

Chapter 72: The Perspective of Fissures

I do not own Fate/Stay Night and stuffs.

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When Shirou woke up, he immediately regretted it.

He could tell his body was healed to an extent, but he was neither at peak capacity, nor fully rested.

“You’re up.”

Which only made matters worse when he heard his Servant greet him politely to the side.

Time be damned, he was in no condition or mood to welcome the world right now. Much less what the world would likely throw at him in the next few hours.

... Wait.

“Saber.” He slowly sat himself up with some effort and looked around. He was in his room and nothing appeared amiss. The clock by his futon said it was a little past noon.

“How do you feel?” His loyal Servant knelt by his side, ever at the ready and her face as stoic as expected given the circumstances.

“Like I just tried to take on an Apostle Ancestor by myself.” His dry sense of humor barely worked if the slight twitch in his Servant’s lips was any indication.

“I see. Given the circumstances, it’s expected that you feel at least that much. You are as reckless as some of my knights at times, and I do not mean that in any endearing fashion.”

“You really do have to tell me what exactly they’ve done one of these days so I can finally set a bar to compare myself to,” He gave her a dry stare.

“I would, but I am frankly terrified you will simply try to surpass it at some point.” His Servant matched his accusation with her own.

“You say that, but I’m equally as terrified that the nonsense I’ve done still doesn’t equate to some of these supposed suicidal endeavors the other Knights of the Round Table have taken and accomplished on thoughtless whims. Dragons and armies I understand, but I genuinely can’t tell if Apostle Ancestors really have fallen that far since your time or if the people under your command were just shamelessly insane.”

Saber had the decency to look away with a faint blush on her cheeks. "... To be fair, you would not be the first."

He snorted in amusement before grimacing at the pain in his chest. Looking down, he saw that he was wrapped up to some degree, primarily around his heart.

"Any issues?" She asked, skirting around the real question that was bound to be asked eventually.

"I can breathe." His lame reply didn't help matters. "Any problems after Caster got the salt crystals out? Lingering curses? High blood pressure?"

"You're the last person to ask about raising blood pressure." Saber gave him a look. "But surprisingly no. In fact Caster requested to keep the shards for experimentation. She was taken aback by their purity and structure."

"That so? Makes sense. That vampire I fought in Fina, his First Mate if I remember correctly, was rather obsessed about that sort of thing. Her purification mysteries and rites were no joke. She could actually hold off Kiritsugu's curses to a degree."

"An Apostle specializing in purification rites of all things? You truly do attract the most bizarre attention."

He wouldn't be surprised if his unexpected opponent last night was Fina's ace against other Ancestors. "Now if only said bizarre attention would stop trying to kill and or use me like some oblivious pawn we could finally get somewhere," He paused as a thought came to mind. "What are the odds that Caster is willing to help make a bounded field to do that?"

"About as likely as her giving into her desires to kill you the moment you demand another nigh impossible chore." Her flat reply came without any hesitation or second thoughts in the slightest.

Shirou had the decency to break out into a small cold sweat, knowing that he had been unfair to Luvia's Servant with the amount of requests he had been making of her ever since they joined forces. "... I'll put the idea on the shelf for a bit then and see if I can find an alternative. Maybe ask Rin first."

"As you should."

He had trouble getting on his feet.

He had lost an absurd amount of blood last night. More than enough to kill him if he didn't down the supplements of Saber's blood as though he was a drug addict to stimulate his healing during the ordeal.

"You should lay down." Saber supported him as he finally managed to get up. "You clearly need more time to rest."

"I can do that in the living room." He dismissed her suggestion instantly.

"You're not cooking anything in that state." His Servant firmly put her food down on the matter before anyone brought it up.

"... I was just going to make some tea." The fact that he avoided eye contact didn't help his situation.

"Sakura will make you tea. You are going to rest in the livingroom." He was corrected without any leeway.

"Fine." The Tenth Apostle Ancestor pouted like a petulant child as they opened the bedroom door...

BRIGHT.

LIGHT.

OXYGEN. NITROGEN. WOOD.

*IRONGLASSSULFURGRASRENOVATIONSTENYEARSOLDSEVENHUNDREDTHOUSANDFI
VEUNDREDEIGHTYKILOGRAMSDIRTCOMPACTEDREPLACEDREAVED-*

"HNGH?!"

"Shirou?" Saber flattered as her partner suddenly went rigid before his entire body started to shake wildly and stumbled back as though he had just been assaulted.

"W-wait. Hold on." He didn't care that he had accidentally bitten his tongue talking with his serrated teeth as he spoke. He couldn't tell either. The sudden deluge of information and overwhelming exposure to natural light had punched him in the face like a pair of heavyweight punches in both his eyes.

His skull was overloading to the point that he felt something momentarily pop, and he had been utterly unprepared for it. The pain was so bad he almost blacked out again, and the sensation of something familiar running down his nose didn't help matters either.

His pure eyes had triggered the second he had stepped outside. No, the second he had looked outside.

Damn it. He really had gone overboard.

“Shirou, what happened?” Saber asked again. “Your nose is bleeding.”

“Might have overdid a few more things than I thought during the fight. Not certain yet, but... I *think* my eyes are photophobic now. The second I looked outside, the natural light made them go out of control. Hold on.”

Using a hand to rub his eyes while he mustered the strength to try and control his circuits, he managed to return his sight to normal again and looked up with a heavy sigh.

A quick glance outside sent a pang through his head like a spike. His eyes didn't activate this time, but he felt his control on them weaken momentarily.

Wonderful, another literal headache to deal with.

“Yeah, definitely natural light triggered. Best to put down the blinds when we get to the main room.”

“... Right.” Clearly Saber had thoughts on the matter that she decided to not voice at that moment. “Anything else amiss in particular?”

“Let me check.” Pushing past his headache, Shirou did a full self diagnostic with his magecraft. Other than the obvious damage he was still recovering from, and his eyes deciding to be even more of a pain than normal, nothing else seemed amiss. His body wasn't falling apart or rapidly aging being exposed to the outside. His blood wasn't hungering for mana or external sustenance more than usual. “No. Everything looks good so far. Just my eyes for now.”

“Good. The last thing we need is for your habit of producing more concerns for everyone to kick in again at this stage.”

“Don't need to tell me twice. I'm tired of it too.” Shirou couldn't help but wonder if this was what it was like having an overbearing mother... or a mother at all for that matter.

Crunch.

“Urk?!” He flinched as Saber's grip on his shoulder tightened to the point that her fingers were digging into his joint to the point of dislocating his arm. “S-Saber?”

“I’m sorry Master. I couldn’t help it. My instincts informed me you were about to fall, so I had to correct my hold on you just now.” She was blatantly unapologetic for her actions.

“N-no problem. It happens.” He grimaced as the pressure lightened a moment later and he felt his bones realign themselves into place.

“Shirou? Saber?” Upon entering the living room, Sakura and Rin turned to greet them, having been there already.

“Sakura, can you prepare some tea? Rin, the blinds for the windows, if you would please.” Saber politely listed out her requests as she half carried Shirou to the futon of the room and lowered him.

“The blinds?” Rin frowned in confusion.

“Eyes are photosensitive now.” Shirou rubbed his temple to reduce the minor headache he had.

“Seriously?”

“I know. Yes. They are. Add it to the list.” He really wasn’t in the mood for everyone to comment on his poor luck right now.

Rin gave him a flat stare before getting up to help out. “So help me Shirou. At this rate I won’t even be able to help you at all or else I’ll be arrested for Dead Apostle Research.”

“Well at least you’d go out being one of the few to do so on an Ancestor.”

“That’s not funny. I’m serious. You know how shallow the nobles at the Association are. They’ll look for any excuse they can to tear us to bits the moment they smell blood in the water. It’s only because you’ve been stabbing pretty much everyone that’s gotten close that they’re too occupied tearing each other to bits to focus on us for now.” With a few pulls and twists from the dated blinds, the room was partially shaded, allowing Shirou to sigh in relief and be able to see without squinting.

“I know, I’m just...” Shirou let out a tired sigh as he leaned back and stared at the ceiling and tried to organize his thoughts.

No. Prioritize. Now wasn’t the time to relax. Not just yet.

He rested a hand on the table in front of him and began to tap a finger on it.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

His mana flowed into the formalcraft seal and down into the property, reading each and every detail from the bounded fields of his home.

It only took him a few seconds to read the details he wanted to know the most.

Might as well rip the bandaid off and stop skirting around the issue.

“Rin. Sakura. Saber. Can you care to tell me where everyone else is at the moment? And how is it related to why you took Avalon from my body?”

Judging from the looks he saw on the girls’ faces, he could tell it was going to be another one of those days.

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“This is quite the repository of damning evidence, Lord El Melloi II.”

Waver strongly resisted the urge to scoff or roll his eyes.

Instead he glanced to the side, where Caster was operating on Marjatta Edelfelt alongside Illyasviel Einzbern.

All within the caverns underneath Mt. Enzo. Specifically in front of the Greater Grail system.

Sitting at the table fabricated by Caster, Waver waved off the woman’s accusation. “Given the circumstances, are you truly surprised by the contents by this point? You have already heard what I have had to say and pieced together what I haven’t. Whatever you are reading should only be more of the same at this point.”

The documents they were referring to were ones that Marjatta had in her clutches in her mad state, her mind addled by Irisviel’s intake of Fina’s mana in one go and agitating the Grail system, as she broke out of her room with the sole intent to give to the Vice Director.

Documents that Shirou had given to Luvia over a week ago that outlined every and anything he had done regarding his mysteries and his plots to manage the Grail War.

Which included his management and experiments on his condition as a pseudo Dead Apostle.

Needless to say, Luvia was horrified upon recognition of what her sister had done.

More so when she was forced to explain to the others what her sister was screaming about delivering to the Vice Director. She had put in a considerable effort to hide and secure the documents to prevent them from being found.

However she had forgotten that, as with most little sisters, Marjatta had long developed a means to invade her elder sibling's privacy when the mood suited her. More so when she was left locked in the room they currently shared for days on end with little to do except stew in the instability that the Witch had imposed onto her psyche.

By the end of her explanation, Illya genuinely looked ready to unleash Berserker on both sisters right then and there.

It probably would have happened too if Marjatta didn't show signs of literally exploding right then and there.

The sudden influx of mana that Irisviel had taken from fina was substantial. It was more than enough to make Illya and Sakura dizzy and uncomfortable, but Marjatta was nowhere near as well put together as a Lesser Grail as they were. Her awakened Origin of Burst perpetually put the mana in her body in a state of disharmony to both contain and channel levels of mana that she would have no hope of surviving under conventional circumstances.

It was only after, much to almost everyone's genuine shock, Luvia kowtowed before everyone, all but begging for her sister's life while apologizing profusely for her oversight, and proclaiming the Edelfelt's debt for their leniency.

Sakura, like Illya, clearly wanted to kill Luvia on the spot for allowing even more of Shirou's secrets to escape, in physical form no less.

Rin, more of a magus than her sister, admittedly was torn between her anger and her desire to finally and firmly have Luvia and her family's resources under her thumb.

Whatever decision they would have come to was taken out of their hands, when the Vice Director took the documents out of Marjatta and took any control of the situation into her own.

Caster would only heal Shirou up to the point where he would no longer require immediate attention before addressing Marjatta.

Additionally, the fae artifact Avalon would be confiscated from Shirou. In part to be used as a stabilization catalyst for Marjatta. In part to see just how potent his healing capabilities were without the artifact.

It took quite a bit of convincing for Saber to let that pass in particular, seeing as it was *her* artifact to begin with, and was not too keen on seeing it in the hands of another without her permission.

The words she had exchanged with Lorelei alone could have constituted a war in itself.

It was only after they had managed to extract a promise from the Vice Director, which in itself was akin to pulling teeth, that the Noble Phantasm would be returned once it was no longer necessary to stabilize and rectify Marjatta's condition.

After that, Caster was run ragged jumping between Shirou and Marjatta to make sure that neither one fell past a line of no return until she managed to extract the salt crystals in his heart and mostly treated the worst of his wounds.

Almost immediately afterwards, she demanded that Marjatta be treated close to the Greater Grail. The exposure to the corruption wouldn't do her any favors, but the bulk of the bounded fields and systems she had utilized to monitor and manage the Grail itself were there, so it was ironically the best location to treat and control the girl's fluctuating mana.

Seeing as the Greater Grail was involved, Illya was all but obligated to join the group as the Einzbern representative and explain to the few Homunculi that had already arrived what was going on to prevent any confusion. Vice Director or not, her word carried more weight with the newcomers than anyone's right now.

"Sometimes what isn't written down reveals more than what is." Lorelei casually turned a page, ignoring the looks she was getting from Luvia and Illya. "Emiya must have taken to your lessons better than I assumed. Much of your choice of vernacular and methods of experimentation are here. Unless there is something else you desire to admit."

"Admit" implies an action or truth that you are unaware of," Waver didn't fall into the trap, "While my time was limited, I did help Shirou inspect and analyze his abnormal condition and how to best carry through afterwards. While I can't remotely consider myself an expert to apostles, I can provide outside observation and conjecture to aid his decision making. All of which you are already aware of or surmised."

"Perhaps." Another page was turned, "Though I couldn't help but some key details are vacant. The boy's position as an Ancestor for one."

"We already know he was just as informed about the matter as we were until the middle of the war." Waver dismissed her unspoken accusation.

"Then there's the matter with his use of the Noble Phantasm, Balmung. There's no reference to it here."

“I doubt anyone would be comfortable writing down the details of the countless Noble Phantasms he’s seen and recorded during his encounter with Gilgamesh. As for his use of Balmung in particular, I’m as surprised as you are.”

“But not his method of extracting it from his body.”

“We admittedly discussed it occasionally when he was younger. Before Louvre. He got the idea from older reports of encounters with ironically the former tenth. Nero Chaos. However, Sirius and I both shot the idea down every time. Why and how he continued with it is beyond me. Either in that book or a desperate gambit he always held in the back of his mind. I’m unsure which would disturb me more. The fact it actually worked is irrelevant.”

“But not enough to harvest the child of blood and bone for years I see.” She made no gesture or motion to recognize the sword on her hip.

Waver knew what she was getting at. Keeping Shirou stored away and used as a resource to make more of the swords, or even countless appliances with the potential to become any tool desired at a mere whim would have been a very tempting prospect for many in the Tower.

“Kiritsugu was always one to go the extra mile to stack the deck in his favor. More so against unknown and uncertain trials, regardless of how it would make some perceive us. It is only reasonable to assume that some of that rubbed off on his son. And we are for the better for it if recent events are any indication.”

“Given the circumstances, I am surprised you have the confidence to say such a thing.” The Vice Director looked up for the notes with a hint of skepticism.

Waver shrugged, blowing out some smoke from his cigar. “Merely a byproduct of processing the evidence and facts around me. I know what you are doing, and I won’t interfere. My actions won’t change a thing.”

“You believe I am already ensnared in another of the boy’s plots?” She frowned.

The weakest Lord chuckled and shook his head. “Nothing so nefarious. Shirou is simply more apt in speaking in actions, not words. In that regard, you could consider him an exceptional debater. You can’t deny he made more than a convincing argument last night. As far as I’m concerned, as a teacher, he’s more than made his point on where he stands and backed it up.”

“Careful Lord El Melloi II. I am not one of your students.”

“No. You are an investigator of the Department of Policies. You take information and events transpired to make decisions and verdicts based on the rules of the Tower, and for the benefit of

those therein.” Waver dismissed her threat. “Not that exceptions haven’t been made every now and then due to extraneous circumstances.”

To his credit, the Lord managed to pretend to be calm and collected while one of the most powerful women in the world glared dangerously at him. For a few seconds at least.

Then he turned his head to a more notable object within their vicinity. “Still, perhaps it was for the best that things turned out the way they did regardless. Somehow I doubt that the Einzbern would have gone out of their way to inform us of this development had we been absorbed in merely trying to stay your discontent.”

The Witch of Colchis. Gilgamesh. A well of mana stolen from the city itself. And nearly two Servant’s worth of mana ripped from the Eighth Apostle Ancestor.

If one considered the fact that Gilgamesh’s spirit origin alone was worth nearly three whole Servants, then the amount of power fed to the Grail system was more than enough to enact it by this point.

Had Shirou and Caster not put in the effort to absorb and bleed off the power the system and Lesser Grails had absorbed already, they likely would not have been able to have such a calm and civil conversation at that moment, in full view of a Greater Grail that was slowly starting to germinate... something. Something vile and nauseating that had all of their hairs stand on end.

Something that would have been far larger had Shirou not had the foresight to take precautionary measures.

Something that was still manageable.

“Circumstances that you seem to be rather thankful for.” Lorelei noted.

“Circumstances that I could have done without. The list is quite extensive, I assure you.” Waver firmly held his ground. “In case you forgotten, Shirou is only the first student I have taught. I am genuinely terrified of the cumulative disasters the rest of my charges.”

“And what, pray tell is the difference between the boy and the rest of your troublemakers then?”

Waver didn’t even bother to try to hide his trauma. “The difference between them is that Shirou doesn’t look for trouble. He just attracts it like moths to a flame. My current class on the other hand, are clearly moths flying headfirst into any and every disaster that catches their attention, no matter how much I try to warn them of how dangerous the world is. For the life of me I can’t tell which is worse.”

“The one that doesn’t involve Ancestors for starters.”

“Unfortunately that doesn’t help. My event on the Rail Zeppelin had several participants.”

She gave him a hard stare.

He gave her a defeated dead one.

“... Expect the Department of Policies to start an investigation into your students’ past actions and activities.”

“If that investigation includes a Teacher’s aide, that would be much obliged.” He had been requesting one for literally *years* now, but the Tower management kept on roadblocking the paperwork for it at nearly every step of the way.

The only way around it was if he took on a personal protege under his wing, but that idea in itself was a loaded gun for its own reasons. In his situation, anyone that took the position would have to essentially forego time and resources dedicated to their prior family’s craft and loyalty in exchange for the El-Melloi’s, not something many magi would risk unless they happened to not be the main inheritor of the family crest. He’d more or less have to take in a blank slate, a novice with nothing but potential and maybe a personal quirk or two, which was an unlikely event at best.

But now was not a time to dwell on “what if’s”.

Especially when doing so made the Vice Director liable to kill him with her staring.

He cleared his throat. “Regardless, we have had similar songs and dances of this nature on repeat over the past month, Lady Barthomeloi. Enough that you should know what to expect and what the results of your current inquiries of me will be. I will neither comment, reveal, nor interfere on the matter. Rather, I advise you speak to the others if you desire any fresh inputs on what you are currently debating.”

“And I advise you not speak to me as if I am one of your helpless students, Lord El Melloi II.” Lorelei’s tone was frosty.

Waver’s lips twitched in amusement. “My apologies. Force of habit. Due to my lack of abundant power and wealth, lecturing and storytelling are my most reliable go to’s to keep myself alive in situations like this.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

More than likely to use it against him at some point.

“Edelfelt.”

The Vice Director’s clipped tone cut through the air and snapped Luvia out of her almost hypnotic state of staring at her sister’s treatment. It was abundantly clear that she was not in the best of states with her eyes sunken in slightly even with makeup, on top of her exhausted demeanor. Still she was the current head of the Edelfelt family, and would not allow that much as an excuse for poor performance and presentation in front of her superiors.

“Yes, Lady Vice Director?” The teen girl nodded while ignoring Waver to the side and Illya pretending to not pay attention to the conversation in the background.

“Out of all the Masters supporting the fool’s whims, you are the most peculiar. You owe him no true outstanding debts. You hold no true ties with him. No outstanding obligations, familial or personal. No relations to the Emiya Name outside of a shared mutual historical occupation that never had you cross paths. Your interactions with him were at best a few steps more than cordial since his introduction to the Clocktower. The strongest formal agreement you currently have outside of the ones dealing with Altrouge and her brood involves experimenting on jewelwork and literally ripping a Noble Phantasm from his body on occasion.” Lorelei pulled no punches. “So why bow instead of barter for your sister’s life? Why has the elegant Hyena of the Edelfelt turned into a dog begging for scraps? More so when you held the key to make the boy and his associates do whatever you wished in his hand the entire time?”

Luvia’s eyes widened as though she had just been suckerpunched for a moment, before quickly regaining composure... no. The Barthomeloi’s sharp tongue and chastising sparked an irritation and fire in the girl that had if anything been kept on low for probably longer than she herself had intended.

“Tell me, Lady Barthomeloi, how has trying to hold onto Shirou’s leash fared for you as of late?”

Waver tried. He really did, but he couldn’t help but inhale too much through his cigar at the comment and burst out coughing uncontrollably.

Lorelei fared slightly better, merely clenching her fingers and slightly tearing the pages in her hands.

The blonde didn’t stop there as she flicked her hair back imperiously. “I acted the way I did for the same way you did. Shirou Emiya is exceptionally interesting. With or without his Reality Marble. With or without the Apostle nonsense.”

An interesting opening statement, and true. But it was still akin to saying “water is wet”.

“Where you saw an asset to be controlled like the bulk of those under your thumb, I saw something far greater in value. The rapture of study, discovery, creation, wealth, association,

genetics, mysteries, and merits do not make him so much as twitch or garner the slightest bit of his interest, yet excels on a simple path of mystery that has escaped all of our observation. He is clearly altered, yet in some ways is more human than the bulk of our associates. On a good day, he is a breath of fresh air. One that cuts through the monotony of politics and false pretenses that stifle our lives. And on a bad day, he is an unrelenting blade that gets to the point of issues faster than anyone else just because it annoys him. With or without mysteries. You made use of as much whenever he had time to visit the Tower and make an appearance.”

Lorelei could not deny as much. She had used Shirou to deal with some of the most corrupt and troubling members of the Tower that used countless underhanded means to avoid proper judgment.

Ironically, while the boy was skirting the same line now with his research and Apostle situation, he had not technically done much more than that in hindsight compared to his peers. No involving civilians. No risking the revelation of magic.

Nothing... save for risking the world order just by existing as the next Tenth Apostle Ancestor and stirring the politics of monsters.

Luvia went on, “Anyone can tell that he had his own goals and intentions for growing as skilled and strong as he was. That ludicrous motivation of his could never be spawned from mere personal and familial obligation. Much less pride. Killing an Apostle Ancestor, even a weak one at that age was no mere fluke. Walking around the Clocktower with little formal preparation or care for the countless superiors around him, yet conversing with them as though they were as human as the typical civilian on the street. It could only be born from a deep madness. Controlling him outright would be a fool’s errand, and getting in his way when he’s clearly made his mind on something personal is nothing short of suicidal, regardless of who or what you are. Especially now.”

The only person in the Tower that Luvia could think of that possessed remotely similar qualities was her classmate Flat Escardos. A young magus that was beyond exceptional in magecraft to the point that even most teachers were completely bewildered with some of the feats he pulled, yet whose head was perpetually in the clouds to the point that everyone had to keep an eye on him for his, and their own, sakes.

The only reason why she didn’t treat him like Shirou was because, as stated before, Flat was a childish airhead that needed a literal babysitter more than anything. Friendly to the point that even those that hated him doubted he had a mean bone in his body, but outright oblivious most of the time.

The biggest difference between the two though... was that Shirou knew what he was, and yet still played along with everyone’s whims not out of animosity, but because he genuinely didn’t care.

Until he did. And when Shirou cared, he acted in the way he saw best.

It was akin to playing with a friendly yet genuinely wild animal, or phantasmal beast. They may even be subservient at times, but they will never be truly controlled.

“As for why I concede so much to him, it’s simple. He is my friend, and as stated before, Shirou goes out of his way to achieve what he wants with or without help. Whether it be for himself, or for others that he makes a promise to. If he says he’s going to do something, he does it. My cooperation only hastened and streamlined the end result. Why else did he go so far to protect your reputation? Unless you were under the presumption that he went out of his way to protect the Barthomelloi name out of mere fear and caution.”

“Mere fear and caution is usually enough to keep people in line.” Lorelei stated factually.

“Mere fear and caution was not enough to keep you from coming to Japan, Vice Director.” Luvia crossed her arms under her chest. “I believe that this entire scenario has proven to be outside the bounds of conventional approach.”

“So unconventional scenarios are enough to cow even the Edelfelt then?”

Luvia flipped her hair shamelessly. “On occasion. Just as unconventional scenarios are enough to force Apostle Ancestors to move. For monsters to make deals with man. Even for the vaunted Barthomelloi to make conditional concessions with vampires.”

The Vice Director’s eyes narrowed dangerously, and Luvia to her credit did not so much as flinch under the woman’s gaze.

“... I saw it, you know. His Reality Marble.”

Both Lords of the Clocktower looked at her with varying levels of scrutinization.

“Hooh?” Waver hummed curiously, but did not expose his thoughts further than that.

“A library of Swords, I’ve been told. What of it?” Lorelei’s dismissive tone was almost convincing.

Luvia’s lips twitched in amusement. “It possesses an additional property unrelated to swords. One that Caster believes is particularly effective on Servant and Apostle alike, if our discussions with Saber and Solomon are any indication.”

“Servant and Apostle, but not human, I assume.” Lorelei slowly got to the point, as though inspecting the words coming out of her mouth as she spoke. She did not miss Solomon’s name being brought up.

“Mmm. I found it a rather apt reflection of Shirou. There is an air of comforting peace in it that I did not suspect, even when surrounded by so many Noble Phantasms and other weapons with bloody histories. As though the weapons are savoring the atmosphere as well. It was... relaxing.” Luvia’s gaze slowly clouded over, as though getting lost in her memories of the land that did not exist.

“Edelfelt? Luvia?” Waver noticed her dazed state first and immediately spoke up to snap her out of it. Rude maybe, but a magus’ mind was their sanctum. It was concerning and more importantly dangerous to let a practitioner of magecraft be in an addled state.

His words seemed to fortunately be enough as the girl snapped out of it instantly and blushed in embarrassment. “I... my apologies. Mystery or not, the experience left a lasting impression.”

“I see.” Lorelei clearly did not sound sold. “I am surprised, Edelfelt. I did not expect you to be attracted to peaceful settings.”

Luvia couldn’t help but let out a bitter laugh. “Perhaps, but is it not in our nature to dwell on the impossible? And as for my attraction to that world, I suppose it is the same as a normal human being attracted to a seemingly tame predator. How tempting is it to rub against a tiger’s fur if given an opportunity, or pet a seemingly non-aggressive eagle? The danger is without question present, however our curiosity and trust in the other party overrides that instinctual wariness into a sense of security. False or not.”

“An interesting perspective. Answer me for yourself. According to your judgment, was that sense of security you felt false?”

The blonde smiled. “Yes. And no. Rather, in retrospect, instead of believing that “my safety was secure” in that world, it would be more accurate to say that “my danger was not warranted”.”

“You are saying he did not see you as a threat?”

Luvia shook her head. “No. Only that I did not earn his animosity. Like I said before, his Reality Marble already possesses a predisposition of peace. I did not say that it was incapable of hostility. From the sky to the horizon to the swords themselves. The land itself is practically sacrosanct, like a site of worship or mourning.”

“And disturbing the peace on such hallowed grounds brings judgment.” Waver frowned, putting pieces together. “Respect for the dead and aversion to disturbing their rest is something that nearly every culture around the world respects unanimously. Necromancers use similar logic for

curses in cemeteries and burial sites. It's a popular and powerful line of spellwork in Egyptian tombs in particular."

"I didn't think the boy pursued that peculiar line of magecraft on top of all his other projects and obligations." Lorelei didn't sound convinced.

"He didn't. Egyptian mysteries and necromancy are too esoteric and out of the way for him. If anything it's just a coincidental conceptual overlap." Waver's finger tapped absently on the table as he pondered the topic.

The overlap between Shirou and "death" was a curious one. The most glaring connection was the end of the Fourth Grail War, but that didn't match up with the overwhelming theme of "peace" that Luvia described. Nor did it match up with what he knew of Archer's history, motives, and Reality Marble...

He blinked and his finger tapping stopped.

Ah. So if that's the connection... yes, then it all falls into place from that perspective.

His lips twitched up slightly in amusement.

Luvia was mistaken. What she had felt in that world was not "peace". Merely a sensation that could be considered a prelude to it.

"Care to share your deduction, Lord El Melloi II?" Lorelei didn't miss his slight change in expression.

Waver took his cigar from his mouth and blew out some smoke into the air. "I'll grant Shirou some privacy and not divulge any details. However, to answer your inquiry, I'm confident the factors you are dwelling on would have still pervaded in his inner world even if his encounters and relationships with the Dead Apostles not taken place. I am not outright dismissing the idea that these factors were influenced, affected, or even enhanced, by his current condition to some margin. Only that being one is not the root source for them."

"You sound confident in your hypothesis. What aren't you telling us?"

"Nothing of significance." Waver dismissed his superior's accusation, "Both of you know Shirou well enough to know what he is about by now. My realization only compounds onto the image and premise, much like his Reality Marble. If you are searching for proof or evidence that his Apostle Nature has compromised him to the point of being a liability now or in the future, then I am afraid this would be of no use."

Luvia's posture slightly relaxed at his statement, as though letting out a breath of relief that she didn't know she was holding in the first place.

Lorelei on the other hand only frowned in annoyance, both due to Waver's refusal to give a straight answer and his confidence that what he knew was of little use to her. There was no point in assuming he was lying to her. Not at this stage in the game. He genuinely believed what he said, and as a theoretical academic that knew Shirou longer than almost anyone in Fuyuki, it would be foolhardy to challenge or press the matter without embarrassing herself.

Whatever this peculiar trait of the boy's was and its subsequent implications, she would just have to dismiss it. For now.

"I expect this means you intend and have no issues resuming to partner with him in the future then."

"To an extent." Luvia couldn't help but smile hungrily and confidently. "For the short term, undoubtedly. However once matters resolve themselves, I expect to resume my role as head of the Edelfelt family and exploit my newly gained resources. Both for business and research. Then there's our arrangement regarding the True Ether research and Balmung that I refuse to abdicate. As for the long term, well that depends on whatever mess Shirou finds himself in at the time. He's a big boy that can work his way out of most ordeals, however I am more than willing to provide my services on occasion. For a price of course. Either from him or whoever is speaking on his behalf."

Lorelei nodded slowly before looking to the side, where a similar blonde was lying on the stone floor in the middle of an elaborate formalcraft circle. "And your sister? She is a liability."

Luvia's smile faltered.

The Vice Director was right. Marjatta was a liability. Both in her current physical state, and mental. The child could not be trusted to hide secrets as she was. Her awakened Origin rendered her incapable of holding something like a "secret" inside permanently, much like her power, emotions, or thoughts.

Sooner or later, she would compromise the story surrounding Shirou Emiya, the Tenth Apostle Ancestor, the Fifth Grail War, and those closely related to him.

Lorelei Barthomelloi unfortunately counted among those numbers.

And she had reached the end of her patience dealing with whimsical risks.

Shirou at least was willing to play ball and took notable steps to underscore that point from the very beginning.

Marjatta not so much.

Luvia let out a deep sigh and bowed deeply. “I apologize for the discord my sister has caused, and recognize the risk she poses. We have discussed in earnest what to do with her for some time, however my hesitancy to protect my family has taken advantage over me on several moments.”

“And?” Lorelei’s tone brokered no excuses.

“... While I cannot condone my sister’s actions, nor her execution, her memories of the war is still more than feasible.”

“Extraction. Not sublimate?” Waver asked curiously. The act of outright removing memories from an individual was a more permanent, yet just as risky alternative to just simply masking or burying the target’s memories. The former was more reliable, but prone to harming the target in some capacity as a consequence.

“Caster’s proficient in various fields of medicinal thaumaturgy, efficient or otherwise. There are various medicines and compounds that are prone to inducing permanent short term memory loss when ingested.” Luvia conceded. “Effects can vary from hours to even one’s own name and history and name, to even erasing one's ego entirely. Some can be reversed. Others, permanent.”

“And your recommended poison of choice?”

Luvia scoffed and looked at the Vice Director with a hint of annoyance. “A controlled drought induced coma. Designed to help aid calm her body to help treat and address her Origin’s effects in the meantime. After a certain quantity threshold is met, it has an aftereffect of “eroding the accumulated psyche” starting from the most recent memories. She’ll be under for a month, and lose two to three months of memories in the process. Guaranteed. Hopefully the loss of memories and trauma will aid in her recovery.”

“You do not possess anything faster acting?”

“Faster, but not safer. I still intend for Marjatta to be a functioning member of the Edelfelt family after this disaster. That includes being able to work in the field with functioning circuits. After what the Witch of Betrayal did to my sister, I have little confidence that her memories and Origin can be addressed simultaneously safely with other means that are quickly and readily available.”

“Noted.” The Vice Director neutral tone did not betray whether she was displeased, annoyed, or even interested in Luvia’s reply. “I expect regular reports and updates during and after her treatment.”

She didn't have to say what would happen if Luvia failed to do so, or provided faulty information.

"Of course." The teen's tone was just as clipped and to the point as the Vice Director's, "Is that all, ma'am?"

"For now. I expect for you to continue to be cooperative with Policies for the foreseeable future." The woman's tone brooked no argument.

"As I expect to be properly compensated for any extracurricular requests that Policies make of the Edelfelt and their new resources." Luvia confidently stated before glancing to the side where three copies of Balmung were stabbed into the ground in the middle of an exceptionally large formalcraft circle. "Now if you will excuse me, I must continue my research on true Ether and jewelcraft originating from the Age of Gods."

"That girl. She's always been confident in class, but this is taking it to a new level." Waver sighed, shaking his head. "I'll be sure to load her with some projects to match that confidence when we get back to bring her back to earth."

"Don't pity the child. She decided to put on an act, and she will either carry it through to the end to make it real or suffer the consequences." In spite of her cold tone, Waver noticed that she did not explicitly tell him to *not* carry through with his idea.

"Noted." The teacher shrugged helplessly, as though it was out of his hands now. "Though I would advise being less antagonizing everyone with your interviews. While Shirou is undoubtedly popular here after what he's done, some are liable to be more protective of him than others. Servant or Master."

"You believe they would do something reckless."

Waver tapped the end of his cigar over an ash tray to let the burnt ends flake off. "We did just witness our mutual associate pick a one on one fight with White Knight Svelton last night. And win, much less survive. Idiocy is contagious at times. Especially when it's successful."

"It is the Tower's prerogative to prevent such lunacy to begin with. More so those that pride themselves in education." She gave him a dry glance.

The man chuckled and held his hands up in surrender. "I haven't had direct contact with Shirou since shortly after the Louvre incident, if you recall. If you want a name to blame, there's an old drunk that's more suited for the position."

The pair could practically hear Sirius laughing his ass off right behind them, at both their misfortune and out of sheer blatant amusement from the recent events that just took place.

“... You’re closer and easier to deal with.” In a rare moment of weakness, Lorelei focused on the papers in hand, avoiding eye contact with her fellow Lord.

“I’m honored.” Waver chuckled but not saying anymore on the matter. Glancing to the side, he noticed Illyasviel standing a distance away, facing the Greater Grail but no doubt paying attention to the two Lords in some capacity. “Regardless, I advise you are less heavy handed with miss Einzbern.”

“I presume she is one of the more loyal individuals here you mentioned.”

“Partially.” He shrugged. “The remainder because she’s the master of Heracles and Kiritsugu Emiya, who will no doubt be listening into the conversation.”

“You sound confident that the Servants matter.”

Waver shook his head and donned a wry grin. “My lady, you may be the Vice Director of the Clocktower with a notable range of accolades under your name, but make no mistake, those won’t be of much help when it comes to managing extremely dedicated guardians.”

Lorelei looked up from her paperwork and stared at him dead in the eyes. “You are serious.”

Waver’s smile grew. “Half my trip here was regalling Altrouge Brunestud with tales dealing with my students. The other half was regalling her with how I told their parents. She found my stories entertaining.”

“You sound awfully proud to amuse that monster.” She was blatantly not amused.

“I’m still alive, aren’t I? I had to keep her entertained and distracted somehow. Fortunately for me, the Black Princess is fond of meaningless gossip. I suppose immortality has granted her the luxury of finding amusement in some little things.”

“Good. You can write a report on it when we return to the tower.”

“It will be done eventually. You know how absurd my current backlog has become as is after the trial. Report or not, I’m going to be drowning in paperwork for the rest of the year regardless. At least you have an office of assistants to help you out with yours.”

“You sound as though you don’t.”

“I don’t.”

Lorelei paused and glanced at him. She might as well have been gaping in disbelief.

“Rumors of the El-Melloi Family’s finances are more accurate than most assume, and while I do fulfill my role to the best of my abilities, it is with minimal support.” Waver sighed.

“Kidnapping, Apostles, and Greater Grail or not, this latest excursion is as close to a vacation as I’ve gotten in years.”

The Vice Director sighed and shook her head. “This entire ordeal has been saturated with nothing but disappointment and frustration. Do try to ease my expectations for the rest of my stay, Lord El-Melloi II.”

Waver leaned back in his seat and picked up some of his own documentation. “As you wish, Lord Barthomeloi. Now then, shall we move forward and beckon Lady Einzbern?”

o. o. o.

Inside Shirou’s workshop, Kiritsugu and Irisviel sat quietly, each deep in their own thoughts.

Kiritsugu on a chair next to a standard workbench.

Irisviel on a chair in the center of the formalcraft circle that had summoned Saber in this war, and kept her stable in the previous.

One morose and contemplative.

The other withdrawn, haunted and regretful.

“I had a feeling I’d find you two here.”

Chack chack.

Merem didn’t blink as Assassin’s gun immediately pointed right between his eyes, the weapon held not even half a foot from his skull.

“Leave.” Kiritsugu didn’t mince words. Self proclaimed ally or not, Solomon was not to be trusted.

“Not until I’ve said my piece. Believe it or not, you’ll find it worth your time.”

“To us specifically? I thought you agreed to hide no more secrets from Shirou.” Assassin slowly put his finger on the trigger.

Merem’s expression didn’t so much as twitch. “Illyasviel is the rightful head of the Einzberns.”

The Servant of Murder's finger froze.

The Servant of the Grail's breath stilled.

"I'm old. Among the oldest of the Apostles. Blessed by Crimson Moon himself. I've had dealings with many parties over the millennia. Other Apostles. The Clocktower. The Church. Atlas. I even played a bit in China during the Liao dynasty. And, as fate would have it, some centuries back, the Einzbern, not that you would find any records."

There was a small pause. None of them moved. Kiritsugu still had his gun at Merem's skull, and Merem looked at Kiritsugu expectantly, as though giving the assassin the honor of deciding what would happen next.

No bullets were fired. No orders were made. But the gun did not budge.

So, Merem continued.

"The Einzberns, the *true* Enzberns, not merely their Homunculi, were alive then, but I had the opportunity to once witness them when Justease was at their head. How human and homunculi revered her every decision, action and word. It did not matter if she was artificial or not, for in their eyes she was their magnum opus. It was as though the Third Magic was personified in her."

He turned his gaze to Irisviel, "None of them would ever treat Justease von Einzbern, the way you or your child have."

"Irisviel's a copy of Justease. Modeled after her to be a tool for a single purpose. Not a leader." Kiritsugu's argument was not one to dissuade the vampire's plan as it was to wring more information from him.

"Your wife and daughter are more than simple imitations in her likeness, Kiritsugu Emiya. There is more than Angra Mainyu listening and watching through their eyes, as you already are aware."

"You..." Kiritsugu's finger once more rested on the trigger-

"Merem Solomon. Twentieth Apostle Ancestor. One of the staunchest supporters of the Crimson Moon. Faint echoes of your existence and influence pervaded the walls of Einzbern castle before I took my first step, though the reason why has ever evaded me."

Irisviel spoke, but it was not her words.

Her tone. Her accent. Her disposition. The very air around her altered into an ephemeral state mirroring winter itself.

“Just as echoes of your beauty and your true desires whispered across the land when you once walked it. Justeaze Von Einzbern,” Merem nodded slowly. “Although, I see it as a legacy that is respected only in words in this era. By your own no less. As an outsider, I find it rather insulting and humiliating to the point of comedy. As someone that has a friend involved in this mess however, I see it as a problem.”

“You speak of Shirou Emiya.”

“Do not pretend I am blind to your state, Justeaze. As a medium for a system tapping to the Throne itself to summon Servants, you are notably susceptible to the effects of the Counter Force. Why else did someone that blatantly desired to stop the Grail War and prevent any wish to be made, be chosen as a Master?”

Kiritsugu stilled at the revelation. The mechanics behind how and why Masters were chosen outside of the three Main families were an abstract subject that even he knew little about, yet Merem’s observation was still valid. “... I prepared him for the war. He had the capacity and the resources to fight.”

“Fuyuki is littered with lesser magi and associates tasked to clean up after the war. Any one of them could have filled a spot if necessary. A clueless mundane murderer was even made one in the previous war to compensate for a spot,” Merem shot the idea down, not once looking away from Justeaze, “But you knew that. You knew the threat of Angra Mainyu and leaned towards the Counter Force’s urgings whenever possible to prevent its birth. I assume that is also why Kiritsugu Emiya was an ideal Master in the previous war. He was the perfect bait to lure Angra Mainyu into a false sense of victory with what it thought was the ideal candidate to make a wish. It may not have been how he envisioned it, but he still saved the world in the end.”

The shed was sickeningly mute as Merem’s words were digested. Kiritsugu... did save the world in the end, didn’t he? He stopped the Grail. Stopped the thing that had been inside it from coming out.

Was that... was that genuinely the Grail making his wish come true since before the war even took place?

“What do you desire, Merem Solomon? What is your purpose for inciting these two Servants?” Justeaze asked almost innocently, tilting her head confused, “The War is over. The Master of Saber’s efforts have proven successful. My system will soon be dismantled and extracted to parts unknown even to myself, hopefully dealing with the corruption in the process. So long as all parties keep alert, they should manage to address any further complications that Angra Mainyu may invoke in order to accomplish its birth.”

“Because my world revolves around far more than a few Ghost Liners and an artificially granted wish. And currently it also includes the dregs of what will be left behind once your world is

resolved.” Merem shook his head and glanced at Kiritsugu again. “I made a mistake. Shirou Emiya is not suited to be an Apostle Ancestor.”

“Anyone could have told you that,” In spite of his words, Assassin tried to figure out what the vampire was talking about specifically.

“I don’t think they could.” Merem held his ground. “His body is turning into something distinctively not human. His sensitivity is increasing. No doubt he could consume the mana and blood of others to extend his life. His mind itself was warped from the beginning to possess a Reality Marble. Many would falter at that list and refuse to deny the potential isn’t there. But none of that, nor his limited lacking power, is related to his disqualification.”

He sighed and looked up as if to see the sky through the roof of the shack, “Ironically, it is your fault for this unexpected twist, Kiritsugu Emiya. Your efforts to change the future extended and altered beyond your calculations. Your son, his goal, is... human. So hauntingly human that he’s gone full circle to inhuman again. An obvious irony that I cannot help but curse myself for failing to notice earlier.”

“Human? Make sense or get out.” The elder Emiya was starting to lose his patience with the monster.

“I suppose you wouldn’t understand at face value. I am speaking from a monster’s perspective after all...” Merem rubbed his chin in thought, “To put things another way, his Reality Marble accepts, reflects, and welcomes the *end* in a way no true Apostle Ancestor would ever willingly recognize.”

Kiritsugu stilled, “Welcome... are you saying Shirou-”

The vampire waved his hand dismissively, “Oh no no. Don’t misunderstand. Please. Shirou has no intention of actually dying himself. Not yet at least. But he isn’t afraid of it. Rather he finds... an outstanding and genuine natural beauty in it. Whereas nearly every other Apostle and Ancestor out there yearns for a goal or state that requires a form of everlasting life without the shackles of needing to feed to maintain ourselves over the centuries and millennia, Shirou would without hesitation willingly just fade away once he felt his time had come. Immortality, power, authority, it holds no sway and poses no lure to him. All his goals and ambitions can and likely will be accomplished within a generic human lifetime, which is utterly bewildering to the rest of us, let alone magi with their generations of unfinished projects and aspirations. He already has what he wants. It’s what makes him so difficult to read and predict. It’s what makes him so interesting, and ultimately what should disqualify him as an Ancestor had I not been so foolish to rush things as I had.”

“Your point?”

Merem laughed. “My point, is that it’s going to be an utter chore keeping things calm once he meets some of our peers. And as the one that sponsored him, it is my responsibility to at the very least address some of the inevitable fallout. And, in lieu of that, other than of course killing him myself, at the very least address some of the factors that may contribute and exacerbate said headaches. Ensuring that he has reliable allies and a Servant at his side for the long run at the moment among that list. Just above ensuring that said allies have minimal baggage of their own.”

“You desire the Einzbern’s resources to be under the child’s thumb.” Justease summarized the vampire's intentions bluntly.

“Ideally, in one form or another. I doubt anyone expects him to be capable of doing the task himself directly. However I would not mind settling for wiping the family out entirely once the matter of the Greater Grail itself is addressed. So long as that malfunctioning golem of yours does not become an issue again.”

It was the ease that Merem spoke of wiping out the Einzberns that sent a single chill down their spines. Both knew he was fully capable of the feat, but it was another thing entirely for him to genuinely contemplate it.

“I think you’re talking to the wrong people about this then. You’d get better results with Acht or Illya for that matter. Unless...”

Ancient monsters like Merem never did things that mattered half heartedly. The ones that weren’t mindless beasts at least. If he was making a play, there were usually hidden factors involved. And the only one that Kiritsugu could think of was right next to him.

“You desire for me to interact with the Einzbern Homunculus system to give authority to Illyasviel without her knowing your involvement.” Justease surmised.

“I desire you to do whatever feat that is available to Justease Von Einzbern to save everyone time and effort regarding the relationship between the Einzbern family, Shirou Emiya, and the soon to be dismantled Greater Grail.” Merem clarified, “I would use my Command Seal if necessary to speed things up, however its influence only applies to the Servant known as Irisviel Einzbern and does not extend to the Greater System’s consciousness.”

“Not that you don’t have some other means to force my cooperation, no doubt.” Justease did not appear to be bothered by Merem’s admittance in the slightest, “You do know that Illyasviel’s claim will be questioned once she obtains her new body. If she decides to reveal herself.”

“Shirou’s planning on hiding Illya after the swap. This is in contrast to everything we planned.” Kiritsugu warned.

“You make it sound like he’s never had to change plans before. Its efficacy is already half of what it once was with Barthomeloi in the know,” Merem shook his head. “There’s always been a risk of her being discovered eventually. This just cuts off several agonizing steps and another secret to hide while landing you another resource. It’s not like the Einzbern are social to begin with. She takes the head, but the world will just assume that the collard butler is still in command with no one else the wiser.”

The shack was dead silent as the vampire’s words were slowly digested by the pair.

“You expect us to believe that you desire the power of Servants and the Einzberns in our children’s hands just so you have less work and obligations to do?” He didn’t like it. Every aspect of Assassin’s being told him there was another angle being played that he wasn’t seeing.

“Ideally.” Merem shrugged. “I do mean it. The better off and secure Shirou’s position is, the better I look, and the less tasks I’ll be saddled with if someone does try to get smart. But if there was another benefit to this... hmmm... it would probably be nice to have a peer to occasionally talk to that isn’t after my head that can handle his own. And, although I did not initially plan for it, it would be... relieving, for there to be another notable force in favor of humanity to be present during the Aylesbury Ritual.”

“Aylesbury...” Kiritsugu frowned at the name that had been mentioned almost ad nauseum over the past week. He had heard echoes of the supposed ritual to be conducted there even when he was alive. Anybody that tried to investigate it usually disappeared within the first few days of getting close to the damn place. In the mercenary circles, it was jokingly referred to as “England’s Crystal Valley”. A guaranteed suicide mission that was always available but never taken. “You’re confident that Shirou will eventually show up there.”

The sad smile was all Merem needed to convince both Servants just how certain he was. “Altrouge has already expressed her intent to invite him. By this time next year there will be less than a handful of active Ancestors that won’t know of it if that. To rebuff a direct solicitation from her as a fellow Apostle would be... problematic.”

Kiritsugu couldn’t help but let out a dry snort of amusement. That certainly was one way of describing how Shirou wanted to treat his life after the Grail War. “An invitation he can’t refuse then.”

“Not without consequences. Especially from the Princess of Blood and Contracts of all people,” Merem shrugged helplessly.

“... Damn dealmakers,” The Servant cursed under his breath and finally put away his gun.

There was a reason why he had imposed and taught Shirou how to use and abuse Geass scrolls so much. Ironclad contracts were ideal for keeping others from doing stupid things. The problem

came from the monsters that made equally powerful promises and arrangements just by existing and speaking, and Altrouge Brunestud was by far at the top of the list.

Even Rule Breaker couldn't get them out of this problem.

"Indeed. It is no longer a situation that Shirou can simply avoid, so he must adapt. And it is easier to adapt with more than less."

"This can't be rushed. Not with Barthomelloi watching and wound up as she is." Kiritsugu warned.

"I can feed Illyasviel what she needs gradually. She is my clone as is her mother. However I do not know how viable her new body will be for communication. This venture depends on that variable."

"Given Touko Aozaki's infamous reputation, the Third Magic, Caster, and the resources provided, I'm willing to wager it won't be much of an issue." Merem smiled innocently.

The two Servants didn't buy it for an instant. He was clearly hiding something.

"Are you willing to swear on the Crimson Moon?" Kiritsugu all but accused.

Merem's smile dropped.

"... I forget how reckless humans can be when it comes to the safety of their young. Servants are no different apparently."

"You play games. I don't. Are you confident or not?" To his credit, Kiritsugu didn't so much as twitch at Merem's sudden and dangerous change in demeanor.

"My stance hasn't changed, Servant, but do not test your luck. The Crimson Moon's name holds great weight for those that know its true value. It would be in your children's benefit to not forget that."

"Fair enough." Kiritsugu didn't bother apologizing or acknowledging the vampire's threat, not once looking away from the monster. "Iri, no. Justeaze. Start feeding Illya what she needs slowly. It'll be a backup card in case Barthomeloi starts getting last second thoughts."

"... Very well. I will go along with this gamble, under one condition. You will make it clear to the boy that his priority is to aid Illyasviel in reconstructing and eventually completing the Grail's primary function once the taint is cleansed. One way or another. I will be inscribing this prerogative in Illyasviel's soul to ensure this will come to pass. Be it sacrificing Servants or

rendering all their resources to ash, the Greater Grail will be activated and the Fourth Magic will be realized. The corruption will interfere with any suggestions more complicated than that.”

Kiritsugu frowned, but didn't argue against Justeaze's request. "I'll let them know. So long as it doesn't threaten my children or risk the end of the world. Again.”

“The boy would no doubt rend the Greater Grail system itself to oblivion if he discovered as much. We have an accord.”

Irisviel blinked, and her entire body language changed instantly as though a switch was flicked. The cold winter aura of maturity was replaced with a more immature, yet tainted fae like aura. “Kiritsugu? That was...”

“Another headache to be dealt with, but one in our favor for once. Hopefully.” Assassin turned to Merem, “You've said your piece. Leave.”

“That quickly?” Merem was not impressed.

“This is still Shirou's workshop.” Without missing a beat, the Servant rested a hand on a nearby support beam.

Instantly, two dozen Noble Phantasms materialized above their heads.

“And you apparently helped him set up its defenses when you were alive, I see. I should have expected as much.” The vampire laughed and held up his hands in surrender, “Seriously, how reckless are the two of you? Setting up a mechanism to manifest Noble Phantasms to go off inside a tiny place like this? No, if anything, how stupid am I for not expecting something like this to be here? Both father and son are shameless madmen. Hahaha.”

“Out.”

With little more fanfare than that, the Apostle slowly walked back outside with an amused smile on his lips, his every movement scrutinized by the angry husband and father until he left their sight and his footsteps no longer reached their ears.

“... Kiritsugu...”

“I don't like it either Iri, but it's done. If we really can put a collar on Acht and hand the leash to Illya, the better.”

“I don't know how much longer I can hold on.” From her tone, it was a topic that had been bothering her for some time.

Judging from Assassin's reaction, it was a matter that had also been on his mind as of late.

"There have been records of other Servants that were comprised of multiple legends before. Taking aspects of varying spirits to stabilize themselves, but they were never directly connected to the source like I am." Irisviel hugged herself and sunk into her seat. "The Grail, I can feel them watching through me. Justeaze and Angra Mainyu. If I was alive, it would be manageable, but as a Servant, a spiritual body... I'm like a toy to them. Something they can reach out at any time to control and manipulate at will. Caster's bounded fields help, but it doesn't stop them. It only makes the process for them tedious and uncomfortable."

It truly was a pitiful situation. Trapped in not only her body, but mind and soul as well, Irisviel couldn't trust even herself with what may happen next. She couldn't even say that dying right now would solve everything since all that would do was power the Grail and make matters worse.

"..." Kiritsugu remained quiet as he slowly knelt down before his ailing wife and gently put his hand on her cheek. "If you want to die, I'll kill you. If you want to live, I'll stop anyone that tries to put you down. Even the Grail. I will be here for you either way, just like how you were there for me, even when I didn't deserve your faith and love."

"Kiristugu..." Tears fell down the woman's face, the dam of overwhelming emotions she held finally cracking.

"But whatever you pick, please hold on for now. For Illya's sake. For Shirou's sake." It was as if seeing her break down was affecting Assassin. His normally stoic and impassive features gave way to a mournful expression of love and regret. "I'll talk to Caster about it. After what happened last night, everyone's high strung enough as is. Please, just, hold on."

Neither could tell who moved first, the haunted husband hugging his wife or the frightened woman diving into the chest of her love and only source of stability.

All they knew was that much had happened by the time they finally left the small workshop.

o. o. o.

Lorelei Barthomelloi was a woman with strict standards.

As a natural Blue Blood, she expected a certain level of proficiency and professionalism in those she allowed near her, much less did business with. There were rare exceptions of course, those that enjoyed portraying themselves as lessers like clowns and barbarians, but they were still recognized for their "exceptionalism". Outliers related to the Barthomelloi were to be notable and commended as a standard...

With what should be the exemption of Vampires.

Blood soaked cowards and accidents that abandoned their heritage, humanity, and dignity to become monsters. Cowards that feared their own weakness and mortality. Slaves to a vile abomination not even from their world. She despised them all to the point of madness.

It was only due to the master of the Kaleidoscope's long history with the Association, his raw value to humanity, and his defeat of Crimson Moon that stayed her hand from obstructing or antagonizing him in any way. Instead she simply settled on ignoring his existence altogether whenever possible.

Other notable Ancestors with known locations that could and *should* have been attacked by now were similar.

Everyone with an ear to the black market knew where Van Fem would be at least a few times a year. A strike on his territory would be costly, but not impossible. However the bulk of the Association had deemed him a minor threat so long as he wasn't provoked, and he was a reliable source for extremely rare and valuable resources that could not be sacrificed recklessly.

Merem Solomon. The tool of the Church. She willingly left that one alone. He was Nabarak's toy, and she had little desire to get in the way of that particular arrangement.

Gransurg Blackmore, the Black Winged Lord, cooperated with the Association for some time before he vanished. Some say he was in hiding while the Church claimed they had captured him. Either way, she strongly suspected he would make an appearance before long. Another reliable resource, and overwhelmingly powerful against other Apostle Ancestors. Someone that she *had* tried to execute behind the scenes in her younger days, but was outvoted and denied by the other Lords...

... and outright dismissed by the monster when she went through with it anyways. Even to this day he had been a monster compared to the other three Ancestors she had put down herself. As though there was some factor that he possessed that the others lacked.

Rita Rozay-en. The vain Rose Princess that kills and steals the souls of her prey with a mere glance of her mystic eyes. A member of vampire aristocracy that does not hesitate to flaunt her position and wealth. It is overwhelmingly expensive, but not difficult to lure her to events with her tastes. The average price for these traps would cost even the most affluent of magus families at least a decade of their income to establish. And yet all seven attempts to execute her with these traps have resulted in catastrophic failure and loss of assets.

Then of course there were ORT and the Forest of Ennishae. Everyone knew where those monsters were, but nobody knew of a way to kill them.

And yet, here she was, walking through the front door of the recently christened Tenth's home as a genuine welcomed guest.

No traps.

No battles.

No blood.

No contracts.

No threats, ultimatums, or even unamusing banter.

It made her nauseous to the point of screaming. Not that she would ever show it.

She made no efforts to converse with the other tenants of the property. She had already done enough of that earlier, and she had nothing to gain from doing it now.

Instead she honed in on her lone remaining target, sitting on the walkway bordering the back yard with a cup of tea in hand looking up absently like he was some old man.

"You're awake." She stated, standing a couple of meters behind him. Had it been anyone else in his position, they would have claimed that she had donned the role of an executioner.

"I am. Not in any shape to take on a job at the moment, but I'm up." The casual way he addressed her did not do her mood any favors.

So he didn't fully heal yet. Even from this angle she could tell that he was still in poor shape and wouldn't be running about anytime soon.

That answered one of her suspicions. Turns out the Noble Phantasm Scabbard was carrying most of the weight behind his fast recovery over the war after all.

"The scabbard is still required for the Edelfelt girl. Go to them if you need it as a crutch," She calmly accused.

"Haha. You really have no mercy." Shirou had the gall to laugh as though she had made a joke.

It wasn't confidence that made him so relaxed around her. She knew what that looked like. Dealt with it a thousand times and more in her life. No, this was acceptance bordering on apathy. The boy cared what would happen, but genuinely was at peace with whatever came next. Almost as if he was completely used to her holding his life... ah.

“You knew the entire time.”

It was a vague statement that had little context to anyone listening in, but to the pair it held a completely different meaning.

“I did.” Shirou nodded without thinking much about the topic at all.

The Vice Director frowned and looked to the side to where the audience was.

With a flick of her finger, a near invisible wall of air separated the two from the rest of the world, rendering their conversation private.

“How long have you known about the implanted failsafes?”

Shirou smiled.

And distinctively pretended to ignore the feeling of his magic crest warming up without his say so.

Specifically the portion of the crest that had been implanted in him the day he first visited the Clocktower years ago.

“I suspected it by the time I was halfway to your office after waking up the first day. I had confirmation a year after that after meeting with a specialist in Crests that we could trust to keep quiet about it.”

At the very least, the boy wasn't a *complete* fool. “And yet you did nothing about it and risked my wrath with this stunt.”

“I'm an expert on Projection. Not Crests. I'd have to extract what you gave me at bare minimum to get rid of what you set up. Maybe even the entire crest itself, knowing my luck, and I needed as many advantages as I could for the war. Still almost wasn't enough. Plus you probably would have noticed if I tried.” Shirou shrugged as though his hands were tied. “Waver and Sirius know about it. Caster does too. It would be hard for her not to notice after all the times she helped me recover, but I made her promise not to tell Luvia.”

How endearing of them. It almost made her feel something.

“How blatantly reckless. After all the crimes and risks you took with the Barthomelloi name, do you believe that you are exempt or immune from your obligations?”

“Of course not. But at the very least I'm sure that you want to keep whatever happens as quiet as I do to save us all from the headache.”

“Even if what I decide for you is against your expectations? I have been speaking with all your co-conspirators all day gathering information. You are not concerned about my verdict?”

Shirou laughed again, but this time it was more bitter and sarcastic. He turned towards her direction and gave her an unimpressed glance. “You sound like you just made your decision today. We are past playing that game, Vice Director. I could bore you with a list and a half of reasons why you won’t get rid of me here and now off the top of my head, and they are all matters you have already come to terms with before you even landed in Japan. You made up your mind on what to do with me long before last night, depending on how the disaster with Brunestud turned out.”

He sighed heavily and pretended to ignore the irritated glare aimed at his skull. “Your investigation today was not to decide what to do with me, but to determine how you were to manage everyone else.”

“Do not talk down to me child. You’d do well to remember I still hold your life in my hand,” This time the Vice Director did frown slightly, more insulted with how he spoke to her than the fact that he was absolutely correct in his assumption.

Perhaps she’d be more cross if Lord El-Melloi had not called her out on the very same thing hours prior, but now she would have been more disappointed if Shirou hadn’t figured it out.

“As you have for the past half decade. As did half of the Grail War at one point or another. I’m half numb to the sensation as is, unfortunately. You can stop playing up the idea of invoking my death to make me say something I’ll already tell you. It’s not worth the risk regardless of the temptation, and I’d rather be an ally than an enemy. A friendly non-aggressive party with mutual interests at worst.” Shirou drank from his tea and looked at the evening sky, ignoring the heat in his chest as the temperature rose from “warm” to just below “searing”.

Luvia. Sakura. Rin. Bazett. Illya. They all trusted him, for one reason or another. Not to the death for some, but enough that it would be a herculean task to budge them from their positions.

If the Vice Director managed to get one or two of them on her side, things would have been different and his future would have been far more tentative, however that was not the case. The conversation would have already gone in a vastly different direction if it had.

Shirou had too many valuable resources on his side to ignore. Too many cards to play and backups in place. He couldn’t simply “disappear” anymore.

But it was not enough for Lorelei Barthomelloi to show weakness or defeat. “You overvalue your position. A few Servants and some blackmail does not make you the equal to a Barthomelloi, or even a lesser lord.”

Shirou rolled his eyes. “Stop pretending to misunderstand what I’m saying. You know what I mean. It’s not like we haven’t discussed what I’m aiming for a dozen times already. I’d be an abysmal Lord at best, let alone trying my hand at politics proper. Hell, half the people here have already placed bets on how fast it takes for “the Tenth to shove his foot in his mouth” and start a disaster by accident. Berserker included, somehow. The further and faster I get away from the center of this nonsense the better.”

“I see little amusement in a game that considers my name acceptable collateral damage.”

“Tell Lancer that.” Shirou drank some more tea before letting out a long sigh, “So? Have there been any suitable locations and volunteers to aid in relocating the Grail?”

It was a foolish thing to do, changing the topic of conversation like that, but the fact that he wanted to talk about long term projects indicated he had no intention of running away from his obligations. No intention to hide or disappear, not in the near future at least.

“... Nothing distinct, however I am not the one that designed or facilitated the system. A few families and groups have put in offers and requests. For the Grail and services of those here. Edelfelt possesses the documentation for review.”

But she did go through them. After what just happened, she wouldn’t risk anyone incompetent and blatantly unworthy of getting remotely close to the Grail to ruin the game this late into things.

Shirou read between the lines instantly. “Thanks. This should help speed things up.”

“It’s not just the Grail they’re after. More requests have been made for the Servant’s services, and yours. You showed too much of your hand during the trial. Several departments have already made exceptionally lucrative offers for your cooperation. Your ability to examine artifacts and the works of Fae in depth in particular had some families literally on their knees requesting for you.”

There was also the fact that that bastard Kaleidoscope showed up for once telling everyone that he had his eye on a couple of interesting prospects. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that one of them was most likely the Tohsaka girl after the reveal she used a certain mystic code during the trial.

“Why do I have a feeling half of them are potentially more lethal to me than the Grail War was?” Shirou shook his head in mock depression. “Speaking of families, do the Barthomelloi have any requests?”

“Die.”

The woman didn't hesitate in answering in the slightest. She meant it too.

Shirou laughed. Coming from Lorelei Barthomelloi, her answer was simultaneously the closest thing he'd get to hearing her genuine feelings, and her cracking a half hearted joke. "Ha. I'm afraid I'm going to have to refuse that one. Anything else?"

"..." Surprisingly, the upfront woman held her tongue for a moment. Normally she was unnaturally quick to answer any question given by someone she deemed worthy of her time.

The silence itself genuinely worried Shirou more than any of the threats she had thrown at him so far, prompting him to turn and look at her with genuine curiosity.

"Your Reality Marble."

Shirou blinked. "Yes?"

"Solomon and Edelfelt regaled anyone on it whenever it was brought up. I want to see what is so enlightening about your twisted perspective of the world."

"Oh. I suppose that makes sense." Seeing as Unlimited Blade Works was more or less the reason why he was chosen to be the Tenth, could fight against Gilgamesh, and even altered his very condition as a vampire, it was understandable that she would want to see it herself.

"No doubt you are unable to manifest it now, however-" The Vicedirector continued to issue her request while Shirou put down his cup of tea next to him.

Clack.

"-I expect you... to..." She trailed off mid sentence as the world instantly changed around her.

She was not on a Japanese household's backyard porch anymore, but standing on a reasonably large hill in the middle of an unidentifiable land with swords everywhere.

"You were mostly right. I can't do this anywhere. Or at anytime. Not in my condition. But... I suppose you could say that due to certain circumstances, I require less effort to pull this trick off where you found me on the porch." Shirou shamelessly admitted while staring off at the horizon in the distance.

It was fitting that he felt at ease enough to use his Reality Marble effortlessly here. It was the place where he started on his true path after all. Where "Shirou Emiya" truly started to be defined.

The only other place where he'd have such an easy time doing this would be at the top of the staircase in front of Ryuudouji temple. The place where the War finally ended and where he finally realized who and what he truly was in the first place.

Judging from the spike in mana and clear irritation directed in his direction, she was not amused by the surprise.

"I am impressed, dog. I did not think you had the gall to pull such a petty trick on me at this stage."

"You're the one that asked to come here." He wasn't impressed or intimidated in the slightest. "Please calm down, Vice Director. There's no danger to you here. Despite the swords everywhere, this is a place of peace and quiet. I'm still in no condition to fight anyone right now, with or without the Reality Marble. I can hold this place up for at best five minutes, and that's if I don't move from here. If anything, you're in less danger now since I didn't bring anyone else with me. Not even Saber."

The woman glanced around briefly to confirm that he was correct in that regard. It was just the two of them on the hill, and Shirou still looked like a strong wind could blow him over in his current state.

It was the look in his eyes as he stared off into the horizon that threw her off the most.

It was the wide gaze of a small child, full of awe and wonder. Of innocence and eager anticipation, as though about to be read an exciting story.

It was the tired relaxed expression of a man that was at the end of life. A satisfied life coming to an end and relief that the future was in reliable hands.

Both expressions were of the purest and genuine emotion and madness.

And yet it wasn't happiness.

It wasn't pride, accomplishment, or victory either.

The closest thing that it could be equated to was "satisfying closure" and a "relieving and pleasant recognized truth".

It was a pure, calm, peaceful, and completely disinterested insanity that even she had missed until she finally knew what to look for.

And for the life of her she could not understand the slightest bit of it.

It terrified her to her core in a way no monster had ever instilled in her before and she had absolutely no idea why, sending chills down all her nerves and urging her to get away from the boy as fast as she could.

She had never been as close to killing Shirou at any point in time than at that moment.

But she held back her instinctive reaction, just as she had done so countless times before in her life with others. It was not the time or the place for his execution, and like it or not he was right. There was a list of reasons why it was for the best not to put the mad dog down for the time being.

She was nauseated by her shortsightedness.

In her foolish greed for an exceptional agent under her direct command, she had opened up the Barthomelloi name to possibly the greatest mark of shame possible. It didn't matter that he followed orders. It didn't matter that he did his job. It didn't matter that he covered his tracks.

Her foot slid back slightly to recenter herself in her dazed state, only to brush against something just out of sight.

Initially she froze, expecting some random blade positioned to underscore some obnoxious power play in this world, but a brief glance proved that assumption wrong.

It was a golden chain lying haphazardly on the ground. An immaculate piece of work, even by her standards. So much so that she felt more nausea that it was simply lying there on the ground, its length extending down the hill...

... To the base...

... Off into the distance where it branched, and branched in a myriad of directions without end...

... Familiar directions...

Her eyes slowly turned, following one golden trail as it circled the hill she was on hundreds of meters away, where it met another length that traveled back up the hill back to the apex...

A new chill ran through her body.

"I see you have arranged more than swords to arm this world." In spite of her uncertainty, her voice and tone remained steady and imperious.

“Hm?” Shirou blinked in momentary confusion and turned to look at what she was referring to before noticing Enkidu’s arrangement. “Oh. That. I forgot that project was there. I had so much going on recently that it slipped my mind.”

She wanted to laugh in rage.

They were sitting in the center of a titanic formalcraft circle drawn out by what was clearly a Noble Phantasm, and the idiot thought nothing of it.

“Dare I ask what it does?” She managed to growl through her teeth.

Shirou shrugged as though not seeing the issue. “It’s still a work in progress. An idea I only just started to play with. The chain extends indefinitely, so theoretically I can map out any standard format formalcraft circle I want on any scale. After that the only real problem is figuring out how to power it properly. Ultimately I was thinking of maybe setting up this place with something to help out in case I came across some disgustingly powerful headache. Kiritusugu’s dad, Norikata Emiya, had some notes on hyper accelerating the time flow of the user to reach the Root. I was thinking of inverting it so that it didn’t affect myself, but the world, the Reality Marble, to hit hard enough to overcome any power difference I’m up against. Problem was it took too long to get a working circle figured out for Fina, and I didn’t need to use my Reality Marble to fight anyone in the end, so it’s just another project on the shelf for now.”

Another project on the-

Using one’s Reality Marble to effortlessly and instantly establish a near boundless formalcraft based mystery on a scale that could very well affect the planet if it is not contained within the bounds of the inner world... as a *casual side project*. A spell that could very well in itself be worthy of a sealing designation just on the magnitude alone.

Lorelei took in a deep breath through the nose and finally allowed herself to show some frustration and rubbed her temple to alleviate some of her stress. “I have forgotten who I am dealing with. I have forgotten that I am talking to a fool that lacks common sense.”

“That reaction’s kinda why I didn’t talk to the others about it yet. Pretty sure they would tear me a new one if I did. Especially Rin,” Shirou chuckled sheepishly.

The Vice Director clearly was not amused that she was not included in that list of people he didn’t want to drive mad with his ideas.

... That said...

“Why didn’t you use this world against Svelton? Were you unconfident of its efficacy?”

Shirou barked out a bitter laugh. “Ignoring the fact I know and have no experience or knowledge of directly fighting a Reality Marble with another and would probably lose from that alone?”

“Working under that presumption, yes.” Judging from her tone, it was best he didn’t talk like that to her again.

Surprisingly, the boy’s smile widened, as if savoring the very hypothetical scenario she had given him.

Within seconds, each and every sword in the world around them seemed to shudder in anticipation, making the air hum with a chorus of sharp metal from all directions.

“... If that wasn’t a problem, I probably would have won within five minutes. Maybe even killed him if he wasn’t such a coward and hid elsewhere.”

“You speak as though you know how his mysteries work and their potential.”

“And you speak as though I didn’t pick a fight with an Apostle Ancestor. And won.”

Point made.

His agreement with Altrouge to not reveal the secrets of other Ancestors was not forgotten. “Hypothetical conjecture pending, you did not do so with this world. And you didn’t do more damage.”

She was alluding to the fact that Shirou didn’t go all the way to kill Fina. He maimed, mauled and molested the ship and crew viciously, but the Captain remained *mostly* unharmed.

His smile dropped, his mood soured by the reminder, “I assure you, I’m more disappointed with the fact than you are, ma’am. But we both know why I didn’t take that liberty last night.”

Fina was indeed a disaster the world was better without, but Even with him gone, Altrouge and Primate Murder were not entities that could be managed so readily, even with the quite frankly absurd military force that had gathered last night. They, and the world, were not ready for whatever came out of that potential disaster.

The fact that the battle would only benefit Ortenrosse regardless of the victor didn’t help either.

“I didn’t take you to be ridiculous and hypocritical. You speak of caution in the same breath as you do with your reckless feats.”

“How else did you expect I survived them? I have significant evidence to prove my luck usually works against me.”

“On that I have little doubt.” She was not amused, but she refrained from thinking less of the fool for letting out a bitter snort of amusement from her words. “I assume your newfound reckless confidence comes from your newfound resources here.”

“Personally I attribute it to the exhaustion and adrenaline still in my system. And the painkillers.” Turns out that not only magic but certain drugs from the Age of Gods blew away anything modern man could ever come up with.

Or, as Lancer put it, Caster had some real good shit stocked up.

“I’ll see to it to make everyone aware that your suffering is to their benefit then.” She wasn’t joking, but the conversation did help her relax her guard in this fantasy world, allowing her eyes to finally wander. “... So, every sword you’ve seen?”

“More or less. Plus a few I spied through some of the Servant’s memories.” Shirou nodded. “Any requests?”

Lorelei spied the titanic monstrosity that had skewered Fina standing upright in the distance. A colossal slab of stone that seemed even larger than the one summoned the previous night that was a landmark in itself.

She turned and saw what could only be the immaculate golden hue of Excalibur stabbed into the earth next to Shirou, near what she could only assume as the sword in the stone, Caliburn.

Kiritsugu. Miya. Natalia. Balmung. Gae Bolg.

Numerous Noble Phantasms, tools, and mystic codes of immeasurable value littered the world around her, and yet fashioned in a way that they appeared as though their current state was as natural as could be.

All of which could be brought to her own side with the seemingly bland white blade on her hip.

“Are there any in particular I should not attempt to utilize?”

The question paused for a moment, not expecting the question before scratching his head. “Hmm. Cursed blades aside, I wouldn’t manifest anything Fae made. They’re... finicky. Some of their mysteries act like curses but not. As though the mysteries that make them are sentient, rather than the blades. The only reason why I’m confident with them is because I’ve had Avalon in me for so long. Double so for Excalibur. That one’s exceptional even by those standards for reasons even I have trouble piecing together.”

Beyond even the boy’s eyes? How curious. “Noted. Any other tool I should be wary of?”

Shirou frowned for a moment before something crossed his mind.

Before the Vice Director could even comment on it, she noticed a new blade nearby that had distinctively not been there before.

It was a curious tool looking like the cross between an ornamental staff and a ceremonial sword. The edge appeared similar in design to Avalon while a larger than fist sized blue gem was practically enshrined on the other end.

“This is?”

“Marmyadose. Forged for the Gigantomachia by Haphestos and a literal *team* of other Gods and Blacksmithing elites. Indestructible. Untarnished. Pristine and unchipped. As far as swords not forged by the earth on the reverse side go, that monstrosity is in a category of its own. Only Heracles could use it when it was first made, and through sheer coincidence over time it wound up in Saber’s hands, and she could somehow use it too. It’s easily one of the most powerful weapons here, but it doesn’t matter. I doubt anyone else could make that thing so much as budge, poor imitation or not. Myself included. I didn’t even bother trying to use it in any of my fights.”

The best he could do with it was reposition it in his world. Unlike virtually every other weapon forged in it, Marmyadose alone was the only one that would not even twitch if he tried to move it telekinetically.

Hell, he had witnessed the thing through both Saber’s and Berserker’s minds (the latter with Illya’s help and permission), and he was genuinely surprised he had managed to get enough information on it to make a half proper projection of it, not that it did him any good.

Then again, perhaps it was for the best that he didn’t get more of the weapon. He had a strong feeling that he’d probably react the same way looking at the original in person as though he saw Ea.

Needless to say, projecting outside of his body was flat out not going to happen.

“Hoh? A sword that is too great even for you to utilize?”

“Yes, which is why I’m warning you to not play with it.” Shirou’s tone grew hard. “There are mysteries in that thing that even I can’t make heads or tails out of, and I’m supposed to be able to copy, comprehend, and replicate damn near everything about any sword with a glance. Hell, I know things about Excalibur that would floor even Saber. As far as I’m concerned, Marmyadose is a masterpiece in the form of a sword shaped divine black box.”

What *really* worried him was that he had somehow managed to copy said black box into his Reality Marble at all.

Unlimited Blade Works didn't work like that.

What was copied was what was analyzed, comprehended, and broken down intimately. Even the rare Divine Weapons shoved through his brain by his eyes were no exemption from the process. Steps could be skipped to *copy* blades with projection, but the initial examination and structural grasping of them were all near unanimous with the end result of processing information and details of the weapons to the utmost limit.

It was as if Marmyadose itself somehow skipped that rule to purposefully stick in his world to wait.

For what, he didn't know. And it unnerved him, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

A small, albeit cruel smile made its way on Lorelei's lips. The boy was frustrated with the sword, and the irony was not lost on either of them. A blemish to his pride, slight as it may be.

She would heed his words and not play with this divine weapon.

She would not, however, forward as severe a warning to those in Atlas the next time she visited.

"I'll take your words into consideration then." Deeming the mystery weapon irrelevant for the time being, she got back to the crux of their conversation. "Agent Emiya. As of this moment, you are unofficially on probation."

"Sounds about right." He gave her a sidelong glance. "It's best if I had some time off too."

She didn't like the sound of that. "Is there something you have neglected to inform me?"

His lips twitched up in dry amusement. "Somewhat. Turns out that Van Fem was notably curious about who was tearing up his kidnapped daughter's insides last night. He's expecting an explanation in person at his casa in a week. It'll be a private conversation of course."

He pretended to not be affected by the murderous glare the woman was giving him.

"He may or may not also be interested in that peg leg I told him I would discuss with Fina. Conveniently, I happen to be on mandatory holiday for the time being. I've heard Cairo's relatively warm, even during the winter."

She had heard of many poor attempts for a vacation in the Association. Both as a cover and an excuse for one. This was not the worst, nor was it the best. But it sure as hell pissed her off

regardless. "... For a dog that wants to keep his secrets hidden, you are rather inept at closing your mouth."

"Maybe I've just never had anything to bark about till now." His amusement slowly died off, "Speaking of dogs, I assume we are in agreement with regards to Svelton."

"What becomes of the Eighth is of no value to me. You should be more concerned with your competition from your... peers."

Her advice wasn't unfounded. Out of all the Ancestors, Fina was the one that had the most reputable history for antagonizing the others that wasn't the head of a faction.

"The Eighth is mine. The Seventeenth is yours." There was no negotiation in his tone.

... Finally something she could understand from the boy. A mutual distaste for one of those monsters that bordered on irrationality.

"So long as we do not get in one another's way on that matter, I'm willing to accept that. Pending if the fools get in our way on their own merit of course." She didn't smile, but there was a hint of amusement in her voice.

"Don't tempt the world. It really would take it as a personal challenge at this rate."

That time Lorelei did smile slightly, though even she couldn't tell if it was due to the boy's dour expression, the fact that he genuinely believed what he said, or the trials and stress he would be forced to undertake should it happen.

Shirou looked at the horizon again, where the sunlight was notably less prominent than before. "Anything else you want to cover before we're back to the house?"

The Queen of the Clocktower looked down on the boy with an unreadable expression for several long moments.

"... Thanks to you, I have concluded I'm a cat person."

Of all the things the Emiya household expected when the pair reappeared, Shirou laughing hard enough to have tears in his eyes was not one of them.

o. o. o.

