Aozaki Touko might have sealed off here long ago.

The layout of the second floor was very similar to the fourth. Opening a door that looked like it belonged in an office revealed an empty concrete room and a figure wearing a summer jacket.

“Professor?”

Lord El-Melloi II turned. His computer was placed on a battered table, which was the only remaining furniture in the place along with a chair. Next to it was an ashtray with several spent cigarettes stuck into it.

Rin deduced that cigarettes and not cigars meant that he was at work. Cigars were an indulgence for him, while cigarettes were more practical. The former was better for relaxing his mind, while the latter was for working long hours.

“Where's Gray?”

“She's looking after Ergo. She looks pretty tired. You've brought her to a place full of struggles. She seems like the sort of person who takes physical and mental exhaustion head-on.”

“I'm the opposite. If I came alone, I would have already been killed.”

Rin's eyes widened slightly at the way he said that.

“What?”

“I know some people who would gladly put their lives on the line for you, but I've never seen you trust someone as much.” Rin politely turned her head away to not look at his screen. “Are you conducting research?”

“This case has a few notable details. I checked all of the digitized files. Today is also the deadline for submitting student essay scores online.”

“You're still grading papers at a time like this?” Rin asked, surprised.

Lord El-Melloi II pursed his lips. “Work is work, no matter the circumstances. My personal affairs have nothing to do with my students. Besides, people treat me according to this work, and I have already received remuneration from it.”

“I can't imagine there are many lecturers who think that way in the Clock Tower. And you're probably the only one who accepts essay submissions through the internet.”

“I imagine that number will increase. The key to computers is their power to share information, not their processing power. Of course, some people still believe they can rely on their Magic Circuits for processing, but that is a shallow understanding of what computers can do. You can't even play a retro game in your mind.”

“...When I was writing mine, the computer kept jumping around even though I wasn't doing anything...”

“Lady. Like I said before, if you don't do anything, your computer will not break of its own accord.”

“I-it just keeps happening!” Rin insisted, her face reddening.

Lord El-Melloi II shrugged and sat straighter in his seat.

“What did you come here to talk to me about, Miss Tohsaka?”

“I wanted to confirm something before I went to bed,” said Rin, leaning on a nearby pillar and making sure no dust fell onto her long hair. “I heard Gray talk about it too. As of now, we have a difficult choice.”

As she said this, she put up two fingers, and then lowered her middle finger.

“First, we can go with the Yakous and say that Akira was abducted by Ruolong. This way, we might resolve the issue with Gray and Ergo. However, we don’t know what will happen to Akira. No, I’m lying to myself. We’re both mages. We know what will happen if we throw an unprepared person into this mess. The results aren’t hard to imagine.”

A slight look of distaste appeared on Rin’s face.

Had she remembered what happened when she first came into her inheritance as a mage? Or was she thinking of something else?

Next, she lowered her index finger.

“The other possibility is doing what Ruolong wants and handing him Ergo. In that case, I don’t think we even have to return Akira to the Yakous, but that takes Ergo out and doesn’t solve Gray’s problem. I think there’s room for more negotiation with Ergo’s teacher, though I think their chances of letting go of Ergo are rather slim.”

“Your assessment of our current situation is correct,” said Lord El-Melloi II with a nod. “However, rather than choosing the best of two disagreeable options...”

“...It’s better to create a third option by force, correct?” Said Rin, puffing out her chest.

“An excellent answer from an excellent student, though I wouldn’t necessarily recommend force.”

“So? What’s your idea?” Rin stepped out, excited. “Do you know a way to become stronger overnight?”

Even Lord El-Melloi II was at a loss for words as he looked at his student. Reflected in his eyes was the image of Rin with her arms crossed, nodding as if she had just suggested a brilliant idea.

“Oh, but I’d rather not do something too risky. Also, no thank you to anything that affects my Magic Circuits, or anything that reduces my lifespan. I’d rather not have to pull an all-nighter for it, because that’s not good for my health and beauty. I’d rather not have to spend too much money on it, either.”

“Do you want to stop and consider if what you’re saying makes sense?”

“I know, but do you have anything like that?”

“...Why?” Lord El-Melloi II asked after a pause.

“Because I am not enough,” Rin declared. “Mushiki from the Summit Court, Ruolong, and Ergo are all outside the league of common mages. But if I cannot be satisfied by those two options, surely I need to have the power to create another third option that I, Tohsaka Rin, can be satisfied with.”

Rin’s words were full of determination.

Even if she was wrong, those were by no means the words of a weak person. Even if she had no choice but to be resigned to a certain position, those words promised that a reversal would come soon. It was through this sort of determination that the human race had survived for millennia.

“First of all, considering that Ergo only has around a month left to live...”

“He wasn’t bluffing was he? If I’d known this would happen, I would have had him copy the sword from the family collection...”

“Copy?”

“It’s nothing. Do you have a plan or not, Professor?”

“.....”

Lord El-Melloi II was silent for a while. Then, as if giving up, he uttered: “Actually, I do.”



Rin spoke again a good ten minutes later, after she had heard the gist of the idea.

“Professor, are you sure you haven’t gone crazy?”

“Didn’t you ask me for a low-risk option to become stronger?” Lord El-Melloi II replied with a sullen look on his face.

Rin closed one of her eyes. “I always suspected you were dreaming up a plan. I know you did the same in Singapore, but you keep dissecting other people’s magecraft to an absurd extent. If I wasn’t your student, I would find it disgusting. It’s effective, certainly, but I doubt you’d have any right to complain if your target killed you out of gratitude for your analysis.”

“Couldn’t you be a little more straightforward?”

“I thought long-windedness was a British virtue. I didn’t expect you to be so focused on efficiency.”

“I wouldn’t say that I value efficiency. I simply don’t have the luxury of inefficiency.” He sighed at his student’s remarks.

Meanwhile, he reached for the matches beside Rin to light another cigarette. He brought the cigarette to the fire with his pale fingers, and slowly drew in the smoke.

“Thank you. Should we begin our training now? I’ve already briefed you, so it should only take you an hour to learn. The rest is a matter of practice.”

“Can I ask one more question?”

“Go ahead.”

Lord El-Melloi II’s gaze drifted back to his computer, and he resumed typing. Then, he stopped.

“When did you stop having the luxury for efficiency? Was it because of the Holy Grail War?” Rin asked him.

“Yes. We were both participants in the Holy Grail War. You, me, and my teacher.”

“And by your teacher, you mean the previous Lord El-Melloi, Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald, right?”

“So you know of him?”

“Well, our paths sort of crossed, but not really.”

Rin looked into the dusty air. Beyond the window, she could see a half moon that looked as if one half had been eaten away.

“Do you consider the Ghost Liners— Servants— summoned during the Grail War to be familiars, Professor?”

Servants.

They were the most special part of the ritual they called the Holy Grail War. Mages could summon heroes from the ancient past, who were not like any other familiar.

The Heroic Spirit that Lord El-Melloi II had summoned was Iskandar. Or, in other words, Alexander the Great.

He was a historical character famed all across the world, a hero of heroes. For ten years, he had charged across the land from a small state near Greece to the interior of India, rewriting the world map in his name. He stood out even in the history books of the country they were in, and his face was imprinted in the heart of the mage who now smiled somewhat nostalgically.

“No,” replied Lord El-Melloi II, shaking his head in the light of the monitor screen. “How could they be? Just as you said, every moment of leisure in my life has been stolen away. I have not had a moment’s rest these past ten years thanks to it. If I start complaining, I could go on for a whole week.”

“Right,” said Rin, chuckling.

“Is it the same for you?”

“No, my life hasn’t really changed since I met that person.”

“Really.”

“All he did was irresponsibly egg me on.” If only for a moment, as Rin spoke, it seemed as though she were dreaming. “Though, it is thanks to him that I am here now. Yes, I think he will stay with me until I am dead. Even if my memories of him fade like the pages of an old book, even if I forget his face, his voice, his hands, or his scent.”

Even so, there were things that did not disappear.

Even if every record and memory was worn away, there was always something that remained, something that would continue existing even if it could not be saved, even if it could not be repaid.

The night will continue, even if the dreamer wakes.

“I see. ...I agree,” said Lord El-Melloi II, somewhat gently. “And if we are to hold on to our memories, we must not give up on Ergo.”

“That reminds me. Did he look like Ergo?”

“Not at all. Their similarities end at red hair. The way they act is entirely different.”

That alone might be enough to conjure someone’s memory.

Lord El-Melloi II closed his eyes, as if trying to engrave a memory into the back of his eyelids.

Suddenly, his eyebrows twitched.

“...Similarities...?”

“What is it?”

Without answering, Lord El-Melloi II stared into a corner of space for a moment.

“Similar, but not similar at all... similar, but very different... That means that Ruolong...!”

Silence fell over the building.

Rin did not disturb her teacher’s focus, knowing full well that every moment was irreplaceably precious.

At last—

“I understand one more thing about Ruolong’s true nature,” muttered the Lord of the Clock Tower, as moonlight continued to stream in from the window.



He could see the night sky from the window. A half moon peered out from between the clouds.

Ergo blinked several times.

It appeared he had slept for a long time. He saw a girl gently leaning her head against the side of his bed.

“...Gray?”

Gray had probably fallen asleep as she watched over him.

There was a notepad placed on top of his pillow, where Rin told him through terse handwriting of the events that had happened, with a note that told him to sleep however long he wanted. He learned that they had negotiated a truce with Ruolong, and that the owner of this building was an acquaintance of Ryougi Mikiya.

“...I see.”

For some reason, it made sense immediately. It was easy to accept that Lord El-Melloi II, Ruolong, and the man named Ryougi Mikiya would be able to reach such a compromise.

“...Sir,” mumbled Gray in her sleep. “Please, save...Ergo...”

He felt his chest tighten at those words.

He wondered why they had felt so close to each other ever since they had met. To Ergo, Gray was like a sister he was separated from at birth, and he was sure Gray felt the same.

(...*And that's why...*)

That was why he was also afraid.

During the fight in Singapore, his impulse to devour gods had awakened against her. He had felt like a wolf hunting down its prey, and though he managed to suppress the urge, he did not know if he could keep it down another time.

Lord El-Melloi II told him that he should suppress it, because everyone was enduring something. Ergo liked being told that. It made it feel as if he had control over his own life.

Even so, he found the neck of the sleeping girl alluring.

Simply looking at her pale skin made him drool.

“...!”

Ergo stood up, adjusting Gray's hood so that it was back in place.

“Hmm.”

He felt out of sorts, as if all the crevices of his body had been filled with legs. Simply moving his knees made him feel as if he was lifting a boulder. Every part of him hurt. Every movement caused sweat to bead on his skin.

(...*This feels different.*)

He had not felt this way after using his divine arms in Singapore.

Perhaps something about his body had changed, or was it because he had not been able to control his divine arms at the battle on the GranTokyo North Tower? The rage of Sun

Xingzhe still remained in the pit of his stomach. The sensation of emotions within his body that were not his was terribly strange and disconcerting.

(...*I will change...*)

His emotions and his body were all bound to change.

Within a week, a day, or even an hour, Ergo's body and mind could be changed irreversibly. As he had no memory, he had no way of knowing what was his true self.

—“*I also want to devour you. I've said that before. Not that you would remember.*”

What Ruolong had said just before Ergo went out of control echoed in his ears.

No matter how hard he tried, he could not disregard the tan-skinned young man who claimed to be his best friend. Was that a remnant of his past self? Would he wind up forgetting Rin, Gray, and Lord El-Melloi II; the people who had supported him so much?

Would they all slip from between his fingers no matter how hard he tried to hold on?

(No.)

He opened the door softly so as to not wake Gray, and claimed the stairs to the roof with his hand against the wall.

It seemed that there had once been plans to build a fifth floor, so the roof of the building had strange pieces of foundation sticking out from it.

“Ah...”

Catching his breath, he looked up at the half-moon in the sky.

Its fleeting light seemed to pool on the floor. If he looked past it, he could see the lights of the city shining like jewels in a box. Possibly because they were some distance away from the center of Tokyo, the night was still dark, and Ergo could clearly see both the lights on the ground and the light from the stars.

“...It's...beautiful,” he muttered.

His pain seemed to recede a little as he looked up at the stars.

He saw a lock of black hair at the corner of his vision. There was a girl sitting there, reading a picture book from a chair that had been left out on the roof. Her presence seemed so natural it was almost magical.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

“...Ryougi Mana...”

It was the girl he had met on the day of the festival.

Even though there was a lamp attached to a pillar near here, it was still a little too dark to read.

“Isn’t it bad for your eyes to read in the dark?”

“My dad told me that as well, but I want to be a bad girl today, so I’m staying up late,” replied Mana, her gaze still fixed on her book.

Her long hair glimmered in the light of the moon. A strange thought occurred in Ergo’s mind that she might have come from the moon.

“What are you reading?”

“Andersen,” the girl replied, finally looking up. “Do you want to read too? There are a couple other books there.”

She gestured toward a nearby pillar with her chin.

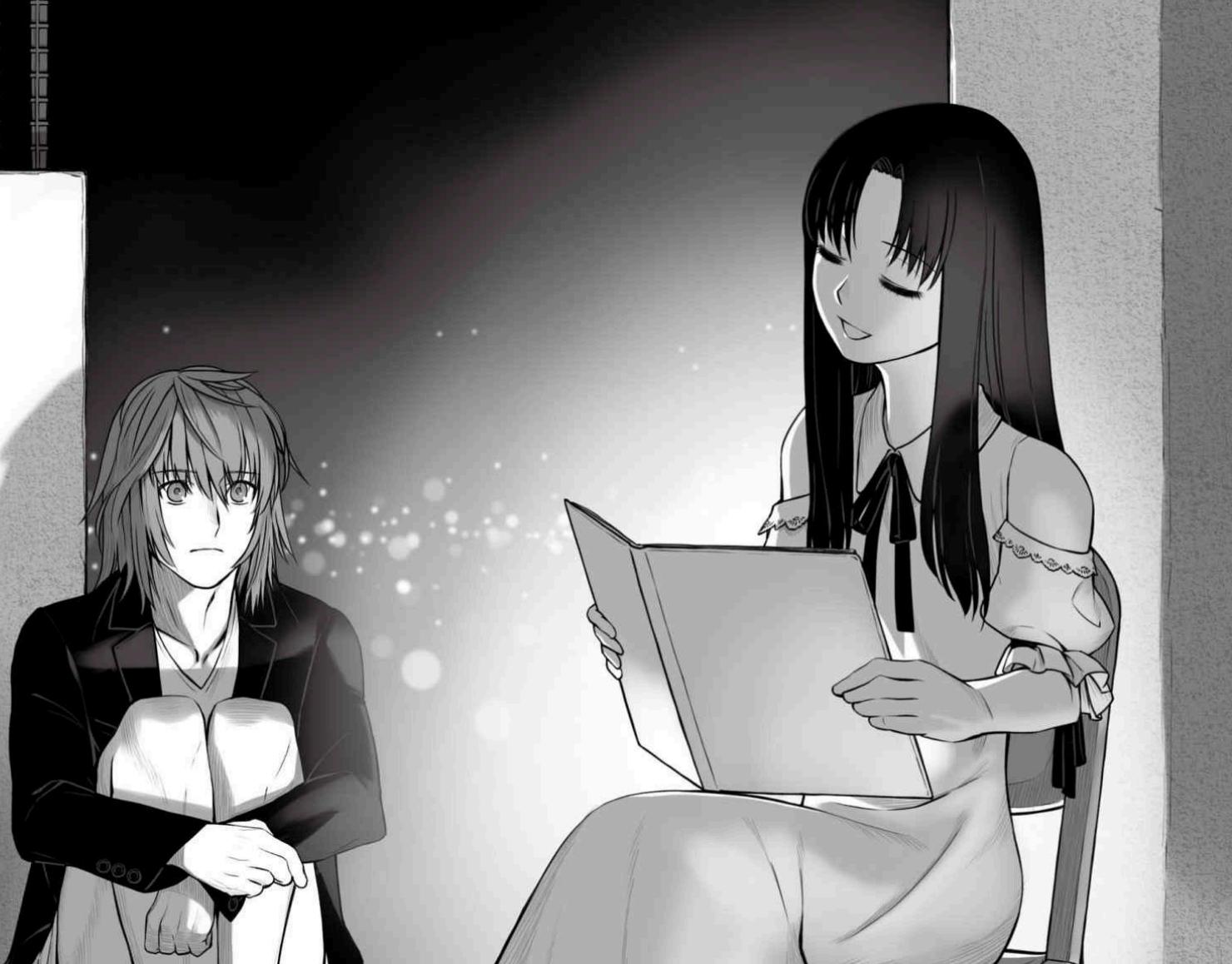
The unfinished foundations had been converted into a bookshelf, with a cover to protect the books from the elements. From the dozens of spines lined up, Ergo read the names of authors like Andersen, Michael Ende, and Ogawa Mimei. He did not know what these authors had in common, but all of the covers were beautiful.

“The current owner of this building likes fairy tales, so I read them sometimes. Oh, if you can’t read Japanese, I can read it out loud for you. I never offered to do this, so it’d be a shame if you turned it down.”

Ergo looked toward the bookshelf again, confused as to whether this was a threat or if she was being friendly.

“I can probably read it, but...could you read it aloud for me?”

He chose a book with the face of a lonely girl on the cover.



“The Red Candles and the Mermaid? Nice. I like that one too.”

She took it from the bookshelf and opened it.

Her pink lips read the first line.

“Mermaids do not only live in the southern seas. They also live in the northern seas.”

In a clear voice, Mana read aloud, the story unfolding like some fleeting dream.

There was once a pregnant mermaid who came to a human village as she could not bear the pain of loneliness. Even if she had no choice but to endure it forever, she would not let her child ever taste it. She decided to leave her newborn child on the stone steps of a shrine.

For some reason, the mermaid had heard that humans were the kindest creatures in the world. She believed that someone so kind would not callously leave the child to die.

“The moon shone bright that night, and the sky was as bright as morning. As an old woman came down the mountain to visit the shrine, the baby on the steps began to cry.”

Fortunately, the baby was picked up by a kind elderly couple who made candles for a living.

Though the girl was beautiful, she still had the tail of a fish, so she could not go out in public. Instead, he helped the elderly couple make candles. She carved many different patterns into their candles.

Strangely enough, it became rumored that if you placed one of her candles onto the shrine or carried it on yourself, your boat would never sink, no matter how harsh the storm.

“And that was why the temple at the shrine on the hill was alight with the candlelight day and night. Their light was especially beautiful at night, and you could see their orange glow all the way from the sea.”

It became known that the gods of the shrine and mountain were generous. But no one ever thought of the girl who poured her heart and soul into drawing patterns onto the candles. No one was there to feel sorry for the lonely girl.

“One day, a swindler (TN: Alternatively, businessman) from a southern land came to visit the village.”

The atmosphere of the story suddenly changed.

The southern swindler set his sights on the mermaid (TN: this book phrases it very vaguely, though every version I've come across says this guy wants to sell her into a freak show). He lied to the elderly couple, telling them that mermaids have long been seen as unlucky, and that bad things would happen if they let her stay with them. The elderly couple's attitude changed overnight, and they heard none of the girl's pleas to stay.

While she still continued to paint the candles, it was all to no avail. By the time the swindler came again to take the girl away, her candles had become bright red.

“That night, the weather changed quickly, and a storm larger than anyone had seen blew over the seas. The fraudster had locked the girl into a cage to transport her to the south on a ship.”

After that, as long as there was a red candle burning in the shrine, a storm would happen no matter the weather.

Naturally, people realized that the red candles brought ill omen. However, red candles appeared at the shrine mysteriously every night. Those gods from before had become the village's curse, and everyone came to despise the shrine.

“After a few years, the village at the foot of the mountain faded away.”

That was the end of the story.

Ergo looked up at the moon again. He could almost see the shadow of the mermaid girl in the silver crescent.

“Thank you,” he said, bowing his head. “I’m glad you were willing to read it to me.”

“As long as you liked it. Since just sitting here won’t improve your mood, let me ask you a question.” Mana closed her book and tilted her head. “What do you plan on doing with Akira?”

The question made Ergo’s breath catch in his throat.

She had not read the book in order to ask this question, but the story had made her think of it.

It took Ergo several seconds to squeeze out a response.

“....I don’t know.”

Ergo knew that Yakou Akira wanted to stay with Ruolong. If they tried to separate the two by force, they would probably end up hurting her.

At the same time, he had also heard that Lord El-Melloi II only became involved with this Japanese magecraft organization in order to return the gods inside Ergo.

He had not lived long enough to value his own life. He had the vague idea that it was probably a privilege to have so many good memories, which was why he could not ignore the possibility that their ritual would also help Gray.

“I don’t know, but I’d like to know.”

He did not want to trample someone else out of ignorance. As Rin had told him, being alive inevitably meant hurting others. Of course, that probably meant that she would consider all her options and prepare herself for the possibility of hurting others.

He wanted to live that way as well.

There would be times when he hurt others, but at least he would be prepared for it if it happened.

Then, he suddenly realized something.

“Are you and Akira friends?”

“I spoke with her sister Mei a few times. I always thought she liked her family manor, back when she was alive,” said Mana, in a lighthearted tone. “Why don’t you ask Ruolong about it? Didn’t he call himself your best friend?”

“Unfortunately, I’ve forgotten all about that.”

“Did you lose your memory?”

“Yep. The professor calls it memory saturation, but the symptoms are similar,” he said frankly, wondering if he really should be talking to such a small child about such a subject.

The girl was quiet, and a gust of wind blew past. She looked up at the night sky and tapped her feet on the ground.

“I heard that the previous owner of this store called this place **Garan-no-dou** (伽藍の洞),” she said after a while, suddenly changing the subject.

“Garan-no-dou?”

“It’s a pun on **Garandou** (伽藍堂). It’s a bit childish, but I admire any adult who still comes up with childish things.”

Ergo was not sure what to make of her statement. She was an extremely precocious girl, and he wondered whether it was because she wanted to seem older than her age. Perhaps she wanted someone to think of her as older than she really was.

Regardless, she continued.

“I wonder if that was the original owner’s ideal.”

“Their ideal was... hollowness?”

“Isn’t it like falling in love?” Said Mana quietly. “No matter how much you love books, the more books you have, the smaller the spaces in your bookshelf get. Once you figure out your tastes, it becomes hard to pick up anything else. Optimization is the correct answer, but it’s not as exciting.”

Ergo watched her child’s face speak of love, not knowing whether she understood it or not.

He thought of the mermaid from the story, the first one who gave her daughter to humans.

Somehow, she came to believe that humans were the kindest creatures in the world. Perhaps she had fallen in love with an imaginary group of humans that even she did not know.

“You might have memory loss... but that’s more than just a loss, because now you have the present. Now that’s another pun, but I might as well have fun if I get the chance(TN: I could not figure out where the pun is in this sentence. Here it is: あなたは記憶を失ったんだろうけど.....それは失っただけじゃなくて、何もない今を得たということじゃないか、しら。).” Mana smiled. “And besides, I know I’m not the first to say it, but if you’ve lost your memory, you get the chance to read your favorite books for the first time again, right?”

It may have been insensitive to speak of other people’s deep-seated struggles using such a metaphor.

However, Ergo burst out laughing.

“You’re right. I get it.”

“Very well. You can always forget things, as long as you treasure what you remember,” said the girl, wagging her finger.

Ergo felt as if he was being lectured by a small child, which was, strangely enough, not a bad feeling.

Rather—

“What?”

“No, it’s just that...”

At some point, the pain in his body had dissipated without him realizing.

It’s just like magic, he thought. Even though Rin said that magic and magecraft were completely different things, he could not really separate the two.

Cutting through his own train of thought, he asked the girl another question.

“Do you like books that much?”

“Yes, because the person who wrote my favorite books is dead. If possible, I’d like to meet one who is alive.”

For the first time, the girl smiled bashfully. It was an innocent smile that seemed appropriate for her age.

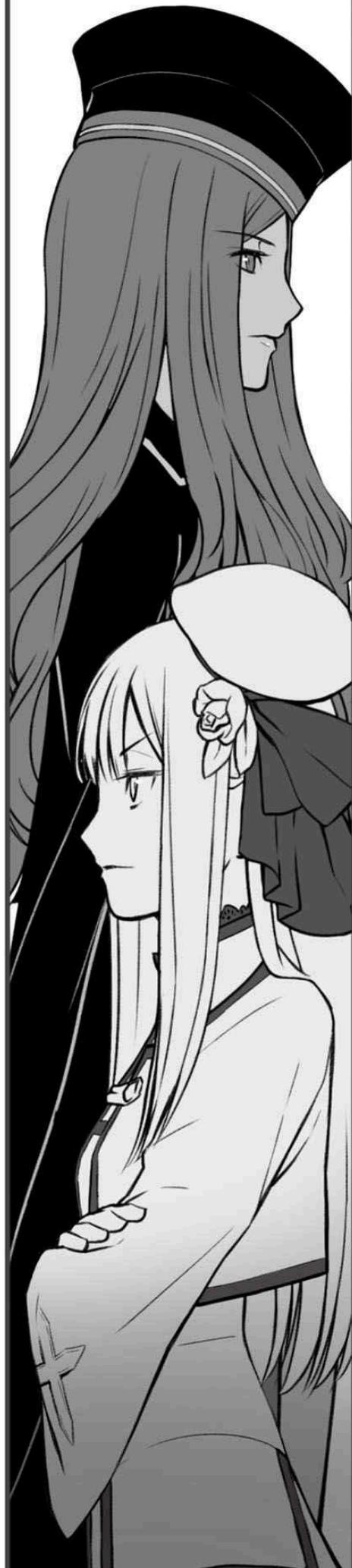
“An author who is still alive?”

“After all, if they’re still alive, I can look forward to their next stories. Even if they’re mediocre or bad, it’s nice to read a new one.”

Her white blouse danced in the wind; her voice melted into the summer air.

“As long as the author is alive, they can create anything. Even a god.”

◆ 転章 ◆
-Fragments-



—The stage shifts away to a pitch-black room.

The room was not so dark that it seemed black. There were several Japanese-style candles placed around it, enough to give it a dim light. However, even near the light sources and wisps of smoke, there was only one color as far as the eye could see.

Put simply, the walls, ceiling, and floor were all completely black.

One of the walls was covered in a great number of Noh masks.

As Lord El-Meloi II had noticed, they were all male masks.

A woman sat in the center of the room— Yakou Akane.

She was dressed in a pure black kimono that seemed a part of the room. Sitting perfectly still, she stared at the mask-covered wall. Her breathing was so shallow she could have been mistaken as dead.

“*Furube*².”

A muttered spell escaped her lips.

It meant “to shake”.

Over and over again, she continued to repeat the word.

“*Furube. Furube.*”

As Akane chanted, her body began to quiver.

This resonance was a type of Japanese magecraft. Since ancient times, **sorceresses** (*Miko*) had believed that the quivering of their souls could reach up to the heavens, to demons and gods. It could even shake the dead awake.

“*Yurayurato, furube* (*Sway, and shake*)”

The masks began to quiver too, starting with one, and then spreading to the others. The sound that the wooden masks made as they scraped against the wall made it sound like the wall of masks were crying.

² <https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%8D%A5%E5%9E%5AE%9D> ??

It was the role of a Yakou sorceress to divine the meaning of the gods from this noise.

“O lord of the Black Chest!” She called out. “....Why do you rage? No, are you frightened?”

Her voice was gentle, like that of a mother speaking to her child.

Sorcerers were not true followers of the gods. In order to arrive at the desired result, they could use whatever attitude they wished to confront the gods.

“What do you see?”

Her eyes narrowed into thin threads.

Her vision blurred, and her body settled into a new rhythm based on her breathing. She felt only the atmosphere that came from the masks, sealed them all into a box inside her mind and listened to the will of the masks as it was.

Inside her mind, she saw two masks that mirrored each other, as if they were two faces of the same god.

“No...are there already two...?”

A tight wrinkle appeared at her brow.

Suddenly, she fell forward, bracing her hands on the black floor.

Her trance was broken. Though she had only been possessed for a few minutes, it was clear from the beads of sweat on her face how exhausting it had been.

“It seems we cannot afford to wait for the next festival. We can only bring the festival forward. Unfortunately, we cannot count on the Lord of the Clock Tower, either.”

Her sigh seemed to say that most of what she saw was as she expected.

“Hey,” someone called out to her.

The black sliding doors behind her opened, revealing a kneeling man.

“Akane-sama.”

It was her son, Yakou Yukinobu. He wore the determined expression of a **gargoyle** (*onigawara*).

“The ritual is about to begin. I will leave the rest to you.”

“Understood.”

Yukinobu nodded.

“Give the rest of the divine body to me.”

“Of course.”

He nodded again. Then, he untied the sling on his left arm and gave his cast a knock. It shattered easily, revealing that most of the skin on his arm had been cruelly peeled away. What little remained was tattooed with a strange pulsing ink.

“Pulse” is not a metaphor.

The markings truly seemed to breathe on their own, as if a foreign parasite resided in Yukinobu’s skin.

“Don’t move.”

As she said this, Akane picked up a small knife. It had also been specially prepared for the ritual. Grasping her son’s wrist, Akane wielded the knife as though she didn’t need to use very much force at all.

There was a short cry of pain, and the sound of splitting flesh.

While her son continued to grit his teeth, Akane turned away to face the wall.

She reached out to the first mask to tremble and took it off the wall.

The interior of the mask had a strange texture, which Akane recognized as the human skin that had been inlaid within it.. Though it had been many years since the skin had been taken from its original owner, it was still fresh.

Akane pressed the skin she had peeled from Yukinobu inside.

Next, there was a squelching sound.

She had placed the mask on her own place without hesitation.

“Aaah!”

The old woman's body began to spasm. Even so, her fingers still held the mask tight in place. The mask itself was also trembling, so it looked as if she was laughing.

Yukinobu did not move at all behind her. He only stared at his mother silently.

"Ah... Aghhhh, Aaaahh!"

There was a mixture of pain and joy in her voice, followed by the horrid stench of rusting metal.

A pool of red blood had spread from the gap between her face and the mask, spreading over her black kimono.



—The stage shifts again to a foreign country, to a suburb of London, the capital of Great Britain.

Here was a street called Slur street that was home to the Department of Modern Magecraft, which was controlled by the El-Melloi faction, though that was a secret only mages knew.

The time difference between England and Japan was about eight hours, so the sun was just about to sink and bring the sky into twilight.

Sitting in her office, Reines El-Melloi Archisorte put down her fountain pen.

"You have a guest," said her silver maid, suddenly appearing.

In this situation, silver was more than a description of her hair color. Her entire body was made out of mercury, and that was because the maid was an alternate form of Volumen Hydrargyrum, the Supreme Mystic Code of the El-Melloi family.

"...Ah, as I expected," Reines muttered, then nodded to signal the visitor in.

The door opened, and Reines stood up to regard the briefcase-holding person of considerable height who entered.

"I thought it was about time you came."

Reines was reminded of the ocean. That was how blue her visitor's hair was.

It was not a natural hair color, though considering the mage's organization that this woman came from, this was not so strange. Considering their ability to calculate the future through Thought Acceleration, her emotionless expression was also typical.

She was an alchemist, thought not of the same sort as the western alchemists of the Clock Tower.

"The name is Latio Crudelis Hiram," she said, introducing herself.

"Of the Six Sources of Atlas— that's not a name heard often here, is it?" Said Reines, gritting her teeth to calm her nerves. It was the Alchemist of the Atlas Institute who had fought Lord El-Melloi II I Singapore.

"What brings you here? I understand you had an encounter with my brother?"

What she left unsaid but hinted at was that their fight was based on the actions of her brother alone, and had nothing to do with the **Department of Modern Magecraft** (*Norwich*). She did not know if the alchemist would pick up on the nuance, but all negotiations consisted of small details that piled one atop the other.

As someone who was created by the joint efforts of mages from the Atlas Institute, the Summit Court, and the Wandering Sea, Ergo was like a bomb in the world of magecraft. As of now, no other factions in the Clock Tower were aware of his existence. Though, if word got out, Reines wouldn't be surprised if they decided to join the fray as well.

After all, the Department of Modern Magecraft was a weak faction in the Clock Tower. Even though the El-Melloi Classroom had room to breathe under her brother's leadership, their political and financial foundations could only be described as fragile.

(...Count on my brother to always draw the worst lots.)

Reines looked back to the blue-haired alchemist, trying to stop herself from finding things too interesting.

"That incident is not related to Latio's current purpose," she said in a strange way, shaking her head.

"What do you want, then?"

"We wish to collaborate with the Clock Tower's Department of Modern Magecraft."

"With the Atlas Institute? That's surprising."

Reines silently clicked her tongue.

She felt like she was being beaten at her own game. With the pretext that the fight with her brother had nothing to do with the Department of Modern Magecraft, the alchemist could freely ask for support. Even though she had expected as much, Reines had not expected her to be so direct.

(Of course, it's still a bit early to tell...)

Perhaps it was the way mages from the Atlas Institute tended to operate. The Clock Tower's typical method of roundabout scheming did not mesh well with such a straightforward opponent. That was the way people spoke if the seeds of conspiracy had already been sown between them.

After a moment's thought, Reines decided on what to say.

“Now, unless you give me more information, I won’t know what to tell you.”

“Understood.Excuse me.”

What she pulled out from her bag made Reines' eyes widen.

It was a human skull.

“Tangere.”

With that short word, bones began to grow out from beneath the skull, from the skull to the collarbone, to the sternum and the hip. Within no time, the skull had a full set of limbs.

It was a massive skeleton, tall enough to reach the ceiling.

(...It's sort of like Add,) thought Reines.

It might not have been a coincidence.

Even though Add was the Mystic Code that sealed **Rhongomyniad** (*the Lance that Shines to the End of the World*), its basis was the technology of the Atlas Institute. It made sense that this bone giant would have a similar air to it.

“Pleased to meet you, young lady from the Clock Tower,” the giant skeleton said, bowing politely. “These have been painstakingly calculated by Lady Latio. Take a look.”

“Do not call Latio that.”

“Yes, of course, Lady Latio.”

The bone giant spoke in a casual tone despite his terrifying appearance. It spread its hands, and white patterns appeared on them as bright as the display from a modern screen.

“Wait, is this—?”

It was a world map.

However, there was a black splotch that looked like an ink stain covering the middle of the Eurasian continent, all the way from the Mediterranean to the area of modern-day China, and then further eastward.

“We only have one part of the information regarding the gods that Ergo devoured. Of the three, the divine fragment we chose was one with many aspects and counterparts. Even the members of the Crudelis family present during that ancient experiment could fully calculate which of the factors would awaken. This is a map of the deity’s spread.”

It was not uncommon for a god to have multiple aspects.

For example, Artemis, the goddess of the hunt in Greek Mythology, was sometimes seen as the same as Selene, the goddess of the Moon. Later, she was merged with her counterpart in Roman mythology, the goddess Diana. Similarly, the destroyer goddess Shiva, one of the principal deities in Hinduism, was also regarded as Rudra of the wind and storms.

It was also common for a legend to gain dozens of variations as it drifted from west to east, or vice versa. There were also cases of gods with dozens of aliases acquired through their travels.

(A god that spread from the Mediterranean to India, and then all the way to China...?)

She could not yet narrow down the second god that Ergo devoured. There were probably countless deities that had been spread down this path.

Looking at it, however, a thought appeared in Reines’ mind. She knew of a great hero who had spread Greek culture across to the East and brought forth the Hellenistic period, even though the conquest itself stopped halfway.

“...Iskandar...!”

It was only an association, but that word carried too much weight for her and her brother.

She swallowed and looked up.

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“We have recently discovered that one fragment of the deity— a divine body— is still in existence along this path. Unfortunately, the Atlas Institute has very little contact with the Far East. We thought it possible to negotiate with someone from the Clock Tower to obtain data on the divine body on our behalf.”

“Data?”

“Ergo’s current status needs to be analyzed. In exchange, we will share our analysis of the data with you. Regardless of whether we get Ergo or if you manage to save him in the end, we should be able to cooperate at this stage.”

Reines finally understood where the conversation was going. She also realized how fatal this direction could end up being.

“Wait, hold on. Who is this person in the Far East with the divine body?”

“They are a Japanese organization named Yakou,” replied Latio.



I held my hand up to block the morning sun.

I stood outside the office, having followed someone down to the door after awakening to see him walk down the stairs.

“Mr. Ruolong,” I called out.

The young man who had just crossed the street turned around.

“Oh, good morning.”

Ruolong held Akira in one arm. The girl had her face buried in his neck, and even from this distance, I could see her chest rise and fall in rhythm.

“We slept well, thanks to you. Akira probably felt quite safe.”

“Will you not be returning to the office?”

“Of course. Since I’ve already got the key, I might as well sneak in every once in a while. I’m used to that kind of thing from living on the streets,” said Ruolong with a cheerful smile.

“Presumably the Yakous will be here soon,” came a voice from behind me.

“Oh, you’re awake as well? Or were you up all night?”

My mentor stared at Ruolong from directly behind me.

As Ruolong had pointed out, he did not look like he had slept well. There were dark circles under his eyes.

“When the Yakous find this place, they will surely attack without any regard for your truce with the Ryougis. Is that why you think it best to leave for the time being?”

“I can’t do anything that will trouble my benefactors, can I?” Ruolong shrugged.

I didn’t know if I could call him sincere, but the young man did have a strange sense of honor. Perhaps it was due to the place he was born and raised.

“You’re not just here to see me off, are you?”

“No, I also have something I wish to confirm. As this office is a neutral zone, I’m sure you’ll agree to answer.”

“If you have a question you think I might enjoy answering, go ahead.”

“I’ll be direct,” said my mentor. “You have not devoured a god. Is that correct, Bai Ruolong?”

“Huh?” I blurted out. “But, Sir, didn’t you say that Mr. Ruolong was a substitute for Ergo...?”

“Of course I did,” my mentor said with a nod.

I did not understand. Hadn’t my mentor uncovered circumstantial evidence for why Ruolong had devoured a god yesterday? Even if it was impossible to uncover the purpose of the Wandering Sea, hadn’t he established that Ruolong was of the same sort of being as Ergo?

“There’s a concept called convergent evolution that’s not terribly difficult to understand. Although bats and dolphins are completely different types of animals, both evolved the ability to observe their surroundings by emitting waves through

echolocation. The reason for this is because both animals need similar abilities to search for prey in the darkness. Even inherently different factors may develop in similar directions when placed in similar environments... In other words, they are similar but different."

"...Similar, but different?"

"Ergo's phantasmal hands are probably related to evolution," said my mentor, raising his right hand. He had spoken of this hypothesis before. "Hands receive a tremendous amount of information. The stimuli they received when humans created countless stone tools, earthenware, and arrowheads led to our development. One could say that hands are godlike."

My mentor then lowered his hand.

"In that case, wings are strange. Humans have no need for them. It has been an ancient dream for humans to have wings, but it has never matched the direction of mankind. We have prospered through our hands, but we have never gained wings. Ergo's phantasmal hands and your phantasmal wings may seem similar at first glance, but the thought behind them is completely different."

"Huh," Ruolong muttered, as if finding the idea interesting. "Can I ask what the basis of your suspicion is?"

"I had my suspicions to begin with. Especially because winged gods are only limited to certain areas of the world," my mentor continued, nodding slightly. "Most have their origins near Mesopotamia, or Greece and the Mediterranean. They influenced the designs of winged angels, which are popular today thanks to artwork. That is not to say there are no candidates, but none of them match your nature, which gives rise to another hypothesis combined with what I have just said."

The face of the tan-skinned young man was reflected in my mentor's eyes.

"And besides, surprisingly enough, there is a hint in your name. The Wandering Sea is not so caught up in such things as to object to using 'Baldanders', a word coined long after their founding, as the name of their organization. They only care if the essence is the same. In addition, whether in the modern age or the Age of the Gods, names have a great impact on magecraft. If I were from a country that used Chinese characters, I might have noticed sooner."

(...*His name?*)

Naturally, I didn't understand.

The translation mystic code that my mentor and I used could only facilitate communication. It did not, strictly speaking, allow us to understand the language. Even though my mentor was able to read and write Japanese, he couldn't speak it.

"The category of a winged mystery with characteristics similar to the gods is not restricted to angels. There are beings who are equivalent to gods in the East, but opposite to them in the West, or else seen as mysterious beings who are defeated by the might of the gods... Essentially, think of it this way."

My mentor's voice echoed quietly down the empty morning street.

"For the moment, let us disregard Mushiki, who only wants to devour Ergo. From your organization's concealment of information and your very existence, your father (*TN: Is that guy Ruolong's father or not?*) clearly pays close attention to the Atlas Institute. It could be that the god the Atlas Institute and the being you devoured are connected. Perhaps this connection will render the god fed by the Atlas Institute useless if you ever achieve perfection."

"...Ah." Ruolong scratched his head. "Well, guess my old man picked the wrong guy."

"Is my theory wrong?"

"No. He shouldn't have disregarded you just because you're a modern mage. You should've been the first person to be killed."

A chill ran down my spine.

The intensity of the intent to kill radiating from the words of this cheerful young man was proof that it was not just a threat.

"Well then, let me ask you this, Bai Ruolong."

Whodunit.

Who—or what—had been eaten?

What was it that was connected to the god that Ergo had devoured?

"Did you devour a dragon?"

"A dragon...!"

"While they started out at the same word, in the world of eastern magecraft, there are two characters for 'dragon' that are used separately. The character in your name, Long,

is derived from that word. It would be exceedingly reasonable to use that name to stabilize the magecraft.”

“ ”

Still hugging Akira, Ruolong closed one of his eyes.

(So it isn't a god...)

Had Ruolong devoured a dragon?

“As I said, dragons are viewed as gods in the east, while they are in opposition to the gods. The dragon you devoured must be closely related to Ergo’s second god. Perhaps it is also a divine body, a fragment of a god passed down by the Yakous.”

The dragon that Ruolong devoured, Ergo's second god, and the Yakous' divine body. Here, the three mysteries were entwined.

“...You’re giving me a real headache, Mr. Professor. After all the trouble we went through to negotiate a truce.”

The teeth that peeked out from his lips seemed like the fangs of a beast.

—But it was then that something strange happened.

“Agh!”

Suddenly, Akira clutched her face.

Though she should have been sleeping, she curled into a ball and began to scream in agony.

“(TN: *And here is a scream of agony*: 痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い痛い——！)”

“Akira!?”

Ruolong looked down at the girl in his arms. His eyes widened.

The girl's innocent face had been covered with a pitch black mask. Its color was darker than could possibly be real, so dark it could have even sucked in the stars.

“Professor!”

“Gray! Is something wrong?!”

Sensing that something was wrong, Rin and Ergo came dashing outside.

Akira’s back began to be enveloped in a faint light right before our eyes— no, it was not light.

It was darkness.

“Those goddamn Yakous!”

For the first time, an anxious expression flashed across Ruolong’s face.

A darkness whose nature could not be known was spreading forth from the girl’s back.

“Help me, Ruo...!”

Something seemed to surge in her abyss, like the tail of a mermaid leaping into a pitch-black sea.

Like a black rope, it enveloped Ruolong’s body in an instant.

-Afterword-

“Remember death, Memento Mori,” says the sage, raising his cup.

“Seize the day, Carpe Diem,” sings the poet, dancing merrily.

Both will fall into eternal sleep in the end, becoming nothing but a record.

Sometimes, however, it is the records of a corpse that are truly terrifying.

Those are what remain after death, until the end of time.



Thank you all for your patience. I present to you the second volume of the Adventures of Lord El-Melloi II.

As the subtitle of “Upper” suggests, there will be another volume to this story. As I announced in the last part of the first volume, the stage is set in Tokyo, Japan.

Tokyo is often an important place in the world of TYPE-MOON. I have often imagined what it would be like for Lord El-Melloi II to visit it, and I am honored to have the chance to write of these events.

As a Japanese person, I feel a unique type of anxiety writing about this country from the perspective of the British Lord El-Melloi II and Gray. What I find normal will seem strange and inexplicable to them, and vice versa.

This happens not only in everyday life, but also in magecraft.

Of course, it also happens when discussing gods.

The concept of a god reflects the culture of a country because it encompasses many meanings and is filled with many desires and thoughts. Even if the beliefs were originally the same, they may change in all sorts of ways as they move across countries and regions.

This is why Lord El-Melloi II is traveling—to discern which gods Ergo has devoured, and to see and feel them firsthand.



The guest in this volume, Ryougi (Kokutou) Mikiya, holds a special place in the world of TYPE-MOON.

His story in the Garden of Sinners ended so beautifully that I was worried about using him. However, considering the story was to be set in the suburbs of Tokyo, I thought his involvement would be inevitable. To my great relief, when I made up my mind to meet with Mr. Nasu, he told me that it would be okay for Mikiya to be involved in the world of magecraft (this was before the COVID-19 pandemic). We also had to fine-tune Mana's dialogue, as she only appeared in one short story.

From here on, the story will begin speeding up in earnest.

I hope you will enjoy the story where the fates of many characters intersect that of Lord El-Melloi II.

Finally, I would like to thank Sakamoto Mineji-san for finding time in a busy schedule to draw these beautiful illustrations; Kiyomune Miwa-san for taking care of the research not only for the magecraft but also for the Yakuza and the festival; as well as Kinoko Nasu-san, OKSG-san, and everyone else at TYPE-MOON who supervised and edited the work.

Of course, I will also thank you, the reader, for picking up this book.

We will probably meet again in the winter, after I complete the fifth volume of Wizard's Blue in September, which is a spin-off of the Ancient Magus Bride.

June 2021
While watching Loki on Disney+

P.S.

A special anime episode of the Case Files of Lord El-Melloi II was also announced during the Aniplex Online Fest 2021. Even though the original novel series of the Case Files has already ended, as the author, I am glad to be able to meet the story in another form.

