

Chapter 71: Yield of Labors

I do not own Fate/Stay Night and stuffs.

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It had been a very long time since the Eighth Apostle Ancestor had felt this strongly about someone that he had only recently met and knew little about.

Not since he had been recently turned into a monster like the others and finding his way around their myriad of twisted and disastrous quirks. Altrouge's fae like demeanor. Chaos' dammed up tide of bestial monstrosities. Strout's near invincibility. Chahain being annoying as hell. Sumire being the lush wench that could drink his entire crew under the table. Tatari being... Tatari. Primate Murder being a damn fox dog squirrel that looked more suitable in a small child's room than the disaster that it was.

But... he had been prepared for them.

All the notable Apostle Ancestors knew and kept tabs on one another to some extent. Histories and powers. Moreso when it came to Altrouge and Ortenrosse considering they were the leaders of their factions. It enabled him to read up on them in his early years and at least get ready for the nonsense they brought about.

Or at least try.

This kid though. He was different. New. Even if Solomon had sponsored him to be the new Tenth, nobody had expected him to be this absurd.

He wasn't strong, but he knew how to hit hard enough to actually hurt.

He wasn't some spawn of long lost mystery, but he could still whip out shit from the Age of Gods literally from his body.

He wasn't a high class magus, but he still worked around and tore through the mysteries of others as though they weren't there.

He wasn't some phantom like assassin that was impossible to follow, but he was still whipping out tricks and moves that nobody caught until it was too late.

He wasn't an unstoppable martial master, but he was good enough to simply not *die* already despite the fact he had been up against the Parade.

The Pirate's mouth stretched into a snarl as his eyes scanned over the bay, to the hilt of the titanic

sword stuck down into the depths, and the teenager staring back at him with silver eyes that seemed to pierce through the night like a pair of metallic stars.

He wasn't on par with what was expected of an Ancestor... But he sure as hell wasn't human.

The Eighth Ancestor knew he wasn't the strongest of his kind. Many of his peers could easily surpass his power if forced to fight... but his mana capacity was titanic, as was his natural capability to survive and recover from the vast majority of what the world could throw at him and his crew.

It had been a long time since anyone had genuinely hurt him. Hurt any of them in a way they could not recover from.

Word of this was going to spread, one way or another. Even if he threw caution to the wind and killed the brat right now.

His undead blood flowed. His hand reached for the sword still anchored in his chest...

“Fina. That’s enough.”

He went rigid as the one voice that could reach him sighed as if chastising a child.

“... Ma’am?” He didn't trust himself to say anything else at that moment, only giving his superior a sharp look.

“We did not come here to fight a war, and I still need you to serve as my escort back home.” Altrouge lamented as though she was not on the losing side of the exchange. “Even if you do turnabout the situation and gain us our Host’s allegiance, along with his Servant, it would not do us much. The Tenth’s condition is tremulous at best, and a Servant’s priority above all else is their Master’s safety.”

Meaning if someone tried to get smart, even if Shirou was officially on Altrouge’s side, he wouldn't be able to help her, and Saber would be too busy protecting him to contribute much... or at least have that as an excuse to stay on the sidelines.

What was more concerning was that she spoke of potential near future trials at all. The risk had always been there, but for her to actually dwell on them meant that a new factor must have been recognized to give her pause.

It wasn't Barthomelloi or Solomon. They were present and known powers before this disaster had been agreed to. Notable, but nothing Primate Murder couldn't handle.

Nobody was flaunting their power here either, so it wasn't as if there was some monster

approaching...

A sudden chill traveled down the captain's spine. His eyes briefly darted over the coastline in either direction to see if he could point out anything that was amiss...

... Ah. *That* would certainly do it.

He glanced at the blonde Servant briefly, who was watching their exchange with an almost impassive mask, not that he blamed her for showing cracks at this stage. Whether or not the cracks were present due to the latest unexpected development though was anyone's guess.

The captain spat on the ground in annoyance. A crude, lowborne act, but he didn't care at this point. "Tch. Fine. Doesn't matter what the reason is. Luck or obnoxious planning. Hearing either as the truth would push me over regardless."

The spectators were a mixed bag. Some were blatantly confused as to what just happened. Some were clearly trying to figure it out. And some, like Solomon and Barthomelloi, were unreadable as usual.

"Apostle Svelton. Is that acknowledgement that-"

Saber's question was cut off by a lazy wave from the pirate. "Yeah yeah. I'm done. Your brat's got a notch in his belt. Hurry it up and tell him to put away that ridiculous True Ether sword bomb of his, or whatever it's called, will you? And this annoying prick that he stuck in my chest. I've suddenly lost my appreciation for this damn island."

"That actually worked? Since when do the kid's bluffs not get called out?" The blue Servant, Lancer if he remembered right, frowned in confusion. Not that Fina blamed him. He HAD intended to continue with the fight until Altrouge stopped him.

"Since someone finally realized that he doesn't make empty threats when everything is on the verge of going to hell. Now shut up before he changes his mind." The Servant's Enforcer Master hissed under her breath.

"Saber, if you don't mind."

"He has received word, Lady Brunestud." The Servant reported. Off in the distance, those with properly enhanced eyesight could see Shirou take his thumb off of the grip of the still fully charged sword in his hand, and slowly returned the tool to the back of his belt.

He didn't look good. With a body littered with cuts, blood, and salt, not to mention *another* gaping hole over his heart, it was a wonder that the teen could manage to stay on his two feet.

“You think he’s going to need a lift back? Winner or not, he looks like shit,” Lancer asked the question that at least a couple of them were thinking but knew better than to voice.

“For his sake he better not. I’ve been humiliated enough for one night.” Fina muttered under his breath.

“Wait, he’s turning around?” Rin narrowed her eyes to try and see Shirou slowly staggering away from shore clearer. “What’s he doing?”

Only those with the best sight there managed to spot the teen stop next to the grip of the titanic sword sticking out of the ocean and lean against it, breathing heavily. It was blatantly clear something was bothering-

He rammed his right arm into the hole in his chest.

“What on earth?!” Luvia balked, not the only one visibly surprised by his action. “Is he trying to kill himself?!”

“Considering he has to deal with Barthomelloi soon after this debacle, one might consider he’s taking the easy way out,” Merem merely tilted his head to the side in minor curiosity before realizing something before the others, “Ah. No. False alarm.”

It was hard to tell for most there, but those with good eyes watched as Shirou ripped his hand out of his chest again, throwing a rather sizeable and bloody chunk of crystal away from himself wildly, coughing and leaning heavily against the grip of the sword moments later.

“Looks like Jericho left him a present before he managed to push her out.” Altrouge observed idly. “It must have been rather distracting having that next to his lungs and heart like that. I would have done the same.”

Rin turned slightly green at how casual Altrouge had admitted she’d gorge out her chest cavity with her bare hands to get rid of a foreign object, as though it was a meaningless and effortless task to do so.

Shirou’s chest had already been a mess with one hand rammed through it. Partial vampire and Avalon or not, there weren’t many that envied the state he had rendered himself in after literally giving himself an encore. It was genuinely astounding that he was still conscious as far as most were concerned.

“Gotta give him props, he’s still standing. Not easy to just ram your hand in there like that and not white out,” Lancer’s offhand compliment didn’t go missed. “Hey Saber, you sure he doesn’t need help? It might take a while if we leave him like this.”

“Just wait.” The King of Knights firmly stated in a tone that brokered no argument, which apparently was enough for the Hound of Ireland to shrug casually and say no more.

They watched as Shirou panted and coughed up some more blood for almost twenty more seconds before he managed to recover enough to stand straight again.

He then turned to his side and lifted up his right arm, since he couldn't move his left on the count of his abused and still mutilated left pectoral muscle, and managed to muster enough mana to materialize a meter wide broad sword that just hovered motionlessly mid air with the flat of its blade faced the earth and sky respectively.

He then heavily sat on the sword as though it was a chair, the tool not sinking or budging from the action.

More importantly though, was when he leaned to his side, his arm stretched out as though to grab the titanic weapon that he had fought on-

THUMP.

The entire bay area pulsed hollowly as the massive blade retracted instantly and almost comically if it was any other situation, causing a vacuum that forced the atmosphere that immediately demanded a correction.

The effect was automatic, as the collapsing air pressure caused a miniature bomb-like effect that shattered the salt flows in the water, putting pressure on everyone's bounded fields, and as some would learn later, shattering windows and infrastructure near the coastline.

It was not nearly enough for the monsters currently present to witness Shirou, with some effort after managing to remain on his floating perch in the air, sheathe away a familiar white sword back into the scabbard on his hip.

“Not interfering my ass.” Fina muttered under his breath, giving the Vice Director a dirty glare, which was promptly ignored.

Whatever other issues and comments the Pirate was going to make was cut off as a familiar golden chain immediately materialized from one of the buildings on the docks straight to Shirou, who immediately wrapped his end around the cross guard of the improvised platform, before the golden tool began to retract itself, pulling its maker along with it.

It wasn't exactly a fancy, elegant, or flashy way to return to shore, but it was efficient and got the job done considering the teen's current condition.

“If nothing else, that stubborn child is resourceful.” Altrouge eyed the chain with some curiosity.

“If I’m not mistaken, that golden piece is another Divine Construct. One I have not seen of similar make and potency in quite some time. I wonder, is his repository merely a result of extensive travels, this war, or is something else afoot?”

“If you are insinuating the Church was involved in his development, I recommend you keep your straw grasping fantasies to yourself.” Merem waved away her accusations with a bored expression. “Had that been the case, Shirou would have used at least some tools of Catholic origin against Svelton for some extra insult to injury. Unless you desire to insult your escort by insinuating that his opponent was holding back?”

“Careful with your words Solomon. The brat’s tricks or not, I still have more than enough reserves to cause you and your monsters a few headaches.” Fina grunted, his eyes and teeth nearly shining with irritation in the night.

“Is that right, Svelton? Because from where I’m sitting, you don’t look too good.” Merem’s blue eyes shone just as intensely, if not more. “Are you certain you desire to disregard your obligations now of all times?”

Tang.

The sound of Saber tapping her invisible sword against the concrete met everyone’s ears.

“That’s enough, both of you. There has been enough pointless fighting for one night. Remember your obligations and vows, for your pride and those you consider your allies, if nothing else.”

Altrouge nodded in agreement. “Hmm. Hmm. Well said, King of Knights. Truly you know what it’s like to keep boys like that in line. You must have had plenty of experience with your forces.”

Saber didn’t bother gracing her with a response.

“Tch.” Fina inversely had trouble keeping his tongue quiet.

“That said, I’m truly most disappointed with you Solomon. Giving the boy the title of Tenth when he’s clearly more suited for the Twenty Fifth. Had Be’ze still been alive, they no doubt would have killed to have him as an apprentice.”

“We both know Be’ze *only* taught apprentices, in earnest at that. He never turned anyone personally. Why else is the Twenty Fifth seat still vacant? The only thing ever on that one’s mind was mastering the sword.” Merem rolled his eyes. The deceased Ancestor was a bizarre case where they turned into a vampire solely for more time to master swordsmanship. The moment Be’ze had supposedly reached the level of proficiency he desired, he had turned himself over to the Church, claiming he “saw what he wanted ” and that was it. “Regardless, unfortunately there were some precedents that took priority in that Louvre was the fool that turned him in the first

place. The daughter at least.”

Few noticed the glint of interest in Barthomelloi’s eyes as the conversation went on.

Fina looked like he smelled something rancid. “The brat’s not up to snuff, but he’s better than Ortenrosse’s castaway fodder. All that one did was hide in his castle and steal shit to defend himself with. Did she get a lucky bite in before getting skewered or something?”

“Hostage situation, actually. Before Lancer’s Master did the killing blow. The other two were dealt with shortly afterwards. They took particular offense to losing one of their own.” Merem shrugged. “But at the very least, Louvre was easily addressed, meaning our new friend has no noteworthy strings attached.”

All the vampires there pointedly ignored Lorelei glaring daggers at them.

Yup. No noteworthy strings whatsoever.

“Ah. That said, attempting to utilize hostages wouldn’t have worked this time.” Merem cheerfully added as though he just remembered something entertaining. “The Servants summoned for this war are quite diverse in all sorts of curious ways.”

It was at that moment that Fina realized that he couldn’t sense any of the twenty five men that he had sent out into the city earlier that day for “insurance”.

At all.

“... Crown. What did you do?”

The Twentieth Ancestor’s smile widened. “What are you talking about Svelton? I’ve been here the entire time. I assure you, I truly have not done a thing since you or your men arrived here save for providing entertaining commentary.”

It was all but blatantly obvious that something horrific had happened to the Pirate’s special forces. Something that Solomon knew would do damage just as permanent, if not long lasting, as the cursed corrupted plight of a Servant that had interfered during the battle.

“Fina. I said that’s enough. We can discuss what transpired elsewhere later.” Altrouge sighed. She really had no one but herself to blame for the additional losses. She had allowed Fina to get overconfident and send a few extra men for “surveillance”, knowing full well that the enemy was waiting for them and likely expected something like this...

Still, for another entity to potentially kill off parts of her subordinate for good so casually... what was the name of that person the boy asked to take the Servant away? Sakura?

Hmmm. Well, it probably was too late to ask about these intriguing mystery factors in this city now. She'd probably find out about most of them later regardless with a little investigation, but it was frustrating nonetheless.

She spied the boy gradually approaching, a little over halfway to shore. A bit slow for her tastes, but he was clearly exhausted and the hole in his chest was only halfway healed. His healing potential was without question founded in some mystery other than the usual method of reversing time that most Apostles utilized. Powerful, but dreadfully slow.

Still, she had an image to maintain, especially with Barthomelloi and the King of Knights watching. It wouldn't do to get impatient just yet. And if she played her cards right she might just get something favorable from this night after all.

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If he was asked later on what he felt finally returning to shore after managing to defeat the Eighth Ancestor in one on one (he'd forever consider that particular descriptive term for what happened a bad joke) combat, he'd genuinely have trouble answering.

Not simply because he was too exhausted to care.

Not because his ordeals and trials were not over after the vampires left.

Not even because he had a hole in his chest.

But primarily because he was focusing all his remaining effort on maintaining his balance sitting on his damn floating sword as it was pulled several dozens of meters over the ocean air where the winter sea crosswinds never decided on how fast, hard or even direction they wanted to blow for more than five damn seconds.

... WHILE he was too exhausted to care what happened and had a hole in his chest.

And that didn't take into account the near half a dozen finger sized salt shards still embedded in his chest cavity. He only went through ripping out the largest one bare handed and nearly killing himself all over again because it was pressed right up against his heart, making each pulse of the organ hurt so badly he felt like he was being stabbed anew.

The irony was not lost on him.

Throw in the fact that he was still overheated from pushing his circuits far beyond their normal limits, and he was sorely tempted to just dismiss the sword he was sitting on and just fall headfirst into the water in front of everyone.

“I expected that sort of petty logic from Mordred or Gallahad, but not from you Master.”

Unfortunately, he had a voice in his head that did not think so highly of such plans.

“Gotta distract myself somehow.” He couldn’t muster the effort to think clearly to talk to his Servant.

“You’re almost done. Just a bit more and this ordeal will be resolved.”

“This one, yeah.” He coughed and pretended to ignore the blood and salt on his tongue. He was going on a light seasoning diet for months after this. “Not sure I’ll be awake for the others.”

“I’ll negotiate on your behalf if necessary. I’m certain the others will also find some respite if I do so.”

“I’m too tired to be hurt or care about that last part.” Honestly, he was surprised he could feel anything enough to keep his balance at all at the moment.

Twenty seconds later, he somehow managed to keep himself on top of his makeshift transport and found himself hovering about ten meters off the ground over the docks.

Now all he had to do was fake being fine enough to resolve the meeting. Perfectly doable.

“I can’t believe I got pushed around by a brat about to keel over.” Fina snorted, giving the teen a dirty look..

Perfectly doable.

“You said it, not me.” Shirou rasped out just as sarcastically before looking to where Altrouge was... vaguely. His pure eyes could process the information where everything was, but he couldn’t see clearly since the end of the fight. “Lady Altrouge. Are you satisfied with the results of the exchange?”

“Fufu. And then some. You certainly surpassed everyone's expectations, even with the unexpected outside interference.” The young looking vampire gave him a backhanded compliment.

“And I’m certain you were satisfied and had quite the view from where you were.” Shirou’s silver eyes momentarily shone in the night in unamused annoyance.

“Fufu. Yes. I suppose I did.” The Princess of the Apostles heard his unspoken counterargument loud and clear.

Nobody missed Merem let out a chuckle and Fina frowning in displeasure.

“Then the conditions for the bet have been fulfilled?”

The Princess of Blood and Contracts’ crimson eyes glowed with mirth. Mysteries of unknown worth and depth echoed behind the scenes. “Of course. You have earned your victory, Tenth. No word or hint about your condition will leave the vicinity of me or mine. So long as it remains a secret of course. Lord El Melloi II is free to go as he pleases. And so long as you and yours maintains a level of civility with me and mine, the notable members at least. It would of course be the height of embarrassment if our accord was broken due to a misplaced undead. With that groundwork, I see no reason why I should not respect your little patch of sovereignty... Though to be certain, you ARE representing *all* the Masters and Servants currently present in this city in this arrangement, correct?”

Shirou knew exactly what Altrouge was getting at, and it was a notably colossal loophole for both sides. If any of the Servants summoned in the war came in conflict with Altrouge’s forces knowingly, then it would render their contract instantly.

“In their *current* arrangements, yes. Servants obey Masters. Should a Servant change who they serve to someone not under my influence and antagonize you, then you are free to act as you see fit... although I would be open to future negotiations depending on the circumstances.”

Meaning if the Association tried to play games and get lucky stealing a Servant, they would no longer be protected.

“Hoooh? You *are* a surprisingly stubborn and greedy child. Leaving an option to make another deal with me so soon,” The girl looked down at him as if finding him even more interesting than she did five minutes ago.

“He’s an idiot. That’s what he is.” Merem shook his head in disappointment. “Be done with this. The night is still young and we still have another royal to work around.”

Lorelei pretended to ignore being dismissed as just “another royal” in the conversation.

“Very well, if you insist Solomon. And of course boy, you swear to maintain neutrality regarding my conflict with Ortenrosse?”

“With the condition that you will support me and mine should he antagonize me, yes. That’s your fight not mine.”

For how long though was anyone’s guess.

“Then we have an accord.”

A chill ran through everyone’s spines as whatever mysteries Altrouge Brunstud possessed came into effect.

“Now then, before I leave, I do have one last whim I desire to get off my chest.” The Princess smiled innocently.

“Here we go. Just like Medb. Get ready everyone. This is exactly how these royal types get you.” Lancer got ready to move at a moment’s notice.

“Oh calm yourself, Cu Culaiin. I am merely extending an invitation to the Tenth in recognition for his position and achievements.” Altrouge waved him off.

“Invitation?” Shirou frowned in confusion. Truth be told, nobody knew exactly where Altrouge Brunstud lived these days.

“Mmm. I’m certain that your being at Aylesbury in ten years will certainly make things quite interesting.”

“NO.”

Surprising pretty much everyone there, it was Merem of all people that objected the loudest, standing up on his perch with a genuinely angered and alarmed expression on his face. “You forget yourself Usurper. Absolutely not. I could care less about the ritual and its results, but having Shirou present would lead to nothing but disaster.”

Those uninvolved could only watch in confusion, while those in the know merely watched in curiosity. This was without question the most expressive that the Twentieth had ever been since meeting him, and to be frank it was quite concerning.

Shirou on the other hand, couldn’t really tell if he should be flattered or insulted by Merem’s supposed expectation of what he would do if he was there.

“Why are you so alarmed? Given the Tenth’s relationship with Barthomelloi, I thought it was only obvious he would be appearing in some capacity at the festivities regardless.” Altrouge turned her attention to the objector. “At least this way he could be properly supervised during the events.”

“I beg your pardon, Brunstud?” Lorelei took offense to that.

“There’s a difference between having him as an outside party and allowing him to explore the facility even in a limited capacity. You vastly underestimate his capabilities as a saboteur, and it

will be too difficult to keep track of him once we all finally start to kill one another.” Merem grimaced in genuine frustration. “There’s no telling what the ramifications and fallout of the Aylesbury Ritual disrupted by Shirou Emiya would bring. It would be an uncontrollable disaster that I doubt even our combined might would be able to mitigate.”

Okay, even halfway blacked out and aching all over, Shirou still felt hurt from that one.

It was probably a good thing that he couldn’t see everyone that knew him personally unconsciously nod in agreement to what Merem was saying.

“... Or I could just not go.” Shirou half grunted half sulked from his perch, not that anyone pretended to hear him.

“Fufu. Your reaction only tempts me further, Solomon. While I do intend to complete the ritual, seeing someone disrupt Ortenrosse’s efforts of vain hospitality as viciously as you fear only intrigues me to see how exactly it could potentially turn about.” Altrouge further teased, “Or is there another reason you do not wish for your sponsored friend to attend so adamantly?”

“I have Saber.” Shirou deadpanned, pointing out his Servant, who still had a notably powerful holy sword.

Fina nodded in reluctant agreement. “Eh, he does have a point ma’am.”

“Fina hush. Had the King of Knights truly been a cause for concern, Solomon would have put in efforts to have her addressed by now. Besides, her vow with Cath Palug works both ways. She cannot interfere with my activities so long as it does not interfere with her Master.”

Saber frowned at being dismissed so easily by the vampire, but kept her calm. Whatever this ritual was, it probably would interfere with Shirou’s life in some capacity, but there were clearly limits on what was permissible and what wasn’t that had yet to be clarified.

Still there were limits.

“As much as I would enjoy listening to your banter, as stated before, we have a schedule to keep. And my Master is not in the most ideal of conditions to humor hosting this charade for much longer.” Saber spoke up with authority that brokered no middle ground. “If there is an underlying purpose to this, Lady Brunestud, please make it.”

“Fufu. My apologies King of Knights. I was so excited I forgot that our adorable new and young inductee has tuckered himself out.” Altrouge giggled, looking at Shirou with mock pity, not that the latter could muster up the energy to care at that point. “The Aylesbury ritual is a rather elite and formal event regardless. A haphazard invitation would not do, in hindsight. I will be sure to forward Lord Tenth his proper missive when the time comes. I expect yours to be delivered at

roughly the same time, Lady Barthomeloi.”

The Queen of the Clocktower frowned slightly, but did not say anything. Everyone knew she planned on “attending” the ritual in her own way when it happened, but from how Altrouge was acting it was as if the noble’s appearance wasn’t simply expected but an integral part of the event itself.

Even worse was that it sounded like her future appearance was akin to an open secret among the monsters. They were treating her as if she was some sort of amusing toy.

Unacceptable.

“Oh dear. It appears I’ve prattled on too much.” Altrouge unapologetically pretended to only just Lorelei’s temper slowly begin to peak. “Fina. I think it’s best if we leave before we overstay our welcome. Our host has other guests to attend to.”

“Bout time. Haven’t had a terrible dockside gathering like this in years.” The Captain sighed and rolled his shoulders only to flinch as he remembered he still had a sword in his chest cavity. “Oi brat. You mind?”

A dry laugh later, the offending tool vanished effortlessly into motes of mana in the sea breeze, allowing the vampire’s wound to heal up almost instantly.

“Much better.” Fina then proceeded to spit out a large glob of blood onto the docks, if a large glob of blood was nearly black and writhing as if it was some sentient abomination. “Ugh. Was holding that vile thing back practically all night.”

“How lovely.” Lorelei sneered.

“Wait.”

Surprisingly, it was Shirou of all people that stopped the monsters from leaving.

“Yes? Is something amiss that you still wish to address?” Altrouge asked curiously.

“You haven’t received my gifts yet.”

Almost everyone looked at the teen in genuine befuddlement. The same child that had all been eager to fight Fina in a fight to the death, was now offering the visiting party *gifts*?

“I beg your pardon?”

“This ordeal was unwanted and infuriating, but I meant it when I said I do not intend to be your

enemy Brunestud. This meeting was one to establish neutrality, and I intend for it to at least be somewhat amicable.” Shirou, though tired, firmly stated his case. “You came here from likely halfway across the world to humor me, and to have you leave after being here only a little over an hour without some form of hospitality leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

Not that I can taste anything but salt at the moment. He mentally amended.

“Oh? Oh my. And here I thought I would be given the cold treatment while here. You really are a sweet little thing, aren’t you?” Altrouge genuinely looked flattered and happy by the revelation. As if she was receiving a flattering gift that she had not been expecting just for showing up.

“Ma’am, it’s likely a trick. Don’t buy it.” Fina warned.

“It’s not a bomb you child.” Shirou rolled his eyes. “Saber, if you would please get the boxes we brought earlier.”

The Servant nodded with a slight frown and walked inland between several of the undamaged warehouses nearby.

“Your Servant doesn’t look too thrilled about this development.” Altrouge noted.

“She was just hoping to have a few for herself.” Shirou replied.

“You gotta be kidding me. Please tell me he didn’t.” Rin muttered to herself in genuine disbelief, looking up at Shirou as though he was a bigger reckless idiot than he already was.

“You know the odds better than anyone here, Tohsaka.” Luvia chided halfheartedly, likely guessing the answer to the question

“For herself?” For the first time, Altrouge was completely clueless as to what was going on.

“What sort of trinket would a Servant desire? They are ephemeral beings. Their times on earth are as mayflies.”

“Mayflies can still find things to enjoy while alive.” Merem shook his head as Saber came out with eight stacked wooden boxes in her hands, and gave his friend a dry look. “Shirou, you truly are too good of a person sometimes.”

“Ah. Of course he would.” Waver sighed in exasperation, recognizing the boxes for what they were.

The departing princess frowned, finally having enough of being seemingly the only one left out of the loop. “I am starting to grow annoyed with this joke. What is this embarrassing gift I am receiving? Am I being mocked?”

“Calm yourself. It’s just specially prepared meals for your journey.” Shirou sighed.

The immortal girl blinked alongside her pirate subordinate. “Food? Is that all? Your grand offering is a mere snack?”

“He’s better than you think. He’s more than a suitable chef for those of our position. You should have seen what he made when the Grail War ended. He likely went all out making your gift, in spite of my advice that you were not worth it. Truthfully I’m somewhat jealous. That’s more than what he usually makes anyone, special guest or not.” Merem lamented, as though pitying her shortsightedness and lamenting the meals wasted on her.

“The boxes are insulated and temporally isolated to keep everything fresh and hot until opened. There’s markings on the side to indicate what’s in each.” Shirou added absently “Since you’re an Apostle I kept the meats and meals as fresh as I could for the most part. Assorted fish and Hida Prefecture beef sashimi for the top six boxes. The seventh is cooked Wagyu, and the bottom is vegetarian, just in case.”

“Shirou, we really have to talk later about your habit of trying to use your cooking to solve problems you can’t blow up.” Rin did not even try to hide her embarrassment with her hand covering her face.

“... It does work occasionally.” Archer reluctantly defended not only his counterpart but himself as well.

“So help me Archer do NOT make COOKING the line you are willing to cross to defend him for.”

“How do we even know those things aren’t a trap? They could be rigged or poisoned for all we know.” Fina frowned.

“I don’t waste food.” Shirou bluntly stated, clearly insulted.

“As much as I wish he’d make an exception, he’s telling the truth. My friend is rather stubborn about his personal hobbies like that.” Merem half laughed half deadpanned, clearly not exactly sure how to feel about the teen’s stubborn streak.

“Do you want my hospitality or not, Merem?” Shirou flatly warned with a hint of annoyance.

The Twentieth held up his remaining hand up in surrender. “You’ve made your point and I concede. What you do with your cuisine is your decision.”

Fina snorted in bitter amusement. “Feh. Should have known. Not much is a bigger pain than a

chef with an ego that actually has some skill with a knife.”

With a heavy shake of his head, the Pirate called forth a trio of culinary specialists from Spain that he nabbed during the cold war and ordered them to take the boxes from the Servant. He wouldn't dare try to sneak anything from his leader, but he would offer to have some of his experts judge the brat's results to see if this nonsense was actually up to standards.

“Fufu. Hahaha!” Altrouge on the other hand, couldn't help but let out a loud laugh once again. “How ridiculous! How many times must this child continue to surprise me? A handmade set of meals personally from another Ancestor? How long has it been since something absurd like that truly took place? What more, I can tell it from your gaze. It was done somehow without the slightest hint of pandering like the other lowborn, but simply out of expectation.”

The Princess of the Dead Apostles turned her attention to Saber. To Lorelei Barthomelloi. To Merem Solomon. To Waver Velvet. To Caster, Lancer, even Fina. All the while her smile never falling.

“How long has it been since someone as peculiar as yourself managed to reach such heights? So strongly associated with such diverse and interesting actors? And yet you somehow *thrived* instead of collapsing under the weight and maddening motions of the world while being so blatantly honest with who and what you are? Aaah. I see it. You are the rare sort that none would notice under the stagnation of mundane society, blending with monotony effortlessly. Yet simultaneously, an unpredictable disaster that all involved parties be wary of, should you decide to get involved with any worthwhile event. An extreme of both worlds. The breed whose existence and potential almost always slips through the cracks of history long before being recognized and polished to reach its true priceless luster. No wonder so many have overlooked your existence unless they stumble literally over the madness leftover from the trials you were forced to overcome. Truly, I am jealous of Solomon for being the first to find a treasure like you.”

Shirou grit his teeth, but held his tongue as she turned her attention back up to him, crimson red pools of mirth shifting about with the silent weight of an ocean's current. He couldn't care less about thriving. He just wanted everyone he cared about to survive intact and happy.

“Perhaps it is the Counterforce at work with the onset of Aylesbury that has spurred on your development? Or someone new deciding to take part in our games? No matter. It may be for a short time, or centuries. However long it may be, you have my acknowledgement as the Tenth, Shirou Emiya. A child you may be, but without question you hold the potential to dictate where the world will travel, intentionally or not, the moment you step on the stage. I look forward to seeing you in the future.”

All the nonsense about him gaining power and turning into whatever the hell he happened by sheer happenstance was more of a headache than a boon, and now the world's supposed fate

would rest on his shoulders again? And he was supposed to be happy about it?

He truly would never understand how these monsters think.

“Fina. Come. Our business here is concluded. Let’s go home.” With a playful smile that told everyone that she would see them again, Altrouge Brunestud turned around and walked back inside the yacht. “Tonight has been a surprisingly entertaining event, everyone. I eagerly await the day when we can reconvene and have more fun in earnest. Until next time.”

The ship disembarked.

“Lorelei Barthomelloi.”

It turned around.

“Merem Solomon.”

The cracked salt flats in the water parted before the boat effortlessly.

“Waver Velvet.”

It reached the open waters.

“Arthur Pendragon.”

It faded from view in the mists of the winter night ocean.

“Shirou Emiya.”

At the pressure of the Princess of the Dead Apostles vanished, the sword that Shirou was floating on finally faded away, allowing its maker to fall lifelessly to the ground, already unconscious.

o. o. o.

Illya didn’t burst through the gateway that bordered the Emiya and Fujimura estates, but she wasn’t moving at a brisque walk either.

The sight of her Mother turned Servant radiating far more mana than normal, sitting in a pool of ether and curses, and cradling two familiar yet brittle pieces of metal while wailing out her father’s name didn’t soothe her nerves.

“Can someone please tell me what is going on? In detail if possible?”

Rider appeared at her side quietly. Even with a blindfold on, her concern was apparent. “I suspect you are also experiencing some recoil from the Grail.”

“If by that you mean I am straining to subdue the sudden craving for mana and my body partially shutting down, yes.” The albino scowled. “Where did mama get all this mana from?”

“I’m not certain, but I suspect that Shirou may have overlooked how deep the relationship between Irisviel and the curse his personal swords carry.” The pair looked over to where Sakura herself was on the porch, panting heavily and leaning against one of the walls. “We were finishing up the rest of the vampire’s tools when supposedly Irisviel acted independently in reaction to overuse of the curse and a small influx of mana. Fortunately, Sakura noticed and the issue was addressed to some extent, but not before Irisviel supposedly absconded with some of the vampire’s power.”

“You call nearly two Servant’s worth of mana *some*?!” Illya hissed in genuine anger before flinching as the stress put undue pain on her frail body.

“It’s fine.” Sakura cut her off, even though she herself was breaking out in a cold sweat and could barely look up. “The Grail, Illyasviel. Can you feel it?”

The original grail sacrifice of the Fifth war scowled before humoring Sakura’s request. Truth be told, it was hard not to notice the Grail’s machinations within her body. She didn’t know how or why, but ever since Irisviel appeared, it was as if all of those who served as Lesser Grails had become innately linked to the system. When an influx of power came into one, the others felt it. Marjatta was the most prominent example, as the poor fool was always “bursting”, even as the mana stored in her body was slowly... bleeding...

“The mana in the system is flowing out?” She blinked in genuine surprise. Technically, they all knew that Caster had been working on addressing the power the Grail had already accumulated, but even so, they did not expect for the large influx of power just now to be emptying out this quickly.

It wouldn’t resolve soon. Releasing absurd quantities of corrupted energies into the environment haphazardly would cause even more problems for everyone, but it was going down noticeably. And with it, the pressure and strain on their bodies was relaxing as well.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. It was my fault. I couldn’t control myself...” Irisviel’s wailing grew slightly louder as she hugged the rusted swords in her hands so tightly that she started to bleed.

Illya held back her feelings for her mother and reached out to her other parent figure. “*Papa?*”

“*As much as I want to help, someone needs to keep watch around the property until everyone else returns.*” Assassin’s controlled but genuine distaste for the situation bled into her. “*The*

fighting has stopped and the vampires have left, but I'm not taking chances. Keep Berserker at the ready just in case. All things considered, we really are at our weakest at the moment."

He was right. Shirou was probably beaten up to kingdom come, again, Illya and Sakura were walking targets for anyone that wanted to take Berserker, Assassin, and Rider out of the equation, and everyone else was at shore.

"Oi. Calm down brat. I don't know what's going on, but you're still Touko's client."

Oh right, and then there was this woman.

Illya shivered as she looked up to see a pair of *rainbow* Mystic Eyes looking down at her from a short distance away. How on earth Touko Aozaki had managed to find an unknown disaster on this level was anyone's guess, but she wasn't going to test her luck.

Even after everything she had experienced in this war. Even with the Grail and Angra Mainyu frothing in the back of her mind...

She could never equate anything compared to the sense of pure *death* she felt from the guest.

"Hey Shiki. Looks like you went on one hell of a walk." Speaking of the red haired devil, the woman making her new body casually walked up from behind, lighting up a new cigarette.

"Anything fun?"

"Not really. If anything they reminded me of you. Only with guns." Shiki shrugged as if it wasn't a big deal.

"Hah! You don't say? Hope you took care of them. The world has enough trouble with just me running around."

"That's exactly what I was thinking. Your worker's comp needs updating."

"I'll pay for your food for the rest of the trip, you lazy excuse for a bodyguard." Touko puffed out some smoke and waved her deadly assistant off carelessly before eyeing Irisviel curiously.

"Well then, that certainly explains a few questions I had. And gives me a few more to waste my spare time on. That black muck she's sitting in doesn't look too sanitary. I hope someone plans on cleaning that mess up soon."

"It'll be gone by tonight." Sakura stated factually, which was more or less saying that she'd take care of it. All things considered, she probably was the best person in their group to get rid of the Grail sludge without complication.

"Good. I'd charge extra if you asked for help. I don't do surprise mess jobs like this at base pay."

“You?” Shiki asked in a ‘I’m the one that does all the hard work’ tone.

Touko rolled her eyes before glancing at Illya. “Word of advice, get a secretary to handle the bullshit if you ever become an entrepreneur.”

“I have a Berserker.”

“Good enough.” The woman looked around skeptically. “Now, I’m not one to pry into my client’s business, but am I to expect any more curious nights to take place while I’m here that I should know about? Or any additional visitors to the city of notable reputation?”

Illya opened her mouth to respond, only for the front door of the house to open loudly and the sound of a large group of people to cut their conversation off.

Quickly coming into view was Saber with a beaten, bloody, and unconscious Shirou in her arms, followed by Rin, Luvia, Bazett, Waver, Lancer, Caster, and...

“Ah. I guess there is.” Touko’s smiled in a way that clearly went beyond the norm if the faint stress lines and chewing on her cigarette were any indication. “Long time no see, Vice Director.”

“Aozaki.” Lorelei’s cold demeanor was both expected, and chilling. “I see the boy was impatient as usual.”

“And now I know how he found me in the first place.” Without any hesitation, the Blue’s sister dropped her cancer stick and snuffed it out with her foot. “Back to the shed, Shiki. You don’t want any part of whatever is gonna be said here. It’s not worth it.”

“Hoh? She’s that scary huh?” The young woman chuckled, pushing herself up from the wall and following her boss. “Too bad. I’m actually kinda curious what’s going on now.”

“Not our problem. Not our paycheck.”

“Speaking of...”

“Not now Shiki. Shed.”

“Fine. Fine.”

The Fuyuki group watched as the pair walked off of the premises in awkward silence before Lorelei glanced at her coconspirators with a no-nonsense expression. “Are there any other distractions any of you desire to address before we get to business?”

“Caster needs to heal Shirou.” Saber stated factually.

“I assumed your artifact and his condition would have sufficed to address that in time.” The Vice Director dismissed the Servant’s concern.

“Before my Master passed out, he informed me that there are still salt crystals embedded in his chest. He only managed to remove the largest before returning to shore.” The Servant held her ground firmly. “While I am not an expert in jewelcraft, I have witnessed enough to surmise that leaving any nearby unaddressed be ill advised.”

Considering the fact that crystals could be used for all sorts of feats like channeling power, becoming bombs, or even say, spy and record nearby conversations, Saber’s point could not be contested.

“Fine then. Get on with it.” The Noble was not pleased with the counterargument before finally taking notice of Irisviel.

“What on earth...” Waver frowned as he finally got a look at the woman as Caster took Shirou away.

“What about her then? Are we to procrastinate further on her behalf? Or is it fine to contaminate this property with the sludge she emits?” Lorelei pulled no punches.

“I can handle the curses.” Sakura panted. “It’s the mana she took from the vampire that’s the problem. The strain it’s putting on those with connections to the grail is, distracting.”

“And why should we not address the issue that she is now and rid ourselves of the headache?”

Chack chack.

Instead of any verbal answer, the sound of a gun being reloaded was heard from the rooftops, making everyone turn slightly to see Assassin sitting on top lazily with a machine gun in hand.

“I thought you said you were out taking care of the area.” Illya asked warily.

“Archer filled in.” He mentally answered.

“I see you show your filial piety at the worst times, Kiritsugu Emiya.” Lorelei glared at the Servant.

“I’ll take care of her if she’s a problem.” He stated coldly, brokering no argument.

“You sound certain.” She questioned his proclamation.

“It’s not my first time.” His frigid tone turned glacial.

“Kiritsugu. Kiritsugu. I’m sorry. My darling. I... I...” All the while, Irisviel’s constant soft sobbing echoed in the background.

Lorelei clicked her tongue in annoyance and broke eye contact first. “... I do not see why the hesitation. Death would be a blessing in the state she is in. Ensure the pointless pain you two endure remains only yours, Servant.”

Kiritsugu merely put his gun down.

Lancer couldn’t help but smirk slightly. The woman might be a frigid bitch, but apparently even she couldn’t hold a candle to the pit in hell that was Assassin when pissed.

“While I’m grateful that Caster found a way to disperse the gathered mana, I’m worried about how quickly it’s leaving the Grail.” Illya grimaced, clearly putting in an effort to change the topic of conversation. “The rate is not insignificant, and with how corrupted the system is...”

“It’s fine. The mana flow of the grail is not disseminating to the leylines or the outside. Caster fashioned a secondary makeshift mana repository for the Grail.” Luvia alleviate her concerns. “All the mana accumulated through the system proper is being siphoned into it gradually, where it can be removed and dealt with safely without harm.”

“I find it hard to believe that you were able to find something that can manage such quantities of mana on such short... ah.” The Vice Director held back an annoyed click of her teeth as she figured out the answer to her question.

“Dare I ask what is the matter, Vice Director?” Bazett asked warily.

“I believe she merely came to the same conclusion I did.” Waver crossed his arms. “There aren’t many mystic codes or tools that are readily available that can handle mana of such quantity and quality, but then again, we are in the home of someone that has only recently proven to be capable of making such tools at will.”

Rin gave Luvia an incredulous look. “You’re joking. You’re using a copy of *Balmung* as a makeshift battery for the Grail?”

“Three, actually.” The Finnish girl had the decency to not look anyone in the eye. “Shirou informed us that the sword actually has the capacity to be a Holy and Demonic blade, making it suitable to contain the curse’s power to some extent. It was actually necessary to an extent, as the repeated experimentation helped familiarize both of us with the sword’s intricacies and limitations. Having an easily replaceable modular siphon link to the Grail instead of trying to

directly alter its mysteries and internals right off the bat has made containing the overall system and corruption significantly easier to facilitate with the current resources, improvised as it may be.”

“And you just so happened to use such a convenient blade as a buffer in case something went amiss right from the start?” The Vice Director was skeptical of her explanation.

“It was Shirou’s idea. He was... *exceptionally* skeptical that everything would transpire smoothly,” Luvia admitted with a slight grimace. “Many of our conversations over the past week were potential worst case scenarios on what could go wrong, be it with the Apostles, the Grail, or even yourself. While we didn’t anticipate Irisviel interfering with the fight against the Eighth, the possibility of her obtaining mana or ambushing another Servant for mana wasn’t ruled out.”

“At least he didn’t try to potentially solve the problem with explosives this time,” more than one person in the room thought with bitter amusement.

“And in the case that the boy lost control over himself to the corruption in him?” Lorelei asked.

“I’d kill him. And if not me, then someone else here.” Saber stated factually with no hesitation. “That had been established since before the War concluded and something he strongly demanded without exception.”

“Good. At least he had the sense to not be a coward.”

Her words did not sit well with the others.

She didn’t care.

Lorelei Barthomelloi looked around at her audience.

At the building she was currently in.

At the workshop where the Servant treating Shirou Emiya had absconded.

“I will be blunt. I am certain that all of you have a whole litany of reasons why you still meander around the fool. Debts, vows, attachments, agreements. And I do not care for them. Those are your reasons, not mine.”

She took a seat at the head of the ornate table in the living room and looked at them all expectantly.

“Tell me. After all the headaches he has caused. After all the debts, trials, and ordeals he has associated with the Barthomelloi name. After knowing the risks he poses to the Association, the

Barthomeloi, and possibly, as hilarious as it sounds, the world. Why should I tolerate the disastrous boy's continued existence?"

Given enough time, any member of the group likely would have had a suitable enough answer to start a conversation.

However, that did not take place, as before anyone had the chance to open their mouths, the sound of a door bursting open down the hallway caught everyone's attention, followed by a pained and agonized scream.

Luvia was the first to recognize the source. "Marjatta!"

o. o. o.

Sitting at the table with a cup of tea in hand, Altrouge merrily pondered the night's events and revelations.

"That child certainly surpassed expectations, didn't he, Fina?"

"That's one way of putting it, ma'am." The Captain scoffed.

"You're just mad because he actually hurt you... no, he could have *killed* you if he wanted. You underestimated him." His superior giggled. "How long has it been since we could say someone could accomplish that?"

It wasn't just that twisted sword of his that could kill the men under his command, a sword that could have easily been the one rammed into his chest instead of the one that locked him in place.

It was the fact that the boy had known from the start that Fina had cheated in their fight.

His main body was still just that, regardless of the shape it took.

But any ship of notable size had lifeboats. A symbol of the crew and ship's survival if not in body then in spirit.

And what better way to ensure that a lifeboat remained intact than to have it docked on shore... with the Princess of the Dead Apostles and Primate Murder on its bow no less?

"Those blasted eyes... I'd rather spit on Rita then ask a favor, but so help me I wouldn't hold back toasting the wench if she manages to pluck the damn things out of the brat's skull one day."

"Fufu. They were a lovely shade of silver, weren't they? Sharp, yet soothing. Not like the gaudy gold that we see everywhere nowadays." Honestly, she didn't care much for Mystic eyes. Unless

they were of the same grade as the Mystic Eyes of Death Perception, most were akin to mere organic mystic codes to her. The boy's Pure Eyes on the other hand were far more interesting as far as she was concerned. She was curious to know what he saw when he looked at her. A monster? A child? Or something else altogether?

"Feel free to go for him. He's clearly your type. Not mine." The pirate rolled his own eyes.

"You would know."

"Feh..." They had had this argument before. Despite her apparent age, Altrouge was no stranger to pleasures of the flesh. That said, Fina was blatantly more active and interested in than she was, which oddly enough resulted in many nights wasted on the two gossiping on personal preferences and experiences. "... Speaking of guilty pleasures, don't think I missed your teasing of Solomon, and his reaction at the end there. What was that about? Why invite the brat to Aylesbury?"

"Hmm? You mean you didn't notice?" Altrouge's smile turned hungry before taking another sip of tea. "Our newly crowned Tenth is more valuable than you think, Fina. A walking treasure, if you will."

"Treasure? You mean other than the nonsense that he's some half breed that doesn't need to feed?" The word instantly had the Pirate's attention. "His swords were something, sure, but they were all projections that would fade away eventually... except..."

"Except for his body." Her smile widened into something genuinely hungry. "A body that can bring a steady supply of metals, leathers, oils, and even *Divine Constructs and Pure Ether* from the Age of Gods into the world if treated properly. A body that has the potential to possibly replicate any form of material there is so long as the conditions for it are met. I suspect even blood."

"Blood?" Fina looked at her skeptically before putting two and two together and paling drastically. "Wait, no, you couldn't possibly be implying Solomon was actually trying to use him as a--"

"Fufu. No. As traitorous as he is, the Twentieth is still loyal to one and only one cause in the end, and he would not sully it by using that child as an imitated stopgap. But as a tool in the future, who can say what the possibilities are?"

The captain smirked and crossed his arms. "Hmm. I see. No wonder he panicked when you invited the brat. Even if Solomon doesn't have something planned, anybody that gets a good look at the kid at Aylesbury will. Which will be a cockup for him either way."

"Indeed. Which is why we may spend some vacations over the next decade doing some treasure

hunting as preparation. Partially so you can recover in time to fulfill your role in earnest again.”

Fina’s smile died as quickly as it came. “Sounds like fun.”

“Don’t pretend I didn’t notice. Child or not, you were harmed more than any anticipated. We both were at fault for underestimating him, as much as it hurts to admit it. Even I did not suspect it would devolve so much, let alone lose the wager, even if it wasn’t ultimately that great of a loss. The remnants of that Divine Curse will take the most effort to cleanse, with or without Jericho’s assistance. As you are now, you will be spending quite some time avoiding your peers to prevent any ideas from spreading. I need you at your best for the festivities.”

“Glad to hear you are so concerned about me, miss.” Walking in without any decorum or care, Jericho limped slightly to the table with an annoyed drawl.

The vampire had clearly seen better days. Even if she had plenty of time to at least look healed, she was still covered in a litter of cuts and scars that she didn’t have before, including a new fresh gash that went from the middle of her face down her front and under her clothes.

Most notable of all was that her right arm below the elbow was missing.

“Of course I also meant you, Jericho. You did more work than anyone tonight.” Altrouge didn’t miss a beat assuaging the newcomer. “How are you faring?”

“Like I went at least three rounds against Strout.” The middle eastern woman spat to the side and pulled up a chair. “That boy’s armed to the teeth in all sorts of vile pieces. Where in the taint of Jerusalem did Solomon find that little shit?”

“The city we just visited, if he can be believed?” Altrouge giggled, eyeing the missing limb. “Do you need any help with your arm?”

“Not sure if you can do anything.” With a frown, the first mate allowed her arm to fully recover to its full glory, only...

Shink!

Shink shink shink shink shink-

SPLAT!

The moment the arm had fully manifested, it started to splinter and erupt with blades spawning over nearly every inch of flesh starting from her hand down until its owner cut it off once again without hesitation. The disembodied mess continued to writhe and jerk around as at least a dozen more sharp implements violently burst out of the flesh until it calmed down.

“Oh my. That is a troublingly persistent Reality Marble curse you’ve received.” Altrouge, if anything, looked even more entertained and excited than before. “I never would have expected that young child to be aggressive enough to pull something like that off.”

“He’s the opposite of the Captain. The stubborn fool’s found a place to “stop” whereas Captain can’t sit still for five minutes.” Jericho sighed and leaned back in her seat. Holding up her butchered limb, she watched as a crystalline nub formed on the stump before slowly growing into a smooth, almost beautiful clear white replica of her original limb. “It’s small wonder he naturally loathes the captain. The two be akin to oil and water. Small wonder your mutual stupidity was contagious enough to make me act like a fool during the fight. Your blasted ego damn near made me run face first into the brat’s blades a dozen times.”

“Fufu. A lesser variant of an unstoppable force and an immovable object. It’s almost embarrassing how silly your relationship can be boiled down to. Though that only makes it more interesting in the end.” Altrouge giggled.

“I find nothing amusing about getting embarrassed by a child many times my inferior, ma’am.” Fina pouted.

“Oh? I find nothing embarrassing about it. Especially considering the interesting implications of your relationship.” Altrouge played with her silverware, moving her knife. “If given the choice, most would likely desire to be the unstoppable object in a matchup in a mundane contemplation of the superior brute force. However, if you turn the perspective around and view things from a different angle, a deeper, more curious question could be asked with greater implications.”

“And said question would be?” Jericho asked.

“Simple,” The dark haired girl smiled, “Which bears more significance? The unstoppable object that has finally stopped? Or the immovable object that has finally moved? An unexplainable phenomenon in perpetual motion defying the laws of motion and logic finally falling into the realm of comprehension and limits. Or, the nigh perpetual constant that remained unmarred and irrefutable, finally giving way, either due to outside influence, or under its own unknown rules? Fufu. No doubt if asked from that perspective, the average human or sentient being would answer that the latter is a more concerning phenomenon, if only due to the fact that there is little that the human mind can firmly understand under the category of the former, and heavily and intimately relate to of the latter. A protective wall. A friendly army. A loving parent. A home. The loss or derivation of those things essentially equates to an irrefutable change of the world itself on a founding level to the generic sentient life form. As such, one could say that “an immovable object that has moved” is truly both an innately terrifying sight and an omen of an imminent disaster. In that sense, our dear Lord Tenth could be considered something of a harbinger. Wherever he shall appear unexpectedly, disaster is sure to take place.”

Ah, but at the end, whether or not the “immovable object’s” derivation would result in it being the omen itself or merely a crumbling bulwark in said omen’s wake was the real question that she was curious of in this analogy.

“... Ma’am, are you implying that I more or less bring out the worst in that annoying little brat just by being near him?” Fina made a nauseous face that said that he couldn’t tell whether to be disgusted, embarrassed, or enraged.

“Who knows? You cannot say that it isn’t interesting though. My analogy was not to lessen what you represent, Fina, but to underscore the significance of the effect your existence has on the child.” Altrouge took another sip of tea. “Personally, I can’t wait to see what your rematch will be like. It can provide some great side entertainment for the Aylsebury gathering before things finally go into motion.”

“Sounds like what you two have going on. Brat looked like the stubborn type that got pissed whenever he was disturbed.” Jericho shrugged. “His Reality Marble was eerily “peaceful quiet”. The kind that makes it easy to fall asleep in, even with all those damn swords all over the place. It was only when I started fighting back that things got nasty. If... no, when we fight the brat again, I don’t recommend letting him manifest it, Captain. It’s not a place the crew would fight well in. Like it or not, we’d be outarmed there. I don’t know how, but the boy’s armory puts even ours to shame.”

“You’re certain about that?” Fina asked skeptically.

“Noble Phantasms to the horizon Captain. Each one different. Don’t ask me how. All I can tell is that it’s clear he hasn’t mastered all of them yet. The longer he’s free to play, the more trick’s he’ll have and throw. Literally.”

“Tch. We really should have done more reading on the damn brat. If that’s true then something’s up. There’s no way that the Association, or anyone has that many weapons of that caliber just lying around for that kid to lay eyes on.” The captain grunted.

“Another task to spend your time on while we travel then.” Altrouge shrugged the task away as though it was meaningless to her.

Fina sighed and sagged in his chair. It was going to be a long decade, “Speaking of unexpected reasons for losing... should we be worried, Ma’am?”

“No. It isn’t the time or the place for that ordeal to raise its ugly head. So long as I respect the line in the sand, so will they. For now at least.”

“Mmm. At least we avoided *that* headache. You think that was planned as well?”

“Of course not. The boy may be reckless but his moves are calculated. Barthomelloi was indeed a surprise, but they have a shared relationship. There is room for negotiation between them...”

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“My sister on the other hand, well, there is little that can restrain the impulses of that mad beast.”

“Lady Arcueid. It is a pleasure to speak with you again.”

Arcueid Brunestud, the White Princess, scoffed at the false priest as they stood on top of a highrise building overlooking the docks from a kilometer away. “Rat of Solomon. The same cannot be said, as per usual.”

“It is quite understandable, my lady. My master sends his regards.” Merem’s Left Arm bowed deeply.

“We both know I did not come here for regards. Had the situation been any different, I would have already killed at least half of your accomplices by now. You have some nerve, hosting such an event so close to where I reside.”

“I assure you, a mere coincidence. The current Tenth was raised, and still lives in this city, long before being turned. A child even by human standards, but one with potential, and dignity. He is merely protecting his home as best he can. Apostle or not.”

“His territory, you mean.” Her eyes narrowed.

“His home.” The rat corrected. “The common standards of nobility leave a poor taste in his mouth. It should please you to know that he is unlike the others to the point that he finds being an Apostle nothing more than a chore he could do without if possible. The goals, aims, and instincts of our kind do not appeal to him at all. So long as his hand is not forced, it is liable to easily forget his existence in its entirety as that of a human. A powerful and curious one, yes, but one that can be dismissed in its entirety for the most part.”

“And that being?”

The sentient arm chuckled and shrugged helplessly. “The same as most living beings. Don’t cause any trouble near his home and his close ones, and he’s perfectly fine ignoring whatever happens. By all rights, he is both humble and boring as far as Apostles go.”

“Humble and boring does not wield Divine curses and cripple Fina Blood Svelton.”

“Humble and boring is what he prefers in a world as peculiar as ours where the hungry and

ambitious thrive, m'lady. Or rather, he hungers and is ambitious *for* humility and boredom. He is more than willing to settle matters diplomatically if the opportunity presents itself and the terms are reasonable. As does my master.”

Arcueid's beautiful visage was marred with momentary distaste and annoyance, refusing to look down at the briefcase that had been offered in exchange for her presence and her stayed hand. The case that contained a third of her stolen hair.

“I have tolerated Merem Solomon's ridiculous actions and undesired assistance for decades, however this is the first time I have truly contemplated hunting him down. Regardless of intentions, the idea that you thought you could buy my services with what was stolen from me like some human crosses a line.”

“Fufu. Please be rest assured, your priceless hair would have been returned regardless of what had transpired tonight, m'lady. We merely assumed that you would appreciate witnessing tonight's festivities and forgive the circumstances currently surrounding my lord and our friend the Tenth. Or was the sight of your Sister's confidant being humiliated by a junior in front of not only his superior, but Barthomelloi not to your satisfaction?”

“No. The fact that he survived was not.”

“Ha. A sentiment we all share, I assure you, but concessions had to be made to ensure that tonight resolved with minimal headaches,” The rat giggled in amusement. “If nothing else, please recall that this opportunity to return your property only came about in exchange for our friend willing to expose himself on my Lord's behalf... as well as revealing what the usurper is willing to do to assuage her concerns with the Aylesbury Ritual so close.”

“The fact that she showed up at all for such a minor chore when she knew I was so close no less... regardless of the Servants, for her to go out of her way to see the boy in person, let alone using so much of my hair to barter. My sister is either paranoid to the point of carelessness, or overconfident to the point of being wasteful with her assets. Either will lead to nothing to headaches.”

“She shouldn't cause any further trouble here for the near future, at least. The wager she lost has ensured as much. And young Lord Emiya is in no hurry to stir the pot anymore than it already has.”

“So the boy doesn't know you reached out to me then. Hmph. Why am I not surprised,” Arcueid pushed back some of her shoulder length hair over her ear. “Odds are I am liable to take his head on instinct had I moved too close. This latest generation of Ancestors leaves much to be desired. It's quite embarrassing, really.”

“While I agree, I cannot deny that there's a curious quality to Lord Emiya that can't be ignored.

Even you can't deny that an Apostle Ancestor that can manifest Noble Phantasms at will is quite an ironic novelty. And as you said, it's not often that Fina sustains genuine damage. Why, he might not even be able to fulfill his duties at Aylesbury if we are lucky."

"As if my sister's ego would allow that to pass. If anything she's plotting how to get revenge on the poor boy that thought he had managed to force her back." Arcueid huffed and shook her head, turning around as if deeming the current setting a lost cause. "Ugh. Wonderful. Now even if I decide to kill the boy it would only be to that woman's favor. I've had enough of this annoying city. I'm going back. Shiki said he was cooking dinner for me tonight."

"Oh? I thought you would be more curious as to the curse that is being held back here. It is quite potent from what I can tell. Not often something of that quality pops up in this day and age." The Rat asked, genuinely interested in her thoughts on the matter.

"That vile little thing? No. I'm not needed. Maybe if it was fully manifested I would take action, but as is, one of the Servants here can address it with little issue. Personally, I don't want to be bothered cleaning up such a rancid pool. It's bad enough that I waste my time chasing after Ancestors." Arcueid made a lazy wave as if shooing away a bug, treating the corrupted grail as little more than a petty chore, and picked up the briefcase. "Humans truly are ridiculous. How they managed to accidentally manifest the beginnings of a founding *Zoroastrianism God* this far East is beyond me. How they haven't managed to kill themselves off by now should be considered a true magic."

"Haha. You are not the first to ponder and lament the fact."

"Whatever. I have what I came for." Arcueid huffed and began to walk away. "I take it you know what will happen if you try something like this again, Rat. Or if I am forced to return here."

"Your generosity knows no limits, my lady."

"... Ugh. Even thinking of calling you a boot licker sends chills up my spine. To expect a rat to actively lick one's feet. Shiki better make something good tonight..."

The King of Rats did not move as Altrouge vanished into the night, leaping into the sky quickly and flashing over the landscape like a shooting star.

".... Fufu. My, that was a rather exciting conversation. I do believe she was about to kill me for a moment there." The monster laughed to himself before finally moving.

Holding off a potential uncontrollable cataclysm with another uncontrollable cataclysm. A risky gambit, and one that his lord would have never considered or attempted so frivolously until recently. Until he met their latest friend.

“Hmmm. Tonight is certainly quite something. It’s been a while since a single unknown day known to only a few would dictate so many future events.”

The man was gone, and in the shadows a single tail flickered out of sight into the unknown cracks of the building.

“One way or another, the next decade should be quite interesting.”

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