Chapter 62: Perspective

I do not own Fate/Stay Night and stuffs.

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Irisviel wandered around the property aimlessly.

She knew she was being watched. Be it by Servant or familiar. It didn’t matter to her. She had no intention or desire to do anything of the like.

Her mind was oddly at peace here. Serene. Only a minor agitation in the back of her thoughts stirred every now and then, that she should be productive. She attributed the newfound calm to Caster’s upgrades to the bounded fields, and the stirring to her connection to the Grail.

It was relieving. Like a pressure was finally being let out of her skull.

Unfortunately, it did nothing to alleviate the ache in her chest.

The shed that she had spent so much time in, and housed so many mixed feelings, was being used as a workshop. Her son no doubt used it for his own devices now, and if she was correct, Caster had added her own touch to the defenses as well. She didn’t know whether to be proud or concerned that he allowed another Master’s Servant so much control over the property, but these were interesting times. There was much she still didn’t know.

In the meantime, she would just chalk it up to the attractive blonde young woman having a crush on her son. He was cute after all. And certainly reliable if things had gotten to the point that she had been summoned to begin with.

Come to think of it, many of the Masters in this war were rather attractive young women. Maybe one of them was going out with him already? She’d have to ask around.

Her body shivered as the thought of grandchildren crossed her mind. Illya had still been just a child when Irisviel had died, and she had just been summoned in the same body. It was too early to think of grandchildren already… wasn’t it?

She shook her head and gave one last look at the shed before turning away. It was best to stay away from another Magus’ workshops regardless whether or not she could break in. Proximity based spells did exist after all, and she didn’t want to risk triggering them.

The yard was kept in good condition. The grass was clipped. The plants were healthy. The walls were clean. The roof was well kept. There was a small set of archery targets against one wall, which was new.

She wandered inside, but made sure to stay away from the bedrooms. The other Servants would obviously not take it well if she lingered there for too long.

The hallways were clean. The living room was warm. The kitchen was exquisite and certainly not the one she remembered. Definitely not Kiritsugu’s doing.

It felt like… home. The home she would have, could have lived in this past decade had things been different.

“Is it wrong for me to miss a place so much and say it’s mine, even when I barely knew it?” She smiled sadly.

Kiritsugu didn’t say anything as he stood quietly behind her. He didn’t have a right to answer that question.

“I can already see what it would have been like. Even feel it. More clearly than in the castles back in Germany or in the forest near here. Illya will adore living here. Shirou did an amazing job with this place. And you did a better one with him.” She turned to look at her husband with a genuinely happy smile and tears falling from her eyes. “I couldn’t have asked for a better family.”

“Iri.” Kiritsugu tightened his fists. “I, don’t deserve that. If you knew what happened, what could have happened in this war... I’ve made too many mistakes. It was only by luck that things turned out the way they have. Even I still can’t explain some of it…”

His words were confusing. She knew her husband. Luck was certainly something he didn’t like to blame things on, let alone mention in conversation if he could help it. Clearly there was a bizarre factor that she didn’t know about that he believed would change her perspective on things. “What are you talking about, my love? Something you can’t explain?”

Kiritsugu faltered and licked his dry lips, debating whether or not to push the topic, before thinking better of it. “When I was alive, I had dreams of the Fifth War. I… failed, Iri. Without knowing better, I made things worse. For Shirou. For Illya. I died making things worse. It would only be due to sheer dumb luck and happenstance that things would turn out without damning the world with the Grail. And even after that, Illya would still die. And Shirou…”

“Would still be a vampire?” She guessed.

Kiritsugu laughed. It was the bitter, ironic sort of laugh that betrayed just how bad the situation is. “A vampire? If only. No. Shirou… because of my stupidity, he became what I gave up. He sacrificed everything and became a Hero. A Counter Guardian.”

Irisviel froze. She may not be a genuine Heroic Spirit, but she sure as hell knew what a Counter Guardian was and what their jobs entailed. “What? But, how do you-”

“Archer’s on the roof.” He cut her off, and made her realize that she had never seen the last of the Servants in the War. “He, failed to save Illya after his War. Between my half assed teaching and the year she had left… after that, he just, wandered. Did exactly what I used to do. And eventually made a deal with Alaya. If that doesn’t underscore just how terrible of a father I am, I don’t know what does.”

“A Counter Guardian? Our boy?” She trembled, all of her positive emotions quickly dying off by the news. “He’s, Archer?”

“Yeah. And he’s even worse than I am when it comes to talking to people.” Assassin tried to smile, and failed. “Don’t bring him up with Shirou though. He, I don’t know. Something about Archer simply goes against him. It wasn’t even this bad in my dreams when Archer actively tried to kill him.”

“What?”

Oops.

“Guess this is a bad time to mention that Archer’s gambling to cause a paradox and off himself and get out of being a Counter Guardian.”

Not that that would work now with the revelation of the Counter Force being perpetually at work on him.

“*Our Heroic Spirit Son* is trying to paradox himself from causality?”

“Not anymore. Or at least, not here.” He lamely excused himself. “This isn’t his timeline. Actually this one has diverted so long ago from his that even he’s surprised he was able to be summoned here at all.”

“Kiritsugu.” Clearly his efforts to deescalate the situation were not working.

He sighed and dropped his hands. “Iri. What do you want me to do? I’ve talked to him as much as I can about this, and it’s not exactly a topic he’s particularly fond of discussing. Let alone repeatedly. Illya’s had a go. Even his Master has had her own attempt or twelve. Archer has never met you. The fact that even I was able to have an opportunity to talk to him is a miracle in itself, and that was after we nearly killed one another several dozen or so times over the War. The best thing you can do is be patient for now, and maybe he’ll open up eventually.”

Irisviel closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Despite being a Servant, she could already feel a headache coming on. “You said this, current turn of events, came from dreams you had?”

“Yeah. I never could find out where they originated.” He was glad for the change in conversation. “But I did what I could with them.”

“Including us being here?”

He shook his head. “No. I, we, shouldn’t be here Iri. Even now I don’t understand it. You’d know better than me at this point.” And to be frank, he was quietly terrified what it could mean further down the line. Seeing his son and daughter alive and have a future was a blessing in so many ways, but he… was Kiritsugu Emiya. He had a bad track record when it came to keeping his loved ones alive.

“Kiritsugu, if Archer is a Counter Guardian, then by chance are you…?”

“No. I’m a genuine Heroic Spirit. Somehow. Barely. I never made a deal with Alaya, nor was I ever offered the chance to make one.” Assassin shook his head.

Iri let out a small sigh of relief and leaned against a wall. “… How did it come to this Kiritsugu? I’m me. You’re you. Our son is either an Apostle or has his soul enslaved for eternity. Illya’s somehow the only one of us that has a hope for a normal future if whatever you have planned actually works out. And here I thought the Fourth War was unreasonable.”

“I know.” He slowly, hesitantly, closed the distance between them before leaning up right next to her. It was the closest he had allowed himself to be to her since they were alive. “That said, you’ve calmed down a bit.”

She laughed bitterly. “Caster’s bounded field. I didn’t even notice it until I was left alone again. My mind… it was like being overwhelmingly drunk and constantly steered in a specific direction. So disorienting that I didn’t even know that I was dizzy to begin with. But, even now I can feel the Grail, Kiritsugu. It wants to be complete. Needs to be.”

“Mmm. We’re working on it. It will go faster if you can help us out.” He didn’t tell her what some of the others had planned just in case, but he knew she suspected a few things regardless. She was of the Einzbern family. She was no fool.

“From here? Or outside? I’m not sure how much aid I can be in my current state.” Her hand reached for his, only to stop at the last moment. “I don’t know if I should even touch you anymore. Kiritsugu, I killed you.”

He closed the distance and held her hand in his. “And I killed you.”

Her eyes began to well up with tears as her head sagged and leaned against his shoulder. “I don’t want history to repeat itself, my love. It was painful enough the first time. If we did it again, with Shirou and Illya here…”

“We won’t. We’re prepared this time,”

“How could anyone be prepared for this?” She chastised.

“We know it’s there. We know what it wants. All the Masters and Servants. That’s already far more than before.” He gripped her hand. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

“… Mmm. I suppose you’re right.” Her eyes closed, exhausted. “At least one good thing came from this mess.”

“I’d say that this entire disaster was nothing but a mixed bag, Iri.”

“… I wasn’t joking earlier, Kiritsugu. When I spoke to Barthomelloi about me being a problem.”

“… I know.”

“Promise me you won’t hesitate if it ever comes to that. If I fall too far to be helped anymore.”

“I won’t. You know that.”

“Promise me Kiritsugu.”

“… I promise.”

“… I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault.” At this point he was holding his wife close as she cried softly in his arms.

After over a decade, Kiritsugu and Irisviel had finally spent their first night together in the home he had bought for them. Leaning up against the living room wall in the middle of the night. No sheets. No pillows. Just the two of them quietly apologizing to one another and hoping that their trials would finally come to a close for them and their children.

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“Did you notice how much she lingered around Caster’s room at the beginning?” Rider asked from the rooftop.

“She’d probably attracted to the Lesser Grails.” Archer shrugged. “She knows about Illya and Sakura and is making an effort to avoid them, but she doesn’t know where the shrew is staying.”

“We’ll warn the others in the morning.” Rider conceded. She didn’t bother to ask if Assassin or Merem noticed. There was no point in asking rhetorical questions like that.

“Mmm.”

“…”

“…”

The pair remained silent as they meandered on the roof, keeping an eye out for potential intruders.

“… If you have something to say, then say it.” Archer broke the silence first. “You’re not the type to linger unless you have something on your mind. And it’s not like everyone else isn’t waiting to unload something on me lately.”

If he was aiming to deter Rider from speaking, he failed. “Did you ever try to save Sakura?”

“Pardon?”

“When you were alive. Did you try to help her? Or at least deal with Zouken?”

Whatever he was expecting, that wasn’t it. “… I assume she wasn’t the one that wanted to know this.”

“She wouldn’t. And she didn’t.”

Meaning that Rider wouldn’t tell her Master unless asked. And that she wasn’t listening now.

“… Like I said before, Rider. My memory from life is fragmented at best. Even summoned properly, it takes me a moment to recall what everyone here looked like, even Illya.”

He was stalling. “You didn’t do anything.”

“I was an idiot when I was alive.” He admitted with surprisingly some remorse. “An oblivious idiot. I’m pretty sure I made that clear enough by now. I, don’t remember much about what happened to her after I left Fuyuki. I went to the Clocktower, and started travelling. Trying to be a hero and all that stupidity. I rarely came back after that. But, when it came to Sakura, I did hear that something did happen to her, and Rin… didn’t take it well. I don’t think I heard from her after that, and Rin never told me the few times I talked to her either. Only that… she had dealt with it and I shouldn’t bother.”

Come to think of it, he was somewhat certain that it was around then that the two started to truly distance from one another. Not that he could blame her.

A story untold, and yet one with mountains of details clearly heard regardless. “And when you were summoned as a Servant?”

He gave her a dry snort. “I told you, I’m rarely summoned as I should. Maybe, maybe I tried to help her the first several hundred or so times I did manage to recall everything. Deal with Zouken. Even I can’t tell if it was out of my desire to do the right thing or out of simple guilt for failing someone that was right in front of me all this time. Succeeded a good number of them. Failed most of the rest. But, soon enough my goals, my wish and goals changed. You already know what I want Rider. I’ve seen everyone die enough times to know that I can’t do this forever.”

Even saving them held little to no weight anymore if he just had to go through the same process endlessly.

He just, wanted it to be over already. He was tired of all the meaningless death and murder around him.

She didn’t blame him for it. His experience mirrored her own in more than a few ways. The only difference was that she found peace and redemption in death, while Archer was trapped by it.

“You really are a fool.”

He wasn’t surprised by the scathing words. He had been called that enough times that it held little effect on him anymore. “How so?”

“Only Shirou Emiya would blame himself for being put in an unreasonable situation and not obtain the ideal outcome in the end.”

That, on the other hand, managed to hurt. Deeply at that.

Before he could say anything to get back at her, the lithe Servant turned her back on him and began to vanish. “I suppose it is fitting, that the only ones here that truly hold you in contempt go by Shirou Emiya. Only an idiot of that nature would hold such comedic standards.”

He let out a bitter laugh as she vanished.

“Yeah, well, if you haven’t noticed yet, the existence of Shirou Emiya seems to be destined to be a modern comedy.”

He had warned the others multiple times, but nobody seemed to want to acknowledge the depth that the Shirou Emiya of this world seemed to reject Counter Guardian EMIYA, even more than the normal variants did. It was more than a fundamental disagreement, but an instinctual hatred, a genuine disgust that would almost make Gilgamesh interested to see fester just to see what would come of it.

EMIYA still didn’t know what it was just yet, but for once he hoped he didn’t find out.

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*To say that she had woken up was a bit of an overstatement. To wake up meant that she had gained consciousness, something she had never truly possessed. A minor awareness, perhaps. Just enough to detect when she was not alone, that there were others around her, speaking and discussing matters at hand. But that was the extent of her mental facilities as of now. Ideas, desires, and the like were beyond her. “I am hungry” was degraded to the sensation of “hunger”, not that she truly ate like most entities.*

*That said, she did get curious every once in a while whenever she was no longer alone. She could understand the words of conversations nearby, even if she could not follow what they said. Occasionally, when she had been left alone for long enough, she would even develop loneliness, even if she never once uttered a sound.*

*“She looks absolutely nothing like you.”*

*That, was a new voice.*

*“That is somewhat the point. It would be troubling if she did.”*

*So was that one.*

*“Most parents would be depressed to hear that.” The first sounded… amused. How odd. Rarely did anyone near her show emotion, let alone a positive one. “Ironic though, with her looks, she’s more passable than you are.”*

*“Do stop your jests. I have trouble tolerating you as it is. How I let you convince me to participate in this farce I still don’t know.” The second voice was younger, but irritable.*

*“Judging from your tone, I’m guessing she doesn’t meet your expectations.” The first sighed. “A pity. I thought you’d develop something of a soft spot to her. While she doesn’t’ look like you, she does share quite a resemblance with…”*

*“Don’t you even try to compare them with this toy.”*

*She didn’t know why but she felt a flicker of discontent with that statement. She had been demeaned and experimented on countless times before. The pain during each process varied from agonizing to maddening when she was aware of it all. However for some reason, this comment seemed to hit deeper than that. As though she had been reduced to something that was irrelevant regardless of what became of her in the end.*

*“Were you not the one that was hoping for just that? That faint gamble of hope to beat the odds and conjure an alternative to the current status quo?” The first smugly asked. “A third for the third. Or was it because it was the third that you saw potential promise in this endeavor?*

*The surroundings quaked with mana, and anger. Enough that she could feel and even comprehend it in her addled state.*

*“Careful Kaleidoscope. You are no longer as strong as you once were.”*

*“Sorry. I sometimes forget your true nature. Regardless, it appears this test was a failure as far as our mutual desires are concerned. Mysteries rooted in the current era and man do not mix well with the results that was desired. Even if True Magic is involved.”*

*“… Do not play ignorant. You knew this was likely to happen.”*

*“As did you.”*

*There was an uncomfortable silence.*

*“Why were you so adamant for my help, Kaleidoscope? It was not because you wished to gamble on a hopeless endeavor.”*

*“… Our young one here has an important role to play for the world. In the future, certain resources need to be available in order for humanity, and the current world itself, to endure. She is the key to it all.”*

*“And my help was needed?”*

*“This time, yes.”*

*“No matter how much you claim to distance yourself from the standards of other Magi, you certainly know how to emulate the worst of their habits.”*

*“My friend, we both know I am nothing of the sort, otherwise you would not have cooperated with as much as you have.”*

*“Forgive me for my distain for being used.”*

*“If it assuages your impression of me at all, I had also hoped that our mutual endeavor would prove fruitful. If for her sake.”*

*“… Even if it was a failure, the others will not take it well if they found out about this.”*

*“Rest assured, there is little reason for her to cross the paths of anyone that might be able to see what she might have been. Knowledge of your involvement will be lost in time save for a scant few.”*

*Might have been? Were they talking about a test she had failed?*

*“Be sure that it does, or I will drag you down with me Kaleidoscope. You have more enemies than I do. There’s a reason why you’re the Fourth.”*

*“Perish the thought.” The first laughed, good heartedly. “Rest assured, she can be considered as much mine as she is yours. It would leave a bad taste in my mouth if I was the cause of her misfortune.”*

*“I have a hard time grasping the fact you said that with a straight face. I can only imagine the vile substances you taste perpetually.”*

*“Humph. There’s no need to be rude… where are you going?”*

*“I was here only for a gamble of an experiment. It failed, so I have no reason to linger in this depressing place. You may use her as you wish. I have no further interest in what becomes of a toy made for someone else’s game.”*

*“Aaah. Leaving me already with the child by myself? What a terrible parent you are.”*

*“It is a jester’s role to entertain the mindless. Do recall I have other obligations to attend to.”*

*“And you do recall that the jester is oft the wisest one in the King’s Court.” The first sighed, sounding somewhat tired. “If nothing else, I hope your endeavors yield you more than what we’ve accomplished here.”*

*“As we do with all new endeavors.” The second voice sounded further away now. For a moment, she thought that it had left entirely. “… Has a name been decided?”*

*“Did you have anything in mind?”*

*“Since when have I ever named anything?”*

*“Haha. Of course. I just thought you might appreciate a change for once.” the first laughed whole heartedly at some joke she did not understand.*

*“It was decided just recently actually. Her name is Justeaze.”*

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“I see you are still hard at work, dear husband.”

“And I see you are still absolutely elated with our current circumstance.” Waver didn’t bother to look up from the pile of documents he was sorting through.

“Don’t be like that. Most men would be elated to have an adoring beautiful young and nubile wife at their side while they work.” Reines smirked as she all but skipped to his side.

“They would. But all I have is a sadistic shrew prodding me every few seconds for her personal amusement.” Waver didn’t rise up to the bait as she teasingly held onto one of his arms.

“Humph. It would be best if you at least tried to play along, or else I might have to try something more drastic to spice up romantic life.”

“Whatever it is, do it when you’re of age. We may be magi, but I do want to avoid being arrested for pedophilia on my resume. No matter how much it amuses you. There hasn’t been a Lord accused of that crime in over a century and I intend to keep the tradition consistent.”

That said, there were always rumors about some of the other lords every now and then, but that was a story for another closed conversation.

“And here I thought you were the adventurous sort.” Reines sighed in false disappointment. In actuality, they were still a few years from actually getting married and consummating, but she’d be damned if she didn’t have fun in her own way.

“I’ve had enough adventure for the time being if you don’t mind. Unless you’d prefer to be the one with half the Association after your head for one petty reason or another.”

“Exchange one pedophile for a swarm of them? And here I thought you were a gentleman.”

“I’d rather talk to a lady than a child if that’s all the better. At least the former is productive.”

“How boring. At how rapidly you age, I suspect that you will be withered and crippled by the time you remember to provide the El Melloi an heir.” She huffed and sat down on the couch in the room.

“We both know that any child I spawn would be murdered before they could walk if I made them the heir to the El Melloi.” He put away the current papers he was reading and started on the next stack. “The Archisore Branch house, perhaps, but not the El Melloi. My blood and history are nowhere near the quality worthy to propagate the main house line without guaranteeing disaster.”

That had Reines frown. “Then you are in a rather precarious spot. Like it or not, dear husband, you are the current lord of the El Melloi family. Your heir must be next in line for the head, and while I am an open minded individual, I would much rather not be used as a petri dish to cultivate children on a whim.”

Admittedly, before their engagement was forced upon them, she had harbored the secret idea of having a few children with Waver on the side before being hitched with a proper Magus with an acceptable lineage. However now that the situation was in reverse, she found the idea less appealing.

“In order to appease some of the more radical factors in the El Melloi Family and the branches, I am considering adopting a prominent sire from one of them and making them the proper heir after adequate vetting.” He reasoned. “Otherwise, they’d just tear apart the family more than they already have.”

“Oh? So you refuse to play the scapegoat for once? How unlike you. And here I thought you enjoyed being stepped on.” She slyly smirked.

“No, that’s just your hobby and a product of lackluster supervision.” He drawled, pretending that Reines hadn’t stepped on him and abused him over the years. It was a bit hard to go against her will when she was frequently surrounded by men that obeyed her beck and call that were at least twice his mass in pure muscle. “Regardless, so long as I keep my decision undecided or ambiguous, and hint that my own child will be the heir should happen to me before I make a final conclusion, I should be able to prevent the branch families of the El Melloi from attempting to take my head for a few decades.”

“Just long enough for you to convince them that you’re more valuable alive than dead and out of the way. That is, so long as you don’t include those that would benefit from our family falling into ruin.”

“Which narrows it down to virtually everyone in the Clocktower then.” He was actually stretching how severe that side of the situation really was. Between his connections with the Democratic faction, his attachment to the new generation of successful Magi, and Barthomelloi’s investment into his position, he had roughly three fourths of the Clocktower at his back in one form or another.

Whether that support was willing or not was another matter entirely though.

“If it’s that severe, then you might not want to wait with making an heir. My l-o-v-e.” Reines taunted.

“Truly, the greatest mystery right now is determining whether you are trying to increase or reduce my stress.”

“Don’t you know? It is a wife’s job to ensure that her husband is properly wrapped around her little finger. Whether his stress goes up or down is irrelevant, as it should be her desire to determine in the first place.”

“A horrifying and damned branch of magecraft if there ever was one.” Waver rolled his eyes as he wrote down some notes.

“As opposed to the insufferable piles of work you normally torture yourself with.” She glanced at the piles of documents surrounding him. “Do tell, what are you tasked with this time?”

Waver slowly looked up and stared at her dead in the eyes. “The El Melloi charter of resources, assets, budget, and expenditures.”

For once, Reines felt a hint of fear and trepidation. “O-oh. Is that so?”

As he spoke, it would feel as if Waver’s image grew inversely proportional to how much Reines’ shrank. “Yes. It turns out that our extended family has made a habit of being far more frivolous and preoccupied with personal and excessive expenditures than research. Exceptionally so in many regards. I could accept it if many of these expenses were for experiments, clientele, and investments, however I have seen enough to have significant doubts.”

“Our craft is rather diverse. Given our relationship, some leeway should be expected… right?” That last word served as both a glimmer of hope and a nail in the coffin for the poor girl.

Before he could start airing her dirty laundry to see her squirm, the door to his office opened up to reveal an unusually irritable looking Lorelei Barthomelloi. The fact that she was showing this much discomfort at all indicated that something was amiss.

“Lady Vice Director.” Waver skeptically lifted an eyebrow. “How unexpected.”

“Am I interrupting something? You two seem to be having a rather, intimate conversation.”

For some reason, Waver didn’t think that their guest was mocking him with the peculiar way she said that last part. If anything, it seemed to irritate her. Best not probe the topic.

“Not at all!” Reines grabbed onto the lifeline and did not intend to let go.

“It was a mere rudimentary discussion on proper financial responsibility.” Waver’s eyes bored into Rienes’ skull. “It can easily be postponed for a later date. I take it that we have another issue to discuss?”

Lorelei glanced at him with an unreadable stare before deciding that Rienes’ presence was inconsequential. “The Grail has summoned a new Servant. It is currently under the Church’s supervision. I thought that as the unofficial expert on the Grail in the Tower, you should be aware of it before it is announced soon.”

Waver stilled before standing up, his paperwork all but forgotten. “*Another* Servant? *Now*?”

“Supposedly, the invasive activity of the errant Caster combined with several Lesser Grails caused an incomplete function of the system to momentarily trigger. The Einzbern have already been informed of this turn of events and have confirmed that, while unlikely, what occurred is in the realm of possible. More concerning is that this new factor is directly influenced by the Greater Grail’s corruption. Fortunately, for once, this newcomer is supposedly willing to cooperate with us, for now.”

“Cooperate?” He was confused. “While influenced?”

“You have encountered her before, if I recall, during the previous War. The Homunculus that the Einzbern sent last time.”

Waver’s skin tone turned pale as the words sunk in. “… I don’t suppose you’ve developed a twisted sense of humor since last we met.”

“If I did, I would have better taste than to conjure something as crude as this.”

“The previous war’s homunculus? Forgive me, but why does her being here matter so much again?” Reines asked, slightly confused.

“Irisviel Von Einzbern was Kiritsugu Emiya’s *Wife*.” Waver flatly stated. “And from what I was told, it was not a shallow relationship.”

“His… oh. That would be a problem then, wouldn’t it?”

“Or an exceptional boon. Most probably, both.”

“That appears to be the shared consensus on the matter from several parties.” Lorelei agreed dryly. “I shared, words with her, momentarily. She appears to be quite eccentric, though I was told that was part of the Grail’s doing.”

“If you’re seeking confirmation, I won’t be of much use. I encountered her less than a handful of times, all of which were particularly tense. Conversation was not something that we had particular time for.” Waver sighed, dredging up the scant few times he laid eyes on the Homunculus. He first saw her at the docks early in the War. Then there was the banquet between the three Kings. Last he saw her was during the battle against Caster at the river.

“And what could you gather from those sparse encounters?”

He frowned in thought as he dredged up old memories as best he could. “She was… as expected of an Einzbern Homunculus, but with a unique degree of free will and emotion. She performed and acted as anticipated, however there were times where she displayed, the best way to put it is childish confusion and innocence. Not necessarily immaturity, but she occasionally showed the sort of helpless bewilderment that my students have when handed tools and mystic codes that they are completely unfamiliar with.”

He still recalled her helplessly fumbling with the oversized cell phone on the river during the battle against Caster. It was like watching an infant desperately trying to solve a puzzle in front of their parents.

“Childish is certainly one way to describe her.” Lorelei frowned. “Although it is difficult to discern as much when she confidently proclaimed that Assassin would execute her should she act out of line.”

Waver stilled. He knew exactly what Irisviel was alluding to, and Kiritsugu had divulged to him and Sirius what exactly had taken place in the Black Grail during the Fourth War, but…

“I hope for everyone’s sake, that that scenario won’t take place.” He spoke his mind gravely.

“I take it you are not merely speaking about the loss of our newest resource.”

Waver momentarily reached for a cigar, but stopped himself. It wouldn’t do to start smoking now in front of his Superior. Later perhaps, but not now. Plus, he was already seriously debating cutting back on the habit to save some money.

… It wasn’t his fault. His cigars were laced with half a dozen mystic herbs and compounds that protected him from a wide range of poisons and spells. They were expensive.

“You underestimate the intimacy of their relationship, Vice Director.” He shook his head. “Em… Kiritsugu, was a truly broken man after the Fourth War. It had nothing to do with his butchered circuits. He held himself together as best he could after finding Shirou and learning of the Fifth War’s circumstances, but only just barely. His initial proposal to Sirius and I to help in his endeavors… was not becoming of someone of his reputation. Executing his wife and forgoing his daughter, on top of the destruction that he inadvertently caused destroying the Grail in the Fourth War left a deep mark on him.”

“You’re saying that should we lose our new Caster, we would lose Assassin as well.”

“In a particularly poor turn of events, that is most likely the case.” He confirmed evenly. “Should the psychological weight of his life be carried over even after death, then there is no question that repeating the sins he enacted and regretted in the past would be too much for him. Much like how the lore and tales of other Heroic Spirits dictate what strengths and flaws they possess when summoned. It is a causality that is engraved into his very existence.”

He would do it if it was to save humanity, without question. It would be akin to asking if the King of Conquerors would consider going on another conquest. The only difference were the consequences.

Waver could still remember Kiritsugu when he was alive. A dangerous man. A dying man too. But more than anything, he was a broken existence that had barely been keeping himself together on nothing but his strength of will and the love for both his children.

If he had to kill Irisviel again… no, any member of his family, while still possessing that weight, that flaw…

And then there was the fallout of how Shirou and Illyasviel would react afterwards. It was a devastating chain reaction that nobody wanted to see the outcome of, especially since the end result was possibly Shirou cutting lose with his newly acquired arsenal of Noble Phantasms.

“I suppose that even those that barely manage to make it to the Throne are required to possess some sort of needlessly colorful tale. How vexing.” The Vice Director grimaced, as if tasting something that disagreed with her. No doubt she had come to the same conclusion he had.

Waver shrugged. “Of course should her departure be on more mutual and amicable terms, the outcome will no doubt be more favorable.”

“Was that optimism or a suggestion?”

“The former, preferably.” He didn’t mince words before taking another document from his desk and scanned it. “However, should something do go amiss, it would most likely be an internal affair than anything. The situation at Fuyuki is well known by this stage to most parties, and to be quite frank, there is little we can do from here. We are speaking about a force consisting of now eight Servants, a Dead Apostle Ancestor, and quite literally one of the most well-armed humans this side of Christ’s execution. All liable to be extremely stressed and on guard. There are only a handful of organizations, let alone individuals that are capable of interfering with such a party. And several have already agreed to stay their hands or support them.”

Lorelei couldn’t argue with that logic for the most part. It would take an unwavering fool or an extremely confident monster to even attempt to agitate such a force without repercussions. “You suggest we do nothing.”

Waver flipped through a few more documents. “I suggest patience. This situation is still quite raw. Not even a week since the War itself has entered its current state, and as we just discovered, unexpected factors are still developing. The best individuals we have to investigate the Grail are either already in Fuyuki or will arrive within the week. The fact that those in Fuyuki went out of their way to announce Irisviel’s existence indicates that they find agitating the delicate status quo as appealing as everyone else.”

“I see. Rather than guarantee their grave and dirtying our hands, we shall let them dig it themselves and see whether or not they climb out. How exceedingly practical of you.”

“If that is how you see it, by all means.” Waver didn’t rise to the bait. “Fuyuki is still a powderkeg of unique circumstances. There is no telling what will and will not set it off as of yet.”

“You do not provide an inspiring outlook, Lord El Melloi II.”

“I have made it my profession to provide facts and the logic behind the mysteries that I am presented, Lord Barthomelloi. I would be a fool to start remising on that specialty in current company.” He countered just as coolly. “If those there cannot properly remedy and manage the situation with the resources at hand, then there is little point in humoring them to begin with.”

“A convenient outcome for you, I suppose. The list of chores you are tasked with is already the topic of pity among the rest of the faculty.” She dryly stated.

Waver snorted. “You speak as if there is difference from what I did before. Pity. Mockery. The only varying factor between the two is that I possess power and resources now, and yet not enough to shunt these obligations onto someone else. I merely hold onto trinkets and slivers of power that they desire now, instead of merely representing those that do.”

“And you don’t consider Fuyuki among those resources?”

“To consider a Servant as merely a resource is a mistake I won’t even dare to employ again in my life, thank you very much. I like to believe I have matured a bit since then.” Waver’s tone grew unusually hard and looked at the Vice Director dead in the eyes. “My *resource* is the strong relationships I have with several of the Masters. To even assume anything more than that is more risky than most of the experiments in the Tower. As of now, I have more pressing tasks to address than what is going on in Fuyuki. Irisviel’s appearance is concerning, however I do not possess the resources, the means, or the time to have any impact on the matter. Let alone in a positive way. I doubt anyone in England does.”

“And you consider me among the rabble?”

“I consider you human.” Waver riposted, leaning back in his seat. “And one of the leading reasons why Shirou has managed to accomplish as much as he has without said rabble scrambling on top of him like the mad rats they are. As least so far. The fear of death and torture is beyond those idiots, but the loss of clout and standing in the Tower is another matter entirely.”

“As opposed to you.” The Vice Director crossed her arms.

He smirked lightly. “I thought it was well established by now that I possess differing principles from the standard magus.”

He stopped smirking when a minor breeze of wind cut his cheek. It was barely a scratch at that, but enough to draw blood. “Don’t play around like a child, Lord El Melloi. I have little patience left for you and yours after the headaches you have caused.”

Waver sighed and shook his head. “Then what would you have of me? I have already provided my insight on the matter, Vice Director. And due to my newfound restrictions and obligations, even you would have a challenge sending me to Japan anytime soon.”

“I was hoping that your unusual insight would have provided an option or leverage to curb the dog’s behavior, or at the very least tilt negotiations with the Church back into our favor regarding our new factor.”

Waver shook his head. “You know more about how to handle the Church than I do, and there is still the matter regarding Kotomine’s deception that needs to be addressed. The way I see it, so long as you keep Solomon’s involvement in those negations to a minimum, you should have all the proper leverage you need. Better still, you could keep Solomon in Fuyuki for however long it takes to address the Grail issue under that pretext.”

That had her attention. “Hoh? Putting the Church’s monstrosity on a leash? I’m surprised. I didn’t expect you to be so cruel.”

If he didn’t know better, he’d almost take it as a compliment. “I’m merely throwing out suggestions, Vice Director. I’ve found myself to be in situations that required flexible processing as of late.”

“I’ve noticed.” She glanced at the documents he was working with. “Though I presume it is less effective when applied to financials and economics.”

“For the most part.” Waver shrugged. “Establishing reliable trust and comprehension is essential to any long lasting relationship. Be it for business, romance, or casual.”

Waver almost missed it, but he definitely noticed Lorelei Barthomelloi freeze and dare he even say flinch at something he said. He didn’t dare point it out though. He wasn’t suicidal.

“Trust…” The Vice Director muttered contemplatively, briefly looking behind her where Reines was wisely staying quiet and not interrupting the conversation. “I have little appreciation for that word and what it implies. The habitual dependence on others based on mere feelings and intuition, especially in the unreliable and weak, is not something a Lord should make a habit of.”

“True, which is why I’ve made a point to make close ties to those that are at most one of those two. Fortunately, as a teacher of some competency, I’ve managed to excel in the art of stamping out the incompetency in those that I take under my wing.”

“And to those you don’t teach? A Lord surrounded by children at all times is a dubious tale at best.”

Waver had to bite back a slew of questions and witty remarks right then and there. It genuinely sounded like she was teasing him. Instead, he merely shrugged. “The position I am in and the situations I frequently cross are usually alone enough to deter those that are unable and unwilling to do so…”

No.

That wasn’t exactly it.

He sounded as if only those that were willing to follow him through his hardships were worthy of his attention.

How disgustingly hypocritical. The mere idea of that left a bad taste in his mouth.

He had no right to chide those that could not follow in his footsteps when he was blindly trying to follow, if not find the footsteps of someone far greater than he ever could be…

*“Bwahahaha! What ridiculous logic you’re trapping yourself in! You might have gotten taller but that head of yours is still as twisted as ever! Only with more hair! What’s wrong with having others look at your back in awe when you have accomplished so much!? Of course they are in awe of you! Look at what you’ve done this past decade trying to reach me! And staying alive no less!”*

… Great, he was starting to hear that annoying gorilla’s voice again while he psychoanalyzed himself. He could have done with that last bit about staying alive.

“You appear distracted, Lord El Melloi.” As always, Lorelei’s voice cut through his stray thoughts with words as sharp as her tone.

He shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “My apologies. I appear to have worked harder than I assumed. My mind has been meandering as of late.”

Lorelei frowned and had a closer look at Waver’s appearance. He had been conducting himself as well as he usually did, however the signs of over a week of work in one form or another was clearly getting to him. He had likely been at one task or another perpetually since the Grail War had gone underway.

“I take it that the branch houses have been providing you with minimal assistance with your transition.”

“Depending on your definition of minimal, yes.” Translation, they had been actively discouraging his efforts.

This time the Vice Director didn’t hold back her displeasure. “How pathetic. This is why the lower class vex me. Even when handed power, you have no idea how to properly wield it.”

Waver blinked in genuine surprise as the woman turned and made way to leave the room. “I shall assign some members from Policies to assist in your hopeless endeavor to get the El Melloi family back to its proper standing. Having you fall apart now would undo everything we have accomplished up to this point.”

“I… you have my thanks.” He didn’t know what else to say about it.

“What I have is a greater debt from you, Lord El Melloi. See to it that it does not grow heavier, or else the only legacy you will be leaving behind is what you owe the Barthomelloi.” The woman didn’t bother to flatter him with false gratitude as she opened the door. “And get some rest. You are a Lord. Put some effort into looking like one.”

The room was dead quiet after she closed the door behind her.

Over fifteen seconds later, Waver looked at Reines, who had a surprisingly complex expression on her face. “… It appears that I got us in the Vice Director’s debt again.”

She looked at him incredulously, and opened her mouth to say something but thought better of it. “You know what? It is probably best if you don’t know.”

“Know what?”

*“Judging from behavioral patterns, it appears that the Vice Director is fond of Lord El Melloi.”* The Mercury mystic code Golem Maid that had once been Volumen Hydrargyrum stated evenly from a corner, completely missing the mood of the room.

“Trimmau!” Reines shouted accusingly.

Waver’s eyebrow twitched. The Holy Grail War he managed to handle. Being on trial and having the Clocktower ready to hang him, fine. Getting engaged to Reines left him in a perpetual nightmare, but a tolerable one. Lording over the El Melloi family in its entirety, possible, if not maddening.

Being a potential target of affection by a Barthomelloi?

Nope.

That settles it. He was clearly overworked and needed to get some rest asap before he started to hallucinate and see some even more twisted shit that even a Caster couldn’t come up with.

“I believe I will take up the Vice Director’s advice.” He quickly scanned the business meeting requests that had been delivered and marked off the ones that looked both promising and not likely to end in his death before closing the folder shut. “I shall be retreating to my bed for the night. And Reines…”

“I’m the one that tried to save you from the truth by dear future husband. Even I know where the line is drawn.” The teenager gave him a dry stare.

“For both our sakes, I hope you do.”

For now, he was going to bed before Rider showed up in his head and started to lecture him about “conquest” again.

o. o. o.

“No wonder Illya took to him so quickly.” Irisviel shot Kiritsugu a sly look as Shirou gave his sister her second stack of waffles that morning.

“If it works.” The Assassin shrugged shamelessly next to her. “Fortunately I didn’t have to teach him much.”

“Hunger is the enemy.” Saber recited almost instinctually as she ate her own sizable offerings/breakfast with perfect posture.

“Mmm. Waffles.” Illya agreed, stuffing her face.

“You teaching cooking is akin to teaching live fire safety.” Shirou snarked as he returned to the kitchen to continue making breakfast for everyone else as they slowly made their way into the room.

Assassin didn’t deny the statement at all as he sipped his cup of coffee. He may not need it, but oh did he need it.

“Morning everyone.” Luvia yawned as she walked into the living room with Caster in tow. “I see breakfast is being made.”

“Smelling it is what woke you up.” Caster quipped. Fortunately her Master was too tired to shoot her an angry glare as she sat down.

“Shirou, could I bother you with something light this morning?” The blonde asked.

“With coffee?”

“Of course.” She nodded with a grimace. “I intend to review some of the outstanding documentation and tasks for the Edelfelt family that have been sent my way that I have postponed due to the war. Most of it was pushed to assistants and lesser heads of the house, but some cannot be addressed by anyone other than myself or Marjatta.”

“Makes sense.” Shirou knew just how vicious the paperwork could be for nobility. “Speaking of your sister…”

“She’s waking up.” Caster answered, getting several curious and slightly alarmed looks. “I was about to bring it up. Apparently having our guest in such close proximity to her is causing some reactions. Had I not been so inundated with other tasks, I might have caught it sooner.”

“Ah. Oops?” Irisviel smiled nervously as everyone looked at her warily. “Sorry? The girl you’re talking about is in that heavily warded room right? I do feel some pull towards it, but I tried to avoid it as much as possible last night. I guess it wasn’t enough.”

Everyone at the table sighed. Even if she did do it on purpose, there was no point in getting worked up about it now.

“In hindsight this was to be expected.” Luvia shook her head. “Caster, I don’t suppose you could keep Marjatta under?”

“No. Forcing her at this stage would be detrimental to her health. The best we can hope for is keeping her in your room until everything blows over.” Caster shot down that suggestion instantly.

“Which is just as unlikely.” Luvia groaned. Her sister was an extrovert to the extreme. She did not do well being cooped up in a room for long periods of time.

“Why couldn’t it have been the other coma patient in this house that was getting better?” Illya mumbled before nearly inhaling another piece of waffle goodness.

“Other coma patient?” Iri echoed confused.

The bulk of the room winced. Mostly because the fact that Issei was in a coma had completely slipped their minds with everything else that had been going on.

“It has to do with the Apostles we mentioned before.” Kiritsugu elaborated. “Some of Shirou’s friends were caught in the middle of negotiations, and one is in a difficult state. He’s in one of the spare rooms as we speak.”

“That doesn’t sound good. Perhaps I can help?” Irisviel asked curiously, tilting her head to the side.

Several of those in the room opened their mouths to reply, only to think about the offer a moment later.

“That, doesn’t actually sound like a bad idea.” Shirou stuck his head out from the kitchen. “You said your powers and skills are focused around healing, right?”

“Mmm. It’s magecraft that derives from Heaven’s Feel. Even among legitimate Servants, my ability to heal others can be considered among the highest rank.” Irisviel puffed her chest out proudly.

“Well, that’s certainly convenient. So long as you don’t curse anyone in the process.” Luvia commented dryly.

“I can supervise the procedure.” Caster waved her Master’s worries away. “The victim is a completely unremarkable boy. If she did try anything I’d be able to find it instantly.”

“Well, that’s one thing we don’t have to worry about at least.” Illya mumbled.

“I’ll see Kuzuki-sensei later to let him know about Issei.” Shirou got back to work making breakfast for everyone. “Maybe ask him to convince everyone from the temple to get away from the city for a week so that they aren’t targeted again.”

“Pity we can’t do that with the Yakuza next door.” Luvia glanced in the direction of said neighbors. “That said, so long as Fujimura-sensei stays with her family, even I doubt that the vampire will try to go after her again. It’s too much risk for him at this stage.”

That, plus Assassin and Caster had loaded the neighbors’ property with all sorts of nasty traps that would only be triggered by anyone trying to sneak in with ill intentions.

“What else is planned for today?” Irisviel asked curiously while pouring herself some tea.

“You mean other than dealing with the fallout from the announcement that you exist?” Shirou noted with a dry tone. “Rin and I are going to be stuck dealing with requisitions and investigations on it all day. The house phone is actually put on mute right now because it would be ringing constantly otherwise.”

“Isn’t that a bad idea?” Illya frowned, actually pausing between bites for once. “What if it’s something important?”

Shirou took out his cell phone and pointed to the table they were all eating on. “If it’s actually important, I’d be contacted by my cell or the table.”

At that moment, the table began to emit a tame sound from its center.

“… Like that.” He deadpanned, putting down his cooking implements and activating a minor mystery that would put his cooking in stasis in case he was forced away from his merry making.

Without any hesitation, he wrapped his head up in his trademark crimson shawl and walked up to the table to answer the call.

Moments later a familiar Irish face popped up as a hologram above breakfast.

“Oi! Lad! You’re still alive!”

Shirou rolled his eyes and moved his shawl again. “Sirius. What happened?”

“Bloody Barthomelloi knows you’re a buggerin’ bloodsucker! That’s what!” The normally drunk man hissed with his own brand of alliteration.

“Ah. That.” Shirou sat down heavily. Another colossal headache he had to deal with. Judging from the fact that the old man had spewed out such classified info on the fly, it wasn’t hard to assume that the conversation was private. “Yeah. She made that known to me a little while ago.”

“Ah?! That?! Lad I damn well had a heart attack when the lass got in me face about it just a few hours ago! Took me that long ta figure out what the hell to do and get the stones an privacy to call ya up!” The old man nearly exploded on him, and for good reason.

“I was a bit preoccupied with the new Servant that just appeared, in case you haven’t heard.” He ignored the looks he was getting from those around the table, including the slightly hurt Irisviel.

“In th’ name of me gran’mother, can your luck get any more tweaked?” Sirius groaned.

“I’d rather not imagine it. With the way things are going, it just might.” Shirou held back a grimace. “What did you tell her?”

“The hell do you think I told her that would have kept us alive till now!? The truth!” Sirius looked at Shirou as if he was an idiot. “Told her how you got to be the mess you were now. Told her what changes your body made. What Waver and I did ta monitor and examine your progress and what we’d do if you did turn into some wild monster. And how much you wailed like a schoolgirl on her first red night about how much of a pain in yer rear it was and cursed out anyone that thought being one was in any way a bright idea.”

His eyebrow twitched in annoyance as everyone looked at him skeptically. “Did you have to add that last part?”

“Considerin’ it would put you in her good books and how little you complain ta begin with? Lad, in case you forgot, it’s not just your ass in the fire here.” Sirius held his ground. “Speakin of headaches, please tell me that Aozaki isn’t pullin a fast one on ya. She’s been known to do that on occasion.”

“And risk pissing off the guy with seven Servants on hand? Not likely.” Shirou shook his head. “She’s coming tomorrow at the latest.”

“Yeah well, tell her to hurry up. I’m getting a bad feelin about this lad. Ya might want to get everything ready to bail.” Sirius licked his lips worriedly. “Barthomelloi even asked me if you were that new Dead Apostle Ancestor, the ass of whatever you call it. I laughed and told her that even your luck wasn’t that deep in the pits, but now…”

“…”

“Laaad. This is the part where you agree with me.”

“…” Shirou had the decency to look away.

“Lad don’t you dare. Don’t you DARE do this to me.” The old man growled dangerously while leaning heavily on the table.

“… Not my fault. I only found out near the end of the war.” Shirou muttered under his breath.

“At the end of the…” Surprisingly, Sirius didn’t explode in anger. The fact that he was visually internalizing his rage didn’t help matters though. “Four limbs be damned. If I ever see Solomon again, I’m wringing that catholic toy’s neck till he shits sermons to Type Moon so hard the Pope can smell it an add it to his speeches.”

Kiritsugu held back the urge to whistle. He hadn’t heard the old man get this pissed off even when he was alive.

“I’m just as thrilled about it as you, but there’s not much we can do about it anymore. At least for now. I’m working on a fix for this.” Shirou sighed. “I was always going to vanish, old man. Ironically, it doesn’t change much for me in the long run.”

“Except it’ll put Barthomelloi on a guaranteed warpath to end you before anyone can bloody well find out!” Sirius snarled, slamming his hands on the table. He looked like he was about to go on a tirade before noticing one important fact.

Shirou wasn’t alone in the room. And not a single one of them looked surprised about the news.

The old man took in a deep breath to calm himself. “You know better than I do how soaked Lorelei Barthomelloi gets when it comes to hunting Ancestors. This won’t affect just you lad. She’ll come after all of ya… but ah’m guessin that you’ve already thought about that bit of fallout by now.”

The teen nodded quietly. “… We have to fall back on the nuclear option. If word of… *this*, gets out, then not only am I screwed, but the Vice Director is as well, to an extent. In the end, nothing has changed about my situation. I’m getting out eventually. And my condition is the sword of Damocles over the Barthomelloi name. None of us want it to drop, but it will if she doesn’t play along. It’s as simple as that.”

Sirius’ fists tightened as he digested the boy’s words. It wasn’t something he wanted to hear, but it didn’t make them any less true. “Ancestors have responsibilities, Lad. Ya can’t hide forever.”

“I can hide long enough to change my appearance. Long enough for people to forget me.” Shirou argued. “I’m an assassin Sirius. The most people in the Association have seen is how I fight sometimes. They don’t know how I kill. And you’re the one taught me how to get rid of bodies.”

“Long enough…” Sirius echoed, his wrinkled face marred in thought. “You have somethin’ planned. Solomon got ya stuck in somethin’ nasty, didn’t he?”

“One heart attack at a time old man.” Shirou didn’t even try to deny it this time. “Let’s just say that some factors are already out of my hands.”

“Ah fuck me sideways.” Likewise, Sirius didn’t even try to hide his despair as he pressed his hands against his face.

“Language!” Irisviel chided, causing Sirius to notice her for the first time.

“… So you’re Irisviel.” Sirius’ deep voice rasped, getting a good look at her for the first time. His examination went on for several seconds before he let out a defeated sigh and sat back down on his seat. “Haaaaah. Kiritsugu was right. He was pants at describing your looks. No wonder an emotionless brick like him fell apart just talkin about ya.”

“I, thanks?” Irisviel fumbled at his words, unsure about the change of gears in the conversation.

The old man looked around the room and saw some familiar faces. “Where’s m’girl Bazett?”

“Sleeping. She was out late doing rounds last night after I took care of an unwanted guest.” Shirou sighed heavily. “Nothing major, but it was something that needed to be done.”

“Mmm. Pity. Would have done me good to lay into her this morning for old time’s sake.” Lying back in his chair and staring at the ceiling, Sirius tapped his finger ambient on his armrest in deep thought before seemingly giving up and scratching his head. “… Well this’ tha pits. Might as well make the most o’it. While we’re still able to talk lad, ya think ya can give me some pointers with that pet project we could never get workin? People in our line of work tend ta have random epiphanies and all that bullshit when they’re stuck in life changin’ events an’ all that bullshit. Maybe give it to Barthomelloi as a bribe to not off ya.”

“While I am unable to follow what is being discussed, it depresses me that such a cliché isn’t completely inaccurate.” Luvia muttered while cradling her coffee, getting a few nods of agreement from Masters and Servants alike.

Shirou blinked in mild curiosity. “That project? I thought you would have figured it out by now.”

The geezer scoffed. “Done? Lad I’m barely a few steps from the startin’ line. Ah can’t get the bloody stuff to infuse itself inta the alloy no matter what ah try. If we didn’t overstock on the crap ah ripped from ya, ah would have given up by now.”

“Project?” Illyaviel echoed what everyone else was thinking. “Shirou, you were making a mystic code?”

“It was an idea to do on the side. We apparently never made much progress.” The teen shrugged while scratching the top of his chest. “Old geezer took shavings from my bones and samples of my blood over the past decade as materials to try and make some super sword mystic code, but nothing ever worked.”

“Ah have your bloody weight in blood and bone powder sittin in storage downstairs right now lad.” Sirius huffed.

“That’s, quite the quantity stored.” Caster skeptically glanced at Shirou warily. Precaution and proper procedures be damned. That level of, extraction was something that should have been considered a torture or punishment during her time. Not a precaution.

Shirou shrugged, not seeing anything wrong with the situation. “Avalon was good at what it did. Throw in some extra healing spells, and I could recover from having several of my ribs literally half shaved off in about a day per session. It wasn’t a big deal. I could still practice magecraft while I recovered.”

“Kiritsugu.” Irisviel turned to her husband with a very blank expression. “Did you approve of what this man did to our son?”

The Servant of Murder muttered something incomprehensible under his breath about origin bullets and covering his bases, but he didn’t dare meet anyone, much less his wife in the eye.

“Onii-chan, from this point on you’re not allowed to experiment or donate parts of your body without our permission or supervision.” Illya must have been angry if she had stopped eating her waffles before finishing them.

“It’s not a big-”

“Do I need to have Berserker join the conversation?” The small girl asked with a frosty tone, causing everyone to shiver.

Shirou glanced at Saber for some backup, but seeing her completely ignore his silent plea cemented his fate. “… I won’t let anyone experiment with my body parts, attached or not, without permission.”

“Good.” And with that Illya went back to her breakfast.

“That includes you Illya.”

“We’ll discuss those minor details when we get to them.” She brushed aside her brother’s stipulation as easily as breathing.

Luvia and Caster didn’t say anything. In fact, they made it a point not to look at one another in concern.

With a heavy sigh, Shirou glanced back at Sirius’ image and decided to move the conversation. “ANYWAYS, it sounds like my, donations, are inert when you work with them.”

“More or less.” Sirius shrugged. “Outside of makin blades I make sharper and more durable, your stuff don’t do jack no matter what ah do.”

Have you tried using implementing some of the steps of Tracing during the melding?”

“Aye. Felt somethin’ there, but it was never enough. Anytime I put it all together the material refused to be crafted into anything. Having a prefabricated model didn’t help either…”

“That’s your problem.” Shirou immediately cut the old man off.

“Eh?”

“Epiphany, remember? It happened. Just like in the comics.” The teen dryly answered. “My magecraft. My Reality Marble, you could say it isn’t particularly good at making “new” things. It’s geared towards refabricating and recollection. You need to stick with that.”

He now had everyone’s attention. It wasn’t often that Shirou went into details about the subtleties of his powers.

“Refabricating and recollection.” Sirius leaned back and thought heavily on this new information. “So, ah should give up makin’ something new with your parts, and make something that already exists… that, or make something that in turn makes something that exists...”

He looked up as if having his own moment. “Bloody hell. Lad, if what yer sayin is on point, it’s not impossible ta recreate Noble Phantasms from your flesh if done right.”

“Which is why you’re going to go with the other option.” Assassin interjected firmly.

It took a moment for Sirius to realize that it was Kiritsugu that had just spoken to him. The drunk opened his mouth to say something to him before stopping as if he was at war with himself. Within the span of a few seconds, he seemed to age at least two decades before losing energy in his body and giving up the idea to speak to Assassin. “Right. Right. Scratch the authentic Noble Phantasm idea. S’more trouble than its worth. So, that leaves the sword that copies. Some sorta, shape shiftin properties gotta be implemented if that’s the case…”

Shirou shook his head in refusal his mind already going in directions that it had not considered over the past few years when working with Sirius on the project. “You’re approaching it wrong Geezer. I told you, don’t make the final product something “new”. Stick with the basics. A simple structure that all other designs can be built off of. Focus on the foundation and absolutely nothing else. One with the intention to sympathize with any design and imitate the growth associated with those memories. The ultimate blank slate in the shape of a sword. If done properly, then the rest of the processes should be able to be drawn out with enough time and familiarity by the alloy itself.”

“Don’t make something “new” or “old”, but focus on makin foundation with the basics, geared towards advanced sympathizing…” Sirius clicked his tongue and began writing something down.

And then he wrote down some more.

And then more.

And then he slammed his head on the table because he thought he was an idiot.

“Ah damn it! *That’s* what was holdin’ me up!”

“Looks like he’s figured something out.” Irisviel curiously tilted her head to the side as she watched the Irishman berate himself by abusing the table with his skull some more. “Does he do this often?”

“Depends how stressed and drunk he is.” Shirou and Kiritsugu said at the exact same time.

Nobody could tell of Sirius was crying or moaning like a child, but it was clear he was beating himself up for what he perceived as an obvious mistake. “Ah bloody knew it. It’s in the basics. It’s ALWAYS in the basics. No wonder ah was havin trouble shaping the blasted alloys every time ah added the powders. Ah was tryin ta derive the damn product from its intended purpose the entire time.”

“You good old man?” Shirou asked.

“Yeah. Yeah. Ah think so. Jus’ gonna, work meself into a stupor till ah feel like ah’m competent again.” With a lazy wave the geezer stood up and began to look around his office, completely ignoring the slight dent in the table and his bleeding forehead. “If all goes well, ya just might have a decent token of appeasement for the angry lass before everything goes pear shaped.”

“Don’t jinx it.”

“Nah. You’re doin that well enough without me.” Sirius smiled with not as much energy as he probably intended, before sighing. “You’ve been a good student Lad. Damn near kin. Helped me out in more ways than you’d think. Next time ah see you, we’re getting shitfaced.”

Shirou couldn’t help but match Sirius’ insincere and tired smile with his own. “Your treat. And I’m bringing Saber to test how good Avalon is as a filter.”

Saber didn’t comment, but she did recall a conversation with Merlin attributing her success during several heavily alcohol saturated meetings with other nobles to her Scabbard. Instead, she focused more on listening and eating. It wasn’t her place to take part in the conversation regardless.

“Cheating brat.” The old man smirked before resting his hand on the table and looked around. His eyes laid on Kiritsugu for a good few seconds longer than everyone else before returning to Shirou. “Good luck lad… Shirou. I’ll do what I can from here. You do what you can from your side. And hopefully, we’ll live long enough ta get shitfaced in the future as two men that’ve seen too much of this fucked world by half.”

Before he could be reprimanded by Irisviel again, the connection was cut off.

The living room was depressingly quiet for several long moments before Shirou made his way to the kitchen again and began to resume making everyone’s breakfast.

Nobody dared to talk to him about the old man.

o. o. o.

She didn’t know when exactly she realized that she was waking up.

That wasn’t an insult to her self-awareness or her ability to think. After spending so long in a state where she was forcefully kept in a perpetual semi-lucid state, it was difficult to ascertain almost anything anymore.

That said, the feeling of simply *breathing* naturally, of feeling air enter and leave her lungs was enough of a novel sensation to slowly jumpstart the rest of her mental facilities.

And then the nerves of her body decided to hit her with the grace and elegance of a sledgehammer.

“Hnnngh.” She groaned out in pain as she realized everything hurt. She ached and hurt as if she had just exercised her body and circuits a thousand times beyond what they were capable of, and yet somehow didn’t grace her with the decency of exploding or dying so that they wouldn’t harass her anymore.

“It appears as if our young mistress is finally coming to.” A mature voice soothingly mocked her from the side, as though taking petty joy in her current state.

“Ngh.” If her tongue wasn’t in such a poor state, she would have spat at the cow, or at least cursed her out with her not so insignificant vocabulary of curses.

“Marjatta.” Another familiar voice rang her ears and skull. Another annoying one, but this far more welcome. “Can you hear me? Can you speak?”

“Loud…” It felt like she hadn’t used her ears in decades. Every sound she registered rattled her mind like a child’s toy.

She vaguely sensed some mana moving around her before the voice spoke up again at a more manageable level. “Better?”

“Mmm.” With arms as heavy as lead, Marjatta covered her eyes. Even with them closed the world was too bright to deal with right now. “What, happened?”

Her sister, right next to her if she wasn’t mistaken, let out a bitter laugh. “What *didn’t* happen, sister? It will take more than a night to go over what I’m willing to tell you. And, knowing you, three times as much to stop you from doing something unfortunate. On the bright side, you are still in no condition to do much of anything as you are right now.”

“Caster?” She croaked. She needed to know what happened to her traitorous Servant.

“Dead. She, caused a good deal of problems. The list is quite extensive. Enough that you will be forced to shoulder some responsibility for her actions.”

“The War?” The fact that both sisters were alive was in itself a minor miracle. The Casters were split up when summoned and were easy targets for the others.

“It has been put on indefinite hold.” Luvia grimaced, knowing the news would not go over well. “There were issues revealed about the ritual, and outside factors that interfered and twisted it into something unappealing to all the managing parties. A ceasefire has been enforced, but not after extensive effort. Your Caster, among others, would not endorse the prospect. Casualties were kept to a minimum, but, we lost Sebastian. Nearly all the properties used by the combatants have been destroyed… save for… Emiya’s.”

Marjatta stilled, be it out of fear, indignation, or fury she couldn’t tell. “The contract…”

“Was a standard one. I have already negated the geass. It was though his aid that we were able to rescue you at all, sister. The Edelfelt family owes him a debt, as unsavory as you may like it.” Luvia’s tone grew hard. “Our former employers are not in a position to take offense to our actions either. The fallout in the Association was, a rather curious affair to be frank. Even the Wizard Marshall appeared.”

No. That wasn’t it. A canceled contract? Unacceptable. “We’re in his house. We can still…”

“Get killed.” Luvia cut her off. “Dear sister, every Master and Servant in the Grail War is currently being housed in this lackluster, albeit spacious building. And save for maybe one Servant, every one of them has firmly allied themselves with him. Neither us, nor our remaining Caster would be able to gather mana to hurt anyone, let alone him, before we were executed. We owe him a debt, and it is our prerogative to repay it as we should.”

The blonde girl had a bad taste in her mouth. All the Masters were here with their Servants? And she was in EMIYA’s house of all places? A ceasefire? What on earth was going on? “The Church wouldn’t allow this?”

“Hah. The Church representative was housing the Archer from the previous War and intended to facilitate the worst case scenario behind everyone’s backs. That Archer… I only saw him through shared memories, but that monster was beyond us Sister. And if that wasn’t enough of a joke, the current replacement for that traitor can be considered an even greater monstrosity. And he is one of Emiya’s most staunch supporters, somehow. Even I still have trouble fathoming just how that bizarre turn of events managed to take place.”

Her head was hurting. She didn’t understand what the hell was going on. One moment she was running away from Emiya after the botched attack on the Matou house, and the next she was in a nightmare that she could barely remember or escape from because of her traitorous Servant, and now she was in the house of her mark?

“She’s not taking this well.” The mature voice of Caster, her sister’s Caster, noted as she began to breathe in and out rapidly.

“It is a bit much to take in. We’re still adjusting ourselves in some sense.” Luvia sighed. “She was never one to accept surprises well. Please calm her down.”

“I’ll do what I can. Her condition is rather delicate.” There was a cool feeling in the girl’s entire being as something seemed to manually grab hold of her lungs and mind and force her into a dazed state. “Marjatta. Can you hear me child? I need to listen. It has to do with what happened to your body while you were arrested by my other.”

“Mmmm.” She could barely answer, slurring her words. “W’happened. Wha’ru doin?”

“To put it frankly, your Origin was forcefully awakened during your ordeal.” The Servant answered, causing her to momentarily still in shock despite her sedated state.

Luvia cut in. “Marjatta, your Origin, Burst, is particularly dangerous to leave unattended. You are perpetually at risk of overflowing yourself. Be it your circuits or your emotions. It was useful as a magical conduit for channeling large quantities of mana, but otherwise you are in a precarious state. Especially now that you are so weakened.”

The girl shivered. She knew, just like any magus did, just how dangerous an awakened Origin was. More so for those that were unprepared. “B-Burst?”

“You were used as a conduit for some high level mysteries, and a great deal of mana was passed through you as a result. Your body, circuits, and mind have been strained far past their limits. We intended to keep you asleep for a bit more time, but certain factors agitated your circumstances and you woke up early. Even so, you are in a precarious situation. Magic. Moving. Any strenuous activity will cause you to be at risk as you are now.”

No. This couldn’t be happening. Not only had her Servant betrayed her, but it had mutilated her body? Her? A heiress of the Edelfelts? No. No no no no no no…

“Marjatta! Get a hold of yourself!” Luvia not to kindly grabbed her sister’s shoulders and shook her to snap her back to reality. “Remember what we said. Your Origin affects your thoughts as well. Your emotions are just as prone to exceeding your limits as everything else.”

“This, what can I do? What has become of me? I refuse to be an invalid. That my own familiar used me like a toy. All because we were forced to run… Emiya. That bastard. It’s his fault. It’s because of that bastard that I’m because of this!” Her mind was running rampant, racing and travelling in spirals without any control.

“It’s because of him that you’re alive sister. We would not have been able to secure you without his help.” Luvia stood her ground, but knew that she needed to give a little something extra to satisfy her sister’s vindictive temperament. “It would be in your best interests to let him live as is for the time being. The War may be on hold, but Emiya has been caught up in several, difficult conundrums as of late. Death would genuinely be a mercy from many perspectives.”

“He needs to die, sister.” Her words didn’t fall on deaf ears, but they were not as effective as Luvia had hoped. “He is the reason I am like this. He has marred my honor. The Edelfelt honor! How can your pride allow you to let him be?!”

Because he did it in her best interests? Because he was one of the few people she could consider a friend? Because she like him? Because he had given her an opportunity to further her family’s craft by decades with a single offer? Because she trusted him?

No. She couldn’t tell Marjatta the truth. It would only cause the girl to truly lose control over herself.

“Because it’s not all his fault.” Instead she took the other approach, abandoning the kid gloves and treating her sister like the adult she claimed to be. Heaven help her. “Or do you remember that you are the one that lost control over her Servant?”

Marjatta looked like she had been sucker punched. “Wh-what?”

Luvia didn’t give her time to recover. “Dear sister, I feel I must underscore just how dire this entire debacle was. Do you know how close we were to a disaster that would warrant Counter Guardian interference?”

No. No she did not. But judging from her sister’s tone, it had been damn close.

“Had you not lost control over your Servant and properly commanded it like an adequate Master, a great number of headaches would not have taken place. Or were you going to inform me that you had murdered the intended Master for Assassin and stolen his Command Seals? While you were incapacitated, Caster had summoned him in your stead. Even if he was against her agenda, her spells ensured his compliance and made things significantly more arduous for us. And that was BEFORE the pair of them used her Noble Phantasm to gain control over Lancer and Rider.”

“Th-three? My Caster had gained control over three other Servants? And she still lost?” The stunned girl shivered, unsure to be amazed or terrified over the implications of what she was hearing.

“Yes. And it was because of your Familiar going wild that I was forced to join with Emiya to clean after *your* mistake.” Luvia loomed over her sister like a disappointed judge. “What you fail to understand is that he is currently the lynchpin that is maintaining the collaboration between all of the other Masters and Servants, a resource that the Association is NOT willing to disregard or throw away for petty motivation.”

It was a rather cunning play in hindsight. So long as they stayed together, they were too valuable to get rid of. From the Association’s standpoint, and their own. There was safety in numbers.

She pressed her point. “Even if you somehow managed to get your revenge, all it would do is place an irrevocable target on your skull. It will become apparent to the world that events here only degenerated so disastrously because of *your* incompetence. The *Edelfelt’s* incompetence. It is only thanks to Emiya’s cooperation and the good will I have scrounged up that has prevented that mindset from taking place already. So don’t you DARE claim that acting like some pedestrian child having a tantrum will in any way rectify the damage your thrashing about has brought onto us.”

Marjatta gaped like a fish. Rarely had she been reamed apart by others so blatantly, let alone her sister. The surprise and pain she felt momentarily numbed her to her overwhelming emotions.

So much so that she didn’t notice Luvia lean forward and hug her until she was already in her embrace.

“Even if you wanted to fight him, at the very least wait to recover first. Emiya is strong. Stronger than any of us had assumed. It would take the both of us together at our best to have a hope of beating him conventionally, and that is with one of us dying in the process. Lord Barthomelloi did not enlist him under her control without reason. If we ever do fight him, we would have to do it properly. And that will require time. More time than you would like, but time nonetheless. Please, rest for now sister. Can you do that?”

Marjatta shivered, her emotions clearly at conflict with one another. However her love for her sister and her experience as a mercenary surpassed her wildly and unnaturally enhanced emotions. “I, will try. Sister. This is, difficult to adjust to.”

Caster looked at her Master with an unreadable gaze. Luvia had not spoken a lie. If the girls ever did want a hope to fight against the boy, they would both need to be at their best.

That said, it was unlikely that Luvia would raise a hand against the boy. She was too enthralled with him to ever do so.

That, and by the time they were capable of taking him on… he would already be long out of their reach.

“I know. Fortunately, we still have a Caster from the Age of Gods to help us adapt and make our ordeal tolerable. I just need some effort and cooperation from you as well.” Luvia smiled and pulled back, glad that the worst of the girl’s episode was receding.

The girl breathed out slowly. “I understand.” She lifted a heavy hand and rubbed her eyes. “… We are all truly in Emiya’s estate? Sebastian is dead?”

“Unfortunately. Your Servant’s methods were particularly aggressive at the end of the War. This is the only Magus estate left in Fuyuki that wasn’t damaged, ironically. You’d think that Emiya’s home would be one of the first that would be set ablaze given his reputation.”

That said, she tried not to recall that Assassin had at one point infiltrated it and set up traps everywhere.

“What about the Edelfelt Castle? Surely a structure that grand is still usable.”

Luvia shook her head. “The Archer of the Fourth War attacked it. It took the combined might of Emiya, Saber and Berserker to defeat him, and that was only barely achieved from what I was told by Einzbern. The place is not suitable for any residence save for the wildlife as of now.”

“A Servant that could take on Saber and Berserker? Such a monster existed?” The very idea of something on that level that wasn’t a Type or a wielder of True Magic was simply impossible for her to comprehend. “Wait, you said Emiya fought too? Why on earth would any fool take part in a battle of Servants?”

*Because he is a fool.*

Luvia wanted to reply as such, but knew that betraying any genuine familiarity or affection to him right now would only cause her sister to react poorly. “His magecraft was unusually suited for that battle. And do recall that he isn’t like other mages. He’s specialized for these sorts of events.”

“Ngh. He could have at least done us a favor and died in the process.” The girl muttered irritably.

Luvia rolled her eyes. “Like I said, dear sister, it was due to his contributions that we are speaking right now. Enemy or not, do show some gratitude for his services. If you behave well, I may even convince him to cook you some of your meals while here.”

“Please tell me you are jesting.”

Caster gave an annoyed huff. “As much as I wish to ignore it, the boy is rather talented and enthusiastic in culinary endeavors.”

“He made Caster pancakes this morning.” Luvia smirked.

“Tch.”

“And she asked for seconds.” The Master teased.

“Must you do this?”

Marjatta swallowed the accusations on the tip of her tongue. She held back her anger, if only barely. Her frustration was there, threatening to overwhelm her as her sister tried to lighten the mood and jest with her Servant.

She could tolerate losing. She could tolerate being saved. But for the one that had been responsible for her current situation, the one that she intended to kill. To have the gall to house her, to heal her, feed her, among her other enemies, and expect her to behave and be *grateful*? To fool her sister to the point that the latter was taking his side over hers?

Unacceptable.

She swallowed, her dry mouth feeling like the emptiness in her throat was as large and heavy as a stone.

But Luvia was right about one thing. Timing was important. She had to be patient before she took action. She was in enemy territory, and surrounded by Servants at that. She would play nice for now, but sooner or later an opening would be made.

And she would take it.

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The back of the truck shut loudly in the underground parking garage.

“That’s the last of it.” A young man in his early twenties with black hair and glasses sighed as he brushed his hands against his pants. “I’m still surprised you’re taking so much with you this time. You’re normally pretty minimalistic when it comes to jobs.”

A beautiful yet mature looking thirty-ish year old red haired woman with a ponytail smoked a cigarette nearby. “It’s just that kind of job Mikiya. Some brats out there that require the VIP treatment.”

“Brats?”

“I’ll tell you about it when I get back.” The woman looked to her side to see another young woman with shoulder length brown hair around the man’s age approach, dressed in an odd mix of eastern and western clothes in the form of a yukata and a leather jacket. “I was wondering when you’d show up.”

“Didn’t think you were serious about it. It’s not often that you’re willing to admit that you need a bodyguard.” The third party shrugged nonchalantly. “You expecting trouble this time around?”

“No. Truth be told, given the firepower the party we’re meeting up with has, if it ever came to blows I’m pretty sure we’d be wiped out within the first few seconds. I just didn’t want to die alone if it came to that.” The smoker joked.

“What she meant so say is that she’d want some extra hands she could trust with the equipment that could also handle their own.” The man laughed, stepping in before another argument could break out and gave both women a look that more or less begged them to not fight anymore.

They found it pathetically adorable. Just like all the other times he did it before.

“Humph. You’re both terrible liars.” The girl in the jacket snorted derisively, but didn’t press the issue. “I thought you said you were meeting up with some kid.”

“I am. A kid with connections. Also one that’s rumored to able to kill almost as many monsters as you can.” The redhead shrugged.

“Sounds like an ass.”

“You would know. Actually as far as murder capable brats go, he’s surprisingly tolerable. Almost reminds me of Mikiya here if you can believe it. Like some sort of bizarre cross between the two of you.”

“I don’t know whether to take that as a compliment or an insult.” Mikiya laughed.

“It’s an oxymoron if anything.” The younger woman deadpanned.

“I said almost.” The elder didn’t care if she was believed or not. “Kid’s nice, but he clearly knows how to stand his ground, if a bit too honest for his own good. Can’t say he doesn’t know how to sweeten a deal though. Wouldn’t be going out of my way for this job if that wasn’t the case.”

“Hoh? Spoiled brat shelled out some more toys to clutter your office with?” She hoped not. There wasn’t much room left in the place, and she liked napping on the couch without something digging into her side.

“Unfortunately not, but I do get to poke around with some interesting subjects this time.” The redhead grinned. “Plus I’ve been in contact with his boss and, well that woman’s someone even I wouldn’t cross on a good day.” Even if they were on the opposite side of the planet from one another.

“Sounds scary.” Mikiya laughed nervously. Considering present company, that meant something.

“You have no idea. Fortunately, she’s a hell of a negotiator that comes with benefits if you work her right.” The elder woman smirked.

“You have something sketchy cooked up again, Touko.” The younger woman drawled.

“Hey hey. Don’t be like that Shiki. I am merely an eccentric entrepreneur making her way in the world.” Touko Aozaki pulled out her cigarette and tapped out the ash. “Now quit your complaining and jump in the truck. We’re in for a long trip this time and I want to beat the traffic out of the city.”

o. o. o.

Waver yawned as he settled himself in the expensive furnishings of the meeting room of the upscale hotel they were in. He had to get up early that morning to meet with his first member of aristocracy of the day.

“Must your first offering to whore yourself be so early and so far away dear brother?” Reines yawned as she sat next to him. “Southend at six in the morning. If I didn’t know better I thought you enjoyed torturing yourself.”

Correction, second member of aristocracy.

“Why bother when I have you around.” Waver tried to blink away his exhaustion, and failing miserably. Truth be told he hadn’t been thinking clearly when he had agreed to this meeting last night. He had just been trying to get away from the tower for a bit and just wanted to get away from the paperwork as quickly as possible. “Regardless, a joint offer from a branch from the Kaiser family is difficult to ignore. More so when it’s one of the few families that the El Melloi has not insulted in some form over the past decade, let alone century.”

“And whose fault is that.” Reines gave him a halfhearted glare.

“At this point I would not be surprised if a god was still around with the sole purpose to make my life more disastrous than it already is.” Waver drawled, his tired eyes gazed over the river Thames as it emptied out into the North Sea. The facility they were in was among the well-equipped establishments in the area, complete with its own docks.

Fortunately, the building was on the south shore of the river on a bend, so their northwestern view of the water would not result in the morning sun blinding them once it finally crested the winter sky. As of now, they still had an hour or so before daylight hit them.

“A pity that Lady Barthomelloi only supplied us with half a dozen members of the Chelon Canticle Brigade as security.” Due to the inconvenient levels of attention Waver had garnered as of late, the Vice Director had seen it prudent to have her personal guard around him whenever he would leave any Association facilities. Be it for his own protection, or to make sure he wasn’t doing anything else that would cause half the Clocktower to explode in controversy.

For the life of him, he couldn’t blame her for it. If anything, he truly was grateful, even if he had to be more careful with his words and actions for the near future.

“Considering the help you had when we first met, I find your comments to be quite hypocritical.” Waver recalled being strung upside down by some very large and muscular guards some years ago.

It was too early to smoke, even for him. Fortunately the hotel had provided some complementary tea and breakfast snacks to dine on while they waited for the other party. It wasn’t up to the standard of the Association for the most part, but he didn’t mind. As he was frequently reminded, he was of pedestrian brood, and his standards for most qualities of life were far less obnoxious than his peers. Lord or not.

He was halfway towards reaching to the plate of chocolate croissants when he saw something irregular by his feet.

It was a fluffy white… squirrel? Dog? Fox? An animal that he could not properly identify, but judging by the hues of its fur and the mana it held, it was clearly not a natural creature. Probably a familiar of sorts.

“Fou?” It tilted its head to the side curiously.

Waver frowned as the hairs on the back of his neck started to stand on end.

This room was guarded on all entrances by Barthomelloi’s guards, plus several bounded fields, and yet this creature managed to get in without anyone knowing. The place had been scanned before, so it couldn’t have arrived before them.

Even if it was a familiar of the other party, to have it arrive before the owner itself was a major faux pas that would never fly by most of the other Lords and major magus families.

It was only then that he realized just how quiet it was.

“Trimmau.” He ordered in a cold tone that immediately got Reines’ attention. Next to him, the Mercury Maid appeared at attention, ready to attack or defend at a moment’s notice. “What is the status of the guards?”

“What’s wrong?” Now more alert, Reines was looking around concerned. Her eyes were not agitated, so she knew there wasn’t a spike in mana in the area, but she couldn’t help but feel an uncertain weight slowly beginning to press down on her shoulders.

Before the Golem could conduct its search of the help, the main door to the room opened to the might of a small squad of men and women in military garb and weaponry, surrounding the group without a word and with little noise until they were all in position and standing stoically.

“What-?” Reines blinked as Waver held up a hand in front of her. The fact that this force were armed with guns and outnumbered them, yet did not fire meant that they weren’t a kill squad. Or rather, they weren’t here to serve as one.

“Waver Velvet. Or Lord El Melloi II.” A new man entered the room, and judging from the way he walked and talked, he was this groups boss. A fit and handsome man of Mediterranean decent, dressed in military fatigues, he moved and smiled with far more charisma than the armed force around them. “You’ve made quite the commotion as of late my friend. Or rather, you rub shoulders with those that do. I must say, I am impressed that someone as low key as yourself would be involved in so many interesting tales. You must be quite the source of entertainment with a pint in hand.”

“I’m afraid my rather tentative position would leave me rather deceased if I allowed myself that luxery.” Waver politely accepted the backhanded compliment. “I don’t suppose you are of the Kaiser family.”

“I am and am not. You could say it is a complicated yet intricate relationship.” The man bowed with a flourish. “My apologies for the inadequate treatment my friend, however my mistress is the sort that requires a particular degree of privacy whenever she meets with someone in these lands. I hope you can understand.”

Waver couldn’t help it. His eyes darted to the hallway where his guards were supposed to be.

He expected blood. He expected body parts. A corpse. Maybe even an absence of their existence…

He didn’t expect the six loyal members of the Barthomelloi to be standing among his captors at the ready as if they were part of the scheme to begin with.

Without any commotion. Without any warning. Or display of spells or mana. Without any damage at all. Six veteran combat mages had been converted to the enemy’s side literally right outside the door.

“W-Waver…” Reines shivered, realizing that their situation was more dire than expected.

“I hope so too. Those are the Vice Director’s men you are controlling. She gets particularly finicky whenever someone takes her things without permission.” Waver stalled for time. He had to think of a way out of this mess. He was out manned and out gunned. In terms of combat, the only thing left of note in his arsenal was Trimmau, and he had a sinking feeling that the mercury golem would not be enough to meet the odds he was against.

Much to his fear, the new man’s smile widened. Enough that his enlarged fangs were visible. “I consider it a benefit to the day’s mission. It’s no secret that the Lady Barthomelloi can be a real pain in the blow hole.”

An Apostle. Wonderful.

“Fina. Stop playing with the poor boy.” Before Waver could think of any counter measures to maybe get out of this hopeless situation, a new, younger and female voice cut in, drawing his attention to the doorway again. “He’s been through enough endless prattling this past week. Don’t stress him with your terrible taste of conversation.”

… Wait. Did she just say Fina?

Waver’s already pale skin tone slowly lost what color it had left and became near transparent as he took in the sight of the red eyed black haired girl that almost appeared to be Reines’ age.

No. No, his luck couldn’t be that terrible. There was a limit to how sideways the world could turn on him in a moment’s notice. This wasn’t just impossible. This was an outright *joke*.

“Fou fou!” The small white squirrel dog thing that had been at his feet the entire time jumped up to the girl and landed on her shoulder with all the adorable affection that the ideal pet would have for its owner.

The military man in charge of the small force trapping him in the room bowed as he announced the girl’s arrival. “Lord El Melloi II, allow me to introduce you to my mistress. The eldest daughter of Crimson Moon. Altrouge Brunstud.”

o. o. o.