

6 三田 誠
イラスト 坂本みねぢ

「case.アトラスの契約(上)」

ロエールメロイ 三世の事件簿





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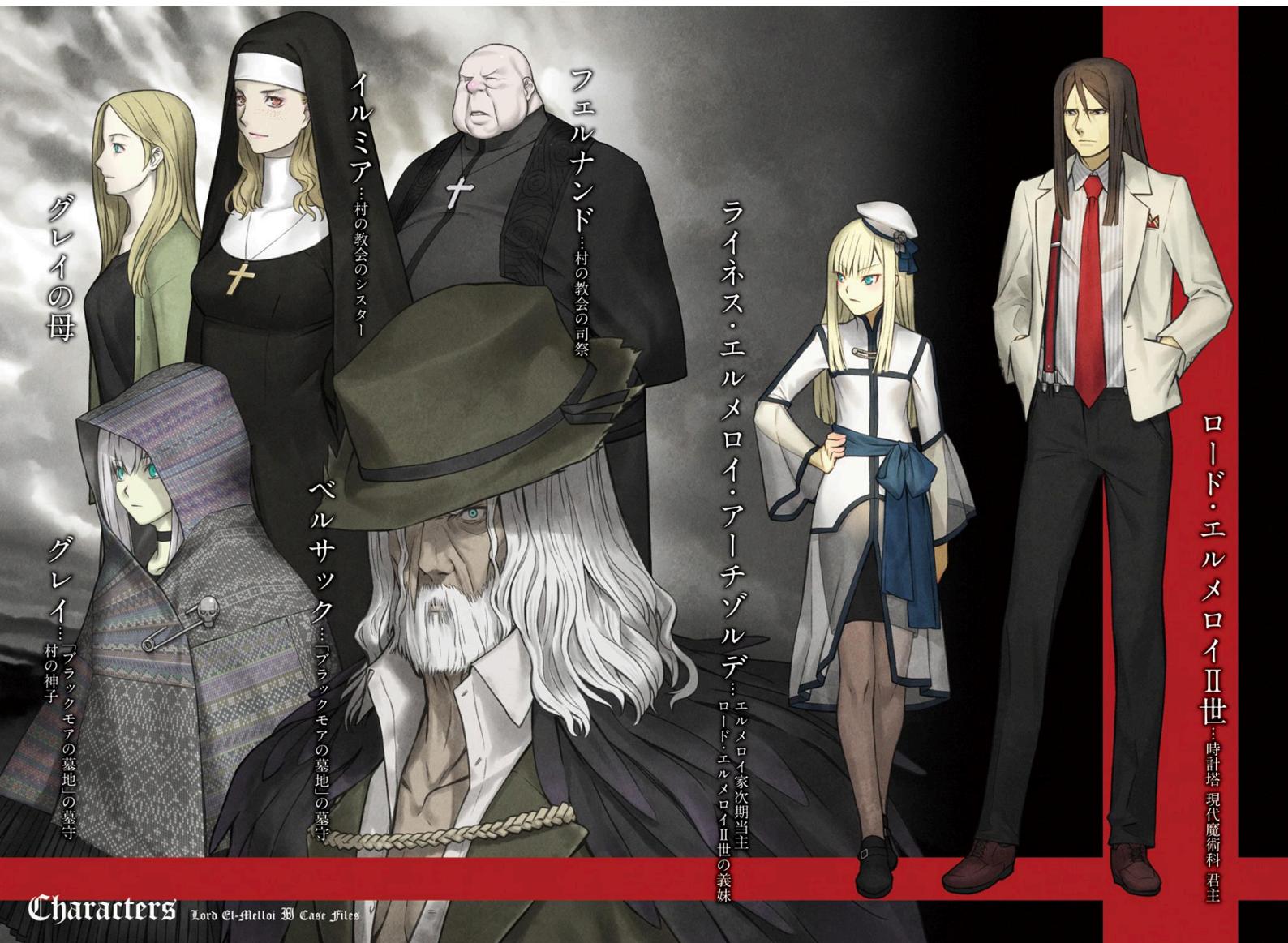
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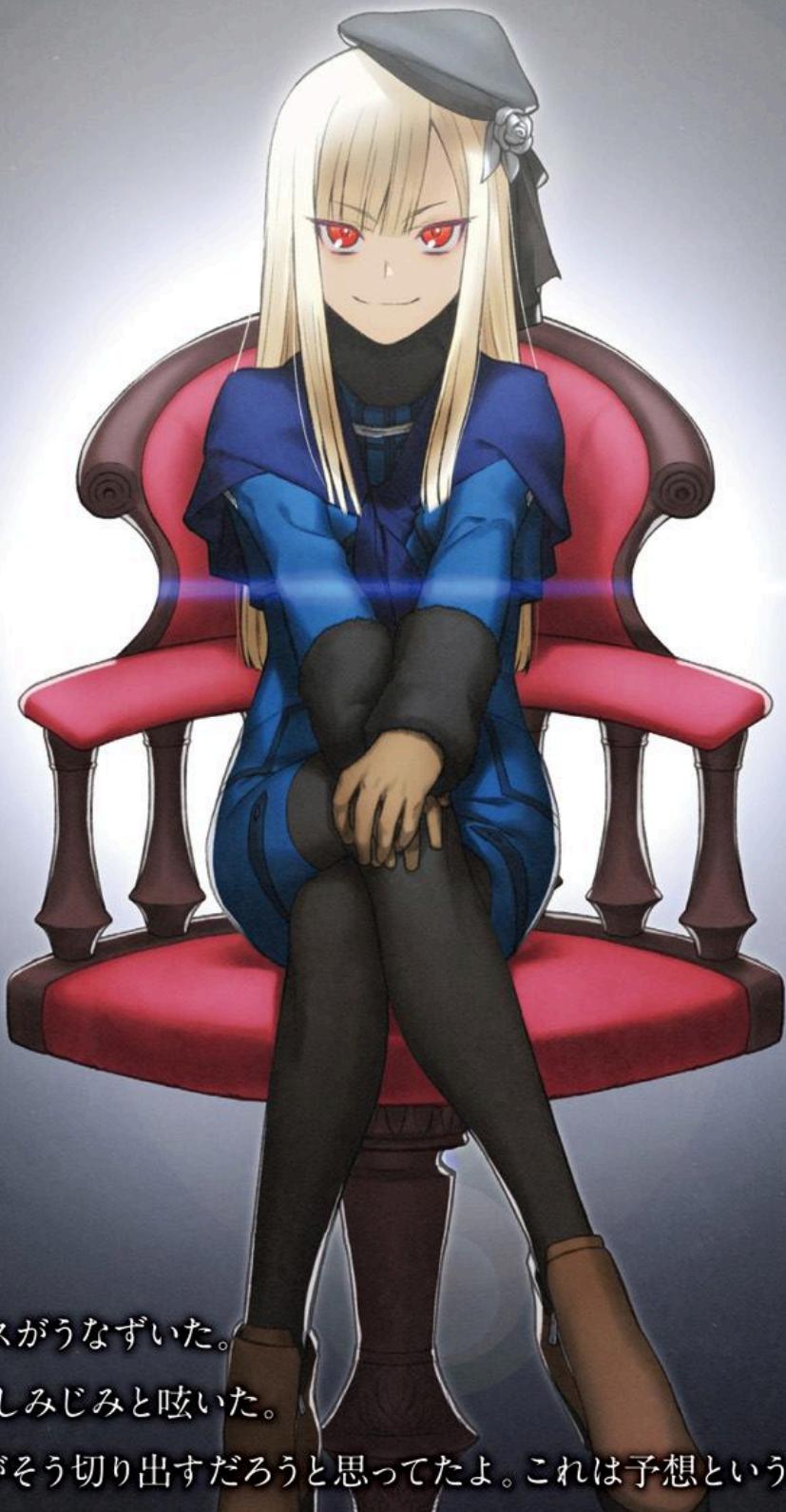
「case.アトラスの契約(上)」

三田 誠

イラスト 坂本みねち

Translated by *TwilightsCall* (Beast's Lair)
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「よろしい」

と、ライネスがうなずいた。

それから、しみじみと呟いた。

「いつか、君がそう切り出すだろうと思ってたよ。これは予想というより願望だけど」

どこか困った風で、自分の思い違いでなければ、なぜか愛しげな口調だった。

「では、しばらく私の——ライネス・エルメロイ・アーチゾルテの口から語らせていただこうか。君と兄が出会う前の物語をね」

——序章より

The Case Files of Lord El-Melloi II

“Atlas” Contract (Upper)“



TYPE-MOON BOOKS

サA-06



Lord El-Melloi
Case Files

The Case Files of Lord El-Melloi II

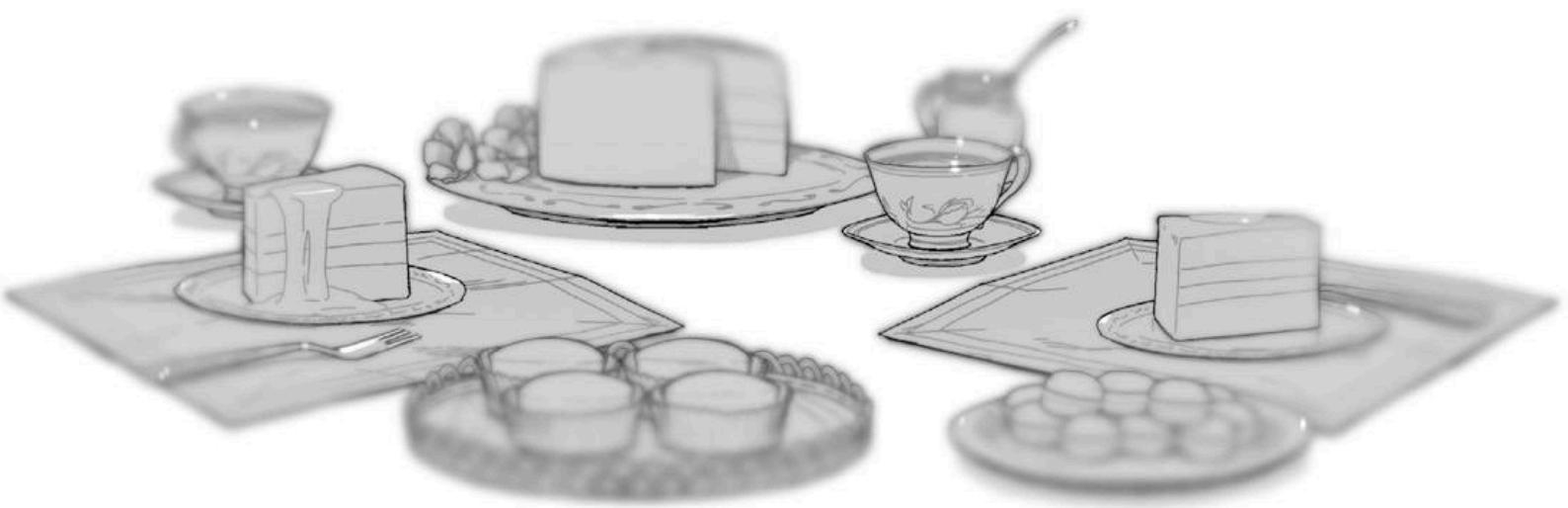
6 case. Atlas' Contract (Upper)

目次 Contents

『序章』	006
『第一章』	025
『第二章』	055
『第三章』	098
『第四章』	152
『転章』	193
『あとがき』	200

◆序章◆

-Prologue-



This room was especially old for a room in Norwich (the Department of Modern Magecraft). There were many people seated in the fan-shaped room. Though there were only supposed to be about ten people in the El-Melloi classroom at a time, there were now about three times that amount of informal students gathered here.

Though most magi despised science, there was still a central heating system installed here, and the classroom was comfortably warm. Apart from the scented wax that had been applied to the walls, this place was no different from a regular college.

Just like someone once said, keeping up an appearance costs money.

“.....”

But then again, I quite liked the sweet smell that the wax gave off. One of the lecturers would pick seasonal spices every morning, due to the supposed boost in concentration that they would give. I once went to thank that teacher for it, but he replied that I should “thank the bees, flowers, and herbs instead.”

...If it was now, then I would have probably told him that he deserved to be thanked regardless.

Back then, I had just come to London and hadn't spoken to other people much.

Back then, I was comforted by the soft, easing scent. Though I knew that that wasn't the original intent of the lecturer, I still wanted to thank him for the warm feeling that it sent through my heart, but...

As I was immersed in these thoughts, they passed through my line of sight.

Today was the day when reports were being graded, and from the second half of the lesson, each of the students walked up to hear the feedback they received.

“There is quite an improvement. I hope you can keep this up, and use this general idea to rewrite the entire report.”

“Hmph. You took quite a few winding paths. Though the system is widely referred to as Kabbalah, in actuality, it contains many different types of magecraft. The methods

discovered by Avicenra are perhaps the best suited towards this topic. When you study Mana later, make sure to take these into account.”

“Not bad. I can give you course credit based on this essay alone. Starting next time, change a topic. Though it might be a challenge, you could look at it from a Mineralogy perspective. If you need me to, I can even introduce you to Kischur (the Faculty of Mineralogy). At your current level, I believe you can balance both studies.”

Though it might be surprising to some people, you could feel how considerate he was from the feedback he gave to the students. I’m not sure if it was that the students discovered this too, but even though some of them received harsh feedback, none of them seemed defeated. Everyone seemed to be full of enthusiasm. This was probably because the El-Melloi classroom gave them this sort of foundation to build upon.

Then again, not all of the interactions were as friendly.

“Flat! Before we even discuss what your essay was like! Why did you get the requirements for the essay wrong again!”

“Svin! Don’t make the same mistakes as him just for the sake of competition, okay! Can’t you consider the feelings of the person who has to take the time to give you supplementary test topics?!”

Similar shouts would resound in the classroom once in a while.

Every time, there would be a mixture of excuses, anger, and magecraft. Then Yvette, who had returned to the classroom as if nothing had happened, also got involved, and dragged Caules in too, who was just trying to study.

I felt... somewhat anxious. I sat huddled in a corner of the classroom and held a hand to my chest. I had also handed in a report this time, so I was very concerned about what kind of comments I would get from my mentor.

I knew that I did not fit in here.

I was not a mage, just a disciple of my mentor. I was only allowed to sit here because of a long trail of coincidences. Though I was aware of this, the fact that I was a member of this classroom was imprinted into my heart.

I had made a misconception.

The misconception that I could continue to stay there. Just as these feelings circled through my mind, a familiar word resounded through the classroom.

“Gray.”

“...Oh, p-present!”

I stood up nervously. Seeing me walk down the steps to his eyes, my mentor tapped the back of his hand on the cover of the report.

“First of all, the format of the report is wrong. The subject is also not unified, and the content is too disorganized. You did not adequately review the information on the premise of Kabbalah. I don't think you considered how the different sources you used would interact with each other. The theory you put forth at the start contradicts what you say at the end because different schools of thought were used. At the Clock Tower, a simple check with the librarian would have reduced this situation by eighty percent. Be careful in the future.”

“...S-sorry.”

I bowed my head in disappointment. I actually realized that something was a bit off, but I never even thought about asking the librarian. It was such a logical thing to do. Why couldn't I figure out any of this without having someone tell me?

“However,” he added.

“Though scattered, the observations about Necromancy are quite refreshing. The section that explores death from the body, spirit, and soul is only basic, but the experiential introduction is very interesting. If you don't mind, I would like to use this paragraph in my thesis after a thorough review. Of course, your name will also be included.”

“O-of course!”

"Thanks. I'll contact you when I'm reviewing and writing the paper. —Next, Yvette. L. Lehrman."

As if nothing had happened, he called the name of the Mystic-Eyed girl.

The legendary lover-in-waiting was here, said the young lady with the blindfold as she stood up, to which several people in the classroom booed violently. I returned to my seat and watched all this halfheartedly.

Afterward, my mentor continued giving each student feedback.

He continued as usual, or more vigorously than before, as if he had recovered from the injury he had sustained at the end of the year. The physical wounds must have healed. After all, as a Lord, there was no shortage of healing magecraft available. For example, when he was discharged from the hospital a while ago, several of his students offered to diagnose him in case there were any after-effects. But he refused all of them, but as far as I remember, his face showed some relief though was still relying on crutches.

But what about his spirit(heart)?

The last incident penetrated deeply into his heart. Before that, he had only been involved in the events of other people.

But this time was different because it was an incident that was clearly aimed at him. Therefore, I had no way of imagining what the impact of the incident would be. I could only spend that time in anxiety and uncertainty.

"Congratulations, Gray!" A blonde teenager suddenly peeked over from the back seat and waved at me.

"...Flat."

The teenager who was smiling broadly was Flat Escardos, who had just had his report reviewed. Even in the El-Melloi classroom, it was not uncommon to see such a prominent figure like him.

"How impressive! It's a rare thing to have your report be used by Professor in his own thesis!"

"No, no, it's just that he happened to be interested in knowing about my hometown."

"That's great, too! You know, it's only been six months since you've been here. When I gave my first report to the professor, I tried to impress him in every way possible. Because I thought that he must have seen ordinary content many times, I decided to win by quantity. I looked all over the Clock Tower and managed to get a big box of bat eyeballs and feces to give to him. I don't know why, but all I got was a good scolding!"

I could imagine the scene as the teenager energetically took the box to the classroom. Maybe he was even smiling smugly as he did so.

"That time, my nose almost became crooked from the smell— Wait, you're cheating! I get to talk to Gray-tan too, get out of the way, go as far away as you can!"

"Ah, Le Chien(the dog)-kun!"

"Don't call me Le Chien!"

A teenage boy with curly blonde hair stormed up to us.

Svin Glascheit. He and Flat were known as the twin juggernauts of the current generation. The unrestrained energy that they gave off seemed to be popular amongst girls(*TN: ?????*). Although I do not know much about this aspect, both of them can probably be considered handsome.

But then, it only applied if they weren't in conflict with each other.

"Eh, but Le Chien-kun is Le Chien-kun! Didn't you want to smell Gray's sweat or something? But didn't Professor forbid you from going near her? Well, if that's the case then you can come to smell me! Come on, no use being polite!"

"Okay, I get it. Flat, you really are my nemesis!" The power on the young man's hand morphed into a sharp claw. There was a whooshing sound as the sharp claws passed by, but Flat escaped from their range with a surprising speed.

"Ahaha! Because of the pain I suffered at the hands of Ms. Tohko, I set up an automatic action system. I can ignore my will and use enhanced techniques to make my nerves

work using only magecraft! The inspiration was the robot body-shells in the games I used to play that could move through pre-programming alone.

Just as Flat dodged and gabbed, the back of his head hit the chair behind him with a thump.

“Oww... It seems I haven’t set the environmental consciousness settings to be precise enough.” Flat grunted and raised his hand, and a magic bullet shot out from his fingertips.

A beautiful rainbow-colored circle shone in the lecture hall as the magic bullet bounced off near Svin’s shoulder.

“Wow, awesome! Le Chien-kun, your resistance has increased again, huh?”

“Shut up. I’ll send you on your way right now!”

Like a superhero from a comic, another set of claws appeared on Svin’s hands—“Calling all people who can stop them.”

A stern voice rang out from the lecturer’s chair.

“...Those who can stop them will receive one course credit, and those who assist will be exempted from one report, or will be provided with one hour of personal counseling. Informal students may also attend this time.”

Along with the cold voice of my mentor, the lecture hall erupted with loud cheers. The two people were quickly surrounded by a whirlwind of magecraft, including Caules’ Electricity Magic, Yvette’s Mystic Eyes, a pair of knives that changed into fire and ice, along with Elemental Magecraft, Rune Magecraft, and Witchcraft. The vortex of magecraft clashed with the two people in a storm of chaos.

Although Flat and Svin were the twin juggernauts of the classroom, the rest of the students were not simply silent spectators. All the magi had their sights set on their positions and would grab them at the first opportunity. That was why the room was now boiling in enthusiasm like this.

The daily routine of the El-Melloi classroom was unchanging. It was so normal that I found it hard to breathe.

"What's wrong, Gray?"

While giving instructions to the students, my mentor came up to me.

I think his face was stern because he was trying to concentrate on preventing property damage. I heard that this classroom was built more sturdily than other classrooms because of this kind of incident. Even so, the Department of Modern Magecraft (Norwich) was probably not rich enough to replenish destroyed property as it wished... But I think the main thing was just my mentor's personality.

"You've been looking dejected. Most people's first reports are around this level. I can't give you credit yet, but I can say that you've passed."

"Oh, no...no, it's not about that." —No. I couldn't look him in the eye, even though I had held back from asking during the feedback earlier, I couldn't now. At that moment, the bell rang.

"I-I'm sorry. Perhaps next time! I have to leave now!"

I lowered my head and left the classroom in a hurry.

*

A cool wind brushed against my face as I exited the school building.

It might come as a surprise to some, but London winters were actually not that cold. Though the days were short and the skies were cloudy, thanks to the westerly wind and the warm currents from the Gulf of Mexico, the temperature rarely drops below zero. Even so, the icy chill that blew into my cloak still scared me for a second. It was as cold as the hand of a winter fairy, and it made my just-relaxed spirit tense up once more.

I breathed into my palms and set off from Slur Street(the Department of Modern Magecraft).

Even if I walked slowly on purpose, it would take me no more than ten minutes to get there. Not too far down the block, there was an elegant mansion. It was not very large, though the carefully-cared for grounds were still impressive. Under the tiled roof, there

were old brick walls covered in sprawling ivy, making it seem like a house out of a fairy tale. This description suited the house well, as the people who lived here were magi.

As usual, I was shown in by the mercury maid, Trimmau. As soon as I entered the room, I was hit by the rich aroma of black tea. I had indeed given advance notice of the visit, but surely this room had not been prepared especially for me.

At that moment—

“Ah, welcome. Could you wait a moment please?” said the young lady who owned the house from behind her desk.

Since there was no need to hide them at her own house, her eyes were now shining with a bright, flaming red. She seemed to be at work, and her hand was swishing up and down the papers laid upon the table.

In a few minutes, the thick stack of papers disappeared from sight. Sometimes, all she needed to do was cast a glance at Trimmau, and the maid would immediately explain what she needed in detail. Watching her work was like watching a perfectly coordinated acrobatic act.

“It is good to be back, but it means that I’ll have to do all this work. Though I’d love to hand as much as possible to my brother, that guy has no idea how to deal with politics and inter-factional relations. In the end, it’s this sort of day-to-day work that matters.”

Reines sighed and rubbed her temples.

“I heard that you went to Animusphere (the Department of Astromancy).”

“Indeed. It was not a pleasant experience.” Said the young woman with a shrug of her shoulders.

I heard that she had entered a partnership with Olgamarie Animusphere when she was following-up with the Rail Zeppelin case, and recently went to the Department of Astromancy (Animusphere) several times for further discussions.

Although Olgamarie’s father, the Lord of Astromancy was on the fence about the Central Powers, Olgamarie seemed to have developed an interest in it because of the

last incident. She proposed a new plan to use the funds left over from the Mystic Eye auction and to sell a nuclear power plant(!?) that was particularly difficult to deal with.

The proud face of the young girl who was slender but strong came to mind, and for some reason, I felt a sense of happiness.

“Well then, let’s have some tea. I want to try a different store today.”

Reines stood up from behind her desk and winked at me. I also dutifully tasted the dessert that Trimmau served.

“...Ah, this chiffon cake (*TN: A type of light cake made with vegetable oil instead of butter*) is delicious. It’s not too greasy, and has just the right amount of sugar.”

“Mmm, the galette (*TN: A type of French dessert that somewhat resembles an open-topped, flat pie*) is not bad either. The person who came up with this combination of pistachios and slightly tart apricots is clearly talented. This was definitely worth sending someone to buy it early in the morning. Let’s add this store to our itinerary.”

Some of the desserts were like quartz, others were like paintings. Each one was beautiful in its own way.

It was only when I arrived in London that I realized the incredible power of desserts. I’m sure they contained a special sort of magic that made people forget about all the problems they were facing. The taste made me feel as if I was melting from the inside out. But this was the only time I could not let myself revel in this deliciousness.

Reines seemed to predict what was going to happen next, and frowned slightly. Just as we were making light conversation while sipping our tea, she suddenly spoke up.

“...So you’ve inevitably come to this point, haven’t you.”

There was a sigh mixed into her words.

This was her lament about my mentor’s recent actions. Although I had briefed her about the general situation at the end of the year, today was the first time I told her about the details. During the conversation, I recalled the incident once again, and it was like a hole tore through my heart.

I remembered the reason why I had been unable to look my mentor in the face in the lecture hall.

The end of the incident.

When Master had given up his participation in the Fifth Holy Grail War.

“That brother of mine really is a fool,” Reines said, clasping her hands together and leaning back on the couch.

She checked the pieces of information with me again one by one, stacking it together like a tower. Finally, it seemed to have taken shape in her mind, and the young woman spoke somberly.

“So that’s what it is. He must be happy to be able to take revenge on Faker, the [other king]. There’s nothing you can do to stop him from being too happy. After all, this is probably the first time in ten years that my brother’s achieved something worthwhile on his own. No wonder he’s in such high spirits.

“Then again, that still isn’t the direct reason why he gave up on the Fifth Holy Grail War. Alas, that brother of mine really does know how to persist at critical moments. I suppose my training did have an influence on him.”

She laughed a little.

It was easy to say what Reines was trying to say.

Yes, the main reason why my mentor had abandoned the Fifth Grail War.

“He couldn’t just leave [the other king] be, could he?”

The young woman stated her own opinion naturally. At this moment, she looked somewhat similar to Master. Perhaps it was because they were siblings. Even if not by blood, there were still similarities.

[The other king].

A Servant who we met aboard the Rail Zeppelin. One who was the enemy of Master and I, with the extra class of Faker. And the former head of the Department of Modern Magecraft, Dr. Heartless.

As the events played back in my mind, the young woman in front of me continued to speak.

“Even if he has to attend the Grail War again, he wants to meet his king again and to prove that the only person who was worthless was himself. That’s what my older brother wants to do. On the other hand, the other king (Faker) is currently working for someone else as a Servant. It’d also be the duty of a king’s subordinate to find out about it. Therefore, he must put aside all his own selfishness and find out the goal of the Master who the Servant works for. Not to mention that she was summoned by his own stolen relic... Or something. My brother would probably think that way.

Besides, if the former head of the department was about to make some big news, as the current Lord of Modern Magecraft (Norwich), he is responsible for doing something about it as soon as possible. Although this is simply foolish for a magus, this is the reasoning used by his brother to justify his actions. He just has this sort of nature. No matter what happens, he will not confuse the direction he wants to go in with the direction he should go in.”

Reines sighed defeatedly.

Though it was just a few sentences, it made me feel immense pain. I felt as if my chest cavity had been filled with stones. I recalled the look on Master’s face when he had smiled and said “perhaps let’s just forget about it” as if it was an obvious conclusion, even though meeting his king was so important to him.

Even though he really didn’t want to give up.

Even though he said himself that he couldn’t let go.

After the case, Atrum Galliasta had visited Slur (the Department of Modern Magecraft) once. When he heard that my mentor had given up on the Fifth Holy Grail War, he angrily proclaimed: “I will not make the same mistakes as El-Melloi did. You just watch me return with my great victory“ and promptly left again.

I was surprised that the arrogant man would say something so full of disappointment and regret. I think he probably just wanted to fight with my mentor again, this time as a magus. Though the battle he had in mind was probably not quite the same as the Holy Grail War. And while this difference could be fatal, I had the feeling that when he yelled at Master, he had reprimanded me at the same time.

Perhaps Master's friend— Melvin Weinz, the one who still called him by his first name, might even have a different answer.

As if she had read my mind, Reines continued.

"I heard that Atrum has already left for Japan. He seems to have sent his people over a while ago, and made a lot of preparations at Fuyuki."

"Fuyuki..." I had heard of this city before. "The city where the Holy Grail War is held... Right?"

"That's right. There have been no reports of all seven classes being summoned yet. Though, some have probably already been summoned and have already started fighting in the shadows. If that oil tycoon walks around the place saying that he 'won't make the same mistakes as El-Melloi', he's probably got a lot of tricks up his sleeve. Apparently, my brother also sent some tickets to the elderly couple that had taken care of him to get them to leave the city temporarily."

"....."

A new Holy Grail War was about to begin.

Saber.

Lancer.

Archer.

Rider.

Caster.

Assassin.

Berserker.

The servants of the seven classes all fought in different ways , like legends manifested into the modern day. How would this great ritual, which Master had barely survived from ten years ago, unfold this time?

And, with what emotion would my mentor face the beginning of the ritual? (TN: *Great this sentence sounds so weird and I don't know how to make it sound more normal I hope the meaning isn't lost*)

“Also...”

“Hmm?”

Hearing my words, Reines frowned slightly.

“How do I put this... I don't have a clear reason why, but I think my brother will get farther than we anticipated. What he says is pretty normal, but if we connect all the dots, the conclusion is simply not possible.”

“...I see.”

I could only reply with a vague answer.

Though, I did understand, somewhat. My mentor was indeed like this sometimes. When he found a clue to an incident or when he was analyzing magecraft, he would suddenly dive into his own world. Though detectives in mystery novels behaved in a similar way, it was particularly fervent (TN: *could also be translated as urgent?*) for him, like he was trying to drill a hole (TN:???? *I have no idea??? Something about this sentence involves the character for “cow” and it's really not helping with the translation. I don't know what this is supposed to mean, I don't know how to translate it*)

As if he could not live if he did not do so.

This was not the way all detectives were. From time to time, my mentor(’s state of mind) reminded me of a violin(TN: *from the text it just means any sort of stringed instrument*) string that had been pulled taut, fragile but resilient at the same time.

If that was the case, then.

“Is there any progress on Heartless?”

“You mean, Dr. Heartless?”

Hearing the name, Reines scowled.

The villain behind the case, and the master of Faker. It was only because of the terrible miracle that he caused in Britain that Master had been forced to stay here.

Then, in the young woman’s opinion, how would Heartless act?

Reines picked up a macaron that was in front of her and sipped some tea. The sweet aroma swirled in the air as she opened her mouth once again.

“It’s rather obvious that Heartless was already involved with my brother before the last incident.”

“You mean, in the earlier cases?”

“Yes, during Ilsema. In order to buy the linden leaf to pay the Grand mage Touko Aozaki (TN: *Which Deepl translates as Arakaki Orangeson for some reason*), someone offered them a large sum of money, yes? It was quite a large sum, and the source of it has not been discovered. I’m afraid it was Heartless’ doing.”

“...”

Reines’ words penetrated my heart, and I felt as if the chocolate in my mouth suddenly became as hard to swallow as salt.

“It might even stretch beyond the Ilsema case. Do you remember that magus from the Department of Law, Hishiri Adashino?”

“...Ah, yes.”

“And didn’t she say that she was investigating him for personal reasons as his sister? According to her, Heartless has already caused many similar incidents. In fact, isn’t Heartless the person responsible for the serial killings seven years ago?”

Her deduction was both similar and different to that of her brother.

Whereas Master interpreted incidents from a magus' perspective, Reines listed the facts and grasped the essence of the other person's side through their actions. It would probably be considered the deduction of a politician. This was the sort of reasoning needed to determine whether someone was an ally or an enemy. It must be the sort of ability she had developed in order to survive.

"Heartless can't be the final culprit," stated Reines.

"Just like that time in Ilsema, he's not related to the case at all. For the case seven years ago, the origin of it was the fact that Marisbury Animusphere wanted to find out more about the Holy Grail War. That is to say, Heartless is not more than a piece of background. He could be easily replaced by an alternative. Regardless of his involvement, a similar case would have still happened. Even so, he is so closely related to all of the cases, making him difficult to remove from the equation. ...Hmph, no wonder he calls himself my brother's enemy."

"Why?"

"Because they're very similar. Or, perhaps because they're polar opposites of each other."

Her words were like a sharpened knife.

Reines raised her index finger and continued.

"They both do not regard magecraft as a mere secret, they both do not integrate it with their own lives, and they both have goals that differ from it. But for my brother, this is probably a great source of his displeasure. After all, it is not that he doesn't want to do so, but that simply lacks the talent to. My brother loves magecraft, unfortunately, it doesn't love him back."

This was probably not a rare sight to see.

Someone who had a goal that they wanted to achieve even if they had to risk their own life, yet lacked the ability to do so. But the difference between Master and other people

was that he had not given up and had kept struggling, and would perhaps reach a slightly different end. Whether or not he was satisfied was a different matter.

The person who has a goal that he wants to achieve even if he has to risk his own life, but does not have the talent to achieve it. The difference between the master and the others is that he did not give up and did not keep on fighting, and finally reached a slightly different end. Whether he was satisfied or not is another matter.

“Heartless, on the other hand, is the complete opposite. It isn’t that he can’t do it, but that he chooses not to. Magecraft has enough love for him to make him the former head of the Department of Modern Magecraft(Norwich), yet he doesn’t love magecraft. Otherwise, he would not have let so many talented mages die. By the way, the Department of Law probably thinks the same way.”

Reines’ calm words seemed to pile up.

It made me think of a cup that was constantly being filled with water. Because the container was filled to the brim, the excess would only overflow. Was this water medicine, or poison? (*TN: I was also confused by that sentence, I'll just chalk it up to Gray liking to describe everything in an excessively macabre way*)

“If my brother was the dissector of magecraft, what would that man be?”

Master and Heartless.

Was the fact that they were both the heads of the Department of Modern Magecraft simply a coincidence?

An ill feeling started to wrap around my throat like rose thorns. It was probably just my own delusion, but I could not ignore it. I recalled that Master had once said that magi must never ignore their intuitions.

A silence settled over the room until a sweet aroma hit me. It was the smell of the newly-brewed tea that Trimmau had brought over.

“Well, that’s it for now.” The young woman drank some more of the tea and leaned back on the sofa.

I wasn't sure whether it was out of consideration for my physical state or if it was Reines' instructions from the start, but it was vanilla tea this time. Even though I didn't know what brand it was, the refreshing flavor eased my anxious mind.

"That was tiring," Reines sighed, rubbing her shoulders. Then, she made an expression as if she was about to pull a prank on someone.

"After all, what we were going to do has already been decided, yes?" She said, raising one of her eyebrows.

"Even though he is hopelessly foolish, he is still my brother. If he doesn't last a little while longer, I would have to find someone else to bully(alternatively, make fun of or torment). The best course of action would be to support him now, and to sell him a boatload of favors while I'm at it. Isn't that the reason why you came to find me?"

"Yes. ...Ah, but I don't plan on bullying him."

Reines laughed as I frantically waved my hands.

Her laughter made me feel slightly relieved. This was the first time I realized that a smile from a friend could put you at ease.

I breathed in and nodded.

"Master said that he hoped I could help him. If so, putting forth all my effort is my duty as a disciple. Therefore, I must face this. Since I am here, I hope that Miss Reines can tell me."

Indeed. I had to face this.

It was something I had attempted to escape from all this time using the comfort of London.

To me, it was like this.

"Before I return to my hometown, please tell me how I encountered Master."

"Very well," Reines said, nodding.

Then, she sighed.

“I thought that you would come ask me one day. But rather than saying that it was my prediction, it’s more like my wish.” She seemed to be a bit vexed, but at the same time, if I was not mistaken, her tone felt as if she was spoiling me (*TN: Really unsure about this*).

“Then, let me, Reines El-Melloi Archisorte, tell you the story that happened before you and my brother met.”

◆ 第一章 ◆
-Chapter 1-



~Part 1~

It was early summer. Though I said that, London was actually pretty cool in the summer.

After all, the highest temperature hardly ever went above twenty-five degrees (77°F). The average temperature was only around fifteen degrees (59°F), and at night, it was sometimes even necessary to take precautions against the cold. Watching tourists who had carelessly dressed for warm weather express their regret was one of my greatest joys.

Though due to the rising global temperatures, maybe this fun will end someday.

As for the cause of the warming, go ask some institutions. Though I could not help but feel that science has finally come to this step. Even if there was no magecraft or mystery involved, if a rich person with two children decided to devote all their efforts to cut down the Amazon rainforest, the world would be in crisis in a flash. It doesn't even take a nuclear missile to send everyone on their way.

On that note, the thing that stops this sort of thing from happening in magecraft is called the Counter Force, but I digress.

That's enough rambling.

The reason why I brought up London summers was because something happened that meant I had to leave there.

“Apologies, my lady. I plan on traveling to Wales for about a week for personal reasons. Is it alright to leave all the work to you for that period?”

My brother had said that to me.

That brother of mine! Wants to travel! For personal reasons!

I hope you can understand the sort of excitement that the thought filled me with. After all, since my brother had been forced to become a Lord, he had been performing his duties with far more seriousness than I could have imagined. Though he

desperately tried to hold back his stomach pains, there were some times when I honestly thought he was going to make a run for it. For this reason, I had even prepared tracking magecraft and a couple of torture rooms. I never thought all of those would end up going to waste. Maybe I should reflect on that.

So, when he said this, I could not help but get serious.

I tried every means to complete the necessary negotiations and business ahead of schedule, transferred my remaining chores to Shardan, the second-grade lecturer who worked for us, and put forward the conditions for my brother to bring me along. Oh yes, by the way, I wasn't worried that he was going to escape. I just wanted to take the chance to grasp his weaknesses. Since the war that happened in the Far East ten years ago, apart from the video games he liked to play and the occasional letter he received, there was hardly a trace of private life left on him. What a difficult person to toy with. But my instincts told me that the more I loved a pet, the more leashes and restraints I should put on it. It would be even better if I could bully him in the process.

Anyway, for this sort of reason, I accompanied him into the Welsh countryside. Each holding a briefcase, we boarded a train at Paddington Station in the morning. As I enjoyed the turbulence, I snacked on the desserts that I had brought. In about two hours, we arrived at the Welsh capital of Cardiff.

After that, we took a five-hour-long bus ride, where we passed by a multitude of road signs in both English and Welsh. Then, we needed to walk up a winding mountain path.

The path seemed to be created specifically to blister the feet of the people who walked on it. It was very likely that only animals ever took this path. I very much wanted to slap the person who had made this road and to ask them exactly what they were thinking when they did so.

Occasionally, there was the chirping of birds. The smell of dirt, animal dung, and rotting fruit mixed together, creating a smell that could only be found in the countryside. The lush foliage in front of me stretched out to god-knows-where. Such a scene was enough to discourage the average traveler.

Rather than saying that the mountain resembled another realm, every step we took seemed to be a step towards the underworld of ancient times. Or perhaps we were

getting swallowed into the stomach of a giant. The perverse feeling which that thought gave me made me feel slightly unsettled.

By the way, the first person to show a sign of weakness was my brother. Just as I had a considerable lead on the dimly-lit road,

“...Could you, wait, for me.”

He said, in a raspy voice.

“Oh, really, you’re already tired, brother dearest? We’re only running our magic circuits for a little bit longer than usual. Shouldn’t this be an easy task in a place with so much Mana?”

“Could you please not, poke fun at other people’s, weaknesses with such a look of joy?” My brother protested, bent over and breathing heavily.

I could not help but raise the corners of my mouth in a smile. Even though he was aware of his lack of ability, he still expressed displeasure every time he was honest about it.

This meant that he hadn’t given up on his future yet. Even though he already stopped having hope in his talent long ago, he hadn’t lost his challenger’s spirit. What a contradictory person. Then again, it was for this reason that teasing him was so interesting— no, more like the reason why he didn’t bore me. I really should praise my younger self for being able to find him.

“If you’re going to say that, my lady, you should probably consider the unevenness in your own magecraft. With how you’re doing it, you’re going to waste a significant amount of energy. I’d recommend that you imagine the circuitry between your sacrum (a triangular bone in the lower back) and your fifth cervical bone in more detail.”

And there he goes again. Even though he was absolute garbage at it himself, he had a clear knowledge of what was ideal for others.

How twisted. What was this person’s problem? Who was he, a toy specially made for my pleasure?

“Hey, hey, if I get more efficient, I’ll be miles ahead of you.”

“Even if you leave me behind, I’ll catch up.”

I wonder, was he referring to distance or magecraft?

Whatever it was, his bravado made me laugh.

“That’s not a bad answer.”

I tried to repress the smile that was forming at the corners of my mouth and concentrated on trying to do as he said.

Doing this really did improve the efficiency. To tell the truth, I wasn’t much better than him in terms of stamina. So to relieve my exhaustion, I concentrated my magic on the flow of my blood and on my nervous system.

I took out my water bottle and drank some diluted wine as I looked out over the mountains.

“Aren’t we almost there?”

“...It says so on the map.”

My brother said, leaning on a tree and nodding as he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

He even took out a cigar and put it in his mouth. Though I thought that cigars would probably drain a person’s stamina, I didn’t dislike the smell. Besides, it was a good way to keep the insects away.

“Speaking of which, I remember that you once said that it used to be a fashion to build structures on mountains, yes?”

“Correct. In some religions, building shrines and temples on mountains was a proof of faith. To the believers of the religion, the hardships they endured when they climbed the mountain were a sign of their accomplishment. However, this tendency has changed over the years, and has waned along with the centralization and

secularization of religion. After all, if you stay out here, you can't become politically significant."

The shift of religion.

Even though what they believe in has not changed, the [way they believe] in it has changed with the times.

With the development of the internet, the speed of change will only increase. Maybe in the future even attending service through computers won't be a rare sight (*TN: Well what do you know*). Maybe even computers will have become outdated then.

After all, even though magecraft is based upon attempting to reach the past, accepting the present is necessary.

Though the El-Melloi family only became the head of the Department of Modern Magecraft (Norwich) because of the sudden death of its previous Lord, recently, I've started thinking that it wasn't just a coincidence. Perhaps it was inevitable that the long-ignored Department of Modern Magecraft (Norwich) would receive a Lord.

To be honest, I find this quite interesting.

Chaos suits me more. If the El-Melloi family was still in charge of the Department of Mineralogy (Kischur), I probably wouldn't have been chosen as the successor. Most families only had one mage because of Magic Crests. Originally, I would have just been a random mediocre mage living out my life as a backup from an insignificant family. If you look at it this way, I should have a tiny bit of gratitude for the Meluastea family, who took over both Archaeology and Mineralogy.

"Hmph. Faith. I probably should have asked earlier, but what the heck is this place?"

"...(TN: This is supposed to be suspense or something so pretend there's a word here) Graveyard." Hearing his rasping voice, I could not help but blink many times in succession.

"Oh. I've heard of that before. Even though it's not well-known in the surface world, down where we are, this is probably one of the most famous graveyards in the world. Even though it's famous, the exact location isn't clear... So it's in Wales. Talk about blind spots, I completely ignored the possibility that it might be here."

I muttered, putting one hand to my lips. My brother sighed.

He moved his finger like he was trying to stir up the smoke from his cigar. Perhaps this was a sort of warm-up activity to get his brain up and running.

Then,

“Before we get there, let’s have a lecture.

“Since the beginning of time, people have feared death. Even in a time when it was easier to lose your life than now, nobody was content with their own deaths. After all, no matter the present or the past, you only get to live once.”

“Well, that goes without saying.”

“So, to suppress this fear, they defined what the world would be like after death. They clearly set it apart from the world of the living and gave it a name like the underworld or *yōmi* (the yellow spring, the land of the dead). This meant that death was no longer the end, but a new beginning. Death was just a way that our ancestors could bring themselves to accept the end of their lives.”

It looked like he’d found his stride.

Though his breathing hadn’t stabilized yet, once he touched on this sort of topic, he would not stop. I have to admire his tenacity in this regard. The only thing other than magecraft that could make my brother ignore his bodily functions was probably video games. Though it’s probably very difficult to find gaming buddies in the Clock Tower.

“In the age of the gods, the land of the dead was much closer to us than it is now. The situation is similar with death. Even though it’s a one-way path, the people of the past believed that it was still a connection to another world. The difference of the name by which we call it changes what meaning it has. For example, ancient the Mesopotamian *Kigal* (alternatively, *Kur*, *Irkalla*, or *Arali*, characterized as a dark, shadowy cavern) is vastly different from *Valhalla* (characterized by being a majestic hall for heroes) of the Norse.”

I remember that *Valhalla* was the palace of the god *Odin* in Norse mythology. It was said that the chosen dead could be guided to that place by *valkyries* and that there were hundreds of large doors from which thousands of warriors would enter the feast halls.

As the sun rose, they would fight. They would be resurrected again at dusk, enjoying fine wine and good food and anticipating a new battle the next morning.

Thus, those presently living would not fear death, but instead would enthusiastically participate in the glorious battles that would lead them to Valhalla.

Though I could not understand this, I could agree that this sort of mindset was compatible with their definition of the land of the dead.

The ancient meaning of death. Or perhaps you could call it the most ancient form of magecraft that was shared between every civilization.

“So, death is just a journey to another world. That’s a romantic way of putting things.”

“Not necessarily. In Scandinavia, many mountains had names that are pronounced similarly to Valhalla. Perhaps they thought that those mountains were also part of the land of the dead. If we adhere to this definition, even though people will never conquer death, they can lessen the dread they feel towards it. In those eras, it was very difficult to cross an ocean. Therefore, even the land of the dead would seem closer than the other end of a sea, both psychologically and physically.”

My brother paused for a second, putting the cigar between his fingers and taking out his water bottle to drink water. Then, he used the back of his hand to wipe his mouth before he continued slowly.

“And graves were a way of giving a form to this [world]. Perhaps you could call it a tiny, separated land of the dead.”

...Ah.

I finally started to understand. A grave was not only a place to bury the dead, but it also was something deeper than that. It was a man made, tiny land of the dead.

That was what we called a grave.

“For this reason, kings and other influential people from all over the world would build mausoleums. Because graves were the underworld itself, they were their new palaces and fortresses built to continue their conquest. Valuable funerary objects, as well as countless figurines of soldiers, were placed there precisely for this reason. Whether they were pharaohs, kings, or emperors, they did not think that death was the end.

“Oh, right, and in Asian cultures, they would consider the *Feng Shui* (a system of laws considered to govern spatial arrangement to optimize the flow of energy in Chinese thought), which further reinforces the notion of the afterlife. To elaborate further, there is a division between the places that separate death from life and the places that integrate the two and even attempt to derive power from death. The latter is often found in the Far East, but also includes the catacombs of France.”

My brother’s passionate and slightly off-topic words drifted into the clear sky above Wales.

“Though, these are only the ancient perceptions of grave-making. Like I said before, beliefs change over time. In ancient times, graves were like tiny worlds, but in the present, they are seen more as [windows]. Even people without specific religious beliefs may unconsciously see graves as a window to the dead.”

This is affirmed by the way people pray in front of graves.

Rest In Peace (R.I.P.), we pray. Amen, we say, as if it was a mantra. Because graves exist in our perceptions regardless of whether we believe in the afterlife or not.

“No matter how you put it, graves are linked to the world after death. In both the past and the present, we can peer through the graves and into another world.”

“Another world, huh.”

I repeated in a low voice.

Or you could say, that was where we were headed now.

“...So you’re saying that we’re heading to another world now?”

“Perhaps. Death is the real master in ancient cemeteries. Living people are only visitors who can stay for a short while on this earth. We should at least be prepared for this, especially in a cemetery that is this famous.”

“...I see.”

As usual, he managed to return to the starting point of the discussion.

As a lesson, I could understand it. The reason I didn't review the magecraft-related history of graves was that the meaning of graves has changed dramatically. No matter how beautiful a poem might be, if you had no knowledge of the language in which it was written, it might as well be a random scrap of paper.

I nodded and then asked a question that came to mind. "So this trip is just a field investigation? You do sometimes go to research things that are hardly related to Modern Magecraft sometimes. Is it one of those excursions?"

"To tell you the truth..." My brother said, "there might be a secret to my victory there."

"Your victory?"

I felt that I should feign confusion here for the sake of politeness, but to be honest, my brother's goal was simply too obvious. For this reason, I wanted to grasp his weaknesses.

So I shrugged and said in a resigned voice.

"Really. So you haven't given up yet." There was really no need for me to clarify what "giving up" entailed.

The Fifth Holy Grail War, where the former Lord El-Melloi had died a sudden death and where my adoptive brother had survived, was going to begin again. Apparently, it was supposed to occur every sixty years, but because a situation occurred last time, there were only ten years between this one and the last.

But doesn't going to the world after death to find a way to win sound a bit dangerous? "It's fine if you want to go, but don't you remember what you promised me?"

"Of course not. To deal with the El-Melloi debt, to restore the Magic Crest, to be a stand-in Lord before you become an adult, and to be your tutor, right?"

He paused for a second.

"I'll think of a way to deal with it. Or at least I'll have come up with a general idea. Then I'll be able to go." He said determinedly.

Well, well. I could not help but blink (many times in succession). Even though he still looked as if he could fall over at any moment, there was a certain untamed glint in his eyes that wasn't usually there.

But it's also for this sort of reason that this guy gives me a headache.

I sighed.

In short, I couldn't stop this brother of mine. Rather than saying that it was because I was not skilled enough, he probably couldn't even control himself. He had decided on this way of life long ago and would continue trying to fulfill his wish even if it ate away at his humanity.

I often had this image in my mind.

The image of migratory birds that aimed for distant places that hardly ever stopped beating their wings. When they flew over the ocean, if there were no islands or driftwood, they would be forced to use up all the energy they had to continue soaring. They had to persist even if the seas were stormy, and had no time to turn back even if their companions fell from the sky around them. Only after this sacrifice, could they finally reach their goal.

But would they really be rewarded?

Oh, that got too sad all of a sudden, I thought, and put my imagination on pause.

To be honest, I originally wanted to put a few more leashes(restraints) on him, because having your toy run away would be very boring. Especially since my brother was far more useful than I thought he would be. But if I kept the leash too tight, Melvin might come over to interfere. What a nuisance. Making my brother's life a living hell was actually quite hard.

I considered this as I continued down the mountain path. Suddenly, something moved in the foliage.

“_!”

We turned our heads to the source of the sound. A pattering sound came from within the forest. All of a sudden, about a dozen birds rose into the sky.

“Ravens, huh.” My brother muttered, and then turned his gaze back to the forest.

I also noticed [it].

“Ravens carry the souls of the deceased,” came a deep voice.

A black shadow emerged from where the ravens had once been.

It was a man dressed in black. Though he appeared to be around 60 years old, his sturdy build was visible from his jacket. There was a scuffed hat sitting atop his messy, unkempt hair.



“Ravens often appear in continental Celtic Mythology. They are the guides of the dead, and the birds of grave keepers. Because some say that they caw the word ‘nevermore’ (TN: *So we’re doing Edgar Allan Poe references now? Alright*).”

A raven landed on the man’s shoulder.

“You said that they were the birds of grave keepers. Does that mean you’re—” My brother began.

“What business does a mage of the Clock Tower have with me?”

I didn’t think that he could tell that we were mages of the clock tower at first glance. Or, perhaps he had been listening in on our conversations for a long time now.

My brother stood straight and gave him a bow. “I am Lord El-Melloi II.”

“It’s a rare sight to see someone visit specifically to meet me,” said the man.

He turned around and faced his back to us. “I am the grave keeper Bersac Blackmore. If you have business, follow me.”

He began walking into the woods at a stunning speed, and my brother hurried after him. I turned around to squint at where the ravens had disappeared. The legend that ravens would transport souls reminded me of a place.

“Blackmore graveyard...”

The graveyard whose name constantly circulated among mages, and was one of the oldest graveyards in the land.

~Part 2~

We followed Bersac to a small village that clung to a steep mountain.

The population was probably only around a hundred people. It was a village that could disappear at any time, yet had spent decades in slumber. Most of the buildings were built with stone bricks and looked like they were at least a hundred years old. Though all the people who came by were dressed in modern clothes, it wouldn't seem weird if they donned the clothes of the last century.

Either way, this sort of place was not uncommon in the Welsh countryside. Since it was on such a steep hill, delivery trucks probably wouldn't be able to enter easily, so it was inevitable that it would be so undeveloped.

Even though my brother looked pretty *pretentious* (*TN: ???I have no idea what this word is supposed to translate as*) for a mage, he was still a bit better than regular city folk. But of course, this thought shattered immediately when we entered the village.

“Oh, Mr. Bersac! Who are those two with you?”

An overweight middle-aged man in a priest’s outfit called us to a stop. Rather than saying that he was overweight, “spherical” may have been a more apt description. He appeared more like a ball of fat than a person, and made me wonder how they managed to get him into these mountains in the first place. I wanted to see what would happen if I pushed him over (*TN: REINES-*).

Behind the priest, there was a young nun. She looked like she was around twenty years old. She had a pair of coffee-brown eyes, a charming splatter of freckles across her face, and a couple of strands of her golden hair that had escaped her headpiece. I was surprised that she was a nun at such a young age, but my thoughts were occupied by other matters.

It was the Church.

I couldn’t help but reflexively enter an alerted state. Perhaps this was just the nature of a Clock Tower mage when anything involving the Holy Church came up. How pathetic.

“Father Fernando.”

Bersac called out his name.

“They are my guests. You’ll allow them to pass, yes?”

“Why, of course. The doors of the Church are always open. (*TN: Not sure if I should capitalize the word ‘church’, because it could be referring to the Holy Church or just the physical church in Blackmore village.*)”

Father Fernando wobbled his double, no, triple chin and looked at us. He didn’t attempt to conceal the suspicion he felt towards us, and his eyes narrowed as if he was not awake yet.

“My name is Fernando Croze, and it’s a pleasure to meet you. Your names, please?”

“I am Lord El-Melloi II.”

“Reines El-Melloi Archisorte.”

My brother and I answered truthfully. There was no special reaction on the face of the priest. If they were people from our world, it would be impossible for them to have never heard the name El-Melloi. So he was either a poker face, or just an outsider.

“Oh, so the two of you are siblings, yes?”

“Exactly! We have such a good relationship that we won’t separate with each other no matter where we go! Right, brother dearest?”

I grabbed my brother’s arm in an excessively showy way and immediately felt his displeasure. Hey, brother, this is the time to act like we were close to let them lower their guard! Isn’t that how they do it in B-grade spy movies? I whispered in a voice only my brother could hear, and did my best to put on a lively smile appropriate for my age.

“And who is that nun?”

“Sister Illumia’s the name.” The young nun said, in a slapdash tone of voice.

Her attitude was more apathetic than I had thought. Maybe she would be a better source of information than that hunk of a priest.

“Then, since I have been invited by a devotee, I shall take my leave. Mr. Bersac, would you mind leading the two to the church?”

“Of course. I had planned on doing so anyway.”

“My apologies. Even though it’s just a small, unseemly village, please make yourselves at home.”

Father Fernando nodded, and then left.

After a few seconds, Sister Illumia walked over and leaned in so that her lips were nearly touching my cheek. Just as I was wondering expectantly whether she had some sort of a *special interest in that area*,

“It would be best for you to leave as soon as possible.” She whispered. And then, she turned around without even looking at us and followed after the priest.

Well, well.

How exciting. I loved this sort of unwelcoming atmosphere. Perhaps I could say that the more hostility and malice there is, the more motivation there is to fight. But returning to the original topic, the fact that the nun and the priest had different attitudes was quite intriguing.

Either way, we were brought to the church at the northernmost end of the village.

It was a simple church, with ivy-clad brick walls that resembled fish scales.

When we opened the large door of the church, it was surprisingly spacious inside. The ceiling was quite high, and the interior was well-cleaned, giving it a quiet atmosphere. Though it wasn’t grand, both the golden candelabras and the wooden pews were swept devoid of dust. The devoutness of the village was plain to see. There would probably be quite a few people gathered here every Sunday, sitting in a place where all was silent except for the fat priest’s preachings.

But the most eye-catching thing was deep inside the church.

“...A Black Madonna (in Western Christendom, used to refer to a painting or statue of the Virgin Mary and infant Jesus that are depicted in black).”

Indeed, it was a statue of the Virgin Mary that was dyed in inky black. Though she still held the infant Jesus in her hands, her stature seemed different, and full of majesty. She stood straight, and her gleaming eyes stared downwards. She seemed more like a female general than a kind mother.

“What is that?”

“...Black Madonnas do exist in scattered places throughout Europe,” whispered my brother, as if he was worried about Bersac hearing us.

“The Virgin of Montserrat (in Catalonia) and the statue in Le Puy-en-Velay (in France) are quite famous. These statues differ from regular statues of the Virgin Mary, supposedly because they have absorbed elements of pre-Christian religions. The same situation also happened with some of the saints.”

I remember hearing something similar in class.

The Holy Mother was worshipped in a different capacity than her child, the Savior, because religious syncretism was more prevalent. Some of the local fairies or gods could be Christianized as saints, while others were worshipped as the Virgin Mary.

As a result, the Black Madonna was produced. I have heard that such a statue of the Virgin Mary is still revered in parts of Western Asia and Egypt, so it is possible that this statue went through a similar process before appearing in the church of this small village.

However, I rarely take interest in something so academic, especially when it concerns [those people]. I’d rather think about what sorts of secrets were being hidden. That is to say, how much of this church is as it appears on the surface. To what extent is this place related to the Holy Church?

Even if the people here were from [over there], judging from this statue, they probably weren't die-hard radicals. Though we call it the Holy Church, it isn't a completely united organization.

Though the Church is a confidential part of a large religious organization, one of its origins is in the ecumenical meeting of all sorts of sectors. Therefore, the authorities of the Holy Church don't distinguish between the Old and New Testaments, for example, and can have the largest magecraft base in the world. (*TN: To be honest I have very little idea as to what I just translated there*)

Then again, this statement doesn't always apply. In fact, there is actually a strong bias in favor of the Old Testament. It was even rumored that the cardinals were part of the cadre of the Holy Church. (*TN: I really don't know*) This situation led to a faction that wanted to eradicate all factions other than those who followed the Old Testament, and the organization became a mess of disputes, but...

The Clock Tower really isn't in a position to criticize them, though.

After all, where I come from, infighting is practically a tradition.

It would be an understatement to call it simply a tradition. Including the politics, up to eighty percent of the disputes we have are purely internal. I don't know where all the noble pursuit of knowledge has gone. Well, this corruption did make me feel incredibly excited. After all, this is the way human beings should be.

“—Do you find this statue of the Holy Mother of interest, mage.”

Bersac's voice rang out from behind us.

My brother nodded slightly.

“It's quite rare, after all.”

“I heard that it was something that has been here for quite a while now. Father Fernando would probably know more about it than I do.”

“...I see, then this should be related to the Celtic cultures that originally inhabited this place, right? No, the basis is different. The possibility that only cultural syncretism occurred would also be...”

My brother muttered to himself. If we weren’t here for business, he might have even stayed here for a week just to investigate.

The grave keeper continued to speak.

“Before we arrive at my house, would the two of you mind praying to this statue? After all, it is one of the rules of the village.”

After that, Bersac himself knelt first. Due to his muscular build, he looked more like a knight taking a vow as he prayed.

“As long as she doesn’t mind that I’m a mage.”

As he said that, my brother made a cross.

I didn’t have any sort of repulsion, either, so I followed suit. Since I was basically an atheist, this felt sort of new. I really didn’t care if God (or gods) actually existed. I just think that they would be someone with a personality similar to mine.

Then, Bersac walked out from the back door of the church.

Behind the church, there was a swamp. It was surrounded by metal fencing, and a couple of stone graves stood inside it. That was probably the graveyard.

Ignoring that area for now, Bersac led the way for us.

There was a small, dilapidated house next to the church. Rather than saying it was a house for a person to live in, it was more like a large storage cabinet. Though, from the furniture that was placed around the room, it appeared that he did in fact live there.

On the dirty oak table, there were a couple of metal cups with coffee in them. The coffee looked like muddy water, and tasted like it too. Though I didn’t have the bravery to express my disgust about a drink a stranger gave me, it still took a significant amount of self control to keep my facial expression even.

After he saw that we both drank some coffee, the grave keeper cut to the point.

“What do you want from me?”

“Actually, I have a request.”

My brother stood up and bowed his head politely.

“I have heard much about Blackmore Graveyard. I know that my request is selfish, but I still hope that you can lend me a grave keeper. I will prepare appropriate compensation, of course.”

“...Ha!”

Bersac stroked his beard and laughed.

“The Clock Tower needs our help? And it’s a Lord?”

However, my brother’s expression did not change. He bowed his head and continued.

“I beg you from the bottom of my heart. Also, please allow me to correct you. It is not in the name of the Clock Tower, but in my own name.”

“Hmm.”

The grave keeper continued to stroke his beard and narrowed his blue eyes.

It seemed that he understood that my brother was not fooling around. On his dirty face, only his eyes were as bright as a child’s. Suddenly, I had a thought that surprised even myself.

“In your own name, huh. I thought that everyone in the Clock Tower was already too busy to do anything other than to fight for their factions.”

Wow, to have bad words of where I come from spread even to remote places like this.

“Your opinion isn’t wrong. However, that is not all.”

“So something about chasing the Vortex of Radix (alternatively, the Root of the Vortex, the Root of Akasha, or the Akashic Root), then.”

Bersac’s voice was slightly tinged by anxiety. I see. So he does have a correct interpretation of magecraft.

The Vortex of Radix.

Yes. Supposedly the goal of every mage. Then again, the phrase “the Vortex of Radix” is just a convenient name. Putting it as a phrase is wrong in the first place, so sometimes, it’s just referred to as [] (emptiness, 空, *kara*).

Even the inter-factional wars were based on this. Even if someone was obsessed with the struggle of power, they would not forget it. Or, you could say that some people would rather be obsessed with power in order to escape it. It was the ultimate, secluded dream of all mages.

However, my brother shook his head.

“That has no direct correlation to my request. Though since the Vortex of Radix is the origin of all things, I can’t deny the possibility of a connection.”

That... was an excessively rigorous answer.

Bersac’s fingers tapped the tabletop like a metronome, mechanically keeping time.

“You want to borrow a grave keeper, yes?”

A silence enveloped the room. And the one who broke it was not one of the three of us.

Someone knocked lightly on the door of the hut. I turned my head around, and saw the wooden door creak open slowly.

“...Mr. Bersac.”

It was an elfin girl with a hood over her eyes. The reason why I say it's a teenage girl is because that person had a lovable voice, so it could actually also be a young boy. In my

opinion, I like both. It makes me want to give them a moderate amount of pain and listen to the sound that they'll make when they cry out in suffering. (TN: REINES—)

“Oh, you’ve come.” Bersac’s voice sounded like he found the situation troublesome.

“Um... I heard that there’d be training today.”

“You heard correctly, but today there happens to be guests. My apologies, but there’s no training today. Could you use this time to help prepare a blanket?”

“...Okay.”

The hooded girl only spoke a couple of sentences before leaving. What a shame. I originally wanted to ask her about some things. Though, I could feel that she wouldn’t enjoy talking to strangers.

We turned our gaze back to Bersac, who started talking again.

“Anyway, now I know that you’re serious about this. However, I cannot give you an answer now. I think that we both need some time.” Bersac said, in a polite manner that contrasted his tattered clothing. He jutted his chin towards the window to point in a direction. “There’s a hunting lodge just outside the village. You can stay there for the night.”

“Thank you very much.”

My brother bowed his head again.

“Besides that, if you wish to stay in this village, there are a few rules that you must follow.” Bersac said.

He raised four fingers.

“First, you must pray to the statue of the Holy Mother when you enter. You have already done this.” He lowered his index finger.

“Second, do not go out late at night.”

“Third, do not go to the graveyard alone. Fourth, though multiple people can enter the graveyard, do not ever enter the swamp. I hope you can follow these rules.”

Well, well.

What an odd rule.

Praying to the statue was understandable, but the other rules were quite strange. It was more like something that would appear in an outdated horror movie than something to lecture children with. But before I could ask any questions, the grave keeper spoke up in a serious voice.

“I implore you to please follow these rules.”

~Part 3~

“—Whoaaaa! There must be dust mites here! And maybe even lice!”

The blankets were worn out, and the bed stank to high heaven. We had arrived at the hunting lodge like Bersac had instructed us to do.

I felt uneasy from the moment I heard that it was only used for hunting. It turned out that this lodge was even shoddier than Bersac’s hut. I did my best to apply disinfection magecraft, but I still regretted not bringing more herbs with me. Though I hadn’t taken many classes in the Department of Botany (Yumina), I could still do something to help fix up this space.

On the other side of the room, my brother dusted off the blanket with a practiced motion and wrapped himself in it.

Then, I remembered that he had traveled all over the world. Realizing that he had once led this sort of a life, I hesitated slightly before hastily smothering the blanket over myself before I could worry about the consequences.

The fire swayed faintly inside a cracked lantern in the room.

After a pause, my brother spoke up.

“Milady, you really didn’t need to accompany me.”

“What do you mean, isn’t it a great thing for a brother and a sister to work together to accomplish a task?”

I could not help but feel a sense of pleasure when I saw my brother’s displeased expression in the dim light.

I don’t know if it was because he sensed my pleasure, but he rolled over and turned his back to me. Actually, the back can also show various expressions, but I resisted the urge to tease him and asked the most important question.

“Brother dearest, would you care to tell me... what is the so-called key to your victory?”

“You don’t need to know.”

My brother tossed that at me coldly.

“Why would that be? You know, it’s quite likely that if you attend the Fifth Holy Grail War, you’ll end up the same as my uncle Kayneth. Or perhaps I should say that it would be the only reasonable thing that would happen to you. If so, then of course I would be interested in the sort of strategy my cowardly older brother has devised.”

“.....”

“Oh, so you think that I’ll let you go if you just stay silent? Let me remind you that this matter is well within the scope of the promise you made. After all, if you die, it would greatly impact the El-Melloi family.”

Since I had gotten to this point, my brother replied reluctantly.

“A mage has no chance of winning against a proper servant.”

“...Of course.”

It was so logical that it didn’t cause me to feel anything.

Servants.

What mages(we) call Ghost Liners.

We have various ways to use them. For instance, we can summon them from their “throne” for a short period of time using a ritual to use certain parts of their power or certain fragments of their Noble Phantasm.

However, only the Grail in Fuyuki can summon a servant along with their personalities. Or at least, as far as I know.

Only a small percentage of the people at the Association knew about Fuyuki. Even if they had heard of it, they probably dismissed it as a random delusional ritual of the Far

East. Even though it got a bit of attention because of the death of the previous Lord El-Melloi, it only became a topic of discussion between a few eccentric mages, and interest in it had long since faded away. Even though I couldn't call it outright interference of intelligence, I still felt like someone had meddled with the system. Then again, to the Clock Tower, the Far East was like some barbaric land, so it's only natural that something like the Holy Grail War would be ignored. I probably just had an overactive imagination.

"However, all Servants have something in common," my brother continued.

"Every single one of them is a Heroic Spirit. Servants must be summoned as spirits who can only acquire temporary physical forms through taking in magical energy. Even though they can have physical forms, they are still spirits, and therefore have Spiritual Cores. Therefore, since they are spirits, there must be experts at dealing with them."

Hearing this, it dawned on me.

"Wait... so the reason why you want to borrow a grave keeper is that—"

"To let a Blackmore grave keeper— preferably Bersac Blackmore himself — partake in the Holy Grail War to assist me."

I stared at my brother seriously for the first time in quite a while. On a side note, he had the audacity to say something like this with his back still turned to me.

"Hey, just as a reminder, that's the sort of thinking usually applied to familiars."

Even though it was an odd ritual in the Far East, it was still a proper fight between mages. If so, it would only be reasonable if mages were also the protagonists in the fight. However grand they might be, Heroic Spirits were only familiars, tools to assist with victory. If it was a close assistant or a subordinate, it might have made sense, but bringing a completely unrelated person was unthinkable.

And if that person wasn't even a mage?

A proper mage would never think up of an idea like that. If they did, the people around them would start to question whether they were really a mage or not.

“If I did it the proper way, there’s no way that I could pull it off better than Kayneth, right?”

“Well, that is true.”

I understood.

After all, in comparison to the former Lord El-Melloi, my brother was a complete coward who only survived by being lucky and careful, but this was completely different from whether he would win or not.

“But... Ah, so you’re going to deal with Servants as if they were wraiths or evil spirits.”

“Just like how humans are also creatures. It all just boils down to the basic structure.”

My brother’s voice had become slightly muffled. Oh, did my use of the phrase “evil spirits” tick him off? I pretended that I didn’t notice the change and continued the conversation.

“Do you think the grave keeper will help you?”

“Who knows. After all, I don’t even know if the Blackmore grave keepers even have the ability to deal with Servants. It’s just a possibility.”

As he said that, my brother shook his head.

“Though, this village is surprisingly interesting. Even though Blackmore Graveyard is so famous, nobody knows about this place. Both the Black Madonna statue and the rules just then stimulate my imagination in a nice way.”

“Stimulates your imagination, huh.”

I sometimes wonder whether my brother should be described as unexpectedly crazy, or on the contrary, a little too scholarly for a mage.

“Well, so it’s still better to have me around, right?”

“What do you mean?”

My brother finally turned his head around to face me. At that moment, a silvery fluid flowed into the lodge from the door gap (*TN: Or whatever that gap at the bottom of a door's supposed to be called*).

“—!”

The fluid changed shape as my brother inhaled sharply. The surface of the mercury bubbled, and in an instant, a metallic maid appeared in front of us.

“Hello boys! I’m back!”

The proper-looking maid greeted us with the voice a drunk old man might address aliens with. Well, even though this was within my realm of imagination, the urge to punch Flat in the face rose within me. What the heck was that guy teaching the El-Melloi family’s *Volumen Hydragyrum*?

I sighed, and spoke to my mercury maid.

“Thank you, Trimmau.”

“You still ended up bringing her.”

My brother pressed his hands to his temples as if he was trying to dispel a headache.

“Otherwise, the automatic control functions that I painstakingly added would end up going to waste.”

“Where was she when we were on the train?”

“I stuck her to the bottom of the train car. I also asked her to bring the rest of the luggage.”

“You just like doing this sort of nonsense.”

“Hmm~♪ You can feel proud of your little sister, you know? Or you could call me the dark horse of the El-Melloi classroom, that nickname’s not bad either.”

I puffed out my chest like I was showing off at my brother, whose cheeks were twitching slightly.

“Trimmau, what’s the situation in the village?”

“Yes. Mr. Bersac is still in his hut, Father Fernando and the nun are both asleep at the church. The other villagers have not gone out either.”

“Hmph. So there’s nothing suspicious going on. Is everyone really following the rules?”

I said, propping my chin up on one finger.

Though it was possible that they didn’t go out because there was nothing interesting outside or that the rules were just something to scare visitors with, it didn’t feel very likely.

My brother lay down with a thump.

“These things can be investigated later... I’m really tired.”

Soon after he said that, his breathing turned even, so I suppose that the last sentence was the truth.

Usually at this time, he’d be preparing for my pranks, but he appeared to be truly exhausted. That brother of mine didn’t have much stamina in the first place, so it was inevitable that he would be tired after climbing up such a steep mountain and negotiating with the grave keeper.

I could see the wrinkles between his eyebrows with my strengthened eyes. If those were to be the evidence that he was under my control, I wanted them to be even deeper. And then I immediately began to reflect on whether that thought was too naive. After all, if I wanted something that would stay there forever, I might as well use a more extreme, irreparable method. It’d be best if I could get him to hate me for his entire life. Then he’ll always remember me.

“Goodnight, brother.”

After I said that, I blew out the fire in the lantern. A few minutes later, I tried calling my familiar.

“Trimmau, are you there?”

“I am right beside you.”

“I want to hold your hand.”

“Understood, milady.”

My hands touched something ice cold. Along with the calming temperature that seemed almost like a lifeline, I drifted into familiar slumber.

◆ 第二章 ◆

-Chapter 2-



~Part 1~

The next day was bright and sunny.

I opened the window of the lodge and let the morning sunshine bathe my face.

Because we were in the mountains, summers were still slightly chilly. The lodge, which had been a mess yesterday, had been cleaned. That was undoubtedly the result of a night's work by Trimmau.

She also prepared black tea that coincided perfectly with the time I woke up.

Apart from the stove, everything from the teapot to the water was brought over by Trimmau. Since her automatic control function had been running since yesterday, I had lost quite a bit of Magic Energy, but that was a necessary sacrifice for comfort.

I sipped at the aromatic amber-colored liquid that was in front of me and immediately felt my consciousness return to me.

“Yes, yes. This is what I can call a proper morning. Finally.”

“Today I have prepared pork pâté (a sort of meat sauce that can be spread on bread).”

“Spread it thickly for me.”

“Understood.”

Trimmau spread the white pâté onto the slices of bread and placed them onto my plate. As soon as I bit into it, I felt the delicious flavor spread in my mouth. The smoothness of the meat and the perfect saltiness were a match made in heaven.

I drank another mouthful of black tea in bliss, and enjoyed the aroma that swirled through the air.

I was a bit short on desserts, but I suppose I'll just satisfy myself with chocolate brownies for now. Just as I felt the sugar begin to activate my brain, the door to the inner room was opened.

“How elegant.”

My brother, who had just woken up, walked in as he scratched his head.

Although he appeared to have attempted to comb his hair, it was still a mess. I guess there were people who would prefer this sort of style, but... Actually, as soon as I thought of that, a couple of students' names had already surfaced in my head. Still, I didn't recommend that he stayed like this.

“Yes. After all, the coffee we drank at the grave keeper's place yesterday could be considered a type of torture. Here, have some as well.”

“Well, much obliged for your generous offer.”

As he said this, my brother sat down across from me.

After Trimmau poured him a cup of tea, her fingers shifted into a comb, and she began to help him comb his hair.

My brother was clearly not awake. He kept mumbling to himself and fumbling his fingers as if he was holding a game controller. It looked really weird. Though, after a few sips of tea and a few bites of bread, his eyes regained their vitality. He even started to talk more than he usually did.

“I see. You've done a good job of educating Trimmau. But shouldn't you get some friends to drink this tea with?”

“That almost sounded like the sort of suggestion a real brother would give. I'll keep it in mind.”

The problem was that I didn't have friends like that. Whether you wanted to have tea or eat desserts, you needed people who you trusted to not poison your food. So it was a shame that I didn't really get along with those sorts of people. But if you asked me whether that made me feel sad, I must confess that I actually quite enjoyed it.

The trouble is that although my life is objectively not unhappy, subjectively, I have to admit that it is overflowing with joy. Eating the food that I brought myself if I'm

poisoned, being prepared to negotiate if I'm pressured at a social gathering, and finding the right tactic in a fight. All of this is a great deal of fun for me.

Of course, if I didn't have the butler who taught me to do all this, I would probably have died a long time ago. Even though it's been years since that person left, the techniques and habits he taught me still remained in my heart.

I gave him a casual response and returned to the more important topic.

“Well, what do you plan on doing?”

“Mr. Bersac said that you can't enter the graveyard alone, right?”

Hearing this, I smiled.

“Which means, if there are two people, it's fine.”

“Then, it won't break the rules anymore,” my brother said disinterestedly, and took another bite of the bread.

Even though he constantly complained about stomach pains, his stomach wasn't especially bad. To tell you the truth, he actually quite liked food. He just thought that he was too busy to find time to enjoy it, or something along those lines. What a waste. If you ask me, there's no time in my life to fit in things other than entertainment and pleasure.

“I agree to first visit the graveyard. Since we're here to find grave keepers, we can't avoid going there.”

After I said that, I downed the rest of my cup of tea. At that moment, there was a knock at the door.

“Um... Good morning.”

A minuscule gap opened in the door. Because the door was opened so slowly, the gap was almost like a thread. I almost thought it was some sort of magecraft, or at least some sort of creature that could only enter when invited. I had Trimmau hide, and then invited her in.

“Oh, you can come in.”

“Y-yes...”

With a creak, the door opened a bit wider. From the crack that was about wide enough to fit a fist, I could discern the approximate height and clothing of the person who stood at the door.

It was the girl with a gray hood drawn low over her face.

“Um... Mr. Bersac sent me to be your guide... W-we met yesterday at Mr. Bersac’s hut...”

“Ah, of course I remember.”

Seeing my nod, the girl breathed a sigh of relief. I didn’t know if she was naturally shy, or just scared of strangers. I think it was quite a bit of both.

I shot a glance at my brother to check what he thought of this. Even though this meant that we were effectively prevented from being able to move around freely, having a guide was also useful. After all, there were probably a lot of things that could only be understood with someone to explain them. If we wanted to do some secret investigating, we could always find some other time.

“Then I’ll leave you to it.”

“...Of course.”

“Give us a second. We’ll be out there in a minute.”

I sped up the speed of Trimmau’s transformation and made her slip into the case I had with me. There was magecraft applied to lessen the weight, so I could carry it even without Strengthening.

We walked out of the door to find the hooded girl staring at the sky in a somewhat lonely way.

The sky was very different to what it was a moment ago, and was now covered in dark clouds. I didn't know whether it was a coincidence or not. The girl fitted in well with the dark sky and the ground beneath it, as if she was a winter fairy from a faraway land.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“...No, it's alright,” the girl lowered her head and denied. At that moment, a wind gusted through.

The wind blew her hood out of her face and revealed her face. It was quite a stunning face which was framed by gray hair that had been braided and drawn back into a bun. The sort of introverted look with which she refused to look us in the eyes with was very endearing, and just to my liking. Or perhaps you could say it had quite the bullying value.

But before I could think of that, something surprising happened.

“Whoa!”

It was a cry that sounded like a sudden seizure had occurred. I hadn't heard this sort of unmasked cry in about three years, so I couldn't help but turn around.

“What's wrong?”

“...N-nothing, nothing. Nothing at all,” my brother replied in a dry voice with one hand clasped over his face.

I still managed to catch sight of his expression between his fingers. I had seen that expression before. It was the expression my brother had when he was suddenly faced with something that caused him psychological trauma. But even among my trove of secret weapons, I didn't have one that could incite this sort of a response.

The young woman had also turned over because of his reaction. She blinked, and then asked anxiously.

“E-excuse me... Are you alright?”

“Um, I know this request is incredibly rude, but could you please pull your hood down a bit.”

“...Huh?”

The girl froze.

To be honest, I was also quite surprised. My brother was usually very polite in front of women. Ever since he had taken on the title of Lord, it was the first time I saw him request something so impolite from a stranger. But the strangeness didn’t end there.

“No, it’s alright. You think it’s better if I pull my hood down, right. I see. I will do so.”

Hmm?

I didn’t know why, but her voice sounded full of vigor. What the heck? Was this some sort of weird situation that was outside of my knowledge?

“...My sincere apologies. It causes me psychological discomfort because of personal reasons. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, it’s alright, why would I mind? Please don’t be bothered,” said the girl while shaking her head and pulling her hood over her face.

“—Ihihihi (*TN: This is supposed to be laughter: Ehehe sounds really weird, so I did ihihi.*)! Didn’t think that would happen, did you? Stupid...”

A piercing sound rang out, and then stopped abruptly.

My brother and I exchanged confused glances as the girl shook her right hand vigorously, and then cleared her throat as if nothing had happened.

“...That was?” My brother asked, dumbfounded.

“You might have been hearing things. Please don’t mind.”

She sounded so serious I actually doubted briefly if that was the case.

The private lives of other people were so delicious, so of course I wanted to know what was going on. But I felt that if I asked her at this time, something bad would end up happening, so I waited for another chance.

“Let’s go. Tell me if there’s anywhere you want to go,” the hooded girl urged as she glanced over to my brother, who was still frozen in place.

~Part 2~

We toured around the village with the girl as our guide, and learnt quite a bit from conversing with the villagers. For example, even though this was in Wales, English was spoken here.

For some historical reasons, the number of speakers of the Welsh language had been decreasing. At one time, less than half the population could speak it. It was only in recent years that the language was revived, and the cultural aspect of education has also been strengthened. As a result, there were more young people who could speak the language than old people. However, there was no such tendency in this village, which was probably due to the lack of communication with the rest of the world.

The hooded girl was also surprisingly respected by the villagers.

Though not all of them were like this, about half of them would first give an extremely formal salute to the girl before they spoke to us, as if they had seen a member of the nobility. Or perhaps I should call it awe? Either way, they did not treat her lightly.

Or perhaps I should call it the sort of worship you would expect to see towards an idol.

That's what it reminded me of. Idol worship.

Rather than treating her as a person, it was like they were treating a holy object. Even though the attitudes were similar to the priest and the nun, they were more earnest, and seemed to be filled with joy. It was very weird.

...If that was the case, why was the girl so shy?

Being revered in a small village seemed more likely to make someone arrogant than shy. Okay, maybe I would be the only person who would become arrogant, but at least she shouldn't be timid.

The subtle paradox of the situation disturbed my mind with a flood of questions.

But at least we now had a clear picture of the terrain.

The village was roughly the shape of an ellipse that had been squashed to the north and the south. It was shaped like the gourd that my brother had received when he was traveling in the Far East. The church was in the middle, and the swamp was on the south. The lodge we stayed at last night was in the west of the village.

村の地図

沼

柵(金属)

墓地

狩り用の小屋

村

教会

山道

風車

We also went to visit the church again.

“And over here is the church. Someone should have already introduced it to you yesterday.”

“Yes... There’s also a Black Madonna statue in the church. Do you know where it comes from?”

“...I’m not sure.”

The way she addressed herself carried a slight Welsh accent. It was quite cute. Oh no, my old habits were coming out again. I must restrain myself.

“...But, everyone in the village worships it enthusiastically. Every time someone gets married or gives birth to a child, they’ll report it to the Holy Mother.”

“Huh, even when children are born.” My brother stroked his chin in interest. Usually, he probably would have gotten his cigar out already, but now, he was probably taking the hooded girl’s thoughts into consideration.

If we wanted to find out more about the statue, we really had to go interrogate the priest.

Unfortunately, the priest was not there, so all we got was a load of eye rolls from Sister Illumia. Maybe that would be enjoyable for some people, but sadly, I was not interested in it.

“Why have you still not left?”

This time, instead of whispering, it was like she was scolding an animal. I won’t retell the exact details of what she said, but you get the point. Oh, and in case you were wondering, even though she had an expression of disgust, I didn’t get any excitement from that interaction.

Next, we arrived at the graveyard. It didn’t have an air of solemnity at all. It was just a couple of simple gravestones with peoples’ names on them. There were patterns of ravens carved on the rusting iron gate, which my brother examined interestedly.

“Ravens are seen as sacred here, right?”

“...Yes. This place is managed by Mr. Bersac, but the owner is somebody else.”

The owner, huh.

I had subconsciously assumed that Bersac was the owner. Turns out that was not the case. My brother began to carefully inspect the graveyard.

The lonely gravestones that stood under the ashen sky gave me a feeling closer to hollowness than dread. It gave me the feeling of... a place that collected death like a surface would collect dust over time. Though I said that, it was surprisingly clean here. It was probably because either Bersac or the girl had carefully cleaned it up.

Though there were names and dates carved onto each gravestone, the older ones were already too cracked to read. About a third of them were this way.

When my fingers touched the graves, I could feel the bone-chilling cold of the stone. It was very quiet here, perhaps if you concentrated, you might even hear the echoes of the past. In my brother's words, the world after death was in the same era as the time when it had been sealed away.

The girl spoke up unexpectedly. “Why would Mr. El-Melloi II come to a place like this?”

“Did Mr. Bersac not tell you?”

“That person... rarely talks about unnecessary things.”

He did give me that sort of an impression. Or perhaps I could say that he was the sort of person who did what he said and said only what he would do.

My brother walked up to her, and explained to her as he continued looking around the graveyard.

“I just had something I needed his help with. I came to ask him to lend me a grave keeper.”

After she heard this, the girl blinked and turned her head.

“Does that mean that Mr. Bersac will be going into the city?”

“Well, he has to agree first. What’s the problem?”

“...N-no, it’s just,” the girl stammered. “I’ve never left this village before.”

“Never?”

“Yes. Not once.”

The gray hood bobbed up and down.

“Ah, but once in a while, libraries and merchants with a lot of goods come by. I’ve looked forward to those days since I was little!”

“Libraries, huh. Do you like reading books?”

“Yes, I like detective novels, especially the classics...”

The girl sounded like she was excited for a moment, but then immediately returned to her original state as if a fire had been doused out.

“...I’m sorry. I’m always thinking about myself.”

“There’s no need to apologize. You were simply answering my question,” my brother said, smiling bitterly while shaking his head.

“Though we’ve only spoken for a couple of sentences, I can tell that you’re being troubled by something. However, there’s no need to think so lowly of yourself. You can have more faith in yourself.”

“Faith... in myself, you mean.”

“After all, didn’t Mr. Bersac give you the job of a guide because he trusts you? Even if you can’t trust yourself, you can trust the people around you, can’t you?”

“...”

The girl's shoulders trembled briefly. It was the same feeling as when we had heard that piercing sound, but this time she only shook her left hand a couple of times.

She looked to the side and didn't meet my brother's eyes.

"Are you... that way too?"

"I used to be an absolute fool when I was younger. I never had real-self confidence for a moment. Even so, I lived for a while, and got to know a couple of idiots who believed in me."

The girl put her hand over her right shoulder and fell into silence again.

Next, my brother asked.

"Mr. Bersac is your...?"

Oh, we've finally gotten to a topic I'm interested in.

They did have the right age gap to be father and daughter, but I didn't think that was the case. But they didn't seem like regular neighbors either.

"He's... probably my teacher."

"Teacher?"

"Because I'll become a grave keeper one day."

"Oh, is it a family tradition?"

"Blackmore grave keepers will choose a child from the village to be their successor. I heard that it was a tradition passed down from a long time ago... Mr. Bersac chose me about nine years ago."

Oh, so it was this sort of system.

It was as if the village itself had a contract with Blackmore Graveyard. Even though I didn't know what came first, the graveyard or the village, the system was probably made especially so that the line of grave keepers never ran out. Ugh, why am I thinking about these sorts of things? My brother's investigating must have started to rub off on me.

"But... I can't do it."

"Why can't you?"

Hearing my brother's question, the girl shuddered slightly.

"Are you alright?"

"I..." The girl put her hand to her chest as if she was trying desperately to suppress something she could not contain. After a while, she spoke as if she finally spat out a stone in her lungs.

"...I'm s-scared of... spirits (or ghosts whichever translation you prefer)."

Spirits. In this case, it wasn't superstition.

Mages knew that spirits and ghosts did exist. It was for this reason that people would research necromancy, and that the Holy Church would have Baptism Sacraments (alternatively, Purification Incantations). Though they seemed different, Heroic Spirits also fell into this category.

"It's strange, isn't it. This place is obviously a very old and proper graveyard. And yet, the person who will become the grave keeper is scared of spirits," the girl said, bowing her head.

"But it has been the case ever since I was little. Even though the village graveyard was famous, I never went near it... Still, Mr. Bersac chose me. I... I don't understand why he would."

Was this the reason why her attitude was different from the attitude the villagers had towards her? I did not know.

The girl made a fist with the hand in front of her chest. “Even now, just by standing in this graveyard, I-I feel like I’m going crazy with fear.”

Her rasping voice wafted between the gravestones. Her originally slender figure was curled up even tighter, as if she could disappear at any moment. However, my brother didn’t give her any words of comfort. He was as calm as he was when he was commenting on a student’s report.

“Didn’t Mr. Bersac choose you simply because you were the best choice?” He said.

“You mean... me? That can’t be.”

“Of course, you need to find a way to overcome or sublimate your fear, but more of the people who have achieved high levels of success in magecraft understand the horror of it than those who can do it without care. The initial setbacks may have been blessings in disguise.”

Perhaps because it was so sudden, the girl turned her head. It was the first time I saw her look someone in the eye since I’d arrived in the village.

“Setbacks... are blessings in disguise?”

“That is the case sometimes. Of course, whether it’s a blessing or a curse is down to the actions of the individual. ...Either way, it’s better than those idiots who think they’re geniuses because they don’t recognize setbacks.”

Well, let’s pretend we didn’t hear that last remark. But to be honest, that was the reason that problem child couldn’t share magecraft with anyone else.

For a moment, the girl stood there at a loss for words.

Then, she turned around to see a person standing at the entrance of the graveyard.

“Oh, here you are.”

“Mother.”

It was a kind-faced woman wearing a shawl.

She looked around thirty-five years old. Even though she didn't look especially pretty, there was a sort of warmth and kindness in her face that made me feel relaxed.

"I'm so glad I found you. It's time for prayer, you know? Let's hurry up and get home to pray."

"...But Mr. Bersac told me to be their guide."

"Don't be disobedient. Even though your work as a grave keeper is important, you can't neglect prayer because of it, right? And also, weren't you always afraid of this cemetery? There's no need to force yourself."

The mother smiled and stepped towards the girl.

"After all, your body is very important."

Weird.

Did mothers say things like this to their children? The words themselves sounded quite similar to what usual parents would say, but the way she said it gave me a feeling like spikes were being run up and down my skin. There was a sense that something was off in the same way when a button was tied onto the wrong hole.

The mother cast her eyes towards us.

"My apologies, dear guests, but could you let this child come back with me?"

"I see. She has already guided us through most of the places. Many thanks."

The girl in the gray hood glanced back at my brother and bowed her head down again before leaving us with a few more words.

"Um, please, never go into the swamp."

"I know."

After she heard my brother's answer, the mother and the girl turned around.

“We’ll leave you to it, then.”

“Wait.”

My brother called out to them.

“Is there anything else you want from the child?”

“Just one thing. ...I didn’t get the chance to ask you before, could you please tell me your name?”

“...Gray(not bright and not dark),” the girl murmured after a moment of hesitation.

At that moment, the sun shone through a gap in the clouds.

“The hopeless, Gray.”

Her voice was carried away by the summer wind.

Even though it was supposed to have a hint of warmth, the wind was dim and gray. Maybe it was to match the name of the girl.

After they left, my brother circled around the graveyard again.

He took out a cigar, lit it slowly as he usually did, placed it in his mouth, and continued walking around the graveyard like he was doing before Gray left. After a while, he ran his hand through his hair and groaned.

“What is it, brother dearest?”

“...Oh. Something feels off.”

“You mean, the mother just then?”

“Well, her as well. But the main problem is that his place feels unusual somehow. If only my investigative skills were a bit stronger.”

My brother sighed deeply and then said to me, “Apologies, Reines, but could you help me take a look?”

“Hmm?”

Though I thought it was a bother, I did as he said and activated my Mystic Eyes. Ah, I'd have to take eye drops later, won't I? Not only would it hurt like hell, but I also couldn't just walk around the village with bright red eyes.

The Mana of the area appeared immediately. The magical energy here was more active than in the city, and swirled around the graveyard like the mist that would appear in a cheap horror movie.

“There seems to be nothing weird about it. Aren't graveyards usually like this?”

“Don't just look at one place, but at the bigger picture. Concentrate on your head and let your focus blur. Don't just use your Mystic Eyes to look at it, but imagine that you're a different entity, controlling yourself as well as your Mystic Eyes.”

“Hey, hey, why did it suddenly become a lesson?”

I complained, but did as he said. I squinted and tried to imagine another self. I suppose this was very basic magecraft, so there was no reason why I couldn't do it. But if I needed to do it at the same time as activating my Mystic eyes, it required a bit more concentration.

What I saw started to change.

...What was even going on?

I frowned.

The spirits that the girl in the hood— Gray had talked about were mostly formed from the will of the dead. You could say that they were like the habits of the dead that had been engraved into the world. Usually, they dissipated quite quickly, but cases where they stayed for a long time because of the land or some magic-imbued object also occurred sometimes. This is the reason why haunted houses came about. Though, my

countrymen like ghosts a bit too much, so this would cause the price of those properties to go up.

“What’s wrong?”

“No, how do I say this... When you look at it like this, the spirits are condensed, but also very [diluted].”

I answered my brother, confused by what I saw. Though the magical energy was very concentrated, and there were indeed traces of their will, they were all blurry. The spirits could hardly be differentiated from the magical energy in the area. They seemed to combine into wisps of smoke.

Even so, I could feel a weird force that was different from pure magical energy.

Necromancy was not my strong suit, so I couldn’t put what I saw in words, but this sort of thing stimulated my curiosity as a mage.

It was as if this entire graveyard was a giant undead spirit. Was this the nature of Blackmore Graveyard? In the midst of it, a couple of threads of light shot out.

“Are these... threads? They’re the only things that stand out.” They seemed to be there only because of the cigar, and dissipated when I touched them. They were clearly separate from the graveyard. After he heard this, my brother snapped his fingers.

“Bingo!”

“Oh, you have an idea.”

“Yes. I felt like this graveyard was being interfered with by an outside force. Since you can see it with your eyes, it means that they didn’t try to conceal it. Even though they bothered to at least make it transparent, it seems that they didn’t really care about being discovered.”

“Well, apologies for having a pair of useless eyes.”

They were pretty half-baked for a pair of Mystic Eyes.

I thought that it was pretty worth it just because of how jealous my brother was of them. But to be honest, there were more times they were just a nuisance. Not only did I have to constantly take eye drops, but I also had passed out an uncountable amount of times while doing magecraft from the pain they gave me. Though, since my brother started teaching me, I think he's gotten a sense of when I pass out, so now I don't anymore, even though I feel like I would. ...Ugh, that bastard spartan teacher.

“Can you see what the line is connected to?”

“Wait... Somewhere over there.”

As I said that, I looked up.

There was a tall hill in the opposite direction from the swamp. There was a battered windmill atop it.

“...On that note, didn’t Bersac say that there were guests *again*?” My brother muttered. When we first met, Bersac did say that to us. He was definitely referring to us, then.

“Well, let’s go and meet them.”

~Part 3~

We looked down at the graveyard and the swamp from the top of the hill.

“Aha, so this is the swamp they were talking about.” Though we were warned against entering, we could still look at it from a distance.

It was a surprisingly large patch of swampland, and it fit in well with the graveyard. From the muddiness of the water, it gave me the feeling that if someone slipped and fell into it, they’ll never rise up again. It wasn’t impossible that there were poisonous gasses either, I thought casually.

I remember hearing that flammable gasses from swamps was one of the reasons why will o’ the wisps would appear. Even though this was a very unromantic way of putting it, there was no such thing in this world as a true mystery. There was usually some sort of unexplained phenomenon behind everything.

Perhaps the windmill was broken, because though the wind was blowing, it stayed perfectly still.

The building, which was the same sort that Don Quixote thought was a giant, was now standing there like an emaciated corpse. My brother knocked on the door of the hut.

There was no reply.

“The door isn’t locked. Let’s go in.”

“Oi!”

He opened the door before I had the chance to stop him. My brother was always so blindly decisive at times like this. He walked in unceremoniously and then immediately frowned as he surveyed the room.

“These are...?”

There were all sorts of modern machinery in the organized room.

Wait, were those even modern machines?

I had learned about computers because I thought it would be an advantage in a place full of technology-hating mages, but I had never seen anything like the machines here. There was a crystalline cube that somewhat resembled the translucent computers of late, but there was no sign of a keyboard, mouse, or any other type of input device.

Oh... I see.

A thought flashed across my mind. There was indeed a group of people who dealt with these machines. However, it was common knowledge that they tended to stay in their underground burrows. Though they didn't have a presence in the surface world, they were still a group that was too powerful to ignore.

My brother looked up towards the hallway in the small hut.

It was damp and dark, like a casket of wine that had been preserved for decades. It was a darkness that languished beneath a veil, the sort that had never been looked upon before. Just as I was pondering such delusions—

“—Cut.”

From the end of the corridor, there came a steady voice. Then, there were footsteps.

In the room that was so dilapidated that even the footsteps of someone my weight would make clanging noises on, that person's footsteps were as light as a cat's.

The hem of the cloak swayed as gold hair emerged from the darkness.

That man, whose eyes were closed, looked to be around twenty-five. Then again, his appearance definitely did not reflect his age.



“I had no choice but to say cut.”

He said.

“For a place to meet the new head of the Department of Modern Magecraft (Norwich), everything about the setup of the stage is wrong. The producers, scriptwriters, and directors must all be held responsible. Though plainness isn’t inherently a problem, there still needs to be at least some sort of cinematic design.”

“...That ...can’t be.”

I thought that all of my cells were about to boil.

The identity of the person who stood in front of us was completely unbelievable. No matter how famous this graveyard was, the possibility that he would appear here was far more than just unusual.

The [director].

That role also existed in the Clock Tower.

There, the title was what could be considered a legend, for someone who surpassed all twelve Lords. That person had apparently held that position since the founding of the Clock Tower, and even I had not gotten a chance to meet them.

“Ah, I wanted to meet you at the entrance, but unfortunately, the sun is a bit too bright today. It’s a bit inconvenient for my physique. I did take some preventative measures, but direct sunlight is still bothersome.”

“...”

I’ll tell you the truth.

Both the thoughts of Blackmore Graveyard and grave keepers were completely absent from my brain. Everything I had seen here suddenly became distant memories. Who knew that I would meet something like this on such a laid-back trip with my brother?

...He was...

Now, the phrase “Mages’ Association” is usually just used to describe the Clock Tower, but it originally consisted of three such organizations. One of them was the Clock Tower, of course. Another one was the Wandering Sea, an organization focused on the magecraft of the Age of Gods. And the final one was the outlier, an organization that practiced forms of ancient alchemy different from the ones used in the West today.

“—Zepia Eltnam Atlassia,” my brother murmured.

That was his name—the name of the director of the third organization, the Atlas Institute.

~Part 4~

Zepia closed his eyes and began to speak.

“Seeing your expression, you don’t seem incredibly surprised.”

“Of course I’m surprised. In fact, I’m so surprised I don’t know what sort of expression to make.”

My brother sighed. I could tell that he was nervous from the cold sweat that was running down the side of his face. What he said about how surprised he was was neither modest or metaphorical but the plain truth. On the contrary, if there was slightly less of an impact, he might have just passed out.

“Why would the director of the Atlas Institute be here?”

“Oh, I’m just here to collect some data, don’t mind me. I plan to stay here for a while.”

His pretentious voice echoed in the small room. I felt a shiver run down my back. My heart was beating so fast that I felt that if it beat any faster, it would break into pieces.

Though the possibility was quite low, if Zepia had a fight with my brother here, the entire history of the Mages’ Association might be impacted. The logic inside me told me that it was basically impossible, but fear still crept into my heart.

My brother shifted his gaze downward slightly.

“Won’t having the director of the Atlas Institute in this sort of place cause problems?”

“Haha. We’re not the same as the Clock Tower, which won’t even install telephone wires. We can share information unobstructed no matter where the director is on this earth. At least, from my perspective, there’s no need to force myself to lead the life of a mole.”

The man smiled and shrugged.

“Though I say that, what course of action we take is dependent on the director’s will.”

It was the sort of action that only appeared in plays, yet seemed to fit well with him. The scene that surrounded him looked as if it was lifted straight from a movie. From this angle, he just seemed to be a young man who was about twenty years old. Maybe young was an overstatement, but at least it was better than stating his actual age.

...There were a lot of long-lived mages, but his sort were different. I heard that the director of the Atlas Institute had been the same person for hundreds of years.

No, to be honest, I actually already reached a conclusion. It was just one that I didn't want to think about, but I quickly got confirmation from Zepia himself.

"Ah, since sunlight is inconvenient for me, I suppose the two of you have already realized, yes?" He opened his mouth slightly to reveal pointed teeth.

“I’ve been a Dead Apostle (TN: basically, a TYPE-MOON vampire. But Fateverse Dead Apostles don’t work the same way as *Tsukihime* Dead Apostles) for quite a while now.”

So that was how he managed to live for such a long time. Dead Apostles had most of the well-known qualities of the vampires in urban legends today.

Immortal unless directly killed.

Thirsting for blood.

Afraid of the sun.

Though he wasn't directly under the sun, he was still being hit by it indirectly. So he must have indeed taken preventative measures to remain so unfazed by it.

His head turned slowly. "If I'm not wrong, you are Reines El-Melloi Archisor, yes?"

“...Um, yes.”

It seemed that he had looked into me as well as my brother.

“I see, so this time the script is that the two of you arrive together.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Hearing my brother’s question, Zepia turned to face him.

“Sir. (*TN: Eh in this context it’s just a polite way of addressing someone? I don’t know consider it an alternative to just calling him Mr. Zepia*)”

“How about some wine, Princess El-Melloi, and Lord El-Melloi? Or perhaps I should add the II.”

I heard the sound of my brother swallowing his usual line as Zepia beat him to it. It was the first time I had met someone who had researched us so thoroughly.

“Do you... also drink wine?”

“This question is both small talk and an analysis of my nature, Lord El-Melloi II. After all, I am not some sort of fictional creature (*TN: Well, how do I say this to you, Zepia, you kind of are.*) I enjoy it as a hobby. Also, according to the calculations by my fifth consciousness (brain, the Atlas Institute has this sort of magecraft that’s basically splitting someone’s brain), you search for information in most situations. Time is precious for both of us, isn’t it, so these sorts of calculations are to save time. But it’s still better for us to have a conversation first.”

“...Thank you for your kindness.”

My brother hesitated for a bit, but still nodded.

Next, we entered the back of the hut. The structure of the room was similar to Bersac’s hut, but it seemed completely different to it. Like the entrance, the walls were so boarded over with wood that no wind could escape in. There were a couple of chairs and a table, and with a certain type of mechanism, the wine bottle floated upwards and poured wine for us.

This was probably not Magecraft, but the most ancient alchemy of the Atlas Institute.

Though I didn’t feel warmth, sweat was flowing down my face. My self-automating nerves were completely out of control.

I didn't even taste the flavor of the wine. There was just a bitter taste on my tongue, but I drank it nonetheless. Seeing this, Zepia tilted his own wine glass and started to speak again.

"Then, let's begin from what you might be confused about. First of all, you must be curious as to what connection I have with Blackmore Graveyard, yes? 'Just meeting you here is incredibly confusing—' You say this in most of the scripts, after all."

It gave me a very odd feeling.

As if someone spoiled the ending before the case had even started. Even though I did like reading the end first in a mystery novel, I didn't like getting spoiled by someone else. It was as if someone stroked my skin lightly just before I felt an itch.

"Blackmore is the name of an ancient Dead Apostle with a connection to this land," Zepia said.

"A Dead Apostle who controlled birds and lived for more than two thousand years ago, but was unfortunately killed in this script. And the people here named their graveyard after him as a sign of respect. Actually, I also have a connection to this place."

"Connection... as in? (*TN: He's actually really respectful when addressing Zepia, but I don't know how to illustrate this in an English context. It is kind of the equivalent of meeting Queen Elizabeth I in a fast food restaurant in Fukushima, and if she threatened you with a lightsaber. That was a weird analogy. But either way, respect mixed in with fear with just vast amounts of shock. I suppose you would be very polite to her in that scenario.*)"

"Let me think... An interpretation of the past results could be that we would be comrades, depending on the situation, of course."

"Comrades? With a Dead Apostle from a thousand years ago?"

"Ah, that sort of situation happens more than twenty times in my calculations. Though it's only a possibility, to me, that's already enough of a connection. Though that possibility of me becoming a comrade of Blackmore was already cut before I was born, about a thousand and seven hundred years ago."

...

Strange. He was probably talking about something important, but I could not understand how it was related.

It wasn't the first time I had seen a Dead Apostle. There were people who were obsessed with becoming Dead Apostles in the Clock Tower too. After all, being immortal unless directly killed is quite a large advantage. Time is of the essence when searching for the Vortex of Radix. As a result, most mages put their hopes on their children and grandchildren. Though, if you couldn't reduce the bits that would be lost when passing it from one generation to the other, there was bound to be some people who would try to cheat using certain techniques.

But [this] was different.

If we define it loosely, I did not think that I was even talking to a human.

It was almost like a computer that had been connected to the internet that would spit out information regardless of when it happened.

“If you want additional information, the person who built this graveyard was also a mage who used bird familiars, like the Dead Apostle Blackmore. That's because ravens are known to be able to transport a person's soul, one of the three essential parts of a person. Ravens are used because of this. Grave keepers should have an understanding of this as well. Even though the situation differs depending on who they are, they're still mages who pass on their magecraft to their successors.”

“Please wait a moment.”

My brother could not hold it in anymore and said.

“The way you keep talking is making us completely bewildered. After all, just meeting you here—”

He stopped in the middle of the sentence.

It was too unusual.

Because that was the exact phrase Zepia had predicted that he would say.

“My apologies. Perhaps this will make you uncomfortable, but I feel like it would save time. After all, you would’ve asked this question later in the conversation anyway, so why not tell you about it now?” Zepia replied as if it was obvious.

My brother froze with his wine glass in hand. Though he tried not to show it, ripples still formed on the scarlet surface of the wine.

“...Do you have Mystic Eyes of foresight?”

“It’s slightly different from foresight. There are some similarities to the sort of prediction that happens with those, but it is quite different. As an analogy, novels and plays have similar creation processes, but are very different, yes? On, and since you’re here, why not have some cheese as well? I hardly ever get guests, so there’s no need to be so polite about it. It is quite important to provide your brains with enough energy if you want to understand what I’m saying.”

Cheese and raisins were served.

I could tell from the smell that both were of high quality. This time, the plates themselves also drifted softly down onto the table. He probably used those threads like the ones back at the graveyard.

“What do you mean, then.”

“The possibilities are uneven. I was sure that you were going to come here, but I didn’t know what type of script it would follow. I was also unsure whether the El-Melloi Princess was going to come along or not.”

“—If I was going to come along?”

I couldn’t help but blink several times in quick succession when the subject of the conversation turned to me.

“We live in a web of possibilities. You could say that the outcomes of different events eventually converge on the same wavelength. Though it is [basically] impossible for it

to leap to other wavelengths, we can calculate the shape of the other wavelengths and figure out what the script with the highest possibility of happening will be.”

Zepia sighed and leaned back on his chair.

Oh, so he did breathe. Then again, what good would it be trying to find out more things we had in common? Though I thought that, I couldn’t resist doing so.

“I am not a detective, and I try to reason through induction and deduction. The possibilities are not infinite, but they are countless, so it is impossible to verify them all. Even if I did, new possibilities would arise in the process of verification. It is the same as how Achilles will never be able to catch up with the tortoise.”

As he said this, Zepia swirled the wine in his glass. He looked like a calculator that constantly spit out rolls of tape in an ancient sci-fi movie.

Even as a mage, I thought what he said was absurd. “Possibilities are never infinite,” he repeated, as if it was a phrase in a song.

“Even this universe cannot sustain an expansion into infinite possibilities. But the total number of them is not within the grasp of human beings. Therefore, we say that it is countless. And so perhaps the purpose of this being named Zepia is to limit the stage and the people, and to reduce the scope of the possibilities we need to take into account.”

“.....”

I was starting to understand.

I see... So what we were talking to now was an incarnation of calculation.

Similar to a mage, yet not a mage. Someone who had long since separated from science. The reality in his eyes was just a simulation from piles upon piles of numbers and parsed results. And this reality was just one of the empty worlds (scripts) that he had calculated. It was from this transcendent position that he spoke to us.

Though we (the Clock Tower and the Atlas Institute) were both Mages’ Associations, his perspective could already be counted as a different dimension. This wasn’t simply a

problem of skill level. All that we had was still miles away from his starting point. Even if it was some other Lord instead of the sort of incompetent mage that my brother was, the result would not change.

...Was he even still [alive]?

People cannot become birds. Throwing yourself off of a building results only in death. To look down from an unattainable height for hundreds of years while resisting the urge to simply jump down and to end it all must be a difficult task, even for those of the Atlas Institute.

How would a Dead Apostle, a calculating machine that had long since stopped being human, view the world?

I felt a chill run down my spine that could not have been caused by any mage of the Clock Tower. It wasn't just that the magecraft was ancient and mysterious, the skills and history were completely on a different level.

The Atlas Institute.

Though they once belonged to the same Mages' Association, they had gone on their own separate ways.

There was a saying in the World of Magecraft.

“Lift not the seal of Atlas, lest the world be destroyed seven times over.”

My brother nodded lightly.

“I think that what you say is indeed meaningful. No, perhaps I should say that I will realize what meaning your words carry soon.”

“As can only be expected of Lord El-Melloi II. Out of all the mages in the clock tower, you are one of the first to realize things in most situations.”

“I am honored to receive your praise, but this is probably just due to my lack of confidence. The reason why I accept what others say easily is because I am aware of my incompetence.”

“I think that’s the reason why the world improves. Your influence spreads farther than you think. The shadow which you cast on the world will far surpass the scope of your life. So, perhaps you could say that even the death of your teacher had a certain meaning.”

“Don’t bring up Mr. Kayneth Archibald like that.” My brother’s voice became rude for the first time. He stood up suddenly, and his chair fell with a loud clank behind him.

“...Apologies.”

As he said this, he bowed his head.

“No, no, it was my mistake. As compensation, let me give you a warning.” Zepia raised one hand and said.

“In the future, you will have to make some decisions. Though there is no way to judge whether the decisions will be beneficial or harmful, I can still give the actor a bit of warning. After all, the script that you choose in this journey will affect the way in which you are connected to the Holy Grail War.”

“The Holy Grail War...”

I heard his groan.

Yes, he did come to this graveyard for that reason. My brother said that he came here to search for a way to win the Holy Grail War, so it wasn’t a surprise that Zepia, who constantly calculated everything, knew his wish.

Though, what did he mean by the way he would be connected to the Holy Grail War?

Before that question could be answered, the situation changed. A silhouette appeared in the hallway we just entered from.

“...Why are you two here?”

I remembered that low voice.

“Oh, you’ve come, Bersac-kun. Always so punctual.”

Saying this, Zepia took out an antique pocket watch from beneath his cloak and smiled.

~Part 5~

“I didn’t expect you to go meet [that person],” Bersac said with a displeased voice.

We were standing in the shade of the forest close by. We had come here after we exited the windmill hut.

Bersac had only spoken a few sentences to Zepia before he led us out of there.

The evening wind blew at the treetops.

I started using my breathing techniques. My brain had not yet recovered from the exhaustion. Though we only spoke briefly, and most of the talking was done by my brother, I was still incredibly tired from it. Though I had confidence in my abilities to deal with the crafty old foxes of the Clock Tower, talking with the director of the Atlas Institute was completely different. I felt as if my knowledge of the time and reality had been swirled around in a cooking pot. Though I didn’t think all members of the Atlas Institute were like that, if they were, how odd would the organization be? Could that even be called an organization?

After a while, Bersac asked us a question.

“Where’s Gray?”

“Her mother came to take her back.”

“Is that the case,” Bersac muttered. Then, he stared at us seriously.

“There’s something I want to make sure of,” he said.

“Did you exit your lodge last night?”

“Hmm?”

It was the rule that Bersac had explained to us.

My brother frowned and asked in return.

“No. Didn’t you say that it was against the rules? Why do you ask?”

“.....”

For a moment, the only reply that he gave us was his silence.

His gaze was more like a raptor’s than a raven’s. Specifically, it was like an owl than an eagle. It was the sort of gaze that carried the knowledge of the dark forest and made you feel a weight on your shoulders.

As he faced us, he slowly announced.

“An incident happened last night.”

“Last night?”

“Someone broke the village taboo. If someone breaks the rules, I can tell.”

How did that work?

How shady was he to not tell us about that. Did he want to catch us in the act of breaking the rules?

I couldn’t help but wave my hand rudely.

“Well then, why don’t you go and catch the culprit? Or are you suggesting that we broke the rules?”

“Unfortunately, I have no way of knowing the specifics of the person who committed the act. I only know the number of rules that they broke. You could call it the authority of the grave keeper.”

“The authority of the grave keeper?” There weren’t surveillance cameras or that sort of modern technology, because this village was pretty average in that sense. But if someone had power over the place, they could tell the reasons and logic behind it. However, to an observer from outside the village, it was like a black box.

It made me wonder why there were even these rules in the first place.

At this point, I even doubted if it was just his imagination.

Though, if we delved into that topic, this conversation would never end, so let's first assume that Bersac was telling the truth.

The taboo that he talked about was probably related to the rules of the village. That means, someone may have entered the village without praying to the Black Madonna. Someone could have entered the graveyard alone. Someone could have entered the swamp, and someone could have gone out at night.

One of these had been broken.

Then again, it was pretty easy to break these rules.

Perhaps my brother thought so as well.

“Does nobody really go out at night in this village?”

“Pretty much. But it does happen sometimes. When children play outside, sometimes the rules get broken. ...But this time, two rules were broken.”

If I believed what he said, then one of them was the one about going out at night.

I didn't know how he knew this, so I could only make guesses, but it was probably that someone entered the graveyard or went to the swamp.

“...Or it could be that someone snuck into the village at night,” my brother muttered to himself. (*TN: Note that this is Case Files, so everything he mutters to himself is probably the right guess.*)

Oh, right. That was also a way to violate two rules at once. Weird rules in villages was a setting that could be found in both mysteries and horror stories, but it was really annoying to actually get into that sort of situation. It was actually quite stressful because I couldn't figure out how it worked.

Bersac did not validate or deny what we said. Instead, he just continued to observe us.

“Let me confirm once again,” he asked.

“Lord El-Melloi II. You said that you wanted to borrow a grave keeper, right.”

“Yes, I did say so. That wish has been strengthened further after I discussed with Mr. Zepia.”

“What did Zepia say to you?”

“I heard that this village was only named this way to show respect to a Dead Apostle. And that Dead Apostle could become a comrade of Zepia’s, depending on the situation. And, I also know that he came to this village to gather data... Basically, this sort of thing.”

My brother did not break eye contact with the grave keeper.

The two gazes seemed to spar in the air. My brother was not that brave, so perhaps I should praise his courage. Or, perhaps I should berate him for not knowing how to pick an opponent. But in this situation, I didn’t even know what to do.

“Since you ask this, are the rules related to the Atlas Institute?”

“There is nothing I can say to that.”

Bersac shook his head with an expression of displeasure.

But my brother would not give up.

“Even if you have nothing to say about the Atlas Institute, this village is still special. What I need is a specialist at dealing with spirits. I have been searching for this for the past ten years. For this reason, I have wandered all over the world in my spare time. Though I have never found it, I have gained an intuition. And that intuition tells me that the key lies right here.”

“Ten years, huh.”

“Yes.”

Seeing my brother’s nod, the grave keeper asked with an even stronger voice.

“Why do you need something for dealing with spirits?”

“For something... personal. (Alternatively, for a personal grudge?)”

The Holy Grail War. The ritual that had been carved into my brother’s heart, and had been bothering him for the past ten years.

However, something made me feel worried.

Just then, Zepia had warned him. He said that the choice he made in this village would affect the way that he was connected to the Holy Grail War.

“Hmph.”

Bersac stroked his gray beard.

Then, he pointed at the village gate.

“Please return.”

“Could you please reconsider?” My brother pleaded.

“I know that my request is incredibly selfish. I know that getting a request by a visiting mage might be less preferable than getting killed. Even so, I have something I need to do. And I know that you have the key to helping me.”

“.....”

Bersac was silent for a moment. This time, it was even longer.

The grave keeper’s gaze shifted from my brother and to the graveyard. How long had he spent there? If Gray had never left, then what about him?

“A specialist at dealing with spirits, huh. Your intuition is correct,” he said.

I didn't know why, but his voice carried a sort of tiredness, like the condensation in a bottle of old wine.

I could feel this same sort of feeling on my brother, who had wandered through the world in his free time during the past ten years, between reviving the El-Melloi classroom and acting out the duties he had been forced to do as a Lord.

A grave keeper that had lived in the same place for his entire life and a mage that had been bound to a goal. Though they were completely different, it was as if there was a thread of something similar tying them together. Perhaps it was for this reason that the grave keeper spoke up once more.

“Or, perhaps you could call it the fruit of our labor. ...But for this reason, she cannot leave this village.”

“That is to say...”

After a pause, my brother spoke up.

“Does that have anything to do with how the girl's face resembles that of [a great hero of Britain in the past]?”

What?

Resembles a hero? What does that even mean?

And how does this tie into the conversation?

Either way, what he did had a great impact on Bersac. The face that had not shown a single expression until this point suddenly changed. He turned to face my brother again and stared intently at him.

“...How do you know?”

“Because her face has something to do with the reason why I'm here.”

“.....”

My brother's silhouette was reflected in his eyes. His gaze was sharp to the point where it could probably be used to stab someone. If we further offended him, I felt like my brother would be slashed into pieces.

He stayed this way for a minute or two. He walked a couple of steps away from us as if he wanted to restrain himself.

"Could you please tell me more about it? Apologies, but I hope that your younger sister can excuse herself for a moment."

"Hmm? Why do I need to—" Though I wanted to argue, there was a light in Bersac's eyes that made me back down. Did what my brother say really have that large of an impact? I shrugged and didn't forget to narrow my eyes to express my dissatisfaction.

"Alright, alright. Then I'll head back to the lodge on my own. Happy?"

"If you could, that would be a great help."

Hearing Bersac's words, I nodded, and then quickly turned to leave. I waved at my brother and then walked down the hill, thinking about what had just happened.

What did having a resemblance mean?

What was the secret that could bring the director of the Atlas Institute here? How was it all related to the taboos? Are they related to the Dead Apostle named Blackmore?

Everything was a mystery.

It was as if someone had forced open a Pandora's box in front of my face.

If I wasn't cautious, perhaps I would become the stupid woman who spread disaster. Though it sounded interesting, I suppose I should still prepare some safety measures. Since my brother didn't care about this sort of thing, It was all up to me.

But then again.

In the end, the safety measures didn't end up being useful at all—

◆ 第三章 ◆

-Chapter 3-



~Part 1~

—Time returned to the present.

“Yes, the safety measures were meaningless, because that is as much of the story as I can tell.”

Saying this, Reines ended her retelling. Of course, we were at the El-Melloi manor.

The winter sun slanted in from the windows and blinded me momentarily. I felt as if I had traveled through time and space. Reines was brilliant at telling stories. I remember hearing that the Department of Lore (Brishian), who were bards who mimicked the past, valued the skill of storytelling.

At the same time, my cheeks became hot. Was hearing someone talk about yourself really so mentally taxing? I knew that it might have been disrespectful, but I averted my face and bowed my head as she told some parts of it.

I took a deep breath and carefully asked.

“Um... Is the story over now?”

“After that, my brother asked me to return to the Clock Tower. That brother of mine didn’t even tell me why. I even prepared bounded fields and magecraft for delaying purposes, but it all ended up going to waste. Not only that, he announced that he was going to take you in as a disciple right after he returned. The entire El-Melloi classroom was in a state of complete turmoil. Just having you as a student would be fine, but he’d never taken in any sort of disciple.”

She shrugged and gave a hump of indignation.

I’d never seen my mentor take a hard line with Reines. Even now, I wondered if I had misheard.

“.....”

All and all, it was a long and tumultuous story.

I looked down and pondered.

Not only was it long, to me, it was full of mystery.

For instance, I had never met that person named Zepia from the Atlas Institute. I didn't realize that he was such an important character. It was as if someone just told me that my neighbor was the president of a small country. I could only attempt to accept it.

“—Therefore, I've always been interested in you,” Reines said, propping up her cheek and smiling evilly.

“At first I thought that my brother was just being nice in weird places again. Or, perhaps he finally found someone he was fond of. But it just seemed too weird. After all, that man fits the common image of a mage surprisingly well.”

I could understand this comment.

Though his discerning eye was very unusual for a mage, his values were surprisingly orthodox. In fact, I felt as if his values were the only thing that kept him in his current state. After all, though he had walked the path of being a dissector (of magecraft) to the point of no return, he still wanted to be a mage.

Suddenly, Reines raised her head.

“Oh, thinking back on it, my brother asked about the situation with your face then, right?”

“Well...”

I held my breath for a moment and stroked the inside of my hood.

“...I talked about it... Before, didn't I.”

At the twin towers of Ilsema.

During the case of the gold and silver princesses, I had told Reines about how my face was borrowed from somebody else. Back then, Reines had listened to what I had to say

without uttering a word of comfort or asking any questions. That alone gave me great salvation.

“Well, now I can ask you. What happened after that? Why would that brother of mine take you in as a disciple?”

“.....”

That question made a cold feeling of dread settle in my heart.

It was what I had escaped from. What I kept trying to avoid.

Something I definitely would not touch after I came to London.

I took a deep breath. I needed to be brave. At least, I should tell her about it. But how? My mind was still a mess. With much difficulty, I managed to get the words out of my throat.

“Someone... died.”

Hearing this, Reines frowned.

“Died? Who?”

“.....”

After a few seconds of silence, I uttered two more words.

“...I ...Did.”

Reines’ expression froze for a few seconds. Trimmau still poured tea for me as usual. It was the only time that the aroma did nothing to calm me.

“At the... Case in my hometown, I... Died.”

“Wait, this isn’t a metaphor for saying that the ‘you of the past’ died, right?” Reines asked.

Seeing my nod, she sighed.

“How complicated. Since you came to ask me, it means that you still haven’t figured out what was going on, yes? Though, I still hope that you could tell me some more.”

“Could you... wait a bit for that?”

“Not right now, huh.”

“Yes. Let me return to my hometown first.”

“Sure. Though I want to go with you, I feel like something problematic’s going to happen if I leave the Clock Tower now. After all, the Rail Zeppelin case hasn’t finished up yet,” Reines muttered.

It was no wonder. The Lord title was not just for show.

The only reason why my mentor, who didn’t know how to deal with power struggles, could leave the Clock Tower once in a while was because of Reines’ support. Of course, other factions probably did this as well, but the El-Melloi faction could not afford to have a single weakness with their current standing.

In her words, it was like a castle of children’s blocks that could not keep its balance. If you kept up one side the other would fall. Sometimes you had to take out the entire thing and rebuild it again. I was probably the only person who thought that the feeling of constantly having to strategize like a commoner was in fact, very mage-like.

Reined tapped her temples and continued. “Though, returning to the hometown you supposedly died in doesn’t feel like it would go well.”

“...I’ll find a way somehow.”

“By yourself?”

“Yes. That is what I planned to do.”

I nodded.

I realized how much I had left to learn during my fight with Faker. I did not want to defeat her. It would be too preposterous to even think that I could win against someone as powerful as she was. Though she didn't have a name, she was still someone who had left a mark on history.

Though, it made me think that if I wanted to go against a Servant again, I needed to learn to face my past.

For this reason, I had waited for my mentor to recover.

Though I was not good at it, I had been taking care of him, so if I suddenly left, it would be sure to cause an inconvenience.

“Please send my message to my mentor. I plan to return soon.”

“Sure. As long as you plan on returning. If you said that you were done with all this, I would have to finish the rest of these desserts as I sobbed. Oh, or perhaps I could ask Trimmau to capture you, but if she was going against you, she might not be strong enough.”

“Are you... serious?”

“Aha, I’m glad you understand what I mean.” Reines put her hand next to her mouth and curled the corners of her mouth in a smile.

Her shoulders started to shake, perhaps because it was so interesting. After a while, she wiped the corner of her eye with a finger, then raised her head with a refreshed expression.

“Though, from a personal angle, I admire your spirit. Sadly, it’s not very possible.”

“...Why?”

“Well, It’s just a problem of numbers. It’s highly improbable that you’ll manage to pull it off alone.”

“Alone?” I said, turning my head.

Because someone was knocking on the door.

After a while, a tall figure walked in from the ajar door. I remember combing that familiar dark hair just this morning.

“Excuse me.”

“...What happened, Sir?”

Remembering that I just planned on secretly leaving the Clock Tower behind his back, I looked downwards to disguise my awkwardness.

“...Nothing,” he mumbled, and then turned to the person sitting deeper inside the room.

“Reines.”

“Hmm? Has anything come up, dear esteemed brother?”

He had no reaction after hearing the pretentious way she addressed him.

“Can I leave for around a week?” He asked.

“Oh, again? You really don’t have any sort of self-awareness as a Lord, do you? What a bother. This is the worst time you could have chosen.”

Reines feigned feebleness and twirled the fork she had in her hand around. Of course, she was trying to rile him up. My mentor was aware of this, but if he was able to ignore her attitude, he might not even have been able to become a Lord.

“I will keep in touch whenever possible. I originally prepared a bit for the Holy Grail War. I didn’t think something like the Rail Zeppelin case would happen, but I think you’ll manage it.”

“Hmph. Thanks for the compliment, but could you please consider the feelings of you poor, overworked darling little sister? You wouldn’t want to regret not being nicer to me when you stand at my bedside after I fall sick, would you?”

“Then, could you give me a break? After all, the stomach medicine from the Department of Botany (Yumina) has limited effects.”

“Haha. They should’ve implanted the stomach of a mythical beast in you when they did your surgery. Alright, but where are you even going?”

“...Fine.”

My mentor glanced over at me, and then replied like he didn’t have a choice.

“I would like to visit Blackmore Graveyard again with Gray.”

*

Hearing his words, I could not help but turn my head.

“Why...?”

“I didn’t think you would come to talk to Reines about this as well.”

My mentor rubbed the space between his eyebrows as if he was trying to relieve a headache. He probably heard what we were just talking about. Seeing the lines deepen on his forehead, I felt a slight twinge of empathy (or, pain in my heart).

Reines looked at the two of us and laughed.

“I predicted that it would go like this, so do whatever you want. ...All I can say is, brother dearest, at least talk to your disciple about it first. Why didn’t you talk to her about it if you were going to bring her along? If you were a student, you would probably get points taken off for that, you know?”

“...I planned on telling her eventually. I just wanted to tell you in advance.”

My mentor cleared his throat.

“For some reason, I want to verify it with you.”

“...Oh, uh, of course.”

I turned to look him in the eye. Though I still had some guilt left over from not telling him about going to my hometown, I tried my best to gather enough bravery to face him.

“I said this to you when I first brought you here. I do not invite you to come for any reason that will benefit you. It’s just the very, incredibly selfish act of bringing an innocent person into my personal battles.”

“...Yes. You’ve said this to me before.”

“I can’t even promise your life, much less your safety. Though I promised Mr. Bersac that I would prepare compensation, even if that sort of thing has no value to you, it’s better than nothing.”

“Yes.”

I nodded.

Money was necessary for life in the city. For someone who just came down the mountain, finding a way to live here was not my goal. I didn’t mind where I fell. If there was nothing that had value to me, compensation was meaningless.

The past me lived in this sort of way.

The past me was satisfied with simply existing.

“Therefore I decided to take you in as my disciple. Because I thought that if you were going to live close to the Clock Tower, being connected in some way to a Lord would give you some protection. It was a completely I’ll-do-it-now-and-I’ll-care-about-the-problems-when-they-come-up strategy. Laugh at me if you want.” (TN: *And yes I am aware that that sentence was hardly a feasible translation for something he would reasonably say.*)

“...I was already aware of that, Sir.”

My mentor looked surprised to hear my response, but some things could not be more obvious.

Everything he did was in response to what was directly in front of him (alternatively, coping with the current situation). The sort of techniques were usually borrowing the skills of other people because of his own incompetence, and probably could not be considered as rightful or glorious. ...But, regardless of the means, as long as he managed to persist until the end, there was nothing wrong with it.

When did I start to think like this, I wonder.

“I’ve always known Sir as someone who is incredibly inept yet keeps struggling to survive. So if you told me to laugh at you all of a sudden, I would just be perplexed by it.”

“Reines said something to influence you, huh.”

“Perhaps.”

If that really was the case, I would be very glad. Seeing the smile that crept up uncontrollably at my mouth, my mentor sighed.

“...Fine, I’m just glad you found someone to drink tea with,” he mumbled as he glanced over to Reines. She made an expression as if she didn’t know anything about what he was talking about and took a freshly-baked scone from Trimmau. She covered it with a layer of jam and ate it blissfully as the aroma filled the air.

Though I thought it was a very serious topic we were talking about, it was probably a sign of her strength to still be eating desserts in a completely unaffected way.

“.....”

I didn’t know why, but I felt like I was calmer.

If it was that her pride and stubbornness had influenced me, there was nothing that could make me happier, I thought.

So, I turned to look at my mentor. “I would like to go along with you. Even if it’s a selfish request. I already knew about this sort of thing. So, please tell me, why do you want to visit Blackmore Graveyard again?”

“...Alright.”

My mentor nodded.

He was silent for a second, before he continued.

“There might be a clue about Dr. Heartless in that village.”

I did not understand what that meant.

When I heard that two completely unrelated things were connected somehow, my brain immediately short-circuited.

“...W-Why?”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, he was probably not the person who committed the case. It’s like the Ilsema case. He was connected, but not the person who was directly responsible. ...Ah, I should probably explain to you first.”

“Um, are you talking about the hypothesis that Heartless was the one who provided the funds for the Ilsema family to buy the artifact to pay Ms. Touko? Reines already told me about it.”

“Oh... is that the case.”

Perhaps that was a bit awkward.

“Then did Reines also tell you about what happened when we met Zepia at the windmill hut?”

“...Yes.”

“I didn’t realize it then, but in retrospect, what he said was quite odd. He called me the new head of the Department of Modern Magecraft (Norwich).”

Reines did mention this in her story.

—“For a place to meet the new head of the Department of Modern Magecraft (Norwich), everything about the setup of the stage is wrong.”

Because it was a retelling, the words were not exact, but the meaning was probably the same.

My mentor nodded and continued.

“Of course, as the director of the Atlas Institute, it’s hardly surprising that he knew of this. However, I’ve been the head of the Department of Modern Magecraft for seven years now. If he felt the need to especially add the word ‘new’, there must have been something going on. Gray, do you remember when the visitor came?”

“L-let me think... About a month before you went there.”

Though I didn’t meet him, Bersac told me about how there was a guest there. I thought that it was weird that someone from the city would visit every ten to twenty years. I regretted not asking more about it back then.

Back then, I wasn’t interested in most things.

No.

I just pretended that I wasn’t interested, to make myself believe that nothing else mattered so I didn’t have to think about the tiny village I could never leave and the ancient rules that my life was bound by. It was easiest that way.

But regretting now wasn’t going to achieve anything.

“That means... In that period of time...”

“Exactly. Dr. Heartless could have visited Zepia during that month,” my mentor said.

“Of course, they didn’t have to meet each other on that mountain. After all, Zepia’s range of movement isn’t restricted to just the Atlas Institute. They might have even met afterwards somewhere else. You could hardly call that a coincidence. According to what Heartless said while we were on the Rail Zeppelin, he started taking an interest in me since a long time ago.”

It was true that it was more than a coincidence.

The fact that the director of the Atlas Institute and a Lord of the Clock Tower would meet in a remote Welsh village was already so improbable it could have come out of a fairy tale. And the fact that the director also met another Lord around the same time seemed almost too contrived.

If that was the case, perhaps it was more reasonable that Heartless had once visited that village.

But what was his goal?

What was the “whydunit” that lay behind his actions?

It was like amorphous storm clouds were gathering within my mind. It was like the nemesis of the best detective in the world who controlled the minds of countless people to get his results in a certain story. It felt as if I had unknowingly fallen into the hands of such an opponent.

“It’s hard to say. I don’t think he’s this sort of strategist.”

I sputtered out some of the anxious thoughts that were in my head. My mentor shook his head.

“Analyzing his previous movements, his thinking is careful, but that’s not all. Though I suppose that is unusual in a way, it might be more apt to say that he has an unnatural amount of curiosity. Otherwise, he might have just walked off the Rail Zeppelin instead of staying to observe us.”

My mentor had deciphered that his true goal was to summon a servant. Heartless had also admitted to it himself. The reason why he didn’t retreat immediately after getting what he needed was to observe him.

Indeed, from his actions, you could tell that Heartless was a curious person.

“...If that’s the case, then why...”

“...Well...”

My mentor shook his head again and stopped speaking.

“No, if I continue, then it would be an assumption based on an assumption. It would be acceptable to make hazy deductions, it would just increase the likelihood of missing the truth.”

“Brother dearest, mind if I add something?”

As she said this, Reines raised her hand.

“I know that most detectives always stay on the defensive, but perhaps it’s time to go for an attack? That’s what you think, right? If you could find a clue to Heartless, you’d be going on the offensive.”

“...Yes.”

Seeing his reluctant nod, Reines continued.

“Though, I can’t let you just do that. Though Gray is an excellent guard, there’s no guarantee that we’ll defeat Heartless and that Faker. And I hear Gray say that the case that happened before she came here hasn’t been resolved yet, has it?”

“You are correct. Servants are stronger than mages. Perhaps if I was more capable I would be able to apply Gray’s abilities towards spirits more effectively. ...So, I asked Flat and Svin to help this time.”

“Oh, you went and asked those two?”

Reines blinked, and said with a voice full of surprise.

I also stared at him, stunned.

“It’s quite unusual of you to ask for help from your students.”

“I can’t deal with this myself without ensuring against losses, after all, so I’ll have to bear the humiliation,” my mentor said angrily, averting his gaze. He seemed to be reluctant about it.

But one thing made me very glad.

He must have taken it to heart, then.

After the incident last month, my mentor had said “fight alongside me.” He not only said this to me, but also to Flat and Svin. I didn’t think it was just a slip of the tongue but a sentence that was full of trust and careful thought. It had sunk deeply into my heart.

“...What do you think, Add?”

The box, which would usually be poking fun at me by this point, was silent, so I took initiative and asked it a question. However, it was silent.

Did it not want to make fun of me, or was it asleep?

...Add?

Just as suspicion flashed across my mind, my mentor spoke up.

“I plan to leave the day after tomorrow. If anything comes up before that, tell me.”

That ended the conversation for the day.

~Part 2~

The morning two days later came in the blink of an eye. After I packed my own bag, I only managed to help with my mentor's luggage, arrange the timetables, and eat a meal before the morning arrived. As Reines had said, we boarded the train to Cardiff and then rode a bumpy bus all the way to a remote station before we walked up the steep mountain path.

The path was still a bit strenuous for my mentor, so we had to stop a couple of times.

Even this was the same as Reines had told it. I wanted to laugh at that thought.

“Look, isn’t that a mysterious swamp? In a horror movie, there would be a monster appearing with a hockey mask here! With a whirring chainsaw and everything! And of course it’d be the kill-the-couple-first trope. Maybe it’ll use a machete? Or perhaps a regular knife is better?”

“Oi, what happened to the chainsaw you were talking about? And is it your fault that Trimmau’s got a new set of ridiculous movie lines to draw from?”

“Lawn mowers and chainsaws kill people in the same way anyway! Wouldn’t it be awesome to recreate some famous scenes too? It’d definitely be popular! The days when AI will be able to spit out meaningless lines from anime and movies are not far away!”

“Putting aside how weird that is for a mage, I still want to complain about how you’re using scientific advances to do this kind of thing.”

Flat and Svin chatted the whole way. Sometimes Flat would dash away while smiling from the magically-imbued claws that summon up as they talked. Sometimes they nearly went overboard with it, and the only reason why they weren’t engaging in full-fledged combat was because of my mentor’s intervention. Still, they must have such a good relationship with each other. I felt somewhat regretful that I could not join them.

Never mind joining them, I could not stand next to Svin without being intimidated, so no matter what happened, I was always at least a step away from him. Of course, this was also because of my mentor's intervention, but I guess it was all because I left a bad first impression on him.

I remember how he stared at me with his mouth open, completely still except for his twitching nose. Though perhaps my clothes had the scent of dirt on them, there was no reason at all for him to be staring so intently.

“...Ah.”

I pulled at the hem of my skirt slightly.

It was a dress that Reines had chosen for me, and was not very well-suited to hiking. Though, this sort of mountain was basically the same as regular ground for me anyway.

I turned my head around to look at my mentor, who was taking his second break.

He was probably breathing unrestrainedly now, because there was no need for him to maintain an image in front of me or his students. Though I once thought this made him suspicious, I now found it somewhat familiar. They were completely the same thing, so why did I have such a different perspective about them now?

“...It’s a strange feeling,” I said.

“Strange?”

“Yes. Before, I had never left the mountains. After I came to London, I never even dreamt of returning. I never would have thought that I would one day come back of my own accord,” I said, stating my thoughts as calmly as possible. Otherwise, something might have overflowed within me.

“Thank you.”

I bowed my head.

“Thank you for making it so that I can come back here and feel more than just pain.”

“...I only wanted to come here for my own reasons. There’s no need for you to thank me.”

After he said that, he pressed his lips together into a thin line (*TN: Or whatever you’re supposed to call that*). His expression darkened.

“My apologies, I’ll have to ask you to change your face,” he said, with some difficulty.

“My face, is it?”

“It’s just illusory magecraft to deal with the villagers. ...Of course, Flat will be the one actually performing the spell.”

As he said this, my mentor looked to Svin, who pushed Flat away and hurriedly raised his hand.

“Can’t-can’t I do it instead, Sir?”

“I don’t think bestial magecraft is suited to this.”

“I-It’s alright! I’ve also been practicing other things!”

“Your Pride rank was only bestowed because of your bestial magecraft. At this stage, there’s no need to study into other areas and to blunt your traits.”

“Well, I-I... *insert sobbing/disappointed noises that I don’t know how to translate*.”

I didn’t know why, but Svin’s shoulders drooped dejectedly, while Flat puffed up his chest in pride beside him. The two of them always starkly contracted each other, in personality, actions, uneven magecraft. At the same time, they sometimes were jarringly similar. Or perhaps this sort of thing was quite common. ...If that was the case, maybe I would even meet someone like that.

“Well then, hand it to me!” Flat smiled and touched my face without hesitation.

“Game Select.”

There was a slight zapping noise, and I felt as if a mild electric current had just been passed over my face. It was incredibly brief, like some carbonated water had been splashed onto my face.

“Alright, Quick Save!” He clapped his hands, and then handed me a mirror that he had conjured out of nowhere.

“Flat, illusory magecraft doesn’t work on—”

My mentor stopped in the middle of his sentence.

Because the mirror showed a completely different face.

“Haha~♪! I tried distorting the rays of light around the area! Think about it, most houses have mirrors, right? So I tried directly changing the light!”

My mentor looked dumbfounded, probably because of Flat’s usual unconventional behavior. But this time, before he reprimanded Flat, he turned to look at me.

I stood completely still with one hand on my face.

“Gray?”

“Do you... not like it?” Flat asked, worriedly.

A few seconds passed.

“...Of course I like it.” I shook my head in a state of shock. “...Because, it’s... Amazing.”

“Amazing?”

“Because... It’s a different face.”

I touched my face and said.

In such a short moment, he had made the thing that had always bothered me disappear.

“It really is... A different face.”

My voice quavered uncontrollably.

How awkward.

How embarrassing.

And yet, it was freedom.

I wanted to laugh it off, but my emotions flowed out uncontrollably. I didn't know if what I was experiencing was joy or not. All I knew was that there were tears flowing down my face.

My mentor put a hand on my hood lightly.

“Didn't I tell you not to let me see your face?”

“Yes. I'm sorry...”

I wiped my tears hastily and nodded.

“So magecraft... can even achieve this kind of thing...”

“.....”

Hearing my words, my mentor said nothing. Instead, he gently took off my hood for me.

“Let's forget about it today. The clothes you're wearing now are quite different from what you wore back then, so it should be fine if you don't change them.”

“Oh, and also, I cast the illusion at the button there. If you want to remove it, just undo the button. But be careful, if you take it off when I'm not around, I can't help you redo the illusion.”

“...Okay.” I nodded lightly. My mentor seemed to finally have had enough rest, and glanced towards the mountaintop as he rubbed his back.

“Let’s first go visit that Black Madonna statue. Though I don’t know how it works, we’ll be exposed if we violate the taboos.”

“But sir, isn’t that just something they say?”

“...No.” Hearing Svin’s interpretation, I shook my head.

“It’s real. Before, I got caught immediately when I got close to the swamp.”

“Oh, I didn’t think that you used to be a disobedient child.”

“...I got lost.”

My mentor’s words made my cheeks grow hot.

It was before I got the face that I had now.

The young me had gotten lost in the forest. Bersac had found me shivering near the swamp. Then, he had comforted me and told me that there were no signs of entry to the village, so he thought that it was the graveyard or the swamp.

After that, I gained the face of an ancient hero, and then left the village without overcoming my fear of spirits. But now I came back. I could have never imagined even in my wildest dreams that I would accompany my mentor to solve the cases we had experienced during this period of time.

“Oh, can I ask a question?”

Svin said.

Perhaps it was because of my mentor’s instructions, he kept a certain distance away from me, and spoke in a very formal manner.

“When Sir and Gray-tan... Miss Gray left the village last time, what happened?”

“Well...”

I stammered.

“...How much... Do you know now?”

“I know that the reason you left was because you died... That’s all I know.”

I see, so my mentor had probably told them about the general situation like he had done with Reines.

Of course, they were probably the only things he could be sure about. I didn’t even know exactly what happened. Someone else had told me the gist of it.

“What happened was actually quite simple,” my mentor interjected from the side.
“Gray’s corpse appeared in the church.”

“—!?”

Svin looked stunned, while Flat turned his head in interest. I frantically waved my hands around to deny a part of that statement.

“Of course, it wasn’t me, just someone who looked like me that I did not know.”

“Someone who looked... a lot like Miss Gray?”

“...Yes.”

A substitute corpse.

What had happened?

Either way, something odd that was related to me had happened in the village.

“After that, Bersac called me, forced me to take Gray, and told me to leave the village immediately and to never return. So I suppose I’ve really let him down by returning now.”

I remembered when that happened. Bersac and my mentor had parted ways after they discussed something, and Reines had left for the Clock Tower the next morning. Two

days later, the corpse of “someone who had the same face as me” was discovered. It caused a giant uproar in the village, as can be expected.

Like Reines had noticed, I had a special role in the village. The main reason for that was my face, and Add. Therefore, Bersac had handed me to my mentor and told him to leave directly after he had discovered the corpse.

—“You should go see the world outside the village one day.”

He used to say that to me frequently.

Though I didn’t think that day would ever come, my mentor still took me out of the village at the urging of Bersac.

That is to say, he didn’t try to get involved with the case.

Of course, my mentor wasn’t a detective. The reason why he visited the village was to find an expert at dealing with spirits— a grave keeper of Blackmore Graveyard. Since he had already reached his goal, it was normal for him to not have tried to solve the case.

And I...

“...I must have... Never thought about it.”

When I was in the village, I found it difficult to breathe.

Both the body that gradually became less like my real one and the villagers who saw divinity in it made me feel like I was suffocating.

There, the only person who would hate that face was my mentor, so to me, it was like I was shown a ray of light in the darkness. Therefore, I didn’t think that it would be bad to run away with him.

...How was my mother doing ?

—“How was yesterday? Didn’t you take the visitors on a tour? His name was Mr. El-Melloi II, right?”

My mother had asked me that on the day after I had met my mentor. What did she feel about my death? Would she lament it? Would she be tormented by it? Or has Bersac already secretly told her the truth? Back then, I didn't have the energy to consider these problems. Though my mentor still had some things he wanted to know, he never got the answer because I refused to talk about anything related to the place.

That was the root of the problem.

There were probably clues about Heartless in that place. Though I didn't know what Zepia did, it must be related to the dark underside of the Clock Tower and the Atlas Institute.

It was the thing that the past me couldn't bring myself to face.

“.....”

I touched my face again.

The face that Flat had put an illusion on. Behind it, there was the face that had become the face of a great hero of the past. And the face of the girl who had died in that village half a year ago.

It was so nonsensical, too strange for me to comprehend. It had made me cover my hands and my ears. I wanted to forget everything that had happened. In the first two months, I even considered how I could die without feeling pain.

I never thought that I would return to this village of my own will.

Every step made me feel terrified.

I was afraid that I would make some sort of mistake that would pull everyone into a terrible situation.

But even so, I did not stop in my tracks.

I pursed my lips, fisted my hands, and continued to walk up the mountain, from the path that I used to look down at.

I needed to be brave, I thought.

I needed bravery to continue walking with increasingly heavy steps.

I needed not only to take the first step, but also to have the spirit to continue. So, I wanted to ask my closest friend.

“...Add?” I whispered.

There was no reply.

Only the sound of birds chirping and of footsteps on dirt reached my ears.

I could not feel any sign of movement from the hook at my right shoulder. It was as if there was nothing but an empty void there.

“Add?”

An indescribable fear started to well up within me.

“Add.” I called again, slightly louder.

“Hmm?”

This time, there was a muffled response.

“Add...”

“Ihihihi (laughter)... Man, I’m so tired...”

The box at my right shoulder shook slightly and said with an indistinct voice. Its attitude made my reaction earlier seem funny somehow. Though it didn’t make me any braver, I no longer considered giving up.

“...You can sleep, then.”

“Alright!” After the hearty response, the voice stopped.

My steps lightened, as if someone was supporting me from behind. I walked up the path which I had once scurried down as if I was running away from something. I never knew that the feeling of knowing that I was not alone could be so much of a boost.

“Oh! It’s snowing!”

Flat pointed to the sky.

Ethereal flakes were fluttering earthward.

Svin sniffed the air like he could smell the scent of the snowflakes, while my mentor glanced upwards with a look of distaste, as usual. I had seen the snow in my hometown countless times, but I felt that the sky today was a special shade of white.

—Of course, I could never have imagined what awaited us there.

~Part 3~

I froze at the entrance to the village. Was it really this small?

The village used to be my entire world. Now, it was still where my origins were, and a place that could not be separated from my being. But now, it was so small I could not imagine that they were the same place.

...No.

Could I really not imagine that they were the same place?

“...What happened.”

My mentor mumbled.

The village had changed. Not in the buildings or the landscape. Not in the scent of the wind or the color of the light.

“...Nobody’s... here?”

That was right.

There was not a single person in the village.

Though it was a small village, everyone was busy bustling about it. Everyone played a role there. And yet, on this winter’s day, nobody was in the village.

We didn’t spot anyone as we walked into it, either.

The old man who owned the general store and would play games with me was not there. Neither was the old lady who ran the pub.

I did not see my mother at my house, or Bersac at the graveyard either.

After we visited and prayed at the Black Madonna statue, we checked the basement, which was also empty. There was just a cold reception room and a table with tea and biscuits, which showed that someone had been drinking tea here.

We could not find the chubby Father Ferdinand or the short-tempered Sister Illumia.

“How...”

I felt that my blood was freezing to ice.

Beside me, my mentor reached out and touched one of the teacups on the table.

“It’s cold. Supposedly, the tea was still smoking on the Mary Celeste,” he muttered to himself.

The ship that he had brought up was one of the most famous ghost ships in the world, as its passengers had all gone missing in the middle of the ocean. Indeed, the situation now was very similar.

Then, he wiped his finger over the edge of the plate. There was already a light layer of dust there.

“It seems that they have been gone for quite a while. ...Though, this also shows that the villagers were in a situation where they could leisurely drink tea. Seeing the state of the houses, it doesn’t look like any natural disasters happened.”

If there was an earthquake or a storm, and they had left to seek shelter, at least there would be some traces of that. If all of them had decided to leave or if they had been attacked by wild beasts, I didn’t think that the scene would be so peaceful.

“Svin, is there anything strange in terms of scent?”

“There’s no smell of people at all,” replied the blonde teenager with a twitch of his nose.

“But... The scent of magecraft is all over the place.”

The scent of magecraft.

What sort of smell would that be?

Just as I was wondering how he could feel that, Flat inclined his head to look at the roof and drew a circle with his fingers.

“Yep. The flow of magical energy is really weird. Though the concentration is usually high in mountainous areas, the magical energy here is not concentrated, but abnormal. It should be flowing normally, but here, it's as if it's drawing circles in the air.”

“Shouldn't it be a spiral and not a circle? And isn't this sort of thing common in the mountains?”

“No, no, it's really circles! Like those super pipelines that keep circling around the same place that got really popular!”

“It's a bad habit to draw conclusions so quickly. And scents usually move in one direction anyway. What's most important is the correct interpretation of the bigger picture, so what you're trying to do here by jumping to conclusions is completely flawed, Flat!”

“What's the problem with reaching the conclusion! It's like what the Japanese animations say, there is always only one truth!”

“Didn't Sir say this many times already? You can only reach the correct conclusion by understanding the techniques used by your opponent! You're going to mess up one day with your strategy of assuming everyone else can do it just because you can! What we should do now is analyze it as a whole and then try to reach a conclusion.”

Flat and Svin continued to argue.

My mentor watched the two of them with a strange expression. It was like joy, but also with loneliness mixed into it.

As their argument came to something that resembled an end, he clapped to get their attention.

“Pause for a minute. We don't have enough clues yet. Even if you come up with theories now, it'll just make you more confused,” he pointed out.

Perhaps they both realized the truth in that, so didn't continue talking.

Then, my mentor narrowed his eyes.

"A mass disappearance. Almost reminds me of *And Then There Were None* (mystery novel written by Agatha Christie)."

He brought up the name of a classic mystery novel, and then sighed.

He had come to solve a past case, yet had gotten involved into a new one. I had absolutely no idea what had happened, so all I could do was panic.

Why... Would everyone...

Did they disappear into the clouds, or into the earth.

I could not accept that something strange had happened in my hometown. It was, undoubtedly, the place where I had grown up. The scenery had not changed at all from what I remembered, but the lack of people made it difficult to accept.

My breathing sped up involuntarily.

There was a pain in my chest. I felt as if I was going to faint any second. An imaginary fire burnt at my heart.

Suddenly, a strange smell drifted into my nose. At some point, my mentor had started smoking a cigar as usual. Unbelievably, I calmed down just because of the smell. My mentor slowly held the cigar between two of his fingers.

"Let's split up," he suggested.

"Split up?"

"Of course. Since all the villagers have disappeared, we could still get hurt even if we stayed as a team. In that case, we might even be able to reduce the risk somewhat by communicating through magecraft regularly. Flat, Svin, can you two investigate the magical properties of the area?"

“Do I have to, be with Flat?” Svin’s face showed both the pride of having been chosen by his teacher, and the displeasure of having to team up with Flat.

“If Flat went alone, the reports we would get would probably be what he was feeling at the moment and whatever nonsense he spouts regularly. The only person who can catch up with him is you.”

“That’s very flattering, Professor!”

“You shut up.”

“Aaaah! No, wait, ow, Professor!”

Flat was instantly picked up by a strengthened (the magecraft, alternatively, enhanced) claw-like hand. His two legs kicked about in the air. But this time, Svin’s expression did not relax because of this.

“Sir... Does it really have to be this combination?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“No, I just think that you’ll be able to understand what Flat’s saying as well... Ah, but, I would like to team up with Sir as well, and definitely I don’t want to give this opportunity to Flat, but—”

“So, basically, you want to investigate with Gray?”

I was surprised to hear my own name.

Svin also held his breath momentarily out of panic.

He looked as if he didn’t dare to even breathe deeply. His gaze flickered around the place, and his face flushed red to the tips of his ears. I didn’t know why, but his blond curls were also trembling, like the ears of a small, restless dog.

“...I’m sorry. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to team with me.”

“Um, uh, no! D-definitely not! Of course not!” Svin stuttered.

He was one of the most eloquent people in the classroom, so the prospect of teaming with me clearly made him very uncomfortable. Though I firmly believed that he didn’t really hate me, so I wasn’t hurt by that.

My mentor considered it for a second before shaking his head. “Unfortunately, I can’t make use of that option. Your nose and Flat’s magecraft are best suited for looking for clues, while Gray and I, who have been here before, are best suited to investigating the traces left behind in the village.”

“...That makes a lot of sense.”

Svin’s shoulders drooped.

“Though, I understand your worries. I will contact you as often as possible. The only person who can control a nuisance like Flat. My apologies, but I’ll have to count on you for the time being.”

“Oh, alright! Hand it to me, Sir! You can rely on me for however long you want!” The blond teenager’s face lit up immediately, and he patted his chest with the air of a hero.

On the other side, “Professor! I’d like to act handsome as well! Though I don’t know if I’m reliable, you can praise me as well if you want!” Flat, who was still struggling while being lifted in the air, said in a muffled voice.

~Part 4~

Svin Glascheit had always been “abnormal”.

It was not just because he was the youngest person to obtain the rank of Pride in the current El-Melloi classroom. Just that was hardly anything. He found it delightful to be able to learn all sorts of magecraft. Though most of the techniques the former Lord El-Melloi had used were now lost, there were always things to learn.

It was just that every time his bestial magecraft advanced, Svin changed with it.

Yes.

He had always been changing.

Bestial magecraft was the sort of magecraft that changed the user. It wasn’t just the magic circuits that were altered, but the things that connected them as well, like nerves, muscles, or bones. What modern medicine could not transplant could also be affected, like skin, or even parts of the brain.

Svin didn’t remember what it felt like back then anymore.

Was he scared? Or was he happy? Though he did remember crying until his eyes went puffy, as much as he tried, he could not recall what he was feeling back then. His sense of self had already become blurred after it had been mixed around. He could not tell whether those tears signified happiness or sadness. “Svin Glascheit” became simply a title.

Yes, that was what it was, a title.

It was just a tag used to differentiate between people, Svin thought calmly.

Besides that, there was no other meaning to it. Though most mages accepted that they would be eventually consumed by the vectors (*TN: I am confused by that. But it says that in the original text. So interpret it however you like*) of their ancestors, it was especially intense in Svin’s case.

What he felt was more simple(alternatively, pure or primitive).

More unstoppable.

Because when he reached his goal, he would no longer be human.

He didn't find it a burden. He didn't even have the time to think about all this. Ever since they had discovered that his nervous system did not collapse after being introduced to bestial magecraft, many experiments had been performed onto him. Sometimes it was peeling the skin off his back to test his regenerative abilities, sometimes it was sticking his arm into a vat of boiling oil. And now, Svin didn't even know whether he felt pain when that happened. If he had been completely beast-ified then, he might have even derived pleasure from it.

Beasts that were deprived of reason were probably pretty far from mages.

After he came to the Clock Tower, he found some form of sanctuary with Lord El-Melloi II, probably because he(Lord El-Melloi II) could correctly understand him. Under Lord El-Melloi II, Svin, who was not a regular mage but simply a container of his family's magecraft, was properly protected.

Perhaps it was for that reason that he hated Flat, who had joined after him.

That guy's scent had told him that they were both irregulars from the very start. He must also have known that Flat was another uncooperative, overdone(?), and unqualified piece of work. Because they had no defects, they could not understand others (did not need others). They had both accepted this truth.

...For that reason.

For that reason, Gray's scent was special to Svin.

The sort of mildly indifferent scent that didn't belong to a person or a mage and was created by someone from a different realm made the young man feel at ease.

It might even just be pity.

Or perhaps it could be some sort of putrid feeling, like narcissism.

Even so, it was the first time he had cared about a person like this. He had been attracted to that calming scent and had chased after it unknowingly countless times.

Coming to this place was like he was being clasped within her hands.

“...Almost like being enveloped within Gray-tan.”

“Hmm? What about Gray?”

Hearing Svin mutter to himself, the person in front of him turned around.

They were in the middle of a lush forest.

It surrounded the entire village, and was dim even during the day. After they had separated with Lord El-Melloi II, the two of them had gone toward the forest in the north. Snowflakes were still fluttering through the foliage overhead.

Flat exhaled a breath of hot air onto his cold fingers, and continued without a bit of ill will.

“Don’t you think the Black Madonna statue looks a bit like Gray?”

“Nobody is like Gray-tan in this world. Just like how Sir is uniquely great(?), Gray-tan is the embodiment of absolute beauty.”

“Ah, I understand what Le Chein-kun’s trying to say! Like Japanese moe or tea ceremonies! Oh, also, where did we say we were going to start investigating from?”

“The swamp. I’ve already told you,” Svin said, not knowing how to react to what he just said. They planned on directly attacking the root of the matter.

“Clearly, that’s the root of all the abnormalities in this village, for safety reasons, Sir and Gray-tan shouldn’t break the taboos, but the same doesn’t apply to us.”

“Ah, but this village is really so interesting! Everything is all over the place!” Flat said with a wide smile. Though, Svin couldn’t help but agree with him.

“There are just too many odd things in this village,” Svin concluded.

“First of all, for a village, there isn’t enough farmland for it to function. If they aren’t self-sufficient, at least there should be a corporation nearby to provide them with food, but if so, that would mean that the village had value. It doesn’t seem that the village is rich in terms of material wealth, so there’s a higher likelihood that there’s some sort of subject of worship here.”

“You mean Blackmore Graveyard or the Black Madonna? Uh, it’s not impossible, but if that was the case, this village should be a bit more famous, shouldn’t it?”

“That’s just a possibility. If it was Sir instead, he would have probably made a more well-rounded analysis— No, he would have already reached some truth that I have no hope of understanding.”

Sven narrowed his eyes slightly.

Flat nodded as if he thought so as well. Though Svin wasn’t sure exactly how much he understood, his thought process was clearer than if he was alone.

“I heard that Gray was being worshipped by them. Is that related? Ah, did she not tell us about this because it bothers her? She’s never willing to talk about the stuff around here, don’t you think so as well?”

His words left Svin speechless.

His classmate sometimes had a surprisingly sharp intuition. It was always this way regarding magecraft, but sometimes it would work on interpersonal connections as well. Even though he could not understand matters between people, he could reach the root of their natures. How should people like that be evaluated?

The young man’s shoulders drooped.

“...Right. On the way here, she’s had this bitter yet thin scent, like the smell of something that was torn in half.”

“Le Chien-kun always really cares about the people around him. Why else would he be so cautious with me!”

It was the feeling as if he had seen through everything again.

It made him want to make a scene (like fight or something?), but it probably wouldn’t work against the person who was in front of him.

“How many times have I told you, don’t call me Le Chien(the dog)!”

After he ground out those words through his gritted teeth, he sniffed the air.

“There’s a weird smell,” he whispered.

The footsteps did not stop.

The young man continued at the same pace he had before. Neither the uneven floor nor the branches in front of him could impede his path. It was the same for Flat.

“Though every place has its own scent, this place smells the same as the high magical energy concentration of the Clock Tower. However, it’s very twisted. It feels very thick, yet could disappear in an instant if I smelled it. Almost like a pure black bed sheet that has just been washed.”

“Svin-kun explains the same way as usual— Super easy to understand! Like the how-to guides of famous FPS’s,” said Flat, clapping his hands.

It was the sort of sentence that would probably get criticized (alternatively, ridiculed) by most people, but for Flat, it was completely normal. The two of them continued carving their way through the thicket when Svin suddenly pointed in a direction with his chin.

“Over there. You know what I mean?”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

Flat nodded and looked as if he was the most confident person in the world. He narrowed his eyes and stretched out his palm so that it was a couple of centimeters away from the ground, and then swiped his hand across.

“There’s a Bounded Field. Whoa, it’s pretty old too. You might not even be able to find one this old in the Clock Tower.”

“You should be the one to undo it.”

“Alright, alright. Then, Game Select!”



Flat twirled his finger. A complicated pattern appeared beneath his fingertip, but Svin knew that it was just for dramatic effect. Flat's magecraft was almost solely based on what he was feeling at the time. Usually, this sort of magecraft wouldn't be able to exist, and the reason that he could make it work was what made Flat Escardos special (alternatively, unusual).

It was also very rare in the Clock Tower, much like Svin's bestial magecraft.

He raised his hand as the scene around them changed.

A path through the forest appeared, as if it had been there all along.

“It’s the sort of Bounded Field that we know about. Alrighty, Game Over. Let’s go.”

Flat walked into the forest, humming as if he was going to a picnic.

Svin followed behind him and spoke.

“Now I understand why there’s a rule about going into the swamp,” he muttered.

“Not because they were afraid that they would get in. Because [they couldn’t get to the swamp at all.]”

“Ah, it would be problematic if they found out that they couldn’t get in at all. Is that why they set the rule? If so, that would explain it!”

This could be called a whydunnit of sorts.

The reason why the rule was set.

Clearly, there was a secret in this swamp. To protect the secret, they even went as far as to set up a mysterious rule. If so, what secret was hiding there? And why did all the villagers disappear?

Suddenly, Flat stopped in his tracks.

“Oh, here we go again.”

“It’s heavily guarded, huh. Flat, according to this smell, the one closest to us is a lure, right?”

“Yep. It’s a mechanism that triggers an automatic attack if you touch it, Black Ice! It’s preparing to deal with us now that we’ve gotten rid of the Bounded Field.”

Flat moved his fingers again, undoing the magecraft efficiently. However, this time he did not manage it in one go.

“—Achoo!”

Because of a sneeze, his fingers loosened.

Suddenly, circuits of light flashed between the trees, and two arrows shot out from the void of a Bounded Field that had just expanded. It was a curse so refined that even a wild beast would have undoubtedly been killed by it.

“Pallida mors.” In an instant, just after Svin finished his incantation, a translucent tentacle-like thing shot out of his back and struck the arrows from the air.

“Oh, is that a new trick?”

“To put it simply, it’s the image of a tail. You’re not the only one who was inspired to improve from the fight with that Grand mage.”

“Ahaha, Miss Touko’s flying kick really is amazing!”

“You were the only one who got kicked, okay!”

Flat completely ignored Svin’s protest and continued to undo the Bounded Field.

If these two were the only ones who came, perhaps all the doors would have swung open.

However.

This time, it was too late. From the moment they reached the village, a gaping hole had already started to appear. Even if they were geniuses, it would not let them pass easily.

The bloodthirsty intent had gained a physical form.

“...It’s in there. Was that just a warning,” Svin muttered.

Flat seemed to have noticed as well.

When they headed towards the swamp, they had purposefully went around Blackmore Graveyard from the west. The reason they avoided the graveyard was because they wanted to break the rules one by one, but they didn’t know if it was the correct decision or not.

The foliage shuddered. From the shadows of the forest, there emerged a silhouette that was roughly the size of the two young men.

“Hmm? Is this the automatic defense mechanism?”

Flat frowned.

“—!?”

And Svin just stood there, deathly still.

The shadow walked over without hesitation.

“Le Chien-kun?”

Svin was too surprised to react to that nickname.

It was a person.

Her elfin body was concealed by a hooded cape.

[And in her familiar, slender hands, there was a giant scythe.]

*

My mentor and I climbed up the hill. Though the villagers were all gone, the windmill at the south of the village was still spinning as if nothing had happened.

It creaked sonorously in the bitter wind, as if it was a giant looking down on some ruins. We reached the hut at the base of the windmill.

Standing there, I suddenly realized something.

“...You had us split up just so you could go there, right?”

“I just thought that was the best course of action,” my mentor said with a surprised expression.

“Though, if it did happen, I do want to prevent them from meeting. There’s no predicting what sort of reaction would occur.”

His explanation was not a lie.

The only reason why Svin accepted what he said was because it made sense.

But of course that was not the only reason.

“I didn’t think that Sir would be overprotective. But since you already brought them here, you must be really conflicted.”

“Shut it, I know.”

Hearing his bitter voice, I could not help but smile.

“I forgive you. ...After all, you did bring me along.”

“If it wasn’t for you, I would die.”

“Alright, as long as you’re aware.”

When did our interactions become like this, I wonder.

To be honest, I was still so scared I wanted to scream. Everyone from my hometown had disappeared into thin air. It was not something I could easily accept. Therefore, I was very glad that I had the task of protecting my mentor to distract me from it.

I quietly adjusted my breathing.

And then I pushed open the door to the windmill hut carefully.

The interior was just like Reines had described it, with odd crystalline implements glowing in the dim room. The crystals that used light to communicate were more like mysterious creatures hidden within a cave than machines.

But the reason that made me and my mentor freeze in our tracks stood deeper in the room.

“Look at who’s come. I didn’t think that the grave keeper girl would return of her own accord.”

A steady voice welcomed us.

I heard my mentor swallow.

Of course, he must have already anticipated this. Yet, anticipation was not reality. It would still be surprising when an imagined situation actually happened.

“...Actually, I didn’t think that you would still be here. I just wanted to look for some clues.”

“Do you find it surprising, Lord,” he said, laughing.

The faint smell of red wine surrounded him.

For someone currently in a poor village in the countryside, both the wine and the cape made from an indescribable fabric seemed out of place.

“Ah, is that the case? The villagers are all gone, after all. It would be natural to find it strange that I am still here.”

The director of the Atlas Institute— Zepia Eltnam Atlasia nodded as he stood in front of us.

~Part 5~

“—Hmm? Is this an automatic defense mechanism?” Even Flat’s voice seemed distant in Svin’s consciousness. The scythe in its hands was too similar to the person he was familiar with. At the same time, the scene was just like what he had imagined when he first heard that they were going to investigate this village.

“G-Gray-tan...”

The figure stood in front of the two dumbfounded teenagers and raised its black scythe.

Only the sound of wind could be heard as the blade swung through the young man, who did not have time to react to it.

It [swung through] in a different sense than what he expected.

“...It’s a shadow?”

At least, it didn’t have a physical form.

After the scythe swung down, the shadow disappeared as if it had melted, leaving Svin and Flat alone in the forest.

“Le Chien-kun! What happened!”

“What do you mean what happened? ...Wait. What did you see just then?”

“Hmm? Wasn’t it just a blurry shadow? But it just disappeared? It was almost like ‘Ghost (the 1990 romance/fantasy movie)!’”

It seemed that Svin and Flat had seen different things.

“Oh, also, let’s investigate that place first!”

As he said that, Flat pointed in a direction.

It was towards the swamp.

The putrid smell irritated his nose. Even Svin, who had a better sense of smell than a dog, had only just noticed it.

Suddenly, a sinister white mist formed.

No, it was not mist.

“Evil spirits...?!”

They yelled in unison.

And it was on a scale that they had never seen before. Though it was slightly less concentrated than the one Lord El-Melloi II had met at the Separated Castle of Adra, Svin and Flat were not there to witness that.

“Le Chien-kun, support me!” Flat raised his finger.

Svin poured Od into the young man’s spell and sped it up as much as possible. However, the flood of undead engulfed their protective shield, and swallowed the two of them up.

“This is...”

“Ahaha! This is awesome! Like a roller coaster! But they seem like... they’re trying to escape something...”

Flat turned around in the midst of the torrent.

His eyes, which glittered with interest even in a time like this, looked towards the depths of the forest.

“Whoa! This’s the first time I’ve seen a spell that’s so intricate and concentrated at the same time, it’s really so cool! Oi, you should come take a look as well, Le Chien-kun!”

“Ah, don’t peer out of your own Bounded Field, you idiot! Can’t you consider the feelings of your teammate! Also, why would you want to get close to something that has a numbing smell like that? Why don’t you just go die directly, you idiot!”

He grabbed Flat’s belt and pulled him back in just as he was going to jump out. But, in the current situation, perhaps that was futile.

“Aaah, what, wait, something’s... Moving!?”

As Flat shouted, the thing in question began to distort.

*

“Mr.... Zepia...”

I managed to utter those words.

Usually, I would be listening quietly on the side as my mentor did the negotiating. The reason why I spoke up first this time was probably because it was related to my hometown.

“Ah, in this mode, I’ve asked you to send messages and to move equipment a couple of times, yes? Though, most of the time it was done by Mr. Bersac.”

“Please tell me.” I said, a bit more determinedly. “What... happened here?”

“What happened, yes?”

Zepia’s voice sounded distant.

“There’s nothing wrong with that as a question, but it certainly isn’t a good one. Questions in a script should always surround the theme. Everything in a story should be designed around the central theme. That is a simple fact.”

“...”

The lengthy response made some part of my heart groan(?).

It wasn’t irritation. Nor was it fear. It was just a feeling that what I saw in front of me surpassed my perception. As if the person in front of me wasn’t a person, but an

intricate puppet, or an insect instead of a mammal. Meeting a mage sometimes gave me a similar feeling, but this time it was different. It was completely different to the mages of the Clock Tower that I had barely gotten used to.

“I’ll answer you in a fairly basic way. What happened here is simply part of an ancient contract.”

“Contract?”

“A contract that was signed long before I became the director. Oh yes, since you’re here, let me give you some information.”

As he said that, Zepia turned towards my mentor.

“Even though you’re only a temporary Lord, you must have heard of the Contract of Atlas, yes?”

“Are you referring to the seven contracts that are said to be scattered around the world?”

“Yes, the seven contracts. The Atlas Institute is obliged to assist anyone who activates them,” Zepia said calmly. Though I didn’t understand magecraft very well, I could tell that it was a very serious topic. The sort of contract that not even the Atlas Institute could resist. If we swapped the Atlas Institute for the Clock Tower in this situation, I could not imagine the sort of things that would unfold. Though I knew Lords other than my mentor, even if only Lord Valualeta of the three Aristocratic families decided to assist someone, what sort of scars would she be able to inflict on the world?

—“Lift not the seal of Atlas, lest ye destroy the world seven times over.”

My mentor hesitated for a second before he asked his question. “Then, I’ll get to the point. Do you know Dr. Heartless...?”

“Ah, Dr. Heartless, yes?” Zepia’s nails slid over the surface of the desk beside him. The crystal seemed to have been affected in some way, and a clang resounded through the room. It was a beautiful yet melancholic sound.

“I did indeed make a deal with him.”

“—!?”

My mentor clenched his fists.

“Where is he? No, wait. First, why did he contact you.”

“Oh, what a straightforward question. I see, so he seems to have left quite an impression on you somewhere outside of the range of my calculations.”

“Please answer me.”

The expression of my mentor, who had been pressing the question, suddenly changed.

The crystal made a noise again.

This time, the resonating did not stop. It continued to gather, as if it was trying to surround us in a Bounded Field of sound.

“Ah, has it started? One of the superweapons of Atlas is hidden in this village.”

“—!?”

I held my breath.

My mentor’s eyes widened as well.

“It’s one of the seven superweapons of the Atlas Institute. Its specialty is reenactment. I suppose I am already quite familiar with it. Though it doesn’t have an official name, it is commonly called Logos ReAct.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“I’m explaining the situation to you, of course, Lord El-Melloi II. What I’m saying are all things you want to know.”

“.....”

It was just like Reines had said. As if he could understand the answer to a problem before it even arose.

Even though everything he said seemed so weird, I couldn't deny that I had been forced to understand something important. Ah, I could say without being afraid that someone would misunderstand me that it was like I had been suddenly told about the location and means of activation of a nuclear missile.

And in an atmosphere that was so lighthearted that I could imagine we were talking over fish and chips.

“That is to say...”

In front of my speechless mentor, Zepia took a deep breath. Then, from his mouth, an avalanche of mechanical sounds poured out.

“Revolve revolve (alternatively, spin or turn.)”

It was a horribly inorganic, unpleasantly hoarse, and hollow voice that I could not imagine coming out of the mouth of a human being.

It was like a faulty music box that was focused on repeating one thing to the point of madness.

Like a howl from a dying wolf, yet so irredeemably comical.

“Let the past and the present, the present and the past turn upside down and revolve and revolve and revolve and revolve revolve revolve.”

After he said this, Zepia's lips curled upwards in a smile, and he gave an exaggerated bow.

“You could call it the remnants of a possibility. A phenomenon that led to a decisive change like when I metamorphosed in Wallachia (??). ...Ah, yes. Let us call it the night of TATARI (祟り, curse), after the mysteries of the Far East.”

His lips twisted.

My vision was distorted along with it.

It was not just me. My mentor also kneeled down on one knee. All the light in the world became a haze, and mixed into the darkness. Everything became black and white, like the ink paintings from the Far East that I had once seen.

“Zepia!”

My mentor shouted.

Not only my nerves, but my Magic Circuits could not function normally.

All my five senses failed to read what was around me. In that moment, I was a bird that fell from the sky, a butterfly that was about to turn back into a larva, a fire that could freeze the entire world.

“May you drown in the darkness of the night,” I heard Zepia say.

“Exploring a fictional setting should do. Find the mystery that you must solve. That is the only way you can reach the end, Lord El-Melloi II.”

~Part 6~

---Code: Logos React, Re-entering.

— Distortion Value: B.

---Extracted Time Period:

—■■■■■Program activated. Began replacing targets.

—Full process, Clear. Atlas—

I think I heard something.

Code that was more direct than usual, and that I could not understand at all.

When I came back to my senses, I found that I was lying on a soft bed.

“...This place... is...”

My voice was incredibly fuzzy. My head hurt.

After I got up shakily, I went down to the living room [as usual.]

“Good morning, Gray. Did you not sleep well last night?”

Strange.

My body told me that something was off.

The sky was bright. It wasn't consistent with my biological clock. Also, why was it so warm? Wasn't it just snowing? Now, I felt like I was going to sweat if I moved even a little.

Early summer...?

That would explain it. However, it was impossible.

“Gray?”

Ah, yes.

Where was I?

Wasn't I just confronting Zepia with my mentor? Though I didn't understand what sort of monster the director of the Atlas Institute was, I was determined to protect my mentor. However, now I was...

"Gray, are you alright? Did you hear what I said."

The person in the kitchen said again.

How familiar that voice was. Though I had noticed so long ago, I could not make my consciousness accept it. My brain could not process what my sensory organs were saying to it. I could not believe the combination of this season and this person.

"Um.... Why... am I here..."

"What are you talking about?"

I heard a gentle chuckle.

"This is your home. Are you not fully awake yet?"

The person that said that walked out of the kitchen with a freshly-baked loaf of bread and appeared in front of my eyes.

Ah, I knew this person. It was the person who I understood the most. The person who was the most unforgettable to me. And of course that was the case, because that person had been with me from the moment I was born, and had been the happiest to witness my transformation.

The sweet smell of the bread evoked a strong feeling of nostalgia and a similar degree of fear.

"[...Mother...]"

I moaned.

◆ 第四章 ◆

-Chapter 4-



~Part 1~

“How was yesterday?”

The kind voice reached my ears.

I still stood there, stunned and unable to understand what had happened.

“Didn’t you guide the new visitors around the village? His name was Mr. El-Melloi II, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, um... yes.”

These words were also familiar. If I didn’t remember incorrectly, it was the second morning after I had first seen my mentor. If that was the case, then the heat was explainable.

But what had happened to cause this?

What was this sort of interaction that I could only encounter if I traveled through time?

Most importantly, if the person who was talking to me really was my mother, asking the same question with the same expression she had before, how was I to respond?

“Mother...”

I muttered, and turned to the mirror as I suddenly realized something.

[It was my usual face. The illusion cast there by Flat had already been undone.] If I had really returned to the past, then it would only be natural that my clothes and face would be the same as they had been then. Since I came to London, most of the clothes I wore were picked for me by Reines and my mentor, so they were quite different from what I wore in the past.

I tried to suppress my feelings of surprise as I sat down at the table, while my mother served me my breakfast. Fresh-baked bread with milk and pickled onions sat there in the morning sun. Everything there made me shudder.

“I had a strange dream yesterday.”

My mother said, across from me.

She tore her bread into two, and spread butter on the pieces. A soft aroma came from it. I remembered that when I was little, I used to spread a large dollop of butter whenever I could, and that I kept getting berated for doing so.

“I dreamt that the visitor took you away. Strange, isn’t it? That sort of thing is completely impossible.”

“...Yes.”

I nodded, somewhat unsettled by that.

Did we have this conversation before? I didn’t remember. I still couldn’t process the situation, and my heart was pounding loud in my chest.

I started eating the breakfast in front of me.

It was something that I had tasted hundreds of times before. Though it was so plain it could not compare to the fancy dishes I had had after going to London, it didn’t taste bad. However, because of the fear I felt now, I hesitated to even swallow. After nearly choking countless times, I was finally about to finish when my mother stood up.

“Well then, I’ll go pray to the Holy Mother now, and then I’ll go visit Granny. Say hello to Mr. Bersac for me.”

She walked a couple of steps before turning around as if she had suddenly thought of something.

“Oh yes, though your work as a grave keeper is important, don’t devote everything to it. After all, you are the blessed child.”

I had heard these words countless times.

Though I had never forgotten about them, my memory had become blurred in all the days that had passed and the cases I had experienced in London. Hearing my mother say those things again gave me a feeling of being strangled by someone.

“...I know.”

I lowered my head. This time, my mother left completely. I trudged up the stairs and back to my own room. In the corner of the room, I called out in a quiet voice.

“...Add.”

It was like a prayer.

The Add then had been talkative and loud. It was still the Add that called me “Idiot Gray” and would tease me at every opportunity. It was the annoying box that was always laughing, the only one in the village who—

There was no reply.

I hesitantly undid my hook, and took the cage from my right shoulder. The eyes on the small box were firmly shut, as if it had been carved like that in the first place.

“...Add. Why, Add...”

Why was he not here to accompany me at this time, of all times? I hugged the cage tightly, and couldn’t muster the energy to move for quite a while.

~Part 2~

Eventually, I left my home and trudged to the village.

All the villagers seemed to be here. Though that could only be expected if I was really in the past, the suddenness made me feel like I had become a ghost.

If only this was a dream. But as I walked through the village, wiping sweat from my forehead, another thought crept up on me. It was almost as if...

What I had done after I left my hometown and went to London was all a dream.

No, this thought was more normal. There aren't that many people who have powerful enough imaginations to think that someone like me would study in a school of magecraft, become the disciple of a Lord, and escape death several times. Though I did like reading and would immerse myself in a pile of them whenever given the chance, this degree of delusion was too much.

“...No, I was there.”

I shook my head and said determinedly.

If I didn't I would have gone with the flow in an instant. The fresh air of the mountains, the intense sunlight, the smell of the dirt, and the dilapidated houses were all too familiar to me. And because it was the place I had been born and raised in, it was so familiar it scared me.

In front of the church, I saw someone who could nearly be described as spherical.

A chin that had three folds and a stomach that made me think of an elephant or a hippo made it seem unbelievable that he could fit in his priestly outfit. His limbs looked like they had been poked into his torso, in a way that some people might find humorous.

It was Father Fernando.

Standing next to him was the freckled nun with a cute pout on her face.

“What’s the matter with you, eh?”

The nun suddenly spoke to me.

“W-what.”

“You look pretty pale. Your body’s pretty important to this village, isn’t it? Doesn’t it worry people if you wander around with that sort of expression?”

“...T-thank you.” I could not help but blink at her unexpected words. Father Fernando and Sister Illumia were part of the few people in this village who did not see me as an object of worship, and I never recalled having this sort of conversation before. Father Fernando watched us from the side and spoke.

“Hmph. Your mother came just then saying that she was going to pray to the Holy Mother, are you going to as well?”

“Oh, no, I don’t intend on doing that.”

“Also, I heard that you guided the guests around here yesterday, yes?”

“...Um, yes.”

“Did they say what they came here to do?”

“N-no, we didn’t talk about that.”

That was what I remembered.

Half a year ago, I think I just explained the situation with the graveyard and the village. Though I didn’t remember the details, I still had some idea of what we discussed.

“Is that so? Of course, the best-case scenario would be that they’re just tourists, but the villagers seem a bit too tense.”

...He seemed to be talking to himself for that last sentence.

“If you have any troubles, please tell me. Didn’t I say that the gates to the Church are always open? If you have anything you want to talk to us about besides the Holy Mother, I would be glad to listen.”

“...Thank you very much. Where are you and Miss Illumia going?”

“We’re going shopping. Isn’t there a merchant coming today?”

The nun fanned the air with her hand.

Though the village was still not connected to the electricity grid (*TN: That answers my earlier question*), there were still people coming once in a while to bring natural gas and other similar resources. All of my books also came this way.

“Alright, Illumia, let’s go.”

“Fine, fine, Your Excellency(?). After all, if we walk too quickly your knees’ll give up on you.”

“Ugh.”

The nun shrugged, and the priest glared at her before they began to leave. Either way, the conversation I had with the two of them did make me a bit calmer.

I closed my eyes and considered.

...What.

What even happened. I still could not understand. Though, if I were to continue my day according to my usual routine, I knew where I should go. So, I walked around the church and made my way to the dilapidated hut. A crisp noise welcomed me. The black-clothed old man happened to be chopping firewood.

He held a massive (*TN: The original sentence had a simile I had trouble understanding, got rid of it*) axe in one hand and chopped his daily portion of wood rhythmically.

It was supposed to be a sight that I had seen countless times, but I had only just realized now how impressive it was for someone of Bersac's age to be able to pull off such a feat.

He spoke to me without even turning around.

"You're a bit late today, Gray."

"I accidentally... wandered around a bit."

I put a hand to my chest and adjusted my breathing, silently observing the room around me.

There appeared to be nothing unusual about the room or Bersac. They were exactly the same as I remembered. I stared at the back of the grave keeper for a while as he solemnly chopped wood for a while before I spoke up again.

"Um... Mr... Bersac."

"....."

There was no response.

That, too, was as usual. He wasn't always silent, and even became a bit verbose when he needed to be, but I assume that he was just disinterested in small talk. So, I didn't mind it and asked my question.

"...Don't you think there's something going on in the village?"

The hand that held the axe suddenly stopped.

Bersac wiped the sweat from his forehead and turned around to look at me.

"What do you mean?"

"N-nothing, it's just, like, if suddenly everyone disappeared and came back or something, or if winter suddenly turned into summer..."

“...What are you talking about?”

The wrinkles between Bersac’s eyebrows deepened.

They were different from my mentor’s, which appeared completely because of annoyance, the lines on Bersac’s face were because of the hardships he had faced as a grave keeper over the years. He withstood the wind and the rain, and would sometimes even have to spend days on end hunting in the forest. It would be inconsiderate to simply attribute it to the differences between internal and external factors. (?)

I forced myself to restrain my breathing and glanced at him timidly.

“...I saw something like that in a book, so I had a strange dream.”

Bersac accepted my explanation surprisingly easily.

Speaking of which, he was, unexpectedly, a great lover of books, which was probably why he could relate to what I just said. When I used to be negative about everything, I had found a haven in his collection of detective and adventure novels.

“Before we talk about that, there’s something I want to tell you about the visitor yesterday,” Bersac said seriously, putting down his axe.

“Has... something happened?”

“He asked me about your face.”

I was startled for a moment, and then touched my own face. The face that was there after Flat’s illusion had disappeared.

“About, my face.”

“About how you seem to have the same face as a certain hero of the past. He also told me why he would know about it as a Lord of the Clock Tower.”

Ah, yes. We had had this conversation before. I did not remember how long I stood there in a state of shock back then. I never thought that someone from the outside would know about my face.

And for that reason, that thought nested into my mind like a baby bird.

—He was afraid of my face.

—He was afraid of my face even though he knew about it.

At that time, that was like a shining beacon in the darkness to me.

If it was just that he didn't know what my face was, it would just be the same to me as Father Fernando's indifference.

But, he was the first person who knew what meaning my face had yet still felt afraid of it.

He gave me the choice to hate the [face that was my own, but also someone else's] that had always tormented me. It was for this reason that I ended up becoming his disciple.

I reflected upon this miracle-like experience once again.

“...What? You’re staring off into the distance again.”

“N-nothing. B-but why would he ask about my face?”

“That visitor seems to want to hire a grave keeper of Blackmore Graveyard.” As he said this, Bersac glanced over at me. “Undoubtedly, you are one of the options. Though, the village probably won’t let you go. After all, this place has run on this system for a long time now.”

“...Yes.”

What he said was right.

So back then, our conversation had ended there. Though there could be a miracle, I had managed to convince myself that such a thing wouldn’t happen to someone like me. Though it was a bit sad, I didn’t think too much else of it back then.

At least, that was probably the case. (TN: *Alternatively, that was what was meant to be, I'm not really sure what it's referring to*)

“...Um, after that, what else did you talk about?”

“Hmm?”

Hearing my question, Bersac turned around, slightly surprised.

“It’s a rare sight to see you interested in this sort of thing.”

“I-is it rare. ...After all, it’s related to me.”

“Well, that is true. He is a Lord of the Clock Tower, so I couldn’t just lie. So I told him everything, from the origin of your face to the existence of Add.”

The origin of my face.

That was to say, one of the great heroes of Britain— King Arthur.

Ah, please don’t laugh. Even I found it almost laughable that King Arthur would be a girl. However, it was the legend that had always circulated throughout this village. They even had what they said was the Noble Phantasm of that hero, which was Add.

Bersac cast a glance at my right shoulder. “That thing’s pretty quiet. Usually, it would be commenting on all sorts of things by now, wouldn’t it.”

“...Um, I suppose we both didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Hmph. Is that the case.”

As he said that, Bersac stroked his stubble. Add remained silent. It made me feel as if my heart had fallen into the depths of an ice cellar.

“Either way, I still need to investigate deeper. Can you guide the guest again today?”

These words made me feel as if I had frozen.

Bersac asked me to go find my mentor. But, maybe my mentor was the same in this situation. If I met a version of my mentor that had no memory of the past six months I had spent with him, I didn't know if I would be able to handle it.

“What? Did something happen yesterday? As a mage, it wouldn’t be odd for him to have some sort of strange penchant, or for him to have done something difficult to believe (?)... Wait, did that Lord do anything...”

“N-No! Nothing like that!”

I shook my head hurriedly and interrupted him.

Bersac stared at me surprisedly for a while, but possibly because he thought that I wouldn’t have hidden anything from him with my nature back then, he just held up the basket beside him.

“I suppose that it’s lunch. Help me deliver it to the visitor.”

“...S-sure.”

As he passed the basket to me, he asked me that question again.

“What happened?”

His soldierly eyebrows knitted together.

“I feel like something’s off about you. Did you get heatstroke? Or is there something you want to buy from the merchant?”

“...No, n-nothing at all.”

I denied it and left the hut as if I was escaping from him.

The hunting lodge for guests was close by. I got there very quickly. Though I could have gone the long way around, I never thought of doing so. I felt as if my bones and muscles had suddenly become cogs and springs, and I had become a mechanical robot.

I froze in front of the door.

I was so terrified of taking the next step that even my throat hurt.

I bit my lip. With the taste of iron rust in my mouth, I pushed open the door as if I was risking my life in doing so.

That person was sitting next to the table by the door.

Long, black hair, slender fingers, and a cigar in his mouth. Wearing the same outfit he had been in back then. Observing me as I entered.

What should I do?

What was I meant to do?

I was so scared, so worried. How was I to tell him that we had known each other for over half a year, and experienced so many cases together? I could not convince him, that would be impossible. No, I'd rather that it was all a delusion. If his response would be to gently try and comfort a random girl from the countryside, how was I supposed to live out the rest of my life?

Even so, I spoke uncontrollably in a rasping voice. "S-sir..."

For a moment, silence filled the room.

And then—

"...Thank God."

My mentor breathed a sigh of relief.

"It seems you are the Gray that I know."

"Sir!"

It was impossible to describe exactly how reassuring those words were to me.

All the worry and uneasiness that had ensnared my heart dissipated in an instant.

I could not help but fall to the ground.

“Gray.”

“I-It’s okay, I’m alright.”

I raised one hand to stop him from standing up and put the other on my feeble knees.

I felt as if tears would fall out of my eyes at any moment if I wasn’t careful. I wiped the corners of my moist eyes, trying to make it seem casual. I bent over slightly and nodded.

“I’m really...alright... I’m... so glad...”

I still could not raise my head. I was so grateful to have a hood.

My mentor did not rush me either. His silence was so comforting I could not help but want to cry again. The smell of the cigar was the same as it always had been, but it reminded my heart of the more than half a year of time that I had definitely experienced.

I put down the basket and tried to calm my racing heart.

“Um, Sir, when did you—” I started to ask.

“I woke up a couple of hours ago. I found that this was similar to the place where I met you from chatting with some of the villagers,” my mentor said, carefully choosing his words.

That was to say, he woke up at around the same time I did.

“Where are Flat and Svin?”

“I don’t know. I can’t detect them with magecraft either.”

As he said this, my mentor shook his head.

This time, a sorrowful expression appeared on his face.

“...Should I not have brought them along?”

“Of course not.”

I shook my head.

“Think about it, the two of them aren’t going to get defeated that easily. Even if we can’t contact them, they’ll certainly make a big scene, and make the situation even more complicated.”

“...Well, you’re not wrong.”

My mentor took his cigar in his fingers and smiled bitterly (alternatively, wryly).

As I looked up at the smoke that slowly drifted towards the ceiling, I asked my mentor the question that had been bothering me for a while.

“Are we really in the past?”

“It’s hard to say.”

My mentor tilted his head.

“It does seem that way. My body also feels normal. Though we can’t just assume that this is the past solely based on that. It’s too strange, after all.”

“Is it impossible even with magecraft?”

“Hm.”

My mentor frowned.

“Well, it’s not completely impossible. I’ve heard that the Fifth Magic and similar things that reach the realm of Magic are capable of achieving a similar feat,” he answered after a brief moment of thought.

“...If that’s the case, would the Atlas Institute be able to do something like it?”

“.....”

My mentor was silent for a minute.

“No, if it was just the person who cast the spell, then perhaps, but sending someone with no will to assist the magecraft at all would be incredibly difficult. Atlas alone probably doesn’t have this sort of technology.”

“What if Heartless helped with it?”

“Impossible.”

My mentor shook his head. (*TN: this is the fifth time a head has been shaken in this part.*)

“In theory, it might be possible, but unless the Barthomeloi in charge of the Department of Law commanded all the members of the Aristocratic faction to partake in this sort of a project, it simply could not be achieved. Displacing people to the past is a type of Grand Magecraft that might even require the assistance of the entire surface world. Even if Heartless had some unknown power and obtained the full support of the Atlas Institute, it wouldn’t be something that could be easily accomplished.”

“O-oh, is that the case?”

If my mentor thought that way, that was probably the truth.

At least, I’ve never seen my mentor misinterpret anything about magecraft. Though he would always struggle with different theories at the hypothesis stage, I had never seen him make mistakes in anything he could confidently assert.

Of course, this was because he had carefully eliminated every possibility that might make him unsure of something. ...I could say that it was the exact opposite of his usual lack of self-confidence.

“Oh, by the way, by the time I came to my senses, Reines had already left. After all, she left first thing in the morning.”

Was this the order of events?

I did remember Reines saying that my mentor had asked her to return to the Clock Tower with an uncharacteristic forcefulness.

“So you really sent Reines back just because of my face.”

“Yes. Like I said before, I made sure that your face was the same as that of a past hero. I also heard that there was a Noble Phantasm related to King Arthur in this village.”

Bersac had said something similar to me just then.

The relationship between me and King Arthur. The history of the village. Even Add—a tool created to activate the Noble Phantasm within it—was part of an ancient plan.

Even if they had forgotten the original meaning of the plan, they still continued acting on it lifelessly.

“...Back then, I didn’t get to ask in further detail,” my mentor said in a low voice. “I planned on doing so, but I never got the chance because of the case that happened.”

“...Yes.”

I nodded.

I continued my mentor’s point. “...Because I will die here, tomorrow.”

That was the way the case had ended in the past.

The incident that caused me to leave my hometown and enter the Clock Tower with my mentor. Originally, my mentor was probably going to investigate deeper into that case. But because of what Bersac said to him, and because of the situation in the village then, he chose to give up.

My mentor pursed his lips.

“You’ll die tomorrow at the church, yes? Looking back on it, I still think that it’s absolute nonsense.”

I understood why he was angry.

He was worried if the [me right now] would die because of it. I couldn't not feel happy that he was angry about this for my sake. It must be laughable to feel happy about a topic related to life and death.

“Who committed this crime, and for what?”

Whodunnit.

Whydunnit.

Only the Whydunnit was meaningful in a case related to magecraft. My mentor had said this countless times. If that was the case, then, what about this case?

“...Find the mystery that you must solve.” I recalled what Zepia had said to us. “Does that refer to this mystery?”

“Ridiculous.”

My mentor shook his head. (x6)

“Though, this could be a challenge. One from the director of the Atlas Institute.”

Was that what it meant?

To find out the reason that I— the grave keeper Gray had died here. I did not know who the Gray who had died then was. In fact, I had not even seen the corpse. Was the person who died really me? Or was it someone who looked identical to me, who I had never seen?

A chill ran up my spine as if ice was seeping forth from my bone marrow (*TN: Oddly specific, but okay*). Though I had been involved in many difficult cases before, this time was different. After all, the mystery here was directly related to me.

“It’s not impossible,” my mentor nodded and said.

“If we don’t solve the mystery, we can never escape this place that resembles the past—Let’s call it the second cycle (二回目) for now—and can never return to the present. I guess that’s what the challenge entails.”

“...I think so as well.”

The mystery that we needed to solve.

The puzzle that the director of the Atlas Institute had given us.

Though I didn’t know why the village would be empty, one of the reasons must be related to this mystery. Perhaps it was even related to why Dr. Heartless contacted Zepia in the first place.

“Alright, I accept. After all, I can’t exactly refuse.”

“Um, yes!”

Hearing my mentor’s words, I nodded vigorously.

“Where should we start investigating from, then?”

“As for that... According to what happened in the past, I will meet again with Bersac at dusk. Let’s first list out the events that happened in this event.”

My mentor took his notebook out from his pocket and started writing fluidly with an ink pen.

“There is another important detail about the past,” I added in a small voice as I watched him. “On the third day after you and Miss Reines arrived in this village, which is to say this afternoon, I decided to follow you.” I felt my face heat up because of embarrassment.

Back then, I hated talking to my mentor with this face.

After that, out of guilt for accidentally touching on my trauma, he told me his goal.—When he was young and immature, he had attended a war somewhere, and had made irreparable mistakes. Though he could never make up for them, he was still a fool. But

he wanted to prove that the people (*TN: yep, people, not person*) with whom he was involved with were noble and deserved praise. That was the reason why he wanted to borrow the strength of the grave keepers of Blackmore.

To be honest, at the start, I had not understood what he was talking about at all.

Forget Holy Grail Wars, I didn't even have a grasp on the concept of magecraft back then. I probably wouldn't have understood what he said even if he took the time to explain to me.

However, his intent (alternatively, will? Emotion?) reached me.

For the first time in my life, I felt this kind of enthusiasm.

And like that, I had said that I could accept his commission if he needed a grave keeper, words that were unbelievable even to myself back then. I never considered how I was to convince my mother or Bersac to let me leave. I did not understand why I committed to it to such a degree.

But, I'm sure that many people have experienced something that suddenly changed their lives. If he could do this much for someone else's sake, I really couldn't stop myself from wanting to help him.

However, we had made a promise.

—“I hope... you can continue hating my face.”

“...Well, that was a thing, yes. (*TN: this sounds so weird and I don't know how to fix it*)”

As he said that, he smiled somewhat.

Our connection started there. Not when we first met, but when we shared the mistakes we had made.

My mentor continued to take notes.

It went like this.

Day 1, Morning: Lord El-Melloi II and Reines depart from London.

Day 1, Afternoon: Lord El-Melloi II and Reines meet Bersac and arrive at the village.

Day 1, Evening: Lord El-Melloi II and Reines visit the church and spend the night at the lodge.

Day 2, Morning: Lord El-Melloi II and Reines tour the village and the graveyard.

Day 2, Afternoon: Lord El-Melloi II and Reines meet with Bersac.

Day 2, Evening: Lord El-Melloi II talks with Bersac.

Day 3, Early Morning: Lord El-Melloi II asks Reines to return to London.

Day 3, Afternoon: Gray accepts Lord El-Melloi II's invitation.

Day 3, Evening: Bersac talks to Lord El-Melloi II.

Day 4, Morning: The corpse of the false Gray is discovered.

Day 4, Morning: Lord El-Melloi and Gray leave the village together.

“...Yes.”

My mentor put a finger on his notes and nodded.

“Though it might leave out some details about who we met or what we talked about, it should be a decent summary of what we did back then.”

“...It should be accurate.”

It matched up with my memory and what Reines had said.

Basically, Reines had been with my mentor all the way up to the morning of the third day. That period of time probably took up around seventy percent of the entire trip.

“We have no choice but to take a different route than we did before,” my mentor said.

“Should we go to the swamp?”

“No, that would break the taboo. Though we could ignore it depending on the situation, it is very possible that there is some sort of a defense mechanism there. If Flat and Svin were here, perhaps we could do something about it, but it's hard to say with my abilities.”

Indeed, if that was not the case, my mentor would probably have investigated it long ago. “What about Zepia, then?”

“Oh, I went to look for him as soon as I came to my senses.”

“—.”

I was suddenly speechless.

“Sir.”

My voice carried a tinge of anger. I walked up to him and raised my head to stare at him.

“G-Gray.”

I raised my fist as I stood in front of my mentor, who looked slightly scared. I gave the collarbone of his expensive suit a light punch.

“Please don’t do anything dangerous when I’m not around.”

“I-I’m sorry. It’s, just that...” my mentor said indistinctly. His gaze wandered for a bit before he closed his eyes and bowed his head in defeat. “I’m sorry. I just don’t have the courage to meet a version of you who I don’t know.”

“.....”

How dare he. (TN: Pretty sure the original was “狡猾, zurui”, but that translates to “cunning”, which just doesn’t make sense in English.)

How dare he do this. He didn’t know at all how worried I was just then. I could not help but give him a few more punches, though even I could not believe that I could do something like that. How many times must this person end up making me cry before he learns to stop? I bent down.

“...I ...forgive you.”

It took a lot of effort to get those words out of my mouth.

“Thank you.”

“...So, what happened with Zepia?”

“He wasn’t there. I haven’t seen him since the third day, so I don’t know if he originally left or if it was just because of the special conditions of the second cycle. I heard that a merchant was arriving today, so most of the villagers go to the square to kill time,” my mentor said, as he checked over his notes once again.

That was right.

Father Fernando and Sister Illumia had left for this reason. Perhaps my mother had left for the square as well after praying to the Black Madonna.

For that reason, I had had the opportunity to talk to my mentor in the past. “Alright, it’s settled,” my mentor concluded.

“Let’s go investigate that church again, Gray.”

~Part 3~

Though it was early summer, it was still chilly inside the empty church.

The church was surprisingly large, considering the size of the village. Though I had never been properly trained in controlling magical energy, this place seemed incredibly peaceful to me. I had been calmed by this place countless times. It was as if it was separated from the rest of the world.

“Just as I remember, no one is here,” my mentor mumbled after looking around.

“People say that this place is so small there isn’t even a person who knows how to steal things. So nobody really locks their doors.”

“...I see. That makes it more convenient for us.”

He walked past the pews, looked up at the stained glass, and examined the altar once more. He even carefully checked the sacramental bread that had been laid out on a plate. The next thing to investigate was naturally the Black Madonna statue, in the furthest end of the church.

“It’s been bothering me for a while, but I never got the chance to ask. This church hasn’t always been managed by Father Fernando, has it?”

“...Yes, Father Fernando only got dispatched here a couple of years ago. Sister Illumia arrived even later, around last year.”

“Hm. So the two of them have different attitudes toward you than the villagers?”

“...Yes.”

That was why Father Fernando did not show much interest in my face.

He didn’t like it or dislike it, he just acted like nothing was special about it. Though he lived alongside the villagers day and night, he was still an outsider to them, and would be dispatched somewhere else perhaps a decade later to fulfill his duty. This village

would probably fade to the back of his mind as a strange, isolated village in the mountains.

“That means that it wasn’t the church that created the statue but that the church was built around the previously-existing Black Madonna. It is fairly common to see a compromise between the local religion and the central system of beliefs but... No, since the Atlas Institute is involved, shouldn’t there be more to this than the Holy Church?”

My mentor put a hand to his chin and narrowed his eyes.

I felt somewhat calmer watching him sink into deep thought as he usually did when faced with something bothersome. Perhaps it was a weird side effect of being alone a while ago. But I felt as if I didn’t get my act together, my mentor would probably decide to go back to sleep (???).

“Either way, let’s investigate before the people return.”

As he said it, he glanced toward the Black Madonna.

First, he backed away a couple of steps to look at the entire statue, then, he took out his magnifying glass to examine it in detail. After that, he took out a bit of reagent from his pocket. He probably always carried these things with him (*TN: Yes, Lord I'm-not-a-detective El-Melloi II, who carries a collection of investigation equipment around the place. Also, he has like, a pack of cigars, a folding knife, some reagent, a magnifying glass, and some strange powder just hidden in his pockets 24/7. How big are this guy's pockets?*). He carefully brushed some dust off of the statue and into the reagent, watching it change color.

“It appears that it’s under the influence of some sort of spell. However... It doesn’t originate from the statue itself. If I were to describe it, it would be something like a relay point.”

As he said that, he took out a thin golden chain. The amethyst pendants on it clanked together, forming an arc.

“This is, dowsing, right?”

It was a very primitive form of magecraft that I had learned about in class before. Apparently, it could be used for searching and investigation, and was used even outside of magecraft to look for underground reservoirs or oil.

“I have the same things I carried on me back then. I didn’t think that you would come, and so I ended up not being able to use it.”

My mentor shrugged.

That was to say, he originally planned on investigating the church as well. Then, he had come across me by accident, as I wanted to avoid the traveling merchants. I felt slightly embarrassed as I remembered how I once thought that it was fate that led us to meet there. But I would let that shameful thought be a secret forever. My mentor would most likely not notice anyway. ...At most, I would just tell Reines.

My mentor had stared at it for the space of a few breaths, checking the arc made by the amethysts.

“This way,” my mentor said, turning around.

It was behind the Black Madonna. My mentor squeezed himself into the crack there and then immediately dusted himself off. The stone normal-looking stone slab there did not change in any way, no matter if we pushed or knocked on it. (*TN: I scanned the text a couple of times and found no earlier reference to that stone slab, so if you’re confused, you’re just as confused as I am.*)

“...There’s nothing there.”

“Well, I suppose it’s not that easy.”

After thinking for a while, my mentor let the pendant dangle from his fingers again.

For some reason, the chain wrapped around his pale fingers reminded me of a pair of snakes.

This time, it took a lot longer.

My mentor’s eyes remained closed, and the pendant stayed still.

“What is it?”

“It’s a matter of imagination,” he answered.

“Seeking magecraft(?) is connected to the conscious and unconscious perception of information by the practitioner. Earlier, I had imagined the church as a two-dimensional space, but now...”

As he said that, one part of the amethyst pendant started swaying unnaturally.

“It should be here.”

My mentor walked out of the church and opened the side door.

After we walked down the ancient staircase and turned into the corridor, we arrived at the storage room that contained wine and other miscellaneous items. Since it was necessary to have bread and wine for the Holy Communion, it was only normal to have them stored here.

“Is there anything special here?”

“...So it’s over there.”

The crystal shook in my mentor’s hand. He compared it to what it had been acting like for a moment before pushing the shelf of wine aside and lifting the carpet underneath it. The shelf was surprisingly light, probably because there were plenty of empty bottles.

My mentor stared at the unassuming floor.

“This basement is directly underneath that church.”

Then, he turned his gaze upward to look at the ceiling.

“That statue could originally be placed elsewhere.”

“Can this sort of thing be moved around randomly?”

“Though it depends on what exact type of spell is being used, in most situations, it probably isn’t a problem to move the sacred icon around slightly. In some places, there even is magecraft directly used to transport gods.”

As he said that, my mentor felt the floor again. Then, he pressed down with some force. This time, the floor tilted over to the side.

“...A staircase?”

An empty cavern and a patchy staircase appeared at the base of the slanted floor.

*

The area around the traveling merchants were very busy.

Though the visitors consisted of only two small trucks and the six people inside them, it was a once-in-a-month celebration for the villagers. The entrance to the village was like a marketplace, and the population of nearly a hundred had all gathered here.

The children were laughing, the adults were picking out goods, while the elderly looked upon them from a distance. The traveling merchants seemed to also be putting on a small performance for their entertainment. Though, this band of merchants also served a function, unbeknownst to most of the villagers. One of the merchants cut through the crowd of people enjoying the sound of a cheap violin and had a short conversation with some of the villagers.

“Father Fernando.”

“Oh, Mr. Bersac is here as well.”

“My radio is broken, so I came to buy some parts to repair it. The general store is also out of stock.”

“Haha, that must be hard work. I heard that there’ll even be dances today.”

“I’m not a fan of that sort of event, so I plan on heading home to rest.”

“Well, that is unfortunate.”

“Oh, right, has that kid, Gray, come here?”

“No, I only met her briefly at the entrance to the church.”

“Is that so? I’ll see you later, then.”

After he said that coldly, he left after exchanging pleasantries with a couple more people.

“Hello, Sister Illumia.”

“Ah, hello.”

“I just saw you over there talking with the merchants, did you order something?”

“No, a friend from the city sent me a letter.”

“Oh, how enviable it is to have someone to write to. An old man like me only knows about the goings-on in the village.”

“This is a good village, though? It should be me who finds it enviable.”

“Hahaha. It’s really nice to hear that from you, Sister Illumia. After all, this is the only place I know, so I’d better believe that this is the best place in the world until the day I die.”

“Well, that’s definitely true.”

After saying goodbye to the old man who ran the general store, Sister Illumia took out the letter she just received and frowned.

“...Ah, has it come,” she muttered to herself.

There was another.

The oldest person in the village, whom the villagers called “Granny” out of respect.

According to the people in the village, she was over a hundred years old. She looked abnormally shriveled as she stood there, wrapped up in traditional garments. She was

almost like a puppet, with layers of wrinkles on her face that almost concealed her facial features.

At that moment, she opened her mouth, with lips that resembled a dead leaf. “There is a sound coming from underground.”

“From underground, you say?”

“Yes. A very distant sound. I remember hearing it once when I was a child. Though it was just that once, I will never forget what it sounded like.”

The old woman’s voice was so low it almost hung down to the ground. It truly sounded like the voice from centuries ago.

“Gray has been completed so well.”

“...Yes she has, hasn’t she?”

The woman smiled blissfully.

It was like the smile of a bride who had waited decades to finally see her lover return. Her face, which was not outstanding in beauty, suddenly looked like a blooming flower.

“The day for that child to shine has finally come.”

It was Gray’s mother.

~Part 4~

As we descended the creaking staircase, I constantly checked my surroundings.

The dirt walls had not been properly fortified, and might even have been naturally formed. The slight moistness of the dirt added to the claustrophobic feeling that the narrow corridor gave me.

“Where is this...”

“Do you not know about this place?”

I nodded slightly in response to my mentor’s question.

“...It’s the first time I’ve been here.”

“I see,” my mentor muttered.

“Just in case, let’s first make sure we have proper ventilation.”

My mentor moved his fingers and chanted an incantation.

I felt a gentle breeze blow across my skin. It seemed that my mentor had used magecraft to control the air in the tunnel, letting fresh air in from the entrance.

I felt a bit of a strange feeling, and could not help but smile wryly.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s just that it’s rare to see you act like a mage.”

“Second-rate mages have their second-rate ways. Even in an age like this, where most things are easier and cheaper with science.”

My mentor raised his hand again somewhat indignantly. This time, it lit up with a faint light.

It was just about bright enough for us to see the path in front of us.

“There are footprints.”

The light in my mentor’s hand illuminated what was beneath our feet.

The ground was distinctly marked with countless footsteps. I groaned slightly(?) thinking about how many pilgrims must have walked this path throughout the many centuries this passageway had seen.

“Is this the true church? Did they build that one to hide this place?”

My heart was beating loudly.

It was the true nature of my village, something that I did not know of.

Should I really continue going forward, a voice whispered into my mind. Did I really want to know the reason why a corpse that looked identical to me would appear?

How terrifying.

I thought I was fully prepared for it, but my brain had not accepted it.

Did this sort of a tunnel really exist in my world? Was this a product of Zepia’s meddling? Random ideas kept popping up in my head.

Still, I was unable to stop in my tracks. I clutched my chest and moved forward one step at a time.

“In the past, the underground was considered part of the underworld,” my mentor said as he walked.

How long was this tunnel? Along the way, it twisted and turned, sometimes rose, and sometimes fell. I had completely lost my sense of direction. Though it felt as if we were tens of meters under the ground, I would totally have accepted it if it turned out we were actually quite close to the surface.

“Regardless of what they call the underworld, it is a place connected to reality, to which one can travel to if they so wish to.”

I remembered that Reines had talked about something similar before.

Yes, we were now walking towards death. Suddenly, I froze.

“Are there spirits?”

“N-No.”

I shook my head and looked to the tunnel in front of us. “There’s... Nothing at all.” I could feel the presence of spirits anywhere I went.

On this earth, hardly any places had not seen death. Places that had not seen some sort of ancient thing breathe it's dying sighs were even rarer. The reason why I sometimes felt terrified was the concentration. The sort of spirits that were dead yet still carried a desire to live and ravage that was so unmistakably [alive] was what made me uncontrollably scared.

This contradiction between the living and the dead was frightening.

But here, it was strange.

It wasn’t just the lack of spirits, I couldn’t even sense a ripple of magical energy.

Since there were so many footprints here, at least some sort of residual will should have lingered here. Even if they were not powerful enough to perceive as language, they should be noticeable. And yet, there was nothing but an empty void in front of us.

Suddenly, the narrow tunnel widened.

I could feel my mentor freeze as the astonishingly large space opened up without warning.

It took all my restraint to stop myself from crying out.

Many skeletons were scattered in that large space.

It was not just one or two sets. There were dozens upon dozens of skeletons there, and they filled up my entire line of sight. The floor was so cluttered with them there was no place to put my feet.

“Blackmore Graveyard,” my mentor mumbled.

He swallowed, slowly turned to look around the room, and knelt down. As he looked at the bones which covered the room like a blanket of flowers, he spoke in a stunned voice.

“What if... the true Blackmore Graveyard did not exist above ground... but was here?”

“...?”

“No, is this even the graveyard at all? The ground under the Clock Tower is also especially... Because that place is fundamentally different from the surface world, and contains crystallized remnants of Mystery... If that’s the case, is this place...”

Along with my mentor’s muttered words, something in the room changed.

The bones shook.

They floated into the air as if they were being tugged on by invisible strings and pieced together.

Just like that, skeletal soldiers stood up one by one. And in their hands, they carried gleaming weapons made of bone. Some of them held swords, others held spears, or even bows. From their equipment, it seemed that they were ancient soldiers.

And they were devouring magical energy.

A bone soldier turned to us. Just as its sword came slashing down, my body moved of its own accord.

“—Sir, get out of the way!”

Though a sliver of uneasiness flashed through my mind, Add still changed shape when I released him from the hook at my right shoulder.

It spun like a Rubik's cube and turned into a scythe in an instant, blocking the blade.

The force of attack was so strong I felt my arm go numb, and I widened my eyes in surprise.

Not only that, the rest of the bone soldiers charged toward us.

They weren't... spirits?

I was surprised by how they appeared to be.

Compared to how strong they were, they severely lacked attachments and wrath. Spirits which had attachments to the world could be called manifestations of emotion. It would probably be right to say that a grave keeper's job was to quell these emotions.

It was basically impossible for this kind of spirit to exist. If that was the case, what were the things I was facing against?

"Is the Spirit Origin (alternatively, Saint Graph or Spiritual Foundation, 靈基, *reiki*)... insufficient?" My mentor mumbled.

"...What?"

"I'm afraid they're different from regular spirits. It seems to be that they can only barely function due to magical energy, taken from the surroundings, that has been inserted into records and uses skeletons as a medium (this part sounds off and also makes no logical sense).Ahh, it's almost like a failed Servant."

Hearing my mentor's words, I swallowed.

If that was the case, I could understand their unusual abilities. The speed of a wild beast and the refined movements full of the intent to kill. I see, it was more accurate to describe them as failed Servants than a mage's familiars.

At basically the same time, I noticed it.

There was someone else there. A human figure whose appearance was clearly different was watching us from behind the droves of skeletal soldiers.

“Huh...?”

I stared back at that figure.

That young woman.

Leading the crows of shadow Servants with the stature of a queen.

I could not see her face because of the metal bask they wore over her face. However, her figure was all too familiar. It was the tragic outcome that I had seen reflected countless times, which I wished would shatter like the mirror I saw it in. It was the tragic end of a girl from the countryside, who was made to imitate a great hero of the past.



[Why, are you here?]

There was no sound.

And yet, I sensed that she had asked me this.

[The time is not ripe, the once and future king has not yet awoken. You are above the earth, and I am below. All we must do is wait.]

I did not answer her question.

There wasn't a way I could answer it.

What if...

A question swirled into existence in my mind.

What if the one who died back then was...

My doubt rose like a dark cloud, befogging my thoughts. The “Me” that had died there. However, before I could voice my question—

[Leave.]

Just like that, the masked young woman turned around and started to walk deeper into the tunnel.

“Wait!”

I wanted to stand up.

To stop me from doing so, the bone soldiers gathered. One or two of them were fine, but the scythe was disadvantageous against tens of them.

—Then I'll use the hammer!

“Add, remove first stage restraints!” I raised the scythe over my head, poured magical energy into it, and recited the words to transform my weapon. However, instead of changing shape, I received a weak whisper in response.

“Sorry... Gray...”

“Add?”

The joy that I felt from hearing the box’s voice was suddenly stamped out by uneasiness.

Because its voice was the sound of something that forced itself to do something impossible.

“Add?!”

No response came.

The weapon remained as a scythe.

Add, who had been silent previously, had completely stopped responding.

“Gray!”

“—!”

Hearing my mentor’s shout, I reflexively dodged the blade of a bone soldier, but my consciousness was still frozen. I could not understand what had happened at all. Actually, part of me knew what happened, but the rest of me refused to accept it.

My knees went weak.

The “Strengthening” of my body had not kept up. Even my ability to absorb the energy around me had fallen to about half of its usual level. Moreover, this place was already lacking in mana, so I wasn’t much different from regular mages in this state—!

“...Gray!”

My mentor's right hand shook.

He used the magical energy that he had barely held in place to shoot out weak magical bullets.

His attacks could only deter the soldiers briefly at best. Though they were failures, they were still failed Servants.

My mentor's magecraft alone could not do much damage to them. Though this was the time for me to protect him, I didn't even have the strength to stand up.

“Add! Add! Add...” It didn't work.

There was no response.

The truth of that burned at my heart like the fires of hell. It cut into me, sharper than a knife blade and deeper than an arrow. The thought that this object which had accompanied me for so long had disappeared crushed my spirit more than any physical attack could.

“Add! Please, Add!” I hugged the scythe tightly and cried. In that instant, I forgot about everything that was happening and cried like a child. “Please, wake up!”

Suddenly, the giant scythe shone with a blinding light.

~Part 5~

A letter fluttered through the church.

It was the letter that had been delivered by the merchant just then. Sister Illumia had sauntered in, brandishing it.

“...You understand this, don’t you?” She asked, raising her chin.

“I understand.”

Father Fernando nodded.

He had been informed of this possibility all the way back when he had just arrived. However, he never thought that it would actually happen while he was here. He had thought that this ancient custom wouldn’t bear any fruit until it rotted to the core.

Ah, how wrong he had been.

He knew pretty well, deep down. He had just been avoiding it until now.

The girl had already begun her transformation when he was assigned here. The chances that that had happened were not ignorable. Perhaps you could even say that it was the highest possibility in centuries.

“If the time is ripe, I shall be the one to kill the blessed child of this land.”

Father Fernando walked forward along with the nun as he made a cross at his chest.

“Just like how our forefathers had guided that powerful Dead Apostle named Blackmore into the lands of rest.”

After a while, the two of them stopped.

In the underground cellar, a wine bottle had fallen to the floor, and the liquid seeping out of it was dripping into the gaping hole between the floorboards.

“Ahhh, sure enough...”

The priest covered his face with his hands.

“It’s exactly like what that guy named Heartless said.”

*

After he returned to his hut, Bersac looked up unexpectedly.

He heard a raven’s cry.

“...Nevermore.”

The birds of ill omen that were said to transport should.

He had spent his life with these birds. Perhaps he would even hear these calls as he died, he once thought, just like all his ancestors, who had lived out their entire lives meaninglessly after handing the role of the grave keeper to their successors.

That would be enough, he once thought.

Perhaps it had fallen behind the times, but Bersac used to be fond of this village which seemed to have been frozen in time. He had thought so until that girl began her transformation. Bersac had noticed that the call of the ravens were different.

“...Gray.”

He pronounced the name through parched lips and with a dry voice. Though he wanted to restrain it, it still leaked out. “I really don’t want to meet you tonight.”

Bersac Blackmore slowly picked up the giant axe that leaned on the wall of the hut.

♦ 転章 ♦
-Epilogue-



Causes and effects entangle.

Timelines converge.

Though most people cannot perceive it, they affected each other like a mass of invisible strings. Everyone follows their own path, each with their own will. They grow old and die because of a combination of causation and time.

—And yet, here, someone was gazing at these invisible strings.

*

He did not know what time it was.

Though his vision told him that he was in the dark, that might not actually be the case. In a room so quiet that he even wondered whether time was flowing in it or not, he made a sound like a zombie and raised his hands into the air.

“No~ That’s wrong, Professor! Zombies need to use bug glue, and the rubber band needs a fishing rod...”

“...Hello, you’re awake, aren’t you,” someone said.

The sound of that made the young man, who had still been asleep, bolt upright. He rubbed his eyes and searched his mind for a couple of seconds for the name of the caped man before him.

“Ah, right! I don’t know you, do I?”

“Hm. I have never introduced myself to you in my memory, so the answer to that question is yes,” said the man, nodding. “I didn’t know that you could interfere with the spell from that place. The Atlas Institute’s structure is completely different from the Clock Tower’s, after all. Though the topic at hand is hardly related to the skill of the mage, it’s undoubtedly beyond the normal realm of knowledge. Who are you? (TN: A *more accurate translation, meaning-wise, might be ‘who the hell are you’, but I can’t find a politer version of that*)”

“I’m Flat Escardos, and this is Le Chien-kun!”

“Oi, is this the correct time to do casual introductions!? Also, what happened to my name!”

The curly-haired boy behind him let out a roar of frustration.

“There’s no need to be like that, didn’t Professor say that greetings are the basics of etiquette? Also, if it wasn’t for Le-Chien-kun’s supply of magical energy, I wouldn’t have been able to pull off that kind of intervention!”

“I never gave you permission to do that! You just took my magical energy and did whatever you wanted with it! Don’t put it as if I was also involved in this!”

“I see, so it’s the rumored El-Melloi classroom,” the man concluded, watching the arguing teenagers.

“The two of you weren’t in the village then, so you are incompatible for the reenactment. My sincerest apologies, but I suggest that the two of you acknowledge this fact.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means exactly what I said it meant.”

As he said that, he turned around to look at the floating crystal ball by his side. The sphere reflected a dim scene, which the man had just been looking at.

Seeing the two blurry silhouettes there, Flat’s eyes widened.

“Professor! Gray?!”

“...Though, I never imagined that this would happen. Though I had prepared many scripts and endured many endings, I never predicted that such a scene would unfold.”

The man slowly narrowed his eyes.

“The mystery I have presented is extremely simple. If all goes according to plan, they will solve that mystery. They’ll investigate the girl that died there, why she died, and

why at that time. They'll also advance towards the ancient mystery buried in the underground graveyard. This is a common development in a detective novel. As long as the characters are assigned according to their specs(*TN: capabilities? The original used the word Spec and I am confused*), they'll inevitably reach there one day. Though, that has nothing to do with whether they will succeed, as there is a rather high possibility that they will perish in the process," said the alchemist.

"Oh yes, it could also be because of you. Just in case, you were wondering, I'm not blaming you for anything. It is inevitable that a play will change due to the accidents caused by the stage or the actors, and the audience's reaction will only change with it. However, a play without incidents, though perfect, is completely lifeless. A show acted by living creatures and for living creatures should at least be alive."

What he said was completely incomprehensible.

Those words were already complete in that man's mind. They were not especially woven for others to hear, and there was no way for someone to perceive what it actually meant. It was unlikely that anyone who could understand what that man said would appear even in the next couple of centuries.

"Though... Ah... Exceptions, how nostalgic." It was the voice of someone who had gotten carried away in something enchanting.

No matter when it was, Zepia Eltnam Atasia was always gazing at [that].

*

The light emitting from Add dissipated quickly.

I was still frozen in place.

My mentor also held his breath because of what he saw. The figure that had suddenly appeared in front of us had that sort of an impact.

It was a knight in shining silver armor, almost like he was pulled straight from a fairy tale—

"...Oi."

The knight raised his sword and sighed.

The blade flashed through the air.

The strike was fast and ferocious, almost like the claws of a beast.

Slashes of silver streaked through the darkness and knocked down the bone soldiers that had charged over in an instant.

“What a capricious guy. What was that, a forced summoning? There has to be some limit to how rude a person can be. Is that the reason why this spiritual core of mine is incomplete?”

His figure was very blurry.

I suppose he was some sort of Servant-like spirit. However, different from the Faker who we had met before, he could not properly materialize. Both his armor and his skin looked as if they were surrounded by a heavy haze.

“You could have called any one of those other knights(nerds), why does it have to be someone like me, who thinks that Heroic Spirits should all just go to hell? I’m not a hardcore knight, neither am I one of those employees-of-the-month. (*TN: Not that he would have actually used that phrase, I just thought it conveyed the meaning best*) I only have the strength of about three of these guys. Though, if you’re putting me up against some sort of brain-dead giant, I could cut his head off with my silver tongue alone,” mumbled the knight as he took out the bone soldiers one by one with skillful strikes.

He was strong. Though he didn’t have the unnatural physical prowess of Faker, he still had an incredible amount of skill. It was the sort of ability that only someone who had had formal training for years and had fought countless battles would possess.

“Ah, wait, did I get something wrong. So you’re the one who summoned me. Your structure doesn’t allow you to manipulate magical energy, but you still did it. What a devoted guy.”

The knight lowered his head to look at the scythe in my hands— Add, who was still asleep.

“...Who... Are you?”

In response to my question he shrugged exaggeratedly. “Hihihihih! You’re asking who I am? Don’t be so mean, haven’t we been friends for ages, idiot Gray?”

Hearing that voice, I was stunned.

Because the one who said that sentence was not the sleeping Add, but the knight in front of me.

The knight raised one hand and patted his temples.

“Ow. I’ve slept for too long, so I’ve gotten a bit mixed up. I wasn’t always like this, but never mind. After all, there’s no need to be exactly like the original, and only natural to adapt to your surroundings as a human.”

The knight casually turned around and slashed with his sword, and more bone soldiers fell.

“And would you look at that, we look like we’re from the same generation. What a ridiculous turnout.”

As he said that, a strange feeling arose within me. It was a mixture of excitement, and a feeling of déjà vu (??).

The only friend I ever had in this village. The one who always teased me and had called me “Idiot Gray” countless times.

Why did I get reminded of that when I saw the knight in front of me? Perhaps it was because every movement and every sentence that he uttered made me feel an indescribable nostalgia.

“Either way, I suppose you should remember the name Kay for now.”

A smile appeared on the hazy face of the knight.

Then, I remembered a legend.

One of the oaths that I took in the Seal of Thirteen.

Sir Kay— The name of the adoptive brother of King Arthur.

Afterword

By Makoto Sanda

All humans will inevitably die one day.

Death is the endless abyss that everyone must witness at the end of their lives.

That is the way the word is defined. The “palace after death” is “a window for the present”, and so a grave is simply a tiny, artificial underworld.

The story has finally advanced to this point.

Gray’s hometown was mentioned as early as the first book. This chapter finally got close to the secrets behind the graveyard that was related to that legendary hero.

The concept of a grave is common across people, but they vary surprisingly depending on the culture. Obviously, differences in religion will affect them, but besides that, graves will change depending on the proximity of the graveyard, the concept of mourning, the location, whether there is a water source or not, or even the social hierarchy (*TN: pretty sure that sentence wasn’t structurally sound but you get what I’m trying to say here so I don’t care*). Even in the present, graves and funerals are some of the types of magecraft that people are most familiar with. Besides that, did the character that had a guest appearance in this book surprise anyone? There must be a bunch of people who read this and thought “Wait, isn’t that one of the twenty-seven ancestors...?”

For that reason, I’ll be going over some deeper and spoiler-heavy content, so allow me to make a separate section.

—SPOILERS— (*TN: For Tsukihime and stuff. I have not read/played Tsukihime. Oh and also all the brackets below, unless marked, were originally there in the text.*)

The director of the Atlas Institute, Zepia Eltnam Oberon (or Atasia), was originally one of the twenty-seven special vampires known as the Dead Apostle Ancestors in Tsukihime.

Though, as has been already touched on in earlier works like the drama CD that came with the volume of Chaldea ACE recently and the Bamboo Broom diaries, the universe in Fate is fundamentally different from the Tsukihime universe.

Speaking of that, it really was a big surprise... After all, Kinoko had already chosen all the authors for the spin-off works way before the first book of Case Files was finished. Now, time for a reenactment of what happened (all the lines of the authors have been completed).

Kinoko: Actually, the twenty-seven Ancestors didn't become the twenty-seven Ancestors in the Fate universe.

Authors:!!!!???? (All freeze, speechless)

Kinoko: Only the Tsukihime universe allows for them to become the twenty-seven Ancestors. On that note, doesn't Tsukihime not have the sort of extremely powerful familiars like Servants?

Sanda: What about CM-!?

Kinoko: That thing gets destroyed because of the destruction of the Human Order. Oh, also, Narita's Fake is different, because it's a special middle ground between the two.

Narita: O-Oh, uh, t-thanks...?

Kinoko: But Sanda'll have to pay attention for the Case Files. It's kind of a long story, but this part in Tsukihime R....

Sanda: Waitwaitwait! Kinoko, wait! Please first organize some notes about this for everyone!

Kinoko: Come on... so annoying. Speaking of which, this pizza's pretty good.

Higashide: Oh ho ho, either way, my work is already done, so take your time.

Sakurai (carefully): ...It also seems to not affect me at the moment, huh.

There probably hasn't been a day that shocked me that much since then. Ah, no, I do remember that...

If you read it along with the fourth book of *Fake*, you might be able to tell that there's something different between the two universes. Comparing world settings with Narita and others and playing spot-the-difference is as enjoyable as the experience the night before a cultural festival.

—END OF SPOILER—

We have finally entered the run-up to the finale.

For that reason, the theme of the story has changed slightly. At the beginning, I made sure that the cases could basically be viewed as free-standing stories, but starting from this book, all the stories will be based on previous ones. If you're purchasing *Case Files* books for the first time, please take note of this.

The *Case Files* of Lord El-Melloi, which I started writing during the fervor of the Type-Moon festival, is accelerating towards the Fifth Holy Grail War in *F/SN*. I hope to be able to catch up with it.

Besides that, I think many of you already know of the manga version of the *Case Files* that will be published on Young Ace. The author/illustrator is Azuma Tou. I was once enthralled by the art style of *Arashi no Hana Murakumo no Uta* (*TN: A manga, translates roughly to Flower of the Storm, Song of the Clouds*), so I was very surprised when I heard the announcement.

And finally, I would like to thank Sakamoto Mineji for illustrating this gloomier book in the *Case Files*, Miwa Kiyomune for helping me confirm many of the details in this book, Narita Ryohgo for supervising (*TN:?*) the lines for Flat, as well as Kinoko, Takeuchi, and all the workers from Type-Moon.

Of course, I also need to thank all of the people who have purchased this book.

The next book should be completed in the winter.

June 2017, while reading *In/Spectre* by Shirodaira Kyo and Katase Chashiba