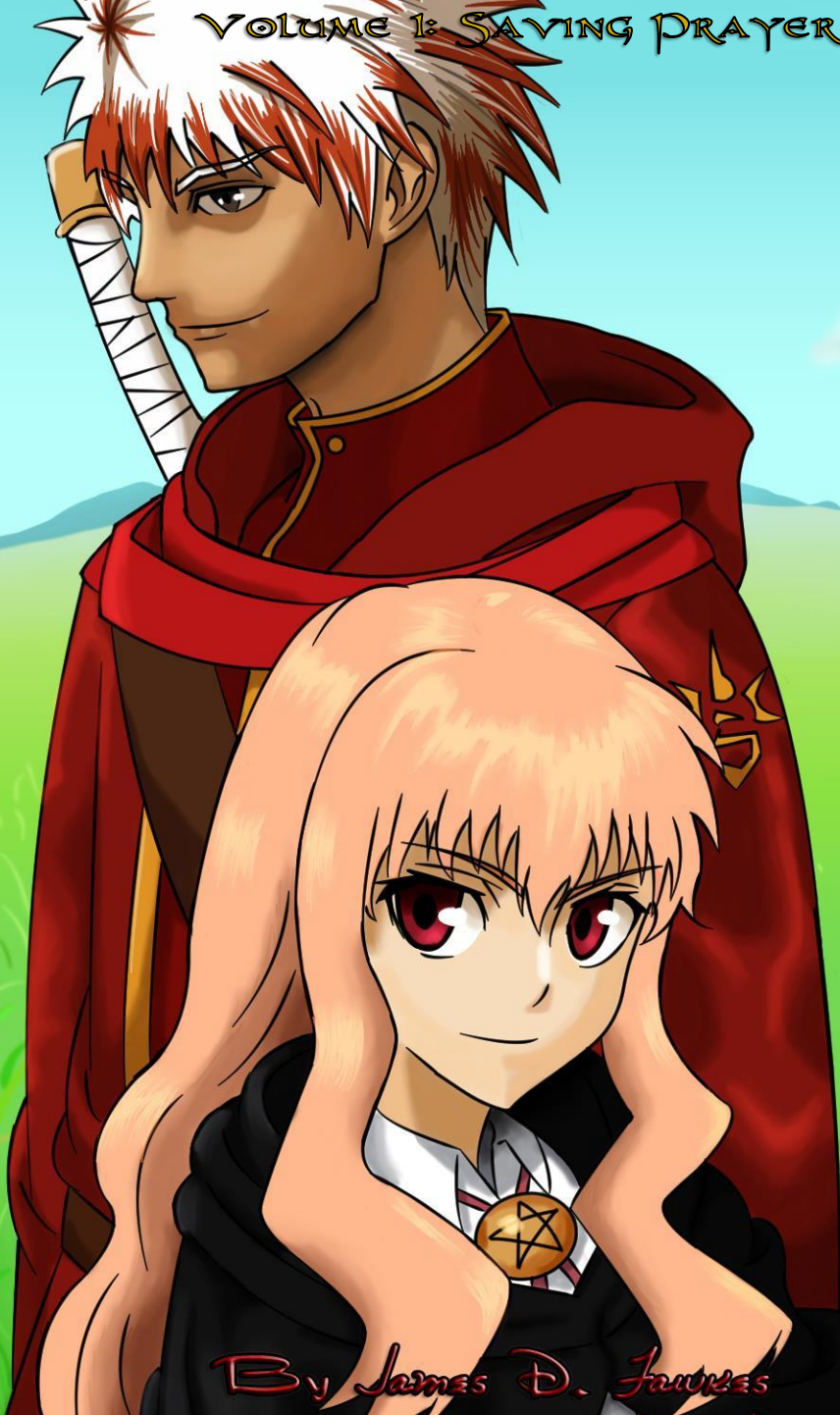


MIRACLE OF ZERO: KINGDOM OF THE FORSAKEN

VOLUME 1: SAVING PRAYER



By James D. Fawcett

MIRACLE OF ZERO:
KINGDOM OF THE FORSAKEN

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A girl cries out for Salvation — and receives a Miracle.

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FOREWORD

The following story, *Miracle of Zero: Kingdom of the Forsaken*, is Rated M for Mature. It contains mature content, including violence, harsh language, intense (but not graphic) sexual situations, and implications of rape.

Please keep in mind that this story was intended for adult audiences — those in their late teens and early twenties. As such, things will not be handed to you: some mysteries will remain mysteries for quite a while, and everything said should be taken with a grain of salt. Just about the only thing that you can trust to be unbiased and true are the Tohsaka-sensei Lecture Corners, because that is their intended purpose. Please put some thought into what you’re reading.

Please also remember that a crossover with this much depth given to the mechanics of the given universes means that some things had to be changed. Though the mechanics of the Nasuverse remain intact, their presence necessitated building a “new canon” for Familiar of Zero. Do not fret: the details you’re familiar with haven’t changed too much, and casting spells still works mostly as it did in the Light Novels; however, the finer details have been altered in order to allow the crossover to work. On the surface, you might find some things that wouldn’t quite work in Familiar of Zero canon, more so if you look deeper behind the curtain, but it shouldn’t drastically affect your enjoyment.

For those of you coming in from the Fate/Stay Night side of things, please keep in mind that any version of Revenant or Miracle Shirou is the Superman to canon Emiya Shirou’s Batman. That is to say, canon Emiya Shirou struggles to accomplish anything and must overcome his enemies with cleverness and guile. Revenant or Miracle Shirou (in essence,

the same character at different times of his development) is, instead, a character with the power to fight and defeat his enemies, but who still struggles to accomplish his goals because of his own innate limitations.

To use another analogy, canon Emiya Shirou is a shounen protagonist, and Revenant Shirou is an Arthurian Romance protagonist. The difference in conflict for these two character archetypes is that shounen heroes fight and grow both as warriors and as people (usually more of the former than the latter), while Arthurian heroes fight, but only grow as people (becoming better human beings rather than better fighters). Too, because of the point in time of his development as a character that *Miracle of Zero: Kingdom of the Forsaken* takes place in, any gains Shirou could realistically make as a warrior would be small and negligible.

Furthermore, one thing that should be kept in mind during your reading is that this is a Watsonian perspective. That is to say, Emiya Shirou is the character whose perspective the reader gets to see, but the actual protagonist is Louise. If Shirou doesn't seem to grow much as a person, if at all, then it's because he's not meant to — this is Louise's story, and Shirou is the one witnessing it.

As a final note, please don't go into this expecting a Grail War. To explain why that's wrong would spoil a number of details about the story, so I won't say anything about that, but if you pay attention, it should be quite clear that it's *not* a Grail War. Not even close.

Without further ado, now, please enjoy *Miracle of Zero: Kingdom of the Forsaken*.

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Chapter I: Fate to Zero

Sound was the first of his senses to return to Shirou — a low murmur of unfamiliar voices buzzed on the edges of his hearing like a swarm of bees, speaking a strange language.

Touch came next, and through the gloves on his hands, he felt the hard ground, still warm from the magical energy that had dragged Shirou across the void, and the warm wind of a midsummer day brushed gently against his cheeks.

He took in a deep breath through his nose as smell returned, and the harsh scent of smoke mixed with the earthy smell of charcoal and burnt grass. Nearly two dozen other scents came a moment later — the sixth sense all magi had, the ability to detect magical energy used by other magi.

So he was not the only one who had been...summoned?

Yes, that sounded about right. The last thing he could remember was being pulled through some kind of void, a tunnel of sorts that had stifled everything except for the sense of being "pulled."

Then, unless it had been a group effort, whoever had dragged him away from...wherever he had been prior (and it seemed he could not remember the past day, for some reason, likely to do with his summoning in the first place) had not been the only one to perform a summoning spell.

No, now that he looked for it, the other smells were older and less defined than the strange, somewhat sour scent of the spell that had dragged him to this place.

Shirou stood from the crouch he had landed in and stretched out his senses, and immediately, the very second he

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flipped on his Magic Circuits, he noticed the density of Mana in the air.

Impossible, was the first thought that crossed his mind. It was too dense, too rich, and too pure — denser, richer, and purer by far than any place he'd been to before, and he'd visited most of the world's continents at one point or another.

It was more like Mana as it might have been during the Age of Gods.

Where...or maybe the better question was...*when* had he been summoned to?

For that matter, as a living, breathing human being, *how* had he been summoned in the first place?

Shirou opened his eyes as the smoke surrounding him cleared away and cast his gaze out at the crowd around him.

They were all children.

Each of the people in the crowd was only a teenager, and none of them could have been much older than sixteen or seventeen, if that. They were all peering at him curiously, taking him in as if they were measuring his worth (he was reminded of some of the uppity noble types at the Clock Tower), and by the muttering that passed between them, it didn't seem like they were impressed.

What they were expecting, Shirou didn't know, and he didn't particularly care overmuch.

Unless they were expecting a Heroic Spirit. Then, he might need to be concerned.

Either way, they were all dressed similarly in black cloaks (that looked like they were straight out of a cheap fantasy movie), white dress shirts, and pants for the boys and skirts for the girls, and each had a strange cord about their necks

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under their shirt collar, held near the notch of their throats by an equally strange golden broach.

And standing at the front of the group, looking at him as though the bottom of her world had fallen away, as though her prayers for a savior had gone ignored, was a petite girl with long, strawberry blonde hair that was so vivid it was almost pink and eyes the color of burgundy. She was shorter and thinner than the other girls behind her and so underdeveloped that she would have looked much younger if not for the shape of her face and the presence of the others in the crowd.

None of that was important, because the moment his gaze met hers, something jolted through Shirou's body, a thrill, a hum of Prana not his own that was fluttering aimlessly in his chest.

It was a fledgling bond, a contract waiting to be finished and solidified.

There was no doubt in his mind: this girl had been the one to summon him.

But it was strange. What he knew of the summoning process was limited almost entirely to the Fuyuki Grail system: you set up a magic circle (and glancing down, Shirou noticed the remnants of one that had been carved into the ground beneath his feet), you said the incantation, and the Grail interfered and stuffed a copy of a Heroic Spirit into a class container for you. In the process, the summoned Servant was also granted knowledge of the place and era into which it had been summoned — to prevent culture shock that might cripple the Servant's effectiveness.

None of that seemed to have happened here, because he had only been provided an understanding of the language — a somewhat archaic dialect that bore an odd resemblance to

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French — and he had been summoned in his entirety, both body and soul.

And beyond all of that, he wasn't a Heroic Spirit and he hadn't gone and made a contract with the World for the Holy Grail, either.

So that meant...he wasn't sure what that meant, actually. That he was dealing with some other method, maybe?

Shirou suddenly wished that he had Rin there with him. She'd probably have everything figured out within five minutes.

Okay, he told himself, think.

He'd been summoned to a strange place, apparently by the small girl in front of him, and he had been provided with knowledge of the language, but not the era or the location. On top of that, he wasn't a Heroic Spirit or a Counter Guardian and he hadn't made a contract with the World for the Holy Grail, which should automatically rule out a Grail System, and that meant...what?

He drew a blank, because the only other thing that he could think of was that the girl in front of him had somehow performed the Second Magic.

And the idea that the petite, scrawny little thing in front of him had enough power to brute-force a True Magic was...terrifying, actually.

"Louise," a member of the crowd called, "what were you thinking, calling a commoner with 'Summon Servant?'"

The members of the crowd tittered in response, and the girl in front of him — Louise, apparently, and he committed it to memory — jerked from his gaze and flushed angrily.

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"I...I just made a little mistake!" she shouted in her own defense. Absently, Shirou noted that she had buried the crushing disappointment he'd seen in her eyes — Rin had a similar sort of personality, covering her embarrassment with anger.

"What do you mean, a mistake? Nothing unusual happened!"

"Of course!" someone else said. "After all, she's Louise the Zero!"

The crowd laughed again, a loud, echoing sound that rang out across the clearing like the chime of a church bell.

Alright, Shirou amended, so she probably wasn't powerful enough to brute-force a True Magic. In that case, and taking into account the numerous animals patiently waiting behind and amongst the group, there was probably some sort of system in place.

A Grail system? It still didn't really make sense, but it was the only real frame of reference Shirou had.

"Mr. Colbert!" the girl, Louise, sputtered embarrassedly.

The crowd parted to reveal a balding, middle-aged man in a long black robe and carrying a heavy wooden staff, and among all of the others in the crowd, most of whom rated as rather weak to Shirou's more magic-attuned senses, this one man sent a shiver down his spine and left an uneasy feeling in his belly.

He was the only one Shirou recognized as a threat, not because he looked or seemed threatening, but because what Shirou could gauge of his power was on a completely different level than the kids around him.

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If he had to estimate it, he'd put this unassuming man at Rin's level, and as Rin was a first rate magus who had apprenticed under the Old Man of the Jewels, the man they called Kaleidoscope, that meant this guy was dangerous.

"What is it that you want from me, Miss Vallière?" the middle-aged man asked.

"Please! Let me try the summoning one more time!"

The middle-aged man, Mr. Colbert, apparently, shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't allow that, Miss Vallière."

The girl looked frustrated, upset, angry — so much like Rin, and yet so different.

"Why not?"

"It is strictly forbidden," Mr. Colbert explained. "Once you graduate to your second year, you must summon a familiar, as you just did."

Shirou remained silent and shifted slightly on his feet as he listened in on the conversation. If he was understanding things right...

But to summon *him* as a *familiar*? It seemed like a lot of effort to go through, calling him into a parallel world just so he could serve as some girl's familiar.

For that matter, why did they bother with summoning at all? Couldn't they just go out, find an animal, and turn it into a familiar the old fashioned way? The resources necessary for a ritual like this... It would have just been a waste of magical energy, and no mage, no matter how lazy, would waste magical energy to summon something they could just go out and find in an alley or something.

Unless...

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Shirou looked back over at the other animals.

"Your elemental specialty is decided by the familiar that you summon. It enables you to advance to the appropriate courses for that element. You cannot change the familiar once you have summoned it, because the Springtime Familiar Summoning is a sacred rite. Whether you like it or not, you have no choice but to take him."

"But... I've never heard of having a commoner as a familiar!"

"*Springtime Familiar Summoning?*"

So there *was* a system.

Yeah, he could see why, now. Most of the other familiars hanging around by the crowd were normal animals, but some of them were magical creatures, beasts that would or should have been called Monstrous or Phantasmal Creatures; the only reason he hadn't noticed them before was that they didn't seem to have that sort of mystical weight and power, here — none of them even came close to the feel of Rider's Pegasus, let alone something like a dragon.

Even so, messing with a dragon, lacking mystical weight or not, and trying to force it to be a familiar by hand was...laughable, really. No wonder they used a system to summon familiars — it made the process easier to accomplish and apparently subdued the wilder, more powerful familiars.

But if this system of theirs, whatever it was, was intended to summon familiars, then why was he the only *human* familiar?

It stank of...Shirou wasn't sure what it stank of, but it certainly wasn't normal — not by his standards (which he

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acknowledged freely as warped), and apparently not by these people's, either.

So he'd need to find out, because once he knew *why* he was summoned, then he might be able to discover how to get back home, back to the people that needed him.

And this girl, having to follow her orders, would only be a problem, a hindrance, so he should just Trace Rule Breaker, prick himself, and be done with —

But no sooner had the thought crossed his mind than did the memory of her eyes, filled with utter, gut-wrenching despair, return to the fore, and he stopped.

This girl, could he really abandon her?

"This is a tradition, Miss Vallière. I cannot allow any exceptions. He," Mr. Colbert gestured pointedly at Shirou, "may be a commoner, but as long as he was summoned by you, he must be your familiar. Never in history has a human been summoned as a familiar, but the Springtime Familiar Summoning takes precedence over every rule. In other words, there is no other way around it: he must become your familiar."

"You have got to be joking..." Louise's shoulders dropped disappointedly.

Shirou decided, then, to stay by her side.

Because she had begged for another chance, a chance to summon a proper familiar. She'd been trying to call something powerful and incredible and had gotten him instead, a success, but one that must have seemed meagre to her. She was desperate to succeed, desperate to do something right, desperately wishing for salvation.

So, he would save her.

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Yes, because when he had been lost and ignorant, when he had been pulled into something far beyond him, left to sink or swim, Saber had supported him kindly, professionally, and firmly, had stood beside him as a gallant, untouchable figure that he couldn't help but admire.

And what this girl needed now was that kind of figure — gallant, untouchable, and unfailingly supportive.

So he would save her simply by being that sort of figure.

"Well then, continue with the ceremony."

"With *him*?"

"Yes, with him. Hurry. The next class will begin any minute. How much more time is this summoning going to take? After mistake upon mistake, you have finally managed to summon him. Hurry and form a contract." Everyone voiced their agreement and began jeering.

Louise stared at Shirou's face as if troubled.

That was his cue.

"Very well, then," he said solemnly as he took a step forward. The words slipped from his tongue naturally, like they had been waiting to be let loose. "If you're finally ready, then we shouldn't waste any more time. So, girl, upon your summoning, I have come forth. I ask of you: are you my Master?"

To'ou. Anata ga watashi no masutaa ka? The ghost of a memory echoed in Shirou's ears.

The girl looked at him as though he had grown a second head. "What?"

"Though I haven't been assigned a class nor gifted knowledge of this place and era, there is no doubt that I have

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been called across the void to your side," Shirou explained in the same solemn tone. "And so I ask of you, girl: are you my Master?"

"Class? Knowledge?" She was grimacing and looked like everything he'd just said had gone over her head.

"It is unimportant," Shirou insisted. There would be time to go over all the technicalities later. "All that matters is whether or not you are my Master, girl. What I'm asking is if you were the one who summoned me."

"O-Of course I am!" she scowled and put her hands on her hips.

"I see," Shirou said it plainly. But still, the contract wasn't complete. There was something missing. "Yes, it is obvious enough that you were the one who summoned me. But I'm afraid I must confess my confusion, Master. Is there something else that must be done to complete the contract?"

She flushed, grimaced again, and stared up at him with an absolutely miserable look on her face.

"Kneel, familiar," she said in a tone that was resigned, upset, and commanding all at once. Shirou, who had no reason to deny her, bent down on one knee.

"You should count yourself lucky," she mumbled to him. "Normally, you'd go your whole life without a noble doing this to you."

She closed her eyes and waved her wand — and yes, it was an honest-to-gods magic wand.

"My name is Louise Francoise Le Blanc de la Vallière," she declared. "Pentagon of the Five Elemental powers, bless this humble being and make him my familiar."

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She leaned closer to him and her earlier comment suddenly became abundantly clear; Shirou couldn't help being amused.

"Girl," he thought, "I've kissed a female version of King Arthur. It doesn't get nobler than that."

The kiss was over quickly, and then she was backing away, flushed red and embarrassed and refusing to look at him. Shirou couldn't help the smile; she and Rin would have gotten along famously.

"You have failed 'Summon Servant' many times, but you have managed to succeed with 'Contract Servant' in one try," Mr. Colbert said happily.

"It's just because he's only a commoner."

"If he was a powerful magical beast, she wouldn't have been able to make a contract."

Some of the students laughed.

Louise scowled at them. "Don't make fun of me! Even I do things right once in a while!"

"Truly 'once in a while', Louise the Zero," laughed a girl with shining curly blonde hair and freckles on her face.

Louise fumed and looked about to retort, but as Shirou well knew, this was a battle that she couldn't win, so he decided to take pity on her.

"You needn't worry yourself, Master," he said confidently. Everyone stopped and turned to look at him. "My master need not worry herself over the blithering of the common rabble when she is the strongest mage here."

The crowd erupted into laughter again.

"How's that, commoner?" someone called.

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"Did she pay you to say that?" cackled another.

Shirou only gave them the smirk he had learned from Rin. "There is no doubt that my Master is the strongest because it was me that she summoned."

Another round of laughter broke out and Louise looked like she wanted to melt into the ground.

"As if a commoner is worth summoning!"

Shirou wasn't deterred.

"You can laugh if you like," he told them all calmly, "but the power of the familiar reflects the power of the mage, right? In that case, then, as I am the most powerful familiar, my master must naturally be the most powerful mage."

He said it as though it was fact.

And it was, more or less. In his own experience, the summoning ritual and any preparations made beforehand only determined what Heroic Spirit was summoned; what sort of parameters that Heroic Spirit had after being stuffed into a Servant container depended upon the capacity of the Master. If the Master was a powerful mage like Rin, then the Servant's parameters would naturally be much closer to his full potential than they would be under a third rate magus, or even an average magus.

But there didn't seem to be that sort of system, here, because Shirou had not been shoved into a Servant container. He had been pulled in his entirety, body and soul, without any loss in power. That meant that the mage's power and magical potential wouldn't need to go into supporting the familiar, so the familiar would always be at full power. In that case, the kind of familiar each mage pulled through the summoning ritual would be determined entirely by the power of the summoner.

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To boil it down, the power of the familiar was a reflection of the power of the mage.

From there, he could judge the potential of each of the children around him simply by looking at their familiars. The cats and owls and toads, ordinary beasts, could immediately be ruled out as nonthreatening, and so their masters wouldn't be much better than he had been, once upon a time, before he'd been dragged into the Grail War. On the other hand, the masters of the salamander and dragon and the other fantasy creatures would be something to look out for, but...

But as he'd noted before, none of those fantasy creatures had the sort of mystical weight he associated with their kind.

If there was half a dozen of them who had summoned things like Rider's Pegasus, an age old Mystery of the Millennial Rank, then Shirou would have been worried, but with such young and weak phantasmal beasts surrounding him, that put Shirou at the top of the food chain.

And since they would need at least three mages of Barthomeloi Lorelei's caliber in order to endanger his life, that put Louise, as his master, as the most powerful mage there.

Suddenly, the foreign Prana swirling inside of his body turned hot and agitated and coursed through his veins like molten lava. It focused most intensely on his left hand, which erupted into pain as shoots of agony lanced up his arm like lightning. Shirou hissed through clenched teeth and fisted the hardy cloth that protected his chest, just over the scar that marked the wound Gáe Bolg had given him those many years ago.

He was embarrassed when a low groan slipped past his lips. This pain was nothing, he told himself. This was nothing compared to the agony of trying to compete with Heracles'

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world-shaking strength, of having power not his own flood his body to stop himself from being flattened beneath the roughly hewn marble slab that had rent the ground asunder. It was nothing compared to turning your own nerves into a jury-rigged Magic Circuit.

It was probably the surprise, he noted absently. No contract he had ever entered had hurt, so he hadn't been expecting the sudden burning sensation that swept through his body like fire.

As quickly as it came, the pain left and Shirou's body returned to normal. He let out a breath, opened eyes that had closed reflexively, and tore off his glove — and there, staring out at him from the back of his left hand, was a collection of runes — and oh, what a mistake it was to never learn runes.

"A swordsman," the girl, Louise, was muttering to herself. "Worse than that, a *commoner* swordsman."

"Oh?" every impulse in Shirou screamed in alarm, and it took all of his self-control not to leap away as the middle-aged Mr. Colbert leaned down to examine the etchings on the back of Shirou's left hand. "Those are some very strange runes..."

Shirou hadn't even heard him approach.

"Well," Mr. Colbert stood unceremoniously and turned to the rest of the class — a mistake, the warrior in Shirou insisted, to turn his back to someone who could very easily kill him without much effort at all, "let's go back to class, everyone."

Then, he spun on his heel and rose gently into the air. Shirou twitched — it was the best he could do to contain the more violent reaction that had wanted to break free, the urge to jerk as though he'd been slapped.

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Levitation was Witchcraft, generally not practiced by respectable members of the orthodox thaumaturgical schools and looked down upon by "real" mages. Truly, he hadn't discounted the possibility, no matter how remote, that he had, in fact, stumbled upon a collection of mages hiding out in France, but if ever there were proof that something was entirely unordinary about this place, it was the fact that Colbert and his students all rose into the air using a levitation spell.

All except his new Master, the girl Louise.

More proof, he supposed, that he was no longer in his own world, if the general strangeness of the situation and the presence of fantasy races wasn't enough.

"Louise, you should *walk* back."

"She shouldn't try to fly. She can't even do a simple levitation properly."

"A commoner is the perfect familiar for you, Zero!"

Then, like that, they were alone, Emiya Shirou and the girl called Louise.

As soon as it was just the two of them, Louise took a deep breath, spun around on her heel, and demanded, "*Who* are you?!"

Shirou blinked. "Oh. I suppose I didn't introduce myself, did I? Normally, I should probably insist upon the usage of my Class name as an alias, but I suppose since I wasn't made aware of my Class and my deeds and real name are almost certainly unknown here —"

"Deeds? Class? Real name?" Louise pulled at her hair. "What are you talking about?!"

Shirou paused for a moment and considered her quietly.

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"Normally," he started slowly, "when a Servant is summoned, it's through the usage of some kind of artifact like the Holy Grail. In cases like that, the artifact does the heavy lifting; the mage is just doing the spell, so it's the artifact that does the actual summoning. A Heroic Spirit is copied from the Throne of Heroes and placed at a portion of its full power in a class container that most suits that hero's particular skillset and Noble Phantasms —"

"Artifact? Heroic Spirit? Class? Throne? Noble Phantom?" Louise grimaced and stomped her foot furiously. "I don't...understand *any* of that!"

Something in Shirou went cold.

"You...don't understand?"

To begin with, no mage worth his salt performed a spell he didn't understand. Even Shirou, who had never been better than a third rate hack, had at least understood what Reinforcement was back when Reinforcement was all he could do. To cast a spell when you didn't know how it worked...

Well, there was a reason that the first thing Rin had taught him was to never perform magic beyond his level.

"Of course I don't understand, because none of that's important anyway!" she scowled. "And besides, you still haven't told me your name, commoner!"

Shirou grimaced. If he wanted to get home, then it seemed he would have to educate his Master, and at the earliest possible convenience.

The *very earliest* possible convenience.

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"Very well," he said carefully. "As I said, Master, I was not made aware of my class when I was summoned, so you may call me Em — Shirou Emiya."

Western custom was to use the given name first and surname last. Though he'd grown up in Japan as "Emiya Shirou," he'd been traveling for too long and had visited too many countries not to have learned that particular convention.

"Shirou...Emiya," she pronounced the words with difficulty. Clearly, it wasn't an easy name for her to remember, probably because it was so different to what she was probably used to.

"Or Apeiron, if you would prefer," Shirou added helpfully. He didn't like using that name, because it roused something that he would rather remain asleep, but it was probably easier for her to pronounce.

She scowled at him again.

"Do not patronize me, familiar!" she shouted. "Besides, Apeiron sounds like a Noble's name, which does not befit a commoner like you! Shirou Emiya!"

At least she'd gotten his name right.

"As you say, Master," Shirou agreed politely.

Distantly, he thought that Gilgamesh would've carved her heart out by now if he were in the same situation as Shirou and Saber would've...well, he wasn't exactly sure *what* Saber would've done in this position, but it wouldn't have been nice. Lancer...Lancer probably would've laughed and called her "his kind of woman."

Louise huffed.

"Come, familiar!" she said snootily. "I will show you to my rooms and where you will be sleeping! If you behave, I

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may even see to it that you're fed before I turn in for the night!"

— o.O.O.O.o —

Louise's room, it turned out, was rather comfortable. It was not incredibly large, but for a bedroom, it was enormous — 200 square feet to do with as she pleased. It had to be about the same size of Rin's room, or the one in the Einzbern castle Ilya had locked him in those many, many years ago. There was a window on one wall, and if that was South (he'd have to check, he wasn't sure) then the door was on the north wall, her bed was near the west wall, and a large wardrobe stood against the east wall. Every piece of furniture and all the furnishings looked like priceless antiques that most auctioneers would sell their left arm just to touch.

To put it simply, Louise's room, while not queenly, didn't belong to a member of the working class.

Of course, that should probably have been obvious, considering most of those other brats had called him "commoner" since the moment he'd been summoned.

Shirou looked down at his clothes and fingered the red cloth — didn't his clothes seem too nice to belong to a "commoner?" Really, what was their definition of "commoner," anyway?

"This is my room," Louise said importantly.

"I see," Shirou replied neutrally. "Very well, then — are we alone, Master?"

Louise jerked. "What?"

"I asked if we're alone, Master," Shirou repeated. "There are things which we must discuss — issues which must be

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clarified and things about this contract of ours that I need to educate you on."

Louise growled.

"There's nothing complicated about it!" she snarled. "You are my familiar and I am your master! There's nothing else to it but that, so there's nothing for us to discuss!"

"I disagree," Shirou told her calmly. "You are woefully unprepared for this situation, Master, and your inexperience shows — no Master in my experience is so foolish as to summon a Servant without Command Spells in order to ensure cooperation."

He neglected to mention, of course, that his experience only included the Holy Grail Wars, where the Matou had contributed the powerful binding magic that formed the Command Spells that could force even a Servant to obey.

Considering he had been summoned without any idea *where*, *when*, and *why*, let alone *how*, there were only superficial similarities between his current situation and the kind he had experience with.

"Inexperience?!" Louise demanded furiously. "Why you unruly familiar — !"

"Master," Shirou interrupted, "please sit. There is much we need to discuss."

He gestured to the table in the middle of the room.

Louise growled again. "I will not be talked to like that, fam —"

"Master," Shirou cut in again, "*it was not a request.*"

It was said politely, but punctuated with a short burst of killing intent — the kind of murderous aura that Gilgamesh

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had unleashed upon him during that Grail War so many years ago, malicious bloodlust manifested in the air and charged with Prana.

Louise stopped suddenly and looked at him with wide eyes as her mouth dropped open slightly. Then, meekly and mechanically, she set herself into one of the chairs.

"Good." Shirou sat himself down in the other chair. "To begin with, I would have you tell me how the magic of your summoning works."

"It's a *summoning*," Louise muttered a little defiantly. She glanced at him, but couldn't meet his eyes, so she looked away and glared at some spot three feet to his left.

Shirou couldn't stop himself from frowning. "Yes, but how does it work?"

"It's a *spell*," she said deliberately. *Are you stupid*, was tacked on silently. "You say the incantation, cast the spell, and it summons the — well, it's *supposed* to summon the familiar most suited to a mage."

Beneath her breath, she added, "Except all I got was a stupid commoner swordsman."

Shirou ignored her insults and considered her quietly.

Where to start, he wondered.

Well, first of all, if he wanted to get anywhere, then first he needed to establish common knowledge. After all, since it was almost assuredly a True Magic that had brought him here, the only way to start looking for a way home was to find out whether or not anyone even knew what True Magic *was*.

And to talk about True Magic, you had to talk about Akasha.

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"Master," he started, "does the word "Akasha" mean anything to you?"

"No," Louise said petulantly. "Stupid familiar," was muttered beneath her breath. "What does that mean, anyhow?"

Shirou frowned at her and she looked away again, flushing with angry embarrassment.

"Akasha is the wellspring of all creation," he said slowly. "As it was explained to me, it contains all knowledge of all things in the past, present, and future — all things that are, will be, or once were. The end goal of a proper magus is to perfect his magecraft in order to reach Akasha and the infinite knowledge located therein, and if that isn't possible, then to pass down the knowledge gathered by himself and the past generations of his family to his descendants in the form of the Magic Crest."

Uncomprehending confusion was her first reaction, then some part of his spiel registered in her head and something seemed to click. Horror suddenly stretched across Louise's face and her skin paled and she blanched as she glanced at his clothing — at last, the quality of the Fae-made armor was recognized, he thought sardonically.

"You," she began fearfully, "you're not the retainer for some wealthy Noble, are you?"

"No," he assured her simply.

She gave a relieved sigh and sank back into her chair. Her question made some sense, he recognized. If his stint at the Clock Tower had taught him anything, it was that belonging to nobility meant playing a high stakes game of blackmail, power grabbing, backstabbing, and politicking. In that case, if Louise had done something like summon another Noble's

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cherished retainer, it would've led to a lot of political backlash and probably would've resulted in a feud.

Luckily for her, he wasn't.

But that assurance seemed to also bring back her fire.

"Well, I don't know what kind of mages you've met," she said snidely, "but no proper Noble would bother with something like that!"

Yet another nail in the coffin — if he hadn't already been sure that this was some sort of parallel world, the oddity of these magi would be another clue. That meant he was stranded in some parallel universe at the behest of a young mage who had lots of power but little talent. He had no immediate method of going home and no idea just what kind of world he'd been pulled into.

On the plus side, it seemed that he finally had some idea of the social structure. But really, what kind of culture was this that the only requirement for noble rank was the ability to use magic?

He could figure that out later. For now...what?

What next?

Perhaps...Right. The summoning.

"In my experience," he changed the subject, "the summoning of a Servant, what you might call a human familiar, is done using an artifact to call upon a Heroic Spirit, a human who is deified after death through the worship of the people. These human spirits, elevated to a status akin to godhood, are then copied and placed into a Servant class and bound to the Master that summoned them."

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Her face twisted with fury and she threw herself halfway across the table as two splotches of angry red colored her cheeks.

"There is only one god," Louise cut in, "and to say otherwise is blasphemous, familiar! To even hint that a human could reach His level, even a mage, is heresy!"

Shirou shrugged, completely unbothered.

"If that is what my Master wishes to believe," he said patronizingly, "then I shall do nothing to persuade her differently."

"You —!"

"As I said," he steamrolled on, "summoning a Servant is achieved through the use of a summoning spell, which then invokes a very powerful artifact to copy a Heroic Spirit and call upon them as Servants. From there, they do battle against each other so that the last one standing may have his wish granted. Without the usage of that artifact, you'd need at least a million mages all working together in order to summon just a single Servant. That's how much power we're talking about."

Which means, he didn't say, there has to have been something helping you.

But she didn't take it that way. The steam left Louise and her mouth dropped open — the number seemed to have thrown her for a loop. Shirou could understand her surprise; it was, after all, a ridiculously large number, and he wasn't even sure that many mages *existed* in his world. The idea of needing that much raw power to perform something that looked relatively easy from the outside was staggering.

But after she had a moment to get over it, she didn't seem to interpret his intent with that statement. Instead, she saw it

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as an implication of her own power and ability; that such an act would normally take so much effort meant that she had done something that should have required more power than even the best mages she knew possessed, and she had done it without even *meaning* to.

That was when the tentative pride began to show on her face and in the lift of her shoulders.

"Wait," she began, "so summoning just *one* Servant would mean that you're an exceptional mage, right? And you...you're one of them? One of those...what did you call them...pseudo-gods?"

The hope in her voice, the desperate *need* to have done *something* right, to have done *something* worthy of notice, it was almost painful to look at.

"No," he said and watched her face fall. "And that wasn't my point in the first place. My point was that summoning requires a lot of power in my experience." He thought briefly of the Command Spell he had used to call Saber to his side, bending space to achieve something like teleportation. What had Rin called it? Something like, an effect on the level of True Magic? "In that case, how does your Springtime Familiar ritual work?"

She grimaced.

"...It's a yearly ritual," she told him grudgingly. "Every year, Second Year students at the Academy etch out the magic circle and perform the summoning spell under the guidance of one of the teachers in order to summon the familiar most appropriate to them. I've never heard anything about any super powerful artifact."

"So then, the teachers would know?"

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"No!" she huffed. "It's a tradition! No one knows how it all works, except maybe the Church! Why would you need to, anyway? It does its job, doesn't it?"

She glared at him again. "Or it was supposed to, at least."

Shirou frowned.

No known artifact to do the heavy lifting, no knowledge of its functions and how they operated, and no one who had any idea how it all worked. What kind of mages *were* these people?

No, no, that wasn't the important part. She'd said that she didn't know anything about a Grail system, and the Einzbern's Grail would never have been powerful enough to summon so many magical creatures on a yearly basis, let alone have enough power left to brute-force the Second Magic, so...something *like* a Grail system, maybe?

On the other hand, the Grail system had been built with the ritual in mind — with the idea that people would be fighting over it, that Servants would be killed and fill the Grail, and the whole thing wouldn't last more than a couple of weeks. There was none of that here, so it couldn't be exactly like the Grail system, but there was also no way any of those students had the power to bend space so casually or brute-force the Second Magic — none of them had the sort of magical energy needed for it.

But then, why didn't anyone know about it? Everyone who'd ever intentionally entered the Grail Wars had known that they didn't have the raw power necessary to actually summon a Servant themselves, that the Grail system was doing the heavy lifting. So why...

Damn, he wished Rin was here.

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Shirou sighed. "Well, I guess I'll be your familiar for now. I'll do my best to protect you."

"Protect me?" she parroted disbelievingly. "Hmph! You're not good enough for that, commoner! There's no way you could beat a noble!"

"Hey now," he began, "don't underestimate me. I'm not a Heroic Spirit, but I'm also not an ordinary human, either. Let's see..."

He glanced around and found the western wall — if he understood the structure right, nothing but more castle lay beyond it.

"If I punched this wall as hard as I could," he gestured to the wall behind her bed, "I'd probably destroy the wall, the room beyond it, the room beyond that, the room beyond *that*, and any rooms above them."

A-Ranked Strength was enough to destroy a house with a single punch, or lob an 80 ton boulder up a hill. B+ Strength was nearly *twice* as powerful. If he were honest, Shirou was probably being conservative in his estimation of the damage he would do should he actually punch that wall with all his might.

After all, Heracles had had B+ Strength without Mad Enhancement, and with that level of power, even the wind swept aside by his sword could do damage. It was incredible to think that Shirou could be capable of such a thing that had amazed him when he was younger.

But that seemed to be the final straw. On top of everything else, that was what broke the camel's back. Even if she had grudgingly accepted everything else he had yet told her, this one thing, she could not.

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"Do you think this is funny?!" Louise snarled, hackles raised. Angry red splotches stained her cheeks. "Is this some kind of joke to you?! Saying something so ridiculous — what, are you playing a prank?! Did Zerbst put you up to this?! You thought it might be fun to tease the Zero, is that it?!"

"Master," Shirou tried.

"Get out!" she roared. "Get out, get out, get out! Stupid familiar!"

He should have stayed. He should have refused. He should have waited for her to calm down and continued the conversation — there was much they still needed to cover, like the runes carved into the back of his left hand and what he had been summoned for — but he didn't.

They didn't have heroes, here. He'd surmised as much from the fact that she didn't understand the concept of a Heroic Spirit. They didn't have heroes who accomplished the impossible — heroes like King Arthur and Lancelot, who slew dragons, or Heracles, who killed a nine-headed Hydra, or Cúchulainn, who could reverse causality to enact his heart-thrust, or Gilgamesh, who had collected all the worlds' treasures for himself.

She didn't understand that there were heroes like that, who did the impossible and who had strength well in excess of ordinary men. Until she saw such a thing for herself, she wouldn't be able to believe it, believe him, so there was no point in trying to convince her otherwise.

That was why, wisely, Shirou retreated. He stood from the table and silently walked to the door. Louise didn't bother to watch him; her eyes were transfixed unblinkingly on the table, and tears were beginning to well up in the corners. Her shoulders shuddered and her mouth was wobbling.

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She was a girl with a lot of confidence issues. Anyone who looked could see that. If left on her own, if she never accomplished anything that could raise her self-esteem, then it was entirely possible that she might do something as outrageous as end her own life. She teetered on the precipice even now, and he was the one who should reach out and pull her away from the cliff's edge.

But not now. Now, they had just met. Now, he was nothing more than a stranger who was probably deceiving her for one reason or another. Now, he had to prove himself to her, had to prove his sincerity to her, before she could trust him, before he could save her.

Yes, he would save her.

But not now.

"I'll return in the morning, Master," he said solemnly. She stiffened, and her fists clenched at the edge of the table, knuckles white, but she didn't react otherwise. "Until then, goodnight, and pleasant dreams."

He closed the door behind him, and as soon as the latch clicked shut, he heard Louise break down into muffled sobs. For an instant, for a short handful of seconds, Shirou paused and hesitated. For that single moment, he thought, perhaps, he should have gone back in to comfort her, to wipe away her tears and save her from the crushing depression of failure.

But he squashed that desire. Now was not the time.

— o.O.O.O.o —

Shirou's feet carried him seemingly of their own accord out of the Academy and back across the courtyard. Above him, twin moons glared down mockingly, as if to taunt him, "Can't you tell? You definitely aren't in your world anymore!"

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Yes, two moons. Unless Zelretch had managed to pull the mother of all pranks (who ever heard of duplicating the moon, damn it?), he was most certainly in some kind of parallel world.

Shirou came to a stop in front of the scorch mark that he had stood in a few short hours ago. He knelt down and touched his fingers to the blackened grass — it crumbled away beneath his touch and left a dark, ashy gray residue on his fingertips. He rolled it about between his thumb and forefinger — it was just normal ash, nothing more, nothing less.

There existed traces of Prana all around him, and especially radiating from the mark that had been burned into the ground, but it was too muddled — too many people had summoned since he had first been here, so anything that remained was too faint and too mixed to decipher.

He sniffed. A multitude of scents burst to life in his nostrils — too many. Again, too many. There were too many people who had cast magic in this spot for him to pinpoint any specific one, so there was no way to try and determine the nature of the spell that had brought him here.

Frustrating, certainly, but not the end of the world. If magic existed in this world that could bring him here from his own reality, then magic must exist in this world that could send him back.

The trouble, then, would be finding it. Fortunately, the limits of a human lifespan did not apply to him, so even though he would rather leave as soon as possible, he could afford to wait a few years if he absolutely had to, and if it came down to it, then he could wait until Louise grew old and died.

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What was another sixty years to him? His hair was already almost entirely white, and his body had stopped aging nearly forty years ago. Another sixty years would mean very little in the long run.

But by the same token, a lot could happen in sixty years.

His brow furrowed.

Sakura and Rin would almost certainly be gone, then. Issei... Issei might make it another twenty or thirty years from now, if he was lucky, but he was already an old man — already going grey, already losing teeth, already gaining weight and slowing down. Rin was a genius — she could simply prolong her own life using magecraft, and she could undoubtedly do it without the pitfalls Zouken had fallen into. Sakura...

How long had it been since he'd seen Sakura?

No, he needed to get home as quickly as possible. He would never forgive himself if he lost the chance to say goodbye to his few remaining friends.

And just as importantly, there were still things he had yet to do.

"Trace...on."

The seven steps were accomplished quickly — practice and experience had reduced the required time by nearly half. The blueprint etched into his mind was made real, and in his hand appeared a crooked, jagged dagger that had almost no killing power. That was fine; this particular weapon was not designed to kill or maim, but to accomplish the negation of all contracts.

All it would take was a single, short prick.

That's all it would take.

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All he had to do was stab his hand just the slightest, just enough to break the skin, and those runes etched just beneath his knuckles would disappear as Rule Breaker negated the contract that bound him to Louise. So very easily, he would be free, and he could search out a way back home at his leisure without having to waste his time following the whims of a young girl amongst a bunch of mages who didn't even know what *Akasha* was.

Shirou sighed, let his grip on the dagger slacken, and dismissed the Projection — Rule Breaker faded and vanished into motes of golden light that winked out like fireflies.

Almost fifty years ago, he had been dragged into the Fifth Holy Grail War — twice, as a matter of fact — and that first time, when he had been clueless and ignorant, Saber had patiently (and sometimes impatiently) supported him. Even though he hadn't had any idea what he was doing, she had stood beside him, his sword, his shield, a gallant figure that never abandoned him and never gave up.

In honor of that, in honor of Saber, he could not so heartlessly abandon Louise. That was why Shirou didn't sever their contract. That was why Shirou resigned himself to a future here, in this world, until Louise no longer needed him. That was why he sighed, closed his eyes, and tilted his head back as the cool night air washed over his skin.

"Sorry, guys," he murmured to the wind, "it looks like I'll be gone for a while."

It was supposed to be an apology to people who couldn't hear or reply, but unexpectedly, the wind answered. A whistle ghosted into his ears — the faint hiss of air being swept aside by something thin moving fast — and his eyes snapped open just in time to catch the shadow of a large figure passing across the distant moon high in the sky.

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"Trace...on."

His eyes suddenly sharpened and the figure in the sky became clearer — a dragon, pale (it was impossible to tell its exact color in the moonlight, only that it was "pale"), with the body structure befitting a Western dragon rather than an Eastern one, and ridden by a small girl about Louise's age astride its neck just above the wing joints.

"An observer...?" he mumbled to himself, and felt a vague sense of satisfaction.

Everyone in this academy, all of these pampered noble children who didn't understand the inherent danger of the skill they flaunted at every turn — none of them had taken him seriously or thought of him as a threat. None of them had considered that maybe there was a reason he'd been so confident, so sure of just how strong he was.

None, except this girl, apparently.

Among all of her classmates, she was the only one who had deemed him threatening or dangerous, so here she had come, high in the sky on her dragon and very nearly silent, to observe him. It was good planning, well thought out, and if he hadn't heard the wind in the dragon's wings and opened his eyes at the right moment, even *Shirou* wouldn't have noticed her.

She was still a bit naive, though, to think that he wouldn't, couldn't see her, even under the full moons hanging in the sky. And in the first place, distance only mattered between equals — no Servant would have had any trouble reaching her, Shirou least of all.

"Clever girl," a voice in the back of Shirou's head said appreciatively, "but you could still get her if you wanted to."

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Shirou frowned and lifted one hand, index finger extended, and mimed drawing a bowstring back. From here...0.46932 kilometers, wind speed of 5 kilometers per hour, accounting for gravitational drift and flight path, the dragon's flight speed — 35.097 knots — and flight pattern...Yes. He could make that shot.

"Child's play," he agreed.

At this range, even a mundane arrow would be enough to knock her off her dragon and out of the sky. She wouldn't realize she'd been killed until after she was dead.

Shirou let his arms drop instead of Tracing his bow — it didn't even need to be said that simply having the *ability* to kill her didn't mean he *should*. In the first place, this was not the Grail War, he was not a Servant, and she was not an enemy Master. She was simply a little girl who happened to be a bit smarter and a bit less arrogant than the rest of her classmates.

It seemed that Louise wasn't the only one here with potential, though.

But something he did seemed to have spooked her, because she and her dragon turned back around and headed back towards the castle, disappearing behind one of the battlements. He opened his mouth as though to call out to her and apologize, but the words never made it out of his throat when he realized exactly how stupid and pointless that would have been, and his mouth closed again with a click.

Well, nothing to do about that, he supposed.

Besides, he should get some sleep. Hadn't he learned from Saber? A warrior's life was always in motion, so it was wise to get sleep whenever you could.

Yes, that was a good idea. It had been a tiring day, and sleep would do him good.

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He turned around and started back towards the school, but had not gotten more than three steps before he had a thought and paused. Frowning, he spun back towards the blackened mark where Louise had summoned him and scorched the ground with the force of her spell. If left on its own, untouched by mages or spells, it would probably take at least a year and some quality fertilizer to give life back to that spot, and perhaps even several more before it recovered enough to match the grass around it.

Well...maybe he could help it along a little bit.

Magic Circuits flipped on and Prana hummed through them — a brief lurch tried to rise up in the back of Shirou's head, but was quelled — then he whispered a few words in a foreign language his tongue had still not gotten used to speaking. After a moment, he gave himself a brief, satisfied nod, turned his Circuits back off, and made for the castle again.

Behind him, the blackened spot where Louise had summoned him had been replaced with lush green grass, freshly grown.

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CONTINUE?

[YES/NO]

Tiger Dojo

"Welcome!" A figure, dressed in kimono and hakama, with short brown hair and a bamboo practice sword. "To the first Tiger Dojo! I'll be your host, the darling, dashing, amazing, stupendous —"

"They get the idea, Fujimura-sensei." A small girl, in a sweatshirt and bloomers, with long, silvery white hair and bright red eyes.

"— Fuji-nee!"

A sigh. "And I'll be the co-host, Ilyasviel von Einzbern. Please take good care of me," Ilya said.

"Right!" Fuji-nee grinned brightly. "Without further ado, let's begin this, the first Tiger Dojo of this wonderful story, Miracle of Zero —"

"HOLD IT!"

A boot came out of nowhere and slammed Fuji-nee straight in the face, sending her stumbling backwards and onto the polished wooden floor. A girl with long, wavy black hair and blue eyes stomped onto the scene.

"Rin!" Ilya exclaimed.

"Tohsaka-san, why?" Fuji-nee moaned.

"Get out of here, you two-bit hack!"

Rin wound her foot back, then swung it forward and punted Fuji-nee away into the distance, completely and totally off screen.

"Fujimura-sensei!" Ilya cried.

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"And stay out, you washed up old hag!" Rin gestured angrily in the direction Fuji-nee had flown. "What's with that youthful look, anyway?! Shouldn't you be, like, eighty years old?!"

"Rin! Why did you do that to Fujimura-sensei!"

"You had your turn, in the original story!" Rin went on, ignoring Ilya. "Now, I'm taking over this show! It's my turn to do something like this!"

She turned to the whiteboard and angrily crossed out "Tiger Dojo," then scribbled another name beneath it.

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner, it read.

She slammed the marker back onto the desk and spun around to Ilya.

"And you!"

Ilya squeaked.

"You're supposed to be dead!" Rin said vehemently. "Shirou went through a lot of grief when you died, so you shouldn't be alive right now! In fact, I'd be doing him a huge favor if I just exorcised your ass! But I need an assistant, so I'm resurrecting you! Got it?!"

"Yes, ma'am," Ilya obliged meekly.

"I didn't hear you!"

"Y-yes, Tohsaka-sensei!"

"Good!" Rin huffed. "Alright, then. Let's get this started. First up..."

On the board, she wrote, **Familiar Runes**.

"For those of you who don't know," Rin adopted the famous Tohsaka Lecture Pose Number One™, "the Familiar

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Runes are a collection of old Halkeginian runes that are automatically inscribed upon a familiar once the mage-familiar pact has been properly established. Depending upon what the familiar is and what sort of mage that familiar is contracted to, the runes will also assign a sort of "class" to the familiar."

"Like Shirou and Gandalf," Ilya added helpfully.

"Like Shirou and Gandalf," Rin agreed. "However, rather than taking an already existent creature and squeezing it into a container the way the Fuyuki Grail System did, the Familiar Runes act more like clothes: they take what's already there and add onto it. As a result, the familiar is always summoned at full power."

"So that's why Shirou was summoned in his real body instead of being removed from the Time Axis and stuff like Saber was?" Ilya asked.

"That's right. Shirou was summoned using the Second Magic, in a way, so it's his real body, not a copy like with the Grail Wars' Servants."

"But I don't understand. Shirou said he could fight my Berserker evenly as long as Mad Enhancement wasn't on and Noble Phantasms weren't accounted for, right?"

"Right."

"How could he do that?" Ilya scowled and stomped her foot. "I don't get it! Even Shirou's Saber couldn't fight Berserker in a straight up fight during the Grail War! He was tossing her around like a ragdoll in every fight! How could a normal human compare to something like that?"

"First of all," Rin began, "the words 'normal human' cannot be used in the same sentence with 'Emiya Shirou,'

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even if it's just the implication of his name and not his actual name. It's just not possible. It's grammatically incorrect."

"Granted," Ilya allowed easily.

"Secondly," Rin continued, "Shirou made a deal with the Fairies back in *Fate/Revenant Sword*, remember?"

"So?"

"So," Rin drew out the word, "that deal was for his sword, his sheath, and that awesome clothing. In return, Shirou was supposed to become...well, that's spoilers, so I won't say exactly what was supposed to happen. I will say, however, that as a result of this deal, Shirou gained a Burden of the Body — kinda like the Divinity skill some Servants have."

"Like Berserker," Ilya concluded.

"Exactly," Rin replied. "But he didn't get it the moment he agreed to the contract. He had to Invert, first, so to speak. Remember that moment at the end where he went sorta crazy? That whole thing where a black bar replaced his name?"

"That happened in the Good End, too," Ilya affirmed. "It was kinda creepy, to be honest."

"Yeah. That was when Shirou became, for just a single moment, an Elemental, one of the Transcendent Kind. Basically, he became a huge-ass Fairy with a tactical nuke aimed at the Grail."

"And then he went back to normal, right?"

"Of course. We can thank Saber for that. But the increased abilities, the inhumanly strong body, all that stuff that changed when he became an Elemental for that single moment? It stayed behind. Basically, he became a human with monstrous strength, a humongous HP bar, enough

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Prana to make a weak dragon jealous, and the kind of luck that just borders on ridiculous."

"Wow," Ilya said, "Shirou's really overpowered, isn't he?"

"Of course," Rin agreed. "But then, you have to remember that there's a human character out there that Nasu, the creator, made up who is capable of casually warping reality as we know it. And that's all True Magic is, either: reality warping. It's just much more limited in scope."

"That's pretty amazing, Rin," Ilya said. Rin lanced her with a glare. "Um, I mean...Tohsaka-sensei. But, ah...shouldn't we get back to the main topic?"

"Sorry, we're out of time," Rin declared unapologetically.

"What?! But we're not finished, yet!"

"We'll just have to cover it next time."

"But I still don't understand how —"

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #1: END

Chapter II: Confrontation

Shirou woke up at dawn with an annoying pain at the base of his neck and grimaced.

Decorative castle walls, a cold wooden floor beneath him, a large window with intricately woven woodwork throughout the frame, a king-sized four-poster bed with a silken white canopy — in other words, the room of Louise Francoise Le Blanc de La Vallière.

So then, it hadn't been a dream.

Of course it hadn't. Emiya Shirou dreamed of swords, not little girls attending magic academies in alternate universes. No, even in those delirious, incoherent moments just after waking, those moments between dreaming and the real world where even the craziest thought seemed plausible, Shirou had never hallucinated something of this nature — not once.

In the first place, he could never have actually thought that he was dreaming something like this.

But there was no point in dwelling on it. If he stopped to curse these circumstances, if he wasted time bemoaning what he had been dragged into, then he would stop moving forward and stand still. He would stop marching towards his dream and wallow in his own pity, in the bleak hopelessness of his situation.

There was no future like that. He couldn't save anybody like that.

So, Shirou stood, stretching out the kink between his shoulders and tilting his head back for a moment to relieve the pain that pressed just above the nape of his neck. He knew well how to handle it — it was only natural, after all,

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when you slept sitting on the floor with your head drooping against your chest. Shirou knew that from experience.

After all, how many nights had he spent in such a position? How many nights had he slept like that, with a sword propped up against his shoulder, ready to stand and fight the moment he awoke?

And so, it was only natural that he had become accustomed to it.

After stretching out, he strode across the room to Louise's bed and reached out to shake her awake, but stopped and hesitated bare inches before his fingers touched her shoulder.

She looked so much more peaceful asleep. Cute, even. The anger that she had displayed the day before, the fierce scowl and disapproval at the way he talked to her, the frustration and fury every time she was reminded of the fact that her familiar was as irregular as they came, it was all gone. The expression on her face was one of innocence and even happiness; the world of her dreams must have been her escape, a place where she was successful and powerful and no one laughed at her for her mistakes. Her paradise, in other words, her happy place.

All the more pity that he must disturb her.

"Master," he began quietly, gripping her shoulder gently and giving her a gentle shake. "It's morning."

She mumbled something unintelligible and continued sleeping. Shirou frowned and shook her a bit more firmly.

"Master," he tried again, "time to wake up."

Louise mumbled something incoherently again and rolled over onto her back, then, suddenly and without warning, shot

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up, straight as a board, into a sitting position. It was only Shirou's inhuman reflexes and reaction time that allowed him to throw himself backwards fast enough to avoid a collision between her forehead and his nose.

"Good morning, Master," Shirou greeted her politely. "Did you sleep well?"

Louise looked at him with sleepy, half-lidded eyes, opened her mouth as though to say something, then let out a wide, jaw-cracking yawn as her arms shot out, stretching. Reflexive tears glittered like diamonds on her cheeks.

Shirou waited patiently.

When the yawn ended and her arms dropped back down to her sides, Louise turned to look at him blankly and blinked once, twice, then spoke. "You. You're..."

She frowned and her brow knitted together as her eyes glazed over a little — she was remembering the night before, no doubt.

"Shirou Emiya," he supplied helpfully.

"Right. Shirou Emiya," she gave a sigh of longsuffering. "My commoner familiar."

Beneath her breath, she added, "Why couldn't you have been something cool, like a griffin or a dragon?"

"Our contract was sealed," he agreed, purposefully ignoring her frustration. "From this point forward, my sword shall be at your side."

"Right," she said unenthusiastically. "That. Very well, then."

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She flung the covers off, slid her legs out of bed and onto the floor, then stood straight and proud, flung her arms out, and tilted up her nose disdainfully.

"Dress me, familiar," she commanded primly.

Shirou didn't move.

No, in the first place, asking a seasoned warrior who had killed and shed blood, who had bled, sweated, and cried to hone his skills and reach the pinnacle of his abilities, who had strode across battlefields and faced monsters that could give even the bravest of battle-hardened veterans nightmares, to dress a schoolgirl as though he were a maid was insulting. Shirou did not take it too personally, but he could not stop the niggling thought that most Servants he had met would have done away with her for daring to presume so much.

He was tempted to tell her that. He was tempted to tell her how Gilgamesh would've rewarded an order such as that. He was tempted to tell her how the King of Heroes would've reduced her to a red smear on the ground for such an insult.

"Master," he began slowly instead, "I cannot claim to know exactly how the familiar system works in this world —"

"What's not to understand? It's simple," she explained matter-of-factly. "A familiar is to aid the mage, of course. If you were a *good* familiar instead of a stupid commoner, then you could probably fetch me ingredients and reagents needed for magic spells and such. If you were a dragon — why couldn't I have gotten a dragon? — then you could fight for me and defend me in battle, because a familiar is supposed to protect its mage, but you're just a commoner, so I bet you can't even do that. *Especially* against another mage."

She flapped her arms a little impatiently.

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"So," she continued snobbishly, "that means that just about the only thing you're good for is servant's tasks, like doing laundry and dressing me and pouring me tea."

Shirou frowned, but didn't otherwise react. His pride stung a little, but he had heard more creative and much more offensive insults from Dead Apostle Ancestors. "Is that right, Master? You summoned one such as me and you want me to do *chores*?"

"That's right," she nodded as though it were the most logical thing in the world. "Commoners can't beat nobles, so it doesn't matter if you were some barbarian swordsman before I summoned you. Since you're just a commoner, the only thing you're good for is menial tasks. So, dress me, familiar."

Shirou allowed his lips to pull into a cold smirk.

"I'm afraid," he told her solemnly, "that if you wish to step on my pride by forcing me to complete such a demeaning task, then you will have to part with one of your precious Command Spells."

"Command Spells?" Louise parroted uncomprehendingly. "What are those?"

"Oh," Shirou sarcastically feigned a realization, "that's right. You mages don't understand the summoning spell, so you don't have a proper Grail System to hand out Command Spells to ensure loyalty. Apologies, Master. I forgot that this world's mages have an inferior understanding of magic."

Angry red splotches appeared on Louise's cheeks, so furiously red that Shirou was afraid, for one wild moment, that she might actually spontaneously combust. If it were physically possible, he imagined steam would be pouring out her ears.

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"I was already going to forbid you from eating breakfast for trying to trick me last night," Louise told him dangerously, "but just for that, no lunch, either!"

Shirou huffed a short, mirthless laugh.

"It seems I've been summoned by a most terrible Master, indeed," he said dryly.

Then, without waiting for her to respond, he spun on his heel and left her room. Her door shut behind him with a loud click.

— o.O.O.O.o —

It was five minutes later when Louise opened the door and came out, fully dressed. The red splotches on her cheeks were still there, but much more pink than violent red, and she held in her right hand a long, thin, elegantly carved stick polished to a mirror shine.

Her wand. Of course.

"In the future," she hissed at him, "you *will* dress me, familiar! Disobey me like that again, and I'll have you whipped for your insolence!"

"One day, Master," he said sardonically, "you will look back upon this moment and thank your god for my patience."

Louise opened her mouth to retort, but whatever she had been about to say was cut off as one of the three doors adjacent to hers opened up and a girl — a young woman — stepped out.

Of course, to call her simply, "a young woman" was the same as calling the Mona Lisa "a painting." She was almost exactly opposite of Louise — taller, curvier, with tan skin, fiery red hair, and the biggest bust Shirou had had the dubious pleasure of laying eyes on.

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Shirou grimaced sympathetically — this girl was going to have quite a few problems with back pain as she grew up.

For all that she looked several years Louise's senior, however, the new girl wore the same uniform, only with the top two buttons undone to show off an almost indecent amount of cleavage. She also gave off an aura of flirtatious sexuality — this was a girl who knew *exactly* how attractive she was and how to use it to her advantage, he concluded. Dangerous, but also smart.

After all, if the enemy was too busy staring at her bustline, then they'd be too distracted to dodge her spells, wouldn't they?

Of course, by the same token, the more attractive she was and the more she flaunted it, the more likely a less scrupulous enemy would take advantage if he defeated her.

The moment the girl saw Louise, she grinned broadly. "Ah! Good morning, Louise!"

"Good morning...Kirche," Louise greeted reluctantly.

"So," the newly-named Kirche leaned forward a little to peer at Shirou, giving him a perfect view down her shirt — intentionally, he suspected with a grimace, "this is your familiar, is he?"

"That's right," Louise confirmed grudgingly.

"Wow! So it really *is* a human! That's amazing!" She studied his face and smiled. "And he looks like a Germanian. Hey, familiar, are you some Germanian noble's bodyguard? Those clothes are pretty nice looking, if a little dated, and that hair of yours is pretty exotic. Not to mention that skin tone — I've only seen that kind of tan on a Germanian."

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"Germania?" Shirou smirked. "Not even close. The place I'm from...you've wouldn't have ever heard of it."

"He's just a commoner," Louise interjected sourly. "Probably spent his entire life saving up for those clothes of his."

"Just a commoner, huh? That's a shame," Kirche said with a sultry smile. "It would've been...*fun* to meet another Germanian. Most of these Tristanian nobles are so prudish and uptight. They don't understand what passion is."

She stood straight again and shrugged smugly as Louise fumed.

"Well," Kirche said, "I suppose it's only natural for Louise the Zero to summon a commoner. What else do you expect?"

The splotches of red that had just barely begun to fade from Louise's cheeks returned full force. "Shut up."

"*I* summoned a familiar yesterday, too," Kirche preened. "And unlike a certain someone — who shall remain nameless — *I* succeeded on my first try." She flicked her hair back over her shoulder with one hand. "And if you're going to summon a familiar, it should be a good one, like this. Flame!"

There was a great, animalistic huff, and a moment later, a large, fiery red reptile waddled out of Kirche's room like an alligator. Heat radiated from its skin, so hot that Shirou could feel it even several feet away.

"A salamander!" Louise cried, sounding a little envious.

And it was, indeed, a salamander, only about a hundred times the size of any salamander Shirou had seen. It was easily as big as a tiger, and the tip of its tail was shrouded in bright orange-red flames. With only that to go on, Shirou

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wouldn't have hesitated to say that this creature in front of him was one of the Phantasmal Species.

Except...

Except, as he had estimated the day before, it didn't have the mystical weight of a Phantasmal Creature. No, despite the fact that this thing in front of him should be a potent magical existence that could never hope to be tamed by an ordinary mage, it stood next to Kirche obediently, radiating only heat and not mystery.

"That's right, a salamander!" Kirche crowed triumphantly. "And the size and vividness of the flame on its tail means that it can only be a salamander from the Fire Dragon Mountains! It's like a mark of authenticity — a priceless collector's item whose value is incalculable!"

"That's nice," Louise said bitterly.

"Isn't it?" Kirche gushed, unaware of, or perhaps ignoring, Louise's tone. "It matches my affinity perfectly!"

"Your affinity is fire, right?"

"That's right," Kirche thrust her chest out proudly. "I'm Kirche the Ardent, the fire of gently smoldering passion. Everywhere I go, I have boys and men alike falling for me. Unlike you, right, Louise?"

Louise huffed and crossed her arms, glaring. "Of course not. I don't have time to go around flirting with everything that breathes, unlike you, Kirche."

Kirche smiled, unperturbed, and turned to Shirou.

"And what about you, cutie?" she asked. "What's your name?"

"Shirou Emiya," Shirou answered succinctly.

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"Shirou...Emiya? What a strange name. With a name like that, I guess you really *aren't* Germanian, after all."

She tossed her hair back again. "Well then, I guess I'll be off. Goodbye, Shirou Emiya, Louise the Zero!"

Throwing that farewell over her shoulder, Kirche strode off, her gigantic salamander shuffling after her with large, exaggerated movements. It was really inelegant, Shirou decided, and rather awkward looking.

"Ooh, that girl *really* gets on my nerves!" Louise seethed once Kirche had left. She shook one tiny fist at the empty hallway. "She thinks she's so amazing just because she summoned a salamander from the Fire Dragon Mountains! Pah!"

"Calm down, Master," Shirou said bemusedly. "You have nothing to be envious of. There are far more powerful things out there than just a salamander."

Louise whirled on him.

"That's not the point!" she scowled, pointing on slender finger at him. "You can determine the power and potential of a mage by his or her familiar! Why did that – that *cow* get a salamander and I just got a commoner like you!?"

"As I said, Master," Shirou replied, "you need not concern yourself. If the value of the mage is determined by the familiar, then my Master is the most powerful mage here."

She scowled at him again.

"Stop that!" she snapped. "It wasn't funny yesterday, and it's not funny now! If you keep making fun of me like that, then don't think I won't whip you, you impudent familiar!"

"...As you say, Master," Shirou conceded politely. "But I must confess my curiosity...Zero? Ardent?"

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Louise blushed a violent red, but huffed and crossed her arms as though she were merely mad. "They're nicknames, of a kind. A mage is assigned one based upon their elemental affinity and characteristic magic."

"I see," Shirou said. "Then Miss Kirche is 'the Ardent' because her affinity is fire...but, Master, why are you called 'the Zero'? Yes, as I recall, the other students referred to you by this name as well when you summoned me yesterday."

There was a moment of silence as Louise's blush spread from her cheeks to her ears and even down to her neck.

"Let's go!" she commanded suddenly.

Shirou thought about demanding the answer anyway, but decided that it was too early to test her patience — until he had established a better relationship with her, he couldn't take the liberty of prying so deeply into something that she was obviously not proud of.

So, instead of protesting, Shirou followed after her dutifully.

— o.O.O.O.o —

They wound up at what Shirou concluded was the dining hall, a large room inside the castle's centermost spire. Inside, three incredibly long tables stretched across the hall, each one capable of seating at least a hundred people, according to his estimate. He wondered briefly how big a tree had to be in order to craft a table that long and that wide, then realized, of course, they had magic, so it was a simple matter of fusing two pieces of wood together seamlessly.

Louise marched to the center table, where all the similarly-dressed students sat. Based upon the lack of variety and the uniformity at each table, Shirou concluded that each color cloak represented a different year of education. Based

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upon the position of the table, the second years, of which Louise was one, were the middle group and wore black cloaks. The others, he didn't know, but based upon the apparent ages, the first years wore brown cloaks and the third years wore purple.

A floor or two above, the teachers ate, separate from the students.

Each table was magnificently decorated — flowers, goblets of gold and silver, shimmering candles, baskets of fruit, and all sorts of other things. The platters and plates were all of the finest porcelain, embossed with different designs and patterns. The chairs were carved with the finest woodwork and etched with majestic symbols. It was opulent and excessive.

Shirou thought that Rin would be right at home.

"Tristain's Academy of Magic doesn't just teach magic, you know," Louise said importantly. She had probably mistaken his silence for awe. "The saying 'nobles achieve nobility through magic' is the cornerstone of our education, so it's only fitting that our dining halls must also befit our nobility. Be grateful, familiar. Normally, a commoner like you would never be allowed to set foot in here, the Alvis Dining Hall."

"As you say, Master," Shirou agreed a little distractedly. He was too busy cataloguing the occupants of the hall to pay much attention to her lecturing.

It was much as he had estimated the day before. Granted, it was harder to tell amongst such a large group, but based upon what he could sense, it hadn't been inaccurate to say that none of these people were a threat. None of them possessed the sort of overwhelming power required to

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threaten his life, so there wasn't anything to concern himself about.

Especially since they were all *children*.

Well, that wasn't actually fair, he supposed. He'd been about their age when the world had first started crumbling down around him — the Grail had not cared that he was so young when it had chosen him as a Master in the War. It hadn't cared about Rin's age, either, or Shinji's, or Ilya's. All that had mattered to the Grail was that they were capable of being or suitable as Masters. All that had mattered was that they each had a connection to the Grail.

Shirou had been a victim of the fire at the end of the previous Grail War.

Rin had been the daughter of one of the three founding families.

Sakura had been filled with remnants of the tainted Grail.

Ilya was the Lesser Grail, the vessel which would contain the Servants until the ritual was over.

Of all the Fifth War's young Masters, only Rin and Ilya had wanted to actually participate in order to honor their families (or simply because it was expected of them). Shinji had wanted to take part, too, but his drive had been only selfish, and he had only wrested the rights to Master from his sister.

In spite of how young they'd been, Shinji had tried to sacrifice the entire school in order to win, Ilya had killed Shinji simply because she could, and Rin had been prepared to end her own sister's life in order to save her from Zouken's control.

In the end, their ages did not mean they were *innocent*.

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"Oh Great Founder Brimir, and our lady, the Queen," a thousand voices chorused reverently, "we thank you for this humble meal you have graciously provided for us this morning."

And, after that brief prayer, everyone started eating. Shirou supposed that this Brimir figure must be their god — probably a Divine Spirit — and wondered just what "Brimir" had done or supposedly done in order to earn such worship. Well, he'd probably find out one way or another the more time he spent with Louise.

Louise, meanwhile, said nothing as she ate. She ate with poise and elegance and studiously ignored both him and the conspiratorial whispers of the nearby students, who were, from what Shirou could hear, swapping rumors about him and her summoning. He supposed that there wasn't really anything he could do about that.

The perils of high school were the same, it seemed, no matter where or what universe you were in.

As she had promised, Louise didn't offer him a seat or a plate or any kind of food during the duration of the meal. It was supposed to be a punishment, he supposed, but he had gone days at a time without food, so a single meal, or even a whole day without, was a bit uncomfortable, but not debilitating or torturous.

He was sure that she intended for it to be uncomfortable, that she wanted him to come back to her, begging forgiveness so he could get even the tiniest scrap of food. She wanted power — power over something in her life when everything else was beyond her control. She couldn't be better than her peers, couldn't lord magical or social superiority over her classmates, so she wanted to have at least a measure of

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control over her familiar, who was supposed to dutifully obey her every command.

Even more so because her familiar was, as she must have thought, so disappointing. No, he had no doubt that she blamed him for being what she had summoned, so it was only appropriate that she would take her anger out on him, even if it was misplaced. Besides, even if it was very irregular, he was just a familiar, wasn't he? It was the same as having a dog or a cat, wasn't it?

The fact that she was missing, of course, was that the rules of having a familiar automatically changed once you involved a human being. You couldn't treat a human the same way you could treat a cat or dog. Animals like that could trust implicitly the moment you showed them kindness and fed them.

Humans, on the other hand, were logical thinkers. A human was capable of recognizing that kindness did not mean trust or benevolence. A human was capable of recognizing that other humans could have ulterior motives, that not all kind acts meant that a person could be trusted.

Humans were capable of betrayal, after all.

He would allow it for now. Louise was new to him. She was new to this whole situation. She didn't know what he was capable of or how to trust him. She was filled to the brim with all these preconceptions of the world, all of this romantic propaganda about nobles and nobility, and she didn't understand how the world actually worked. He had to be patient with her, even if she wasn't patient with him.

Yes, *especially* if she wasn't patient with him.

Once breakfast was over, Louise beckoned him and led him off to another section of the castle, a classroom, oddly

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enough. It was built like the rest of the castle and structured like a university lecturing hall, with a platform on one side at the very bottom where the teacher would lecture and stepped rows of desks that rose steadily higher.

Compared to the rest of what he had seen, it seemed surprisingly modern. Granted, it was probably closer to an eighteenth or nineteenth century lecturing hall at Oxford University than the modern halls at any of the major campuses in Tokyo, but for a society that seemed to have substituted technology with magic, it was oddly out of place.

The moment Louise stepped through the door and into the classroom, with Shirou two steps behind her, everyone stopped talking and immediately turned to look at her.

...and then burst out into laughter. Even Kirche, who was surrounded by a group of boys, didn't bother to hide it.

So she really did have boys wrapped around her little finger, Shirou mused. Well, considering her...ah...*assets*, he wasn't especially surprised.

What was that line from that one movie? Something like, "With the right pair of breasts, *anyone* can take over the world."

Accompanying most of the mages were familiars — animals, some magical, some not — of all kinds. Kirche's salamander was curled up by her chair, and some students had owls, or cats, or ravens. Those were all tame. The truly strange familiars were the floating eyeballs, dog-sized lizards with six legs, and some sort of octopus...*thing* that was squiggling about as though it needed no more water than a human being.

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"I'd known there were some strange magical creatures out there," he muttered to himself, "and I've even seen quite a few myself...but a floating eyeball? *Really?*"

"It's called a bugbear," Louise told him stiffly. She didn't bother to look at him as she made her way to what was probably her seat and sat down.

"The more I see of this world, the more I wonder if it isn't some fevered dream," Shirou chuckled beneath his breath. He moved to take the seat next to Louise, but his hand had no sooner reached for the chair than her head spun around and she lanced him with a glare.

"What?"

"That's a mage's seat," she said condescendingly. "Familiars aren't allowed to sit in it."

Shirou allowed himself a small smirk.

"Then I should be fine," he concluded, and sat down in it anyway. Louise scowled at him and her brow knitted together in an even fiercer glare, but she didn't say anything else.

The door opened and Louise's head spun back around as a plump, middle-aged woman in purple robes and hat walked into the classroom — she must have been the teacher. It all seemed so very surreal; the closest thing his world had to a teaching environment for magic was the lectures at Clock Tower, and even those didn't go into any actual magic.

They had to preserve the mystery, after all.

It just served to further highlight the fact that this was not his world — was this what could have happened if magic had never died? Was this how the world would have gone if magic hadn't weakened, been relegated to secretive mages who practiced far from the prying eyes of others?

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Was this what the world might have been like if everyone had been more like Kiritsugu and viewed magic as a means rather than the end?

The woman swept the room with her eyes and gave them all a satisfied smile.

"Well," she said kindly, "it seems as though the Springtime Familiar Summoning was a great success. I always do enjoy seeing the newly summoned familiars each spring. Although..."

Her eyes slid over to Shirou.

"It seems that you've summoned quite a...*peculiar* familiar, Miss Vallière."

The words and the statement were innocent enough — a bit of confusion and some honest amazement — but all the students around the room burst into laughter as though it were a hilarious joke.

"Louise the Zero!" someone called. "Don't go around grabbing random commoners off the street just because you can't summon anything yourself!"

Louise rocketed out of her seat, splotches of red quickly spreading across her cheeks.

"No! I did everything properly! *He* was all that appeared!"

She pointed one thin, feminine finger in Shirou's direction.

"Don't lie!" the boy shot back, a blond, heavier set teenager. "I bet you couldn't even cast 'Summon Servant' properly, can you!?"

The other students chuckled.

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"Mrs. Chevreuse!" Louise spun back to the teacher. "I've been insulted! Malicorne the Common Cold just insulted me!"

"Windward!" the boy corrected angrily. "I'm Malicorne the Windward! I haven't caught any cold!"

"It's your voice," Louise informed him. "Your hoarse voice makes it sound exactly like you've caught one!"

The boy, Malicorne, stood up out of his seat and leveled a glare at Louise, who glared right back. At the front, the teacher, Chevreuse, made a motion with her wand. Both Louise and Malicorne stiffened, then, against their wills, sat rigidly back in their seats.

Shirou raised an eyebrow, the only outward sign of his surprise.

He couldn't say he knew every magic there was, nor that what he had just seen was impossible, but given what he did know, the amount of power needed to perform a spell that could wrest complete control of a person's body away from that person's mind was not common.

Yes, there were certainly ways to do it that required relatively little power, especially against ordinary humans who didn't possess innate Magic Resistance, but unless you had powerful Mystic Eyes, doing it with the speed of a Single Action as Mrs. Chevreuse had just done was impossible.

Even then, it wasn't so much control as it was hypnotism. When you controlled someone using magic, you were hypnotizing his mind to follow your orders. What Chevreuse had just done was hijack their bodies without manipulating their minds. That was easily pretty high level magic, but she had done it with nothing more than a flick of her wand.

"Unbelievable" was a word for it.

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"Scary" was another.

Could all of these mages do such ridiculous things without realizing exactly how extraordinary it was?

"Miss Vallière, Mister Malicorne, please stop this unnecessary argument," Chevreuse said sternly. "Calling classmates 'Zero' or 'Common Cold' is unacceptable. Do you understand?"

"Mrs. Chevreuse, I'm only called that as a joke," Malicorne said. "But for Louise, I was just telling the truth."

Another smattering of laughter broke out, but Chevreuse swept those who'd giggled with a stern glare and snapped her wand in a rough flick — in an instant, everyone who'd so much as chuckled had a mouth full of red clay. Everyone suddenly fell silent.

Shirou's other eyebrow rose to join its twin.

"Now then," Chevreuse said, "let's begin the lesson."

She coughed and waved her wand; on her desk, a small collection of pebbles appeared as if from thin air.

"I am Chevreuse the Red Clay," she said importantly. "This year, I will be teaching you about the magic of the Earth element. Can you tell me the four great magical elements, Mister Malicorne?"

"Ah — y-yes, Mrs. Chevreuse. They are Fire, Wind, Water, and Earth."

Chevreuse gave him an acknowledging nod. "And counting the now lost element of 'Void,' there're five in total. I'm sure all of you are already aware of that. I believe, however, that the magic of Earth is of extreme importance, and not only because my Affinity is Earth or because of personal preference."

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She coughed again — Shirou was beginning to wonder if she was sick, or if it was just some sort of verbal tic.

"We use Earth magic for many important things in our lives," Chevreuse went on. "We use it to produce and process important metals, to make buildings from boulders, and even to harvest our crops. Each and every one of us needs Earth magic to live our lives comfortably, mages just as much as commoners."

Shirou frowned thoughtfully. So, he'd been right, then. Magic had replaced technology in this world. Everything that had been done with tools and science back in his world was done with spells in this one.

"Now, please recall, everyone, that the basic of Earth magic is 'transmutation.' I'm sure you've all learned this in your first year, but basics build foundations, so I think we should review it."

She looked down at the pebbles and waved her wand over them, muttering an incantation. The pebbles glowed brightly for a moment, white-hot like burning coals, and then faded to reveal sparkling metal ingots the precise size and shape of the pebbles that had been sitting there before.

Shirou's eyebrows rose again. That looked like...

"Is that g-g-gold, Mrs. Chevreuse?" someone asked incredulously.

"No, it's plain brass. Only Square-class mages are able to transmute gold. I'm just..." Chevreuse gave a self-important cough. "...a Triangle mage," she finished smugly.

Shirou frowned again. Shapes, now? Geometry?

"Master," he whispered.

"What?" Louise hissed. "We're in the middle of a lesson!"

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"What does she mean, Triangle and Square?"

"It's the number of elements a mage can add to their spells," she told him hurriedly. "It also determines the level of a mage."

Shirou's brow furrowed. "Number of elements?"

"Well, you can use an Earth spell by itself," Louise explained, "but if you add Fire to it, you can increase its power."

"I see."

No, he really didn't. This system was so very *odd*. You could certainly mix elements back in his own world, but most only had a single Elemental Alignment, and you could only use magic to whose element you were aligned. Average Ones like Rin could use any of the elements at will and combine them as they pleased, but Average Ones were considered extremely rare.

"Those who can stack two elements together, like Earth and Fire, are Line Mages. Mrs. Chevreuse, who can stack three elements, Earth-Earth-Fire, is a Triangle Mage. When you add an element to itself, it just makes it stronger."

"I see," Shirou said again, even though he still didn't, not really. Well, he understood what she was saying, but he didn't understand how it all worked — his frame of reference was too alien. "So how does Mrs. Chevreuse compare, then, as a Triangle Mage? Would you say she's fairly powerful?"

"Of course," Louise said a little harshly. "Most mages never make it past Dot or Line. Triangle mages are pretty powerful, but even they have nothing on Squares."

"And how many can you add, Master?" Shirou asked, honestly curious.

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"Miss Vallière!"

Chevreuse had apparently noticed them talking, however, and had suddenly barked out Louise's name before she could answer. Louise stiffened.

"Y-yes!"

"Please refrain from private chatter during lessons."

"I'm sorry..."

"Since you have time to chatter, I guess you think you don't need to review. Perhaps I should have you demonstrate for me?"

Louise fidgeted. "M-me?"

"Yes, you. Try changing these pebbles here into a metal of your choice."

But Louise didn't stand up. She just sat in her seat with a troubled, anxious look on her face, squirming a little uncomfortably.

"Is something the matter, Miss Vallière?" Chevreuse asked.

"Mrs. Chevreuse!" Kirche suddenly called, looking nervous.

"Yes?"

"I think it would be better if she didn't."

"And why is that?"

"It's dangerous," Kirche said bluntly. The majority of the class agreed with a nod.

"Dangerous?" Chevreuse repeated confusedly. "I'm afraid I don't understand, Miss Zerbst."

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"This is your first time teaching Louise, right?"

"It is, but I've heard that she's a hard worker. Now, Miss Vallière, don't you worry so much. Just give it a try. You can't succeed if you're afraid of failing."

Louise stood up.

"Don't, Louise!" Kirche cried, her face oddly pale.

But Louise squared her shoulders and said, "I'll do it."

Her first step towards the front of the room was shaky and nervous, but the second was strong and determined. Mrs. Chevreuse stepped aside with a smile as Louise took her position at the desk.

"You just have to visualize the metal you want to transmute it into, Miss Vallière," she told Louise encouragingly.

Louise gave a small nod and waved her wand as she began incanting. She closed her eyes and carefully and slowly moved her wand about in patterns. Shirou leaned forward a little and waited — this would be the first time he had seen her cast since she had summoned him.

Suddenly, the flow of magical energy at the front of the room skyrocketed — way, *way* higher than Mrs. Chevreuse's had — and Shirou was moving before he had even considered what he was about to do.

His chair let out a terrible screech as he flung himself out of it, planted his foot on the desk in front of him, and, with a harsh push that utterly obliterated the top and sent the rest tumbling backwards, rocketed towards the front of the room.

Time seemed to slow down as the rest of the room shut their eyes and ducked behind their desks, even as the magical energy *pouring* out of Louise grew even larger. The buildup

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was reaching critical levels, a clinical part of his mind noted. It wouldn't be long before it finally reacted and released itself in one, great wave.

An explosion.

The red scarf that had been wound loosely around his neck came free as he tugged it off and landed next to Louise — it was a holy shroud that rejected fire that he had received during one of his joint ventures with the Church. His Circuits flipped on in an instant, even as Louise looked at him with surprise and her wand hand jerked up while she was distracted.

The scarf transformed into a sheet large enough to cover a single person — it reacted to Prana by stretching out — and Shirou wound it around himself as he pulled Louise into his arms, ignoring her surprised squeak.

Barely an instant later, a great, loud BOOM echoed throughout the room and washed over Shirou with enough force to knock a normal man clear off his feet.

Naturally, Shirou managed to stay standing.

What followed was pandemonium.

The intensity of the sound and the concussive force of the explosion even rattled the floor beneath Shirou's feet, and the sudden noise startled all of the familiars into action — he pulled away the shroud in enough time to see Kirche's salamander shoot awake and let out a panicked gout of flame, a mantichore throw itself out the window, breaking the glass in the process, and every single bird leaping off their masters' shoulders and taking flight, squawking.

There was a distinct ringing in Shirou's ears.

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"I told you!" Kirche cried vindictively as she pointed one brown finger at Louise. "I told you not to let her do it!"

"Jeez, Vallière!" someone shouted. "Save all of us some trouble and just quit school already!"

Mrs. Chevreuse lied on the floor next to them, twitching occasionally and covered in black, stunned unconscious, but otherwise unharmed. He supposed he should be thankful that the explosion had been more flash and bang than force and power — more sound and light than destruction. The shroud would've protected them from the absolute worst of it, but even such a thing wasn't strong enough to stop a full force explosion.

In that case, his clothing probably would've absorbed most of the damage, but the force would still have rattled his brain. He wasn't sure, and he wasn't eager to test it out.

He supposed, however, that she probably hadn't been in any danger — if Chevreuse was any indication, then Louise would've been just fine if he hadn't jumped in front of her. It seemed, however, that this wasn't an uncommon occurrence, nor were her failures particularly surprising or life-threatening. That was probably why the other students had been less concerned about being reduced to tiny chunks of meat than they were about the explosion itself — even the students in the first row, closest to the front, hadn't tried to get further away to avoid being blown up.

Shirou knelt down and looked over his petite little Master — she appeared unharmed, if a little shaken. "Are you alright, Master?"

"Fine," she mumbled, taking a step past him and staring, transfixed, at the podium — the pebbles were gone, but it appeared otherwise undamaged, marred only by black scorch marks.

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Oddly incongruent — an explosion powerful enough to topple a grown adult, but still too weak to destroy a wooden podium?

"Looks like I messed up a little," Louise said feebly.

"A little?!" someone demanded immediately. "That wasn't 'a little,' Louise the Zero!"

Answering calls agreed with the first speaker, jeering and shooting insults down at her. Each one was like a physical blow, and he could see Louise cringe with every single one.

"You can't do anything right!"

"You should just quit!"

"You're a failure!"

"As always, your success rate is ZERO!"

Well, now...at the very least, it seemed he knew why everyone called her "Louise the Zero."

— o.O.O.O.o —

"So then, *that* is why they call you 'Zero.'"

They finished cleaning the classroom shortly before lunchtime — Shirou had been forced (but he would've volunteered if she hadn't ordered him anyway) to help Louise, with the proviso that the classroom could not be cleaned with magic — which was fine, because Louise apparently couldn't cast magic properly and Shirou wasn't quite prepared to reveal his own magic to her, especially for something as mundane as cleaning.

Mrs. Chevreuse had woken up about two hours after Louise's catastrophic failure, but even though she had picked up where she left off and continued to teach, she didn't lecture on Transmutation for the rest of the day.

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Perhaps she had been scarred by the explosion and was too traumatized to try again. It shouldn't be funny, but just the idea made Shirou want to laugh.

A teacher, traumatized by the failure of one student that hadn't even resulted in serious injury. How flimsy and self-conscious did you have to be to be affected by something like that in a world where magic was as normal as breathing?

Louise had spent most of the time they had been cleaning scrubbing halfheartedly with a troubled look on her face, and Shirou, who had had to do the lion's share of the work as a result, thought that she had probably been more focused on her failure and the jeering of her classmates than she had on getting the room clean. He had never had that trouble, but that was mostly because he'd never been concerned with what people thought about him.

Louise was different. She had been brought up as a noble in a noble family in a world where every mage could cast magic with as little effort as it took to lift their arms, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't cast properly. For a girl whose place had always been assured before and was now suddenly in doubt, who had believed with all her heart that she belonged in her family amongst other mages, but was, for some reason, unable to do any magic properly, it would have been heartbreaking.

Without magic, she would lose everything she held dear. She could not live up to her family's expectations. She could not expect to get a better job than as a serving girl to some other noble (and wouldn't that be a kick in the teeth, a daily reminder of what she could-have-been-should-have-been but was not?). Her entire world would fall out from underneath her.

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She had placed all her hopes on the summoning spell, that if she could somehow summon something beautiful, majestic, and powerful, she could stop being the Zero, stop being a failure, and finally regain some semblance of what she had believed should be her life.

But it had not happened. She was still a failure. She could still not cast magic properly. Her familiar was a human, unprecedented and *wrong*. The great, powerful, majestic magical beast she had been expecting, like a noble dragon or a strong, regal manticores, had not appeared. She was a failure who couldn't even summon a proper familiar, who couldn't even cast a simple levitation spell.

Yes, after just a day with Louise, Shirou knew that this was her situation.

But there was a silver lining.

Even amongst her failures, there was something to be said about her situation.

"I suppose it would've been far more humiliating if you'd cast the spell and nothing had happened," Shirou mused. "But an explosion is *something*, even if it wasn't what you wanted."

And that was it. If it were simply that she was not a mage, then nothing would have happened at all. If she wasn't a mage, then she would've said the incantation, waved her wand, and nothing would've happened. The fact that the spell had backfired and caused an explosion meant only that she was trying the wrong method or trying to force herself to use the wrong element.

Louise didn't seem to see it that way; she glared at him from over her shoulder.

"Stupid familiar," she muttered angrily. "This isn't *funny*!"

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"I never said it was," Shirou pointed out.

She stopped and spun around, and he could see tears forming in the corner of her eyes. Shirou blinked, then scolded himself. How had he not noticed just how badly her failure had affected her?

"No," she admitted furiously, a slight tremble to her voice, "but you're thinking it, aren't you!? Louise the Zero, she can't do anything right! She can't transmute! She can't cast magic! Not Fire, or Water, or Earth, or Wind! She's useless! She can't even perform the summoning spell right! Even her *familiar* thinks she's a failure!"

She gestured furiously with one arm, and two tears blazed wet paths down her cheeks, but to her credit, she didn't sniffle or hiccup at all.

"She must have thought everything would get better when she summoned!" Louise continued. "If she got a griffin or a dragon, then everything would've changed, wouldn't it? She should've known better! She shouldn't have even tried!"

Her cheeks were red and her shoulders shook, but she didn't so much as sob. She contained herself. Even though tears were pouring down her face and drip-drip-dripping onto the floor, she didn't sniffle or sob.

"Every spell she tries blows up!" she ranted on. "Even though she comes from a respectable family of mages, she can't use any magic at all! She might as well quit! She might as well give up! She might as well crawl in a ditch and die! Isn't that right, familiar?! Isn't that what you think?! That's what everyone *else* thinks!"

"Louise," Shirou started softly. It was the first time he'd called her by name, he would later realize.

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"Well, I don't have to take that from you!" she shouted before he could say anything. "No dinner! No meals for the rest of the day! In fact, I don't even want to see you! Just leave! Get out of my sight and don't come back!"

She spun away from him and stood there silently, shoulders shaking. He heard her snuffle quietly, and for a moment, considered disobeying her and going to comfort her. She needed it. She really did.

But what would he say? What would happen if he showed her he could do magic?

It would be another blow to her pride — even her *familiar* could cast magic better than she could. She would be furious and depressed and who *knew* what she might do in that state on top of what she was feeling now?

Pick your battles, Shirou, he thought.

He could still save her. But not yet. He had to time it right, or else he would do the exact opposite, and then he would have a young girl's suicide on his shoulders. He could never forgive himself for that level of failure — he would not become EMIYA. He would save everyone he possibly could.

So, instead of walking to her and comforting her, Shirou steeled his voice and said, "As you command, Master."

It took all of his strength not to turn back around as he walked away.

— o.0.O.O.0.o —

Shirou's feet carried him to a hallway he'd never been to before, an empty, unfamiliar hallway that was completely devoid of anyone and anything, and when he realized that, he stopped, turned to the wall, and punched it.

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The wall shuddered and shook, but didn't collapse — he'd managed to control himself *that* much, at least. There was no point in demolishing the school just because he was feeling a little anxious.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"You can't save everyone," he said quietly.

Like a broken record, the words replayed in his ears again and again. You can't save everyone.

You can't save everyone.

You can't save everyone.

He had already known that. He had already known that it wasn't possible to save everyone, no matter how hard he tried. He'd railed against the idea, refused to give up, refused to fall into the trap that his alternate counterpart had suffered from. He would never stop trying. He would never give up. He would save as many people as he could.

It didn't matter if it was borrowed. It didn't matter if that ideal wasn't originally his. Even if it was impossible, even if there was no way it could come true, wasn't it a beautiful ideal anyway? Did not that make it worth following?

But...

But these people, this place, this world, it wasn't his own. It wasn't his responsibility. Why should he sacrifice his world and his responsibility to it for this world, for these people? Why was he trying to save a little girl mage who had pulled him away from everything he'd known and cared for?

Why wasn't he trying his damndest to find a way home?

"Even if the day should come when you no longer need my assistance in combat, please rely on me. So long as you do, I shall never leave you."

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Never alone, striving for Utopia.

He smiled, a small, bittersweet smile.

"Just when I start to wonder why I walk this path," he murmured fondly, "you find a way to remind me, Saber."

He whispered a word, the trigger for his particular mystery, and a golden ripple that appeared over his palm dropped a stuffed lion into his hand.

The lion had clearly seen better days — a good portion of the stitching was frayed, one of his six whiskers was missing, and the black buttons that formed his eyes were dulled and unpolished. Considering that it was nearly fifty years old, however, it was in remarkably good shape.

He'd made sure to keep it that way, and had purposefully asked Rin to teach him some magecraft specifically to prevent it from falling apart and to fix it up if it ever did.

It might have seemed silly for someone his age (or even someone who *looked* as old as he did) to be so attached to what was, for all intents and purposes, an ordinary stuffed lion, a child's toy, but it was the only tangible reminder he had of Saber. Excalibur, or at least an image resembling Excalibur, existed in the Blade Works, and so did Rhongomyniad, Carnwennan, and Caliburn, but they were all swords, spears, and daggers, all weapons that were a part of his distorted perception, and he had to pull them into the world in order for them to exist anywhere but inside his head.

This stuffed lion was real. It was a real object, not a Projection. Saber had held it, had cherished it, once upon a time. It had been hers, and it was the only thing he could reach out and touch, the only real remnant of her time in his life. Everything else was just images and memories.

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That was why Shirou cherished this unassuming little lion. That was why he preserved it in his vault next to priceless treasures like Ogrenix and Draupnir and all the other items he had collected over the years.

"Excuse me," a voice interrupted.

Shirou jumped slightly in surprise and quickly returned the lion to his vault, spinning around to see the speaker.

It turned out to be a young girl who couldn't have been much older than Louise, dressed in a maid's outfit with bobbed black hair and just the *hint* of Asian features.

"Is something the matter?" she asked politely.

"No," he said, a bit more rudely than he'd intended. "I mean, it's nothing."

"My apologies," the girl said with a short bow, "but it seemed like you were troubled and — wait, didn't you have a stuffed lion just a moment ago?"

"No," he replied calmly, feigning ignorance. "I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about."

She blinked.

"Must have been my imagination," she muttered to herself. She blinked owlshly. "Ah! Forgive my rudeness, but would you happen to be Miss Vallière's familiar?"

"Oh?" Shirou arched an eyebrow. "I suppose I shouldn't have expected any less — gossip travels faster than the speed of light."

"Speed of light?" the girl questioned with a slight tilt of her head.

"Don't worry about it," Shirou brushed it off. "So, you've heard of me, then?"

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"Oh, yes!" she said brightly. "It's become quite the rumor, you know, that a commoner was called by the summoning magic. The whole castle is talking about it!"

"Somehow, I'm not surprised," Shirou commented wryly. "Well, you're obviously not a student or a teacher. Are you employed here, then?"

"Yes," she answered with a nod. She still seemed rather excited. "I'm Siesta. I do domestic duties here at the school, like cleaning and serving tea. Pleased to meet you, Mister...?"

"Shirou," he replied. "Shirou Emiya, Miss Siesta."

She flushed a little and smiled. "No need to be so formal, Mister Shirou. My, that's an odd name."

"I'm not from around here," he told her sardonically.

"Oh!" Siesta seemed to remember something. "That's right! Mister Shirou, I noticed you here all by yourself. Is something wrong?"

"It's nothing important," Shirou said. "My Master and I had a bit of an argument and she told me to leave. I'll return to her later."

She gasped.

"That's horrible!" Siesta proclaimed sympathetically. "Mister Shirou, is there any way I could help you?"

At that moment, Shirou's stomach chose to let out a loud grumble.

"Well," he said a little embarrassedly, "now that you mention it..."

"You must be hungry!" she chirped with a bright smile. "I have just the thing!"

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— o.O.O.O.o —

Siesta led him to the kitchens located at the rear of the dining hall. Pots, pans, ovens, and cooking utensils of all sorts were lined up in rows inside while chefs and maids like Siesta buzzed around, busily preparing food for the next meal.

Siesta, with one of his hands grasped in hers, guided him to a small table and sat him down in one of the chairs set up around it.

"Please wait here for a moment," she said quickly, and then she turned around and disappeared into the throng of chefs and cooks.

Shirou allowed himself a small smile.

How long had it been since he had last cooked in a proper kitchen, let alone in his own home? Meals on the road or in camps were often cooked over a fire with only as many spices as you could gather yourself from nearby foliage. Most of his cooking for the past few years had been of that sort, mediocre meals made to the best of his ability with whatever sparse ingredients he could get his hands on and from whatever small game the group had managed to hunt down with what little time was available.

He didn't regret it, of course. His cooking might have suffered, but in exchange, he got the chance to help people, to save others and stop catastrophes. So what if he didn't get to make gourmet dishes while on the road? Being someone's hero, saving someone, was more important than making them an all-you-can-eat buffet.

He still missed it. How could he not? There was something uniquely satisfying about watching someone enjoy something you had created, and the joy of a good meal was a unique kind of happiness.

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Siesta returned a moment later and set a big bowl of stew down in front of him — Shirou's stomach gurgled with anticipation.

"We made this stew from the leftovers of the nobles' meal," Siesta informed him. "Please enjoy it."

Shirou took the spoon she offered him and dipped it into the bowl, fishing out some meat and vegetables, then lifted it to his mouth and ate it.

It was delicious.

"Is it to your liking?" Siesta asked him quietly, sounding a little nervous.

"My stomach weeps," Shirou said solemnly, watching her face fall, and smiled, "because I haven't had food this good in quite a long time."

"Oh!" she exclaimed happily. "That's great! There's plenty more if you want seconds, so please take your time! If you don't mind having whatever's available, then you're welcome to eat here whenever you like!"

Shirou brought his spoon down to the bowl and scooped up another spoonful again and again, trying to pace himself — he hadn't lied to her. It had indeed been quite a while since he had eaten something of such quality, despite the fact that it was leftovers, and moreover, it had been more than a day since he had last eaten anything at all. It took quite a bit of effort not to wolf it all down at once, but to savor it, to eat it slowly and let the flavor rain down upon his taste buds like a gift from heaven.

Siesta sat down at the other chair and propped her elbows up on the table and her head on her hands.

"Weren't you given anything to eat?" she asked him.

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"My Master and I had a disagreement," Shirou said in between swallows. "She forbade me from eating today."

"That's horrible!" Siesta cried.

Shirou shook his head.

"My Master is delicate," he explained after swallowing again. "She does not trust easy. You should not blame her for that; *I* don't."

How could he? She was just a child, a young girl who felt she needed to prove herself, and falling further and further into depression with every failure. She couldn't afford to trust him, not yet, not until she knew he was sincere. He was a stranger whose intentions she didn't know — not even *Shirou* trusted that easily.

Perhaps, in hindsight, his rushed attempt to educate her had been a mistake.

Siesta gave a dreamy sigh. "You're so kind, Mister Shirou. I don't think I could have been as understanding as you if I had been in your position."

"Thank you, Miss Siesta," Shirou thanked her politely. "Now..."

He held out his empty bowl.

"More, please?"

— o.O.O.O.o —

"You really don't have to do this, Mister Shirou," Siesta told him for the tenth time

"Nonsense," Shirou disagreed. "I promised to repay you for your kindness, so that's what I'm doing."

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After he'd eaten his fill (another two helpings after that first one), Shirou had asked Siesta what he could do to show his appreciation. At first, she'd refused to inconvenience him (it was hardly an inconvenience, considering that he had nothing else to do), but after he'd stood his ground on this issue, she'd relented and told him that she was to serve desserts to the nobles.

Shirou's job was simply to hold the platter (a relatively easy task, really) while Siesta served the cakes atop in to the students with a pair of tongs. It was unhurried menial work that he could have done in his sleep, and to be honest, as the faces started to blur together and the people just became flesh-colored blobs, he wasn't too sure that he hadn't.

There was one boy, however, who stuck out, a wavy-haired blonde boy with a frilly white blouse and an arrogant, self-important look on his face. There was a rose stuck in his shirt pocket, and if Shirou were honest, the boy reminded him uncomfortably of Matou Shinji.

"So, Guiche, who're you going out with, now?"

"Go out?" Guiche made a gesture with his one hand. "I hold no single girl in such regard. After all, a rose blooms for the pleasure of all, not just one."

Yes, he was *too much* like Shinji for Shirou's comfort. A scene like this had been not uncommon back in Homurabara, before the Grail War had scattered so many of them and changed so many others.

High school was high school, no matter *what* reality you were in.

Guiche made another dramatic motion with his arm, and from his pocket, a small glass phial with a purple liquid dropped to the floor. Guiche didn't seem to notice or care,

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though from the small, satisfied twitch of his lips, perhaps it had been intentional. From the faint sickly sweet smell that Shirou could detect (though it was difficult, with all of the soil-charcoal-river-fresh-air that floated around him from all of the mages), it contained perfume.

Shirou paused for a moment, frowned, and considered what it was he should do.

It was unbecoming. He should just leave it be and continue on. He was too old to be scolding schoolboys and children for their inadequacies and mistakes, but...

But...

Shirou set the platter down on one of the tables and stepped forward.

He would save this boy, too.

He reached down and picked up the bottle, then set it down on the table loudly. Guiche and his friends stopped talking at once.

"You should be careful," Shirou said in a mild, vaguely friendly tone. "If you drop something valuable without realizing it, then it might get taken before you realize it's gone."

Guiche sneered at him and pushed the bottle away. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he declared snobbishly. "This isn't mine."

"Oh!" one of Guiche's friends exclaimed. "Hey, that's Montmorency's perfume, isn't it?"

"Yeah!" the other agreed. "Only Montmorency's personal perfume is that vivid shade of purple!"

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"Hey, wait, does that mean you're dating Montmorency, Guiche?"

"No, hang on, listen to me—!"

But before Guiche could continue, a girl, a first year judging by her brown cloak, who had been sitting nearby stood up and walked over to Guiche, trembling.

"Sir Guiche," she said faintly, and then burst out crying. "I knew it! You and Montmorency are...are...!"

"Listen, Katie," Guiche tried, reaching for her, "please, it's just a misunderstanding —"

But the girl, Katie, refused to listen anymore, wound back her arm, and slapped him on the cheek as hard as she could. Shirou almost wanted to whistle — she had quite an arm on her, that one.

Guiche rubbed at the reddening mark on his cheek absently

Just when it seemed the whole situation had finished playing out, another girl rose to her feet and took stiff, clipped strides over to Guiche. She had long curly blonde hair styled into curled rolls the way Shirou had seen only on women and wigs from pictures of the eighteenth century European nobility (and Luvia), and he vaguely recognized her as one of the girls who had teased Louise just the day before after the summoning.

Apparently, she was important, because the moment he saw her, Guiche desperately tried to defuse her.

"Montmorency," he began, "please, this is a misunderstanding. I accompanied her on a trip to the forests of La Rochelle, that's all, nothing more!"

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"You...!" Montmorency seethed. "You've been making moves on that first year, haven't you?!"

"Please, Montmorency," Guiche said, "it's nothing like that, I promise!"

"Guiche..."

She grabbed an opened bottle of wine from the table and tipped it upside down over Guiche's head, pouring its contents all over him and dyeing his hair a sickening red color and staining his white shirt pink. She didn't pour just a little of it — she waited until the entire bottle had been drained, then slammed it back down on the table furiously.

"You liar!" she shouted.

Then, without waiting for anything else, she stormed off.

In her wake, there was only silence.

Guiche watched her go, absently pulling out a handkerchief and drying off his face.

"A rose blooms for the pleasure of all," he murmured again.

Shirou almost wanted to laugh.

"Well," he mused quietly, "that went rather better than I'd planned it. I had thought I would have to teach that lesson myself, but it seems the world decided to give me a hand."

He stood straight and moved to leave. He'd been helping Siesta before the fiasco started, so he might as well finish up with that.

"Stop right there."

Except Guiche's voice called out into the silence and made him pause.

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"Is there something you need from me?" Shirou asked neutrally.

Guiche spun in his chair and crossed his legs dramatically. Shirou retracted his previous opinion — even *Shinji* hadn't been quite this bad when it came to theatrics and arrogance.

Or perhaps the difference was in kinds? Shinji's arrogance was partly a facet of his selfishness. Here, it seemed like Guiche's selfishness was a facet of his arrogance, and even then, it was more pomposity than selfishness.

"Two ladies' reputations have been tarnished," Guiche said grandiosely, "because you thoughtlessly picked up a bottle of perfume. How do you intend to take responsibility for this?"

It really was almost funny, if it weren't also so disgusting.

"Responsibility?" Shirou asked incredulously. "For your mistakes? I'm not your father, boy, so don't ask me to take responsibility for your messes."

Guiche's friends laughed.

"He's right, Guiche! Man up!"

Guiche's face flushed crimson to match his sopping hair.

"Listen, server," he said dangerously, "when you set that bottle on the table, I pretended I didn't recognize it, didn't I? Would it have been so hard for you to have some tact and play along?"

"I don't take orders from you, boy," Shirou said, crossing his arms. "And you'll thank me one day, for what just happened."

"Orders...? Ah," Guiche sneered. "You're that commoner swordsman that Louise the Zero summoned,

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aren't you? I shouldn't have expected a noble's wit from such a plebian and a brute."

Shirou snorted.

"If you're looking to insult me," he shot back, "then I'm unimpressed. I've heard *much* worse. I suppose the one good thing about that is the fact that you aren't actually the most arrogant person I've ever met."

Gilgamesh held that dubious honor.

Guiche's eyes narrowed. "It seems that you don't understand the proper etiquette for addressing a noble, commoner."

"Respect is something that's earned, not freely given," Shirou told him. "If you want me to respect you, then you have to be someone worth respecting."

Guiche sneered again.

"Very well," he said imperiously, "then I will teach you why you should respect your betters, commoner. It should be a good way of relieving stress, too."

He stood and turned away.

"It would be in poor taste to taint the dining hall with your blood," Guiche's voice dripped with condescension, "so we'll have our duel in the Vestri Court. I'll see you there once you've finished your duties as a servant."

With a flourish of his cape, Guiche strode out of the hall with his nose tilted up in the air disdainfully. After a moment of glancing between where Guiche had gone and where Shirou stood, Guiche's friends got up and followed, looking excited.

When everyone else had left, Shirou was alone with Siesta.

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He couldn't help but think it was rather convenient. Here he was, looking for a way to prove his strength and his sincerity to Louise, and one just landed in his lap so easily and so quickly...

"Well," he remarked wryly, "I'd been planning for something of this nature to happen eventually, but I never thought it would happen so soon. I guess it has something to do with my ridiculously high Luck stat."

He straightened. "I should probably find Louise. This is the opportunity I was waiting for."

"You..." Siesta started quietly.

He gave her a questioning glance.

"Hm?"

"You're going to get killed!" she cried.

"Try to have a little faith," Shirou said with a grin.

Siesta shook her head desperately. "If you truly anger a noble like that...!"

She turned around and ran away. Shirou blinked, but didn't stop her. She was a nice girl, but Siesta wasn't his Master, nor was she the one he had to prove himself to, so if she didn't want to watch the duel, he wasn't about to force her.

But he *did* need to prove himself to Louise. What would happen in this world for the duration of his stay, how much Louise relied on him, how easily he had access to materials and magics that might lead him home, depended entirely upon Louise trusting him. She could only trust him if she knew he was sincere, and with such doubt in her from the lecture he had tried to give her the previous night, the only way to prove his sincerity was to prove that he hadn't lied.

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And the only way to do that was to prove he was as strong as he'd claimed he was.

"I should probably find Louise, then," he mused aloud. "Ah — and I'll need her to show me where this Vestri Court is, won't I? I suppose she might be in her room by now..."

"You!"

A familiar voice called out. Shirou turned around as Louise marched up to him, washed and dressed in a new uniform. She came to a stop a few feet away and pointed one finger at him.

"What do you think you're doing?!" she demanded. "Do you think that just because I was angry at you earlier that you could go and embarrass me like this?!"

"Oh, Master," Shirou said lightly, ignoring her distress. "Good. That means I won't have to waste time trying to find you. I'm afraid I'm not yet familiar with the layout of this castle, so I have to ask that you show me where this Vestri Court is located."

"Don't just brush me off!" she yelled. "No, even more important than that — I refuse to let you do something as stupid as duel Guiche! Apologize!"

Shirou arched an eyebrow. "Apologize? Master —"

"If you apologize now," Louise cut him off, "then he might forgive you and let you go! If you don't, then he might actually kill you! At the very least, you'll be badly injured! There are some things that even a water mage can't fix!"

"Master," Shirou tried again.

"A commoner can't beat a mage! If you fight Guiche, then you'll be lucky to come away alive!" Louise declared it as though it were indisputable fact, like the world was round or

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grass was green. "And I...I refuse to let my familiar be killed! Not..."

Her head lowered and her voice softened. "Not when I only just summoned you."

Shirou sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Louise..."

"It's the only thing I've done even remotely right," she said quietly. "So...I...I'm willing to forgive everything else you've done. I'll even...I'll even let you eat at the table tomorrow. Just don't die for something as stupid as a duel."

Shirou allowed himself a small, grim smile.

"Master," he said strongly, "I told you last night that my strength was far beyond an ordinary human's. Last night, you didn't believe me, and from what little I have seen of this world, I can understand why. So that's why..."

He was going to prove it to her now. He was going to show her exactly what it was she had summoned, exactly how strong he was. When she saw what he could do, she would understand that everything he had told her was the truth. She would see that he was better than any other familiar she could have summoned.

This world's dragons, manticores, and griffins had *nothing* on him.

"I will prove to you my sincerity."

— o.o.O.O.o —

The Vestri Court was the central garden located between the Fire and Wind elemental towers — at least, that was how Louise explained it to him. As it was on the western side of the castle, it didn't receive much sunlight during the day and was mostly hidden in the shadow of the central tower that

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contained the Alvis Dining Hall. As a result, it was almost ideally placed if you wanted to have a secret duel.

In theory, anyway, but as Shirou had estimated before, gossip traveled faster than light, which was the reason why it was packed with students as Shirou stepped through the crowd to join Guiche at its center.

"Gentlemen! It's a duel!"

Guiche gestured grandiosely with his rose, and the crowd cheered in response. Like Shinji, indeed.

"Guiche is going to duel Louise's commoner!" someone shouted.

Guiche acknowledged the cheering with long, sweeping waves of his arms. The crowd seemed to eat it up; Shirou just thought he looked rather ridiculous.

At last, after nearly ten minutes of pandering to his cheering classmates, Guiche turned to Shirou as if he had just realized he was there.

"First of all," Guiche said dramatically, "I commend you for coming here instead of running away!"

"Of course." Shirou allowed himself a small grin. "It seems that even I have this wretched thing called 'pride.'"

"As you say, commoner," Guiche sneered. "Very well, let us begin, shall we?"

He flicked his rose and a single petal fluttered downwards to the ground — and then, suddenly, a figure erupted from the earth, large and metallic and humanoid, gleaming in the faint sunlight. It was feminine and about Shirou's height, a stoic figure whose entire body was covered by — no, *made of* — shining bronze armor.

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A golem?

Shirou's mind rewound the scene and played it over again. Guiche's wand, what was evidently a fake rose, had flicked once — that was a Single Action, no incantation — and a single rose petal had hit the ground.

Flashy, but unimportant.

From the point of contact, a fully formed bronze golem had been created quickly and easily. He could not detect anything physically inferior about it that could have been the result of abandoning an incantation, so maybe Guiche had simply built the magic into the rose petal and used that to enact a Greater Ritual in what looked like a Single Action?

No, that was what made sense to Shirou based upon what he knew of the magic of his world, and it was the idea that he wanted desperately to believe, but he wasn't foolish enough to think so. No, despite the fact that it should be impossible, despite the fact that it could definitely bode ill at a later point, the only real conclusion Shirou could draw was very simple.

Guiche had just performed an A-Rank spell, the equivalent of a Greater Ritual or one of Rin's best gems, in the speed and with the ease of a Single Action.

Shirou let out a breath.

It was a ludicrous idea, yes. It should be impossible, yes. It would have boded quite ill, yes, if not for a single fact.

The creation of the golem in front of him was definitely A-Ranked magic, and the golem itself was definitely stronger and more powerful than a regular human...

But it was nothing compared to him.

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"I am Guiche de Gramont. My Runic name is 'the Bronze," Guiche said importantly. "Guiche the Bronze. Therefore, this bronze Valkyrie will be your opponent."

Shirou allowed himself a small, humorless smile.

"Very well then," Shirou said strongly. "Since you have given me your name, it's only proper that I respond in kind. I am Shirou Emiya, and though I have no Runic name, if I did, it would be something like 'the Steel.'"

"Stupid commoner," Guiche sneered. "Only nobles have Runic names."

"As you say," Shirou conceded easily.

He glanced at the Valkyrie again, then out at the students who were watching with anxious anticipation.

"You're going to want to step back," he told the crowd. "If you don't back away at least ten yards, then I can't guarantee I won't kill you by mistake."

None of them listened, just whispered to each other about how "presumptuous that commoner is."

Well. There was nothing he could do about that. Maybe they would listen when they saw something impressive.

He probably shouldn't use Gavilain. No, that would be a bad idea. He didn't know exactly how strong this Valkyrie of Guiche's was, but he wasn't going to use his most powerful weapon against it.

"It seems rather ill-advised to use a Last Phantasm in a schoolyard brawl against a snot-nosed brat," Shirou mused aloud — loudly enough for Guiche to hear him.

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"A Last Phantom? What, is that some sort of barbarian sword technique?" Guiche demanded. "No, forget about that — did you just call me a brat, commoner?!"

Shirou ignored him and considered which sword to use.

Well, the point wasn't to turn this kid into a smear on the ground, it was to save him, and to prove his own sincerity to Louise, so there was no reason to use something that would level a mountain. No, it would be a better idea to go with something that wouldn't be catastrophic or utterly destroy Guiche on accident if this Valkyrie actually turned out to be tougher than he'd first estimated.

By the same token, however, he shouldn't use something that might break under the stress, either. He should use something like...

Ah. Yeah, that would work just fine.

Instead of reaching for the golden hilt sheathed in Sarras, he lifted his right arm up, across his chest, and over his shoulder the way he had seen Gilgamesh do many times before. Behind him, though he could not see it himself, he knew an orb of golden light, only about twice the size of his fist, had formed.

This was the other function of the sheath Sarras, a portal to another world that contained all the treasures Emiya Shirou had ever collected.

"So I think," he continued solemnly; a metal hilt that he couldn't see came slowly from inside the golden orb and brushed across his fingers as it moved to fill his empty hand, "that I'll use something a little more...*tame*."

He pulled the sword free from his vault and hefted it with just his right hand — it was a polished black greatsword,

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powdered across the blade with a pattern like smoke, and it was easily as long from tip to pommel as Louise was tall.

This weapon was not an artifact Shirou had found during his travels, but one he had made himself with his own two hands. For that matter, to begin with, Emiya Shirou's nature was not that of a "collector," but that of a "maker," so it was only a matter of time, once he learned the true nature of his skills, before he attempted to craft his own weapons and equipment instead of replicating others.

While Rin had been studying, taking classes, apprenticing under the Old Man of the Jewels, and fighting with Luvia, Shirou had been learning metallurgy, how to alloy metals, how to make swords, and how to put his unique talent to use doing it.

The majority of the weapons he owned were actually of his own creation; the sheath given to him by the fairies, the vault which contained all his treasures, simply allowed him to carry all of them around with him.

"This should be enough," he decided. He felt the incredulous stares of the other students on his back, who had all fallen silent. "See, I've even left the safety on for you — no chance I might accidentally turn you into a fine powder."

Predictably, no one got the joke. The price of living in a technologically stunted world, he supposed.

"S-summoning magic?" Guiche stuttered disbelievingly. "No, that must've been creating a sword from nothing...Earth Magic? How did you do something like that? Don't tell me that the Zero actually managed to summon a *mage*!"

"I have already said it several times," Shirou told him and the crowd, "if the measure of a mage is in what he summons

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as his familiar, then my Master is the strongest mage here because she summoned me."

He pointed the sword, tip first, at Guiche. "Now, are you going to fight me, mage, or did I pull this sword from my vault simply to have it admired?"

Guiche flinched and flicked his wand again, and from the ground, up sprouted five more golems, each identical to the first, each made of gleaming bronze and armored like a medieval knight.

"Attack!" Guiche ordered.

At this command, all six Valkyries sprung into action and soared towards Shirou faster than any human could hope to go. They were agile creatures that were heavy, but nimble, and could probably have outpaced an Olympic athlete.

But Shirou...was at least an order of magnitude above even that.

As the first Valkyrie came barreling towards him, Shirou swung his sword — Ogrenix, not one of his more imaginative names — one-handed with all of his strength and cleaved it clean in half, bisecting it from shoulder to hip. That should have been it — the first one would go down, but he would have to take the others down one by one individually.

But as the pieces of the first Valkyrie fell to the ground in front of him, the wind swept aside by the swing of his sword hit the second and third Valkyries and sliced them in half, too, just as cleanly and just neatly as it had the first, and still, continued on far enough to crash into the fourth — blunted — but strong enough to absolutely demolish its chest and send it reeling backwards into the ones behind it, and they all collapsed onto the ground.

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In a single swing, Shirou had destroyed four of Guiche's bronze Valkyries as though they were made of *paper*.

The silence that followed was deafening. No one seemed to move — even the other Valkyries just came to a stop. No, of course they all stopped. Shirou, a human being, a *commoner*, had just destroyed four golems, all made of metal sturdy enough to block a regular sword, with just *one* swing.

Well, he corrected himself, it probably wouldn't have happened so neatly if they hadn't all come at him one after the other. He'd been spoiled by facing so many enemies who actually knew what they were doing, so this tactically inept schoolboy just didn't measure up.

"Th-that's impossible!" someone shouted into the silence.

"By the Founder!"

"Was that *Wind Magic*?"

"No way! What the *hell* did the Zero summon!?"

"Apologies," Shirou said to Guiche. He adjusted the power he was putting behind his sword and gave Ogrenix a test swing — this time, instead of utterly destroying whatever was in front of it, it just sent the grass dancing. There, that should be enough. "I'm afraid I underestimated my own strength, there — or perhaps I should say, I overestimated the strength of these Valkyries of yours. Sorry. It should be fine, now, so whenever you're ready."

Again, everyone fell silent. No one said a word for a long moment that stretched into a minute, and then two. It was stunned disbelief, a natural reaction to hearing something that should be completely and utterly impossible.

It was Guiche who broke it.

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"A-are you *mocking me?*!" Guiche demanded frantically. "Y-you actually expect me to believe that...that you *destroyed four* of my bronze Valkyries with nothing more than your own arm strength!? Don't be ridiculous!"

"That's what I said, isn't it?" Shirou replied blandly.

"No way," someone whispered incredulously, so loud that they might as well have shouted.

"With just his *arm strength!*"

"Without even using *magic!*"

"Are you going to continue, Guiche the Bronze?" Shirou asked solemnly. "Or would you prefer to forfeit before you further embarrass yourself?"

Guiche's cheeks flushed red, and he waved his wand again — his remaining Valkyries sprang into action as another four sprouted from the ground, and then they all, seven in total, surrounded Shirou and attacked at once.

And with a single broad stroke, Shirou cleaved all seven in half at the waist.

Guiche flinched and stumbled backwards, and Shirou burst out of the lumbering corpses he'd left behind with a sudden speed that was beyond human. Before Guiche could retreat more than two steps, Shirou had already crossed the distance that separated them — a measly ten yards, child's play — and, purposefully controlling his strength, planted his knee into Guiche's chest.

Guiche went down, hard, and let out a gasp as he landed on his back in the grass and the air was driven from his lungs. Shirou reared back his arm, a serious scowl on his face, and drove the point of his sword downwards.

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Guiche, catching sight of the gleam of the blade in the sunlight, let out a breathless scream and shut his eyes tight. The crowd around them let out a large, horrified gasp, and someone gave a shrill panicked scream, calling Guiche's name.

But Shirou did not kill him.

Of course not. Killing Guiche had never been the point, nor had it ever been something he'd seriously considered doing. The point was to prove his worth to Louise and to save Guiche. How could you save someone if you killed them?

So Ogrenix's blade did not cleave Guiche's head from his shoulders, but pierced the ground next to it with a dull, metallic thud. Guiche flinched, but after a moment, blinked open his eyes and looked disbelievingly at the smokey black sword that was embedded in the grass just inches from his left ear.

"Right here and now, I could have ended your life," Shirou told him. Guiche's gaze turned from Ogrenix and met Shirou's. "If it had been my intention, Guiche the Bronze, nothing in this school could have stopped me from killing you. Do you understand?"

"I...I do," Guiche whispered hoarsely.

Shirou gave him a grim, satisfied nod. "Then today, I have taught you two lessons: humility and mercy."

He balled up his free hand and punched Guiche once, just once, in the eye. Guiche jerked beneath the hit and gave a groan from under Shirou's knee. Shirou stood and brought his knee up off of Guiche's chest; the moment he'd been freed, Guiche reach both hands up to press them against his right eye, already bruising.

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"*That*," Shirou said gravely, "is so that you remember them."

With those parting words, Shirou spun around and turned to face the crowd, which gave a great, terrified gasp in unison. He ignored them and started walking with firm, purposeful strides. The students parted like the red sea, backing up and away from him with every step he took.

"Guiche!" the blond girl from earlier — Montmorency, that was her name — broke from the crowd and rushed past Shirou to attend to Guiche. "Guiche!"

"Montmorency..."

"Are you alright, Guiche? Here, let me heal that for you..."

"No, Montmorency, leave it be..."

Shirou allowed himself only a brief, grim smile.

So he had saved more than just Guiche himself with that little display.

And yet, despite Montmorency, who had rushed past him without even caring that she had almost bumped into him, the rest of the crowd seemed frightened and refused to come within five feet of him.

Suddenly, he wasn't just "the Zero's commoner" anymore. Now, they would respect him, but only because they also feared him. He had proven that he was perfectly capable of defeating any one of them and ending their lives, and so they would fear him like he was some sort of demon, even though he had done nothing but superficial harm to Guiche.

One by one, the students in the crowd peeled away as Shirou continued forward, parting before him as neatly as a sword stroke. Everyone stepped back and back and back as

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he went forward and forward and forward, until the last one, and then the last two, scuttled away to reveal Louise, who looked up at him with an expression that was half fragile hope and half awed understanding.

"You weren't lying," she said quietly.

"No," he confirmed for her.

"Everything you said yesterday...was the truth."

"Yes."

There was a long pause as a multitude of expressions played over her face — comprehension, regret, relief, hope, and finally, determination.

"Shirou," she started, using his name for the first time.

"Yes, Master?"

"Teach me."

"Teach you what?"

"Everything."

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CONTINUE?

[YES/NO]

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #2

"Welcome back!" Ilya said brightly. "Tohsaka-sensei is running a little late, today — she's not a morning person, you know — so until she gets here, I'm going to review what we went over last time, alright?"

Silence greeted her.

"Good," she said sweetly, as though someone had actually responded. "Now, last time, we started covering the Familiar Runes inscribed upon each familiar summoned by a mage in Halkeginia. Unfortunately, we got cut short because *someone* decided to waste a good portion of our budget with needlessly excessive and violent animations when she kicked the previous host off stage, so we didn't get to finish."

"I HEARD THAT!" a voice called from the distance.

"YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO!" Ilya shouted back. She cleared her throat and turned back to the audience. "Anyway, we covered the Familiar Runes and how the summoning ritual doesn't stuff familiars into containers like the Fuyuki Grail's Servant system, so Shirou was summoned at full power. We also said that the Runes act like clothes and add onto whatever abilities the familiar already has. After that, we got sidetracked into why Shirou's so powerful — and then we got cut off."

She smiled. "Everyone caught up?"

Silence.

"Good! So, let's continue —"

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A boot came out of nowhere and hit Ilya in the face, sending her careening back to the floor. She landed on her butt, legs raised comically into the air, and she laid there for a moment, stunned, before the big, red, boot-shaped mark on her face started throbbing.

"Ow!" Ilya sat up. "Ow, ow, ow!"

She poked gingerly at her nose and winced. "Ow! That was needlessly violent, Rin!"

Tohsaka Rin stormed onto stage. "YOU WERE GOING TO START WITHOUT ME, WEREN'T YOU?!"

"SO?! YOU WERE TOO BUSY DOING YOUR MAKEUP AND TRYING TO LOOK NICE FOR THE HI-DEF CAMERAS TO DO YOUR JOB!"

"Not that you would understand it, you eternal loli, but some of us *have* aged since the original story! It's a girl's prerogative to look nice!"

"If it's such a big deal, then you should stop pretending and actually look your age, YOU OLD HAG!"

Rin snarled and lifted her left sleeve. On her arm, blue lines began to glow. "WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?!"

"W-wait, you aren't really going to —"

"Die! Die, die, die!"

The camera flickered and went to static. When the image returned, Rin was smiling kindly at the audience.

"Welcome back," she said pleasantly. "As my lovely assistant told you earlier, last time, we covered a portion of the Familiar Runes and what they do. Unfortunately, Ilya is feeling a little under the weather right now, so she won't be joining us for this segment."

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"Crazy Tsundere," someone muttered.

Rin's expression immediately turned thunderous and her hand made for her sleeve again. "You wanna say that a little louder? It's been a while since I last used my Fin Shot, so I'm a little rusty. I wouldn't mind some target practice if you're offering."

Silence.

"That's what I thought." She cleared her throat. "Anyway, to continue from where we left off, the Familiar Runes don't just assign a 'class' to each familiar. Actually, they have a myriad of other effects, too. Their primary function, however, is ensuring that the master and the familiar can coexist comfortably. In some cases, this might even require several functions in tandem."

She gestured to the whiteboard, where a crude approximation of a cat was drawn. "Take a cat, for example. In this case, there might be a function that enables it to understand language, and another function that alters either its brain function or its vocal cords to the point where it can speak, which would enable it to converse with the master and better conceive of orders it might receive.

"The function all Familiar Runes have in common, however, no matter the class, is the Mental Interference," Rin went on. "It's a special type applied by the runes, a constant effect type that can bypass or even overwhelm natural resistance to magical effects. This magic alters the way the familiars think so that they don't miss home and are less prone to disobeying their masters. It makes them put their masters and their masters' needs above their own. At the lower levels, suitable for domesticated creatures like cats and dogs, this effect is only enough to instill a sort of fondness for the master in the familiar. At the higher levels, however,

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it's capable of bringing otherwise dangerous and feral animals to heel. At that point, though, the effects are pretty obvious, and distortion of the personality is inevitable."

She wrote the word "inevitable" on the board and underlined it twice.

"At the highest levels," she concluded, "the familiar is basically an obedient slave."

Ilya popped up behind her. "What level is Shirou's at?"

"C Rank, so fairly strong," Rin answered automatically. "That's the sort of Mental Interference you'd need to tame a fully mature Rhyme Dragon, which probably says something that Shirou needs that level to be controlled and can still resist fairly well, and — hey, when did you get back here?"

"Just now," Ilya said matter-of-factly.

"Wha — how did you get better so quickly?!"

"Avalon," Ilya stated. She gave a shrug that said, "how else?"

"Wha — but — that's cheating!" Rin complained. "Ilya, that's so meta! That's not fair!"

"I'm supposed to be dead, aren't I?" Ilya shot back. "I think it's only fair I get to cheat with Avalon."

"That's not fair!" Rin repeated. "Why do you get to use Avalon and I have to use...use *other methods* to maintain my youth?!"

"Oh?" Ilya said slyly. "What *other methods* are those, Rin?"

Rin flushed. "That's none of your business!"

"Come to think of it, I think you're a little bit...*ahem*...**bigger** than I remember you being when I was

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alive," Ilya went on cruelly. "Maybe you finally caved in and got some...*enhancements*?"

Rin flushed an even brighter red. "Y...You...!"

She lifted her sleeve again and the blue lines of her Thaumaturgical Crest began to glow.

"Whoops, I'm outta here!" Ilya took off at a run and vanished off screen. Immediately, Rin took off after her.

"GET BACK HERE, YOU STUPID LITTLE ALBINO! GET BACK HERE SO I CAN TURN YOUR UNDEAD ASS INTO A SENSELESS LUMP OF DISEASED FLESH!"

"THAT'S NOT EXACTLY A VERY COMPELLING REASON TO STOP RUNNING, RIN!"

"JUST GET BACK HERE SO I CAN KILL YOU!"

Ilya ran past the camera again. "We're almost out of time, so here's the last little bit!"

She disappeared off screen, but shouted back towards the camera. "The Mental Interference works as long as the Runes are on and the familiar-master bond exists! But it's possible for the familiar to develop genuine feelings for the master, so in long-lasting pairs where the familiar-master bond is somehow severed, it's not uncommon for the familiar to have and act on real feelings of affection!"

She ran past the camera a second time. "Aside from these more passive effects — hey, that almost hit me!"

"STAND STILL FOR A MINUTE!"

"Anyway, aside from the more passive effects, the Runes also endow more active abilities based upon the familiar's class, usually something to do with battle! In some cases,

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particularly with familiars that can classify more as mounts, it can even increase the power and potency of a particular magic, usually the familiar's affinity or the master's!"

Ilya came onto screen again and quickly ducked behind the desk. Rin, still running, dashed past her hiding place and left again in the direction she thought Ilya had gone.

After a minute of pause, Ilya glanced up from behind the desk and looked around. The coast was clear.

"I think I lost her," she whispered.

Suddenly, from nowhere, a ball of black energy shot forth and hit Ilya in the head. Ilya stumbled backwards and fell to the floor. Rin rushed on stage and over to Ilya.

"THOUGHT YOU COULD ESCAPE, HUH!? YOU LITTLE —"

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #2: End

Chapter III: Forebodings

“Are you a mage?”

The moment they had sat down in the table in her room, just after the tea had been poured and Siesta, who had prepared it, had excused herself and left, that was the first question that Louise asked.

"Yes," Shirou answered simply. He took a sip of tea and paused to appreciate its tangy flavor. If he had to compare it, he would say it was rather like the Western teas Rin favored — a citrusy spice, punctuated by the sour-sweet flavor of lemon and sweetened by just a touch of sugar, mixed perfectly to give it the right amount of kick and taste.

Siesta was apparently a rather good cook herself, it seemed.

"But you're not a noble," Louise said. It was more of a statement than a question.

"No, I'm not," Shirou replied. He took another sip of tea — it really was quite good. "In my world, magic is not nearly so widespread as it is here. Mages are not nobles lording their magic over those without, but secretive scholars who spend their entire lives studying."

"Wait, wait, wait," Louise cut him off. "*Your* world?"

"Yes, my world," Shirou explained calmly. "The moment I saw the two moons in the sky, it became obvious to me that this wasn't my reality."

He neglected to mention all of the other clues that had been slammed in his face before he'd even so much as glanced at those two moons, because really, there wasn't a

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point in explaining all of it. It was true enough, anyway; the presence of a second moon was the incontrovertible evidence that had dispelled even the remnants of doubt.

"But," her brow furrowed confusedly, "I don't understand."

Shirou paused a moment and considered it, taking another long sip of his tea to fill the silence. How did one explain True Magic to someone who had no idea such a thing existed?

Well, even he only knew so much. The First, Fourth, and Fifth were all complete mysteries to him — he'd had the good fortune to never have met the Blue — but Rin had told him horror stories of the Second and its practitioner, Kischur Zelretch Schweinorg, and Shirou himself had had personal experience with the Third during the Holy Grail War.

"Think of it...like a tapestry or a carpet," he decided on finally. "Each thread is a different world, a different universe, a different reality. Each thread is separate — it doesn't intersect or intertwine with any other. In this world — this thread — nobles with magic rule over commoners. In the world I come from — *my* thread — commoners elect leaders to lead them, ignorant of magic, and use cleverness to do all the things magic can, while mages lock themselves in their homes and study magic as a way to reach the pinnacle of knowledge: Akasha, the Swirl of the Root."

"So yesterday, when you talked about mages and A...Akasha, right? That's what you meant."

"That's right."

Simplistic — very, very simplistic — but explaining technology and science and electricity, as well as the different forms of government, to a girl who had never experienced

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any of it, nor would have, being a schoolgirl, was well beyond Shirou's ability to teach, and far too tedious and longwinded besides.

And beyond that, how was he to explain technology to Louise when he only knew what he'd learned in high school, whether that was in classes or gleaned from using Structural Grasping on the objects he'd repaired? No, he knew a bit from all of the things he'd helped fix those many years ago, but as far as how it all worked, it might as well have been True Magic.

"So...our worlds are separate and different," Louise concluded. "But I don't understand. If they can't intersect or anything, then how did it get you here? And what does all of this have to do with me summoning you?"

"Because there are ways to cross over from one world to another," Shirou told her. "In my world, we call this sort of thing True Magic, or Sorcery. It's something virtually no one can do. I don't know if it was you, or if it was something in the summoning ritual, but when you summoned me, True Magic was performed to bring me here."

"And why is that important?"

"Because if there was something here that could take me from my world, then there must also be something that can send me back."

For a moment, Louise looked bewildered, then crestfallen and depressed, and then, before Shirou could comment on it, it was replaced by her usual expression.

"You want to leave?" she asked, with just the slightest quiver in her voice.

He gave her a soft smile. "You didn't think I'd want to stay forever, did you?"

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She didn't answer. She looked away with a troubled expression on her face and chewed nervously at her lower lip.

"Master?"

"The summoning ritual," she began hesitantly, "binds master and familiar together. For life. It doesn't end unless one of them dies."

Shirou sat back, reeling.

"Oh," was all he could say.

Idiot, he scolded himself. This wasn't the Holy Grail War. He wasn't going to return to his own home two weeks from now, or fade away without his Master's support. He was stuck here.

To be fair, he already knew that. He'd already known that he would be here for an indeterminate amount of time. He already knew that he might have to stay with Louise for months or years before she no longer needed him. He'd even considered staying until she'd grown old and died.

But to have it said like that...

A ritual that bound two people together for life, even if it hadn't been intended for two humans, per say, was definitely important. If this ritual was sacred enough that the bond was intended to last until one or the other died, then...

Ouch.

He looked down at the runes that were inscribed onto the back of his hand — he hadn't noticed it during the duel itself, but afterwards, when he'd retrieved Ogrenix, the moment his fingers had touched the hilt, these very runes had glowed and filled his body with power. No, there was no way he could have noticed them during the fight, not when his entire

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concentration had been on Guiche and on holding enough of his power back not to kill the entire crowd.

But they had glowed when he touched Ogrenix, glowed so brightly that he could see it even through his glove, if only just, and had made him stronger and faster, his body lighter. It wasn't one of his natural abilities, so the only thing that he could relate it to was a Class Skill, like Saber's Magic Resistance or Archer's Independent Action.

And if it — whatever it was — was a Class Skill, then that meant he had a class, and the runes, whatever they said, were probably indicative of what that class was.

Hadn't Colbert remarked on how strange they were?

So if he had a class, that meant that there might actually be a Grail System behind this after all.

These mages didn't know how their summoning spell worked, right? They simply cast the spell and it worked, pulling "whatever familiar most suited the mage's power and affinity" from somewhere across time and space to the mage's side. It seemed that, with the exception of Shirou himself, they all came from somewhere sometime on this world. If the spell itself was relatively simple to cast and generally low cost for the caster, then there had to be something that did the heavy lifting, right? Magecraft was equivalent exchange, after all.

And what decided which familiar was most appropriate to a mage? If it was simply about power or magical affinity, that would be one thing, but a system that could account for the personality as well? There was no way the summoning spell on its own could do such a thing by itself, not unless these mages had access to a hell of a lot more Prana than normal.

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Even more to the point, what assigned these runes and how did it determine which runes to assign to which familiar? Even if this world was stuck in some sort of Age of Gods era, the sort of complexity necessary to do that, to account for all the variables and custom-tailor each contract and each "class" to each specific mage and familiar pair...well, Shirou wasn't an expert on magical theory, but it sounded like something that would require more than just a single mage to accomplish.

So then, there had to be a system, something with the raw power and the necessary function to account for each mage's needs and personality.

Maybe that something was a Grail System.

Or maybe he was putting too much stock in his past experiences with summoning. After all, were not these mages capable of doing incredible things with the speed and effort of a Single Action?

Either way, these runes marked Shirou as Louise's familiar, the partner that was supposed to stand by her and protect her until the day she died. They marked him the same way the Grail's Command Spells had marked him as Saber's Master.

"Then I suppose I'll simply have to stay," Shirou said matter-of-factly.

The tentative joy that crossed Louise's face was nearly heart-wrenching. Could he really get her hopes up like that when he was planning on going home as soon as he had a method to do so?

Yes, he decided. He would teach her, he would raise her, so that when it was time for him to leave, she would no

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longer need him to be strong. For now, he would let her believe that he would stay until one of them died.

"So," Louise started again after a moment, "the way you destroyed Guiche's golems — did you use some sort of spell to make yourself that strong?"

"No."

"Then...some sort of mystical charm or something?"

"I'm afraid not."

Her brow furrowed. "Then...you really are that strong naturally?"

"Yes, I am," Shirou confirmed for her.

"But that's...!" she struggled for a moment for a word. "You said that you're just a human, right? How can you do something like that, then!"

Shirou paused and looked at her a moment, wondering if she would believe him if he told her. Rin had had difficulty with it, too, when she'd found out, but since she'd seen him go toe-to-toe with Berserker that one time, even if he'd collapsed immediately afterward, it'd been much easier for her to accept something so ludicrous.

"Tell me, Louise," he began softly, "how old do you think I am?"

"Um..." she scrutinized his face, frowning and no doubt wondering what the relevance was. He could see that she wanted to ask why it mattered, but she just played along instead. "Well, I'm seventeen, so I'd say...maybe ten years older than me? Twenty-seven or so."

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"You'd be right," Shirou replied, watching the confusion play over her face before he added, "if you'd said that about thirty-eight years ago."

Her eyebrows shot up into her hairline and her mouth flapped open silently. From behind the door, there was a surprised gasp that Shirou took to mean Siesta had been eavesdropping, but it seemed that he was the only one who'd noticed it.

"In every way that matters, I'm human," Shirou explained. "However, as a result of something that happened in my youth, I gained...let's call it a burden of the body. Cut me, and I'll bleed red. Kill me, and I'll die. The only difference between me and any other person is that I don't age as swiftly and my abilities are magnitudes beyond normal."

He took a sip of his tea, drained the last of it, and set the empty cup back down.

"To put it simply," he concluded, "I have all the advantages of being a Heroic Spirit without being dead. I may not be quite as strong as some of the more powerful Heroic Spirits, but in summoning me, Louise, you called the most powerful familiar out of all your classmates."

She was quiet for a moment as all of the information sank in, then she drooped into her chair as a sort of cloud seemed to descend over her.

"I'm going to get old," she said miserably. "I'm going to get old and gray and fat, and my familiar won't age a day. By the time I'm a grandmother, my familiar will look like my grandson. What will people say? They'll think I have a lover half my age. My family's reputation would be ruined."

Shirou stopped a smile before it could become more than a twitch of his lips. "My Master worries too much."

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Louise sighed and pulled herself back up into her seat, marshaling herself.

"You said that you're not a Servant or a Heroic Spirit," she started, "but if you were — a-a Servant, that is — what, um, what class would you be?"

A valid question, perhaps, if a bit of a roundabout way of asking him what his skillset was.

Shirou leaned back and gave it a bit of thought.

He could fit Saber, of course, and Archer, too, but beyond those obvious ones, he'd never really given it much consideration. Why should he? He didn't plan on dying and becoming a Heroic Spirit anytime soon, nor fighting in another Grail War, either, as either a Servant or a Master.

But he'd been summoned anyway, hadn't he?

How ironic.

"There are seven classes that I know of," he told her. "Saber, Servant of the Sword; Lancer, Servant of the Spear; Archer, Servant of the Bow; Rider, the Mounted Servant; Berserker, the Mad Servant; Caster, the Mage Servant; and Assassin, Servant of Stealth and Murder. Of those seven, I could comfortably fill Saber, Archer, and Caster, but in a stretch, Lancer. I'm afraid I've no aptitude for Berserker, Rider, or Assassin."

"Well, if you're a mage, of course you could fill the, um, Caster class, right?" she mumbled. "And Saber — um, you said that was a swordsman, right? But wait." Her brow furrowed. "You just said Archer, didn't you? But you only have a sword. An Archer would — Oh."

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She glanced at an area next to his head. "That vault thing, that thing you did with the glowing light thingy that you pulled a sword from; you have a bow in there, don't you?"

"Among other things," he answered cryptically.

He watched for a few silent moments as she frowned again, and he imagined the wheels turning in her head as her eyes glazed over. She was thinking, thinking deeply, over the things he'd told her the day before and the information he'd given her now, and sitting there, scowling blankly at the table, she reminded him once more of Rin.

"They really would have gotten along famously.

"Master," he started, startling her from her thoughts, "I apologize for interrupting you, but I must confess that my earlier estimation was false."

"Earlier estimation?"

"Yes," he explained. "Before, I wasn't sure if I had been summoned in a class, but when I returned my sword to my vault, I noticed a reaction from the runes on my hand."

He held up his left hand for her to see.

"It was nothing to do with my own natural abilities," he went on. "That means that it must be a skill related to my Servant class — or whatever it is I was made into when you summoned me."

"Oh." She waved it off disinterestedly. "Yes, that. All familiars have that kind of thing. The runes let a familiar do something it couldn't before in order to make it easier to connect with its Master — like a cat being able to talk."

"I see." He smiled a little. "And the runes on my hand, whatever they mean, have something to do with swords. How ironic."

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"Ironic?" she asked.

"Don't worry about it," he told her. "Is there anything else you'd like to ask?"

She was quiet for a moment and looked away from him, chewing on her bottom lip — the sign he had quickly associated with her being nervous or anxious about something. He waited patiently for the question that was coming — there was no point in trying to force it out of her; that would just get her to blow up at him.

"You've said before," she began quietly, "that I'm the most powerful mage on campus. What did you mean by that? I mean, I-I'm a failure. I can't do anything right — just about the only spell that's ever worked for me is the summoning. Everything else just ends in — in *explosions*."

Shirou let the question hang in the air for a moment and considered how to answer it. There were multiple things he could say, multiple explanations he could give, but at the end of the day, he and this girl would have to have a close relationship. They would have to trust each other, because without it, there was no way they could function as a team, as partners, and Shirou would have to search on his own for a way home.

And how did you build trust? By making something personal.

"When I was your age," he decided on, "I had absolutely zero talent as a mage."

Her head shot up and her eyes went wide as her mouth dropped open.

"Before my accident," he was *not* going to explain his contract to this girl, "I was good at only one type of magic,

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and before *that*, I was so inept and pathetic that you would look like a prodigy by comparison."

"W-*what*?" Louise squeaked.

"I could only do one spell," he said, "two, if you want to be technical, and nothing else. I had neither the tutelage nor the talent to do anything else. My friend, Rin, who was nothing more than an acquaintance at that time, said that I was completely hopeless and that the two spells I knew were utterly useless. I had no useful ability at all, and I wouldn't have even been considered a third rate magus."

He leaned back a little and watched the emotions play across her face — confusion and surprise about his abilities (or lack thereof), followed by relief and a little bit of joy that he had been even worse than her, once upon a time.

"Then, some things happened," he continued, "and I discovered a talent for a specific type of magic, one that was related, in some ways, to the two spells I could already do, and shortly after that, I had my...*accident*, and a whole new avenue of magic opened up to me."

"I don't understand," she admitted, a little frustrated. "What does this have to do with me?"

"Because the reason I had no talent except for in that one branch of magic," Shirou explained, "was that my affinity was odd, nonstandard. In my world, you see, you can only use magic related to your elemental affinity. Nothing else will work for you. I couldn't use any of the standard elements because my affinity was so radically odd."

"How odd? What kind of affinity do you have?"

"Swords," he said solemnly.

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Louise blinked and her mouth flapped open, then shut, once, twice, three times, before she found her voice.

"Swords?" she asked incredulously.

"Swords," Shirou confirmed. "The reason why I couldn't use the five elements or anything of that sort is because my body and my magic is specifically set on swords, to the point where every other sort of magic was completely impossible for me."

"And...and you're saying," she swallowed thickly. "You're saying...the reason I'm having trouble with magic...is that *I* might have an unusual affinity, too?"

It was a possibility, but it was also strange. Hadn't she explained just the day before that becoming a stronger mage meant learning how to strengthen your magic by "adding elements?" By nature, that meant that she had to have a very unusual affinity for it to affect her spell-casting so drastically.

Like "explosions."

Of course, he wasn't going to tell her that bit, not if he wanted to keep her from blowing up at him.

"That depends," he hedged. "Have you tried all of the standard ones?"

Her cheeks flushed red and she straightened indignantly, scowling.

"Of course!" she said angrily. "I've tried fire, water, earth, and wind! I already told you that, didn't I? I can't do *any* of it!"

Shirou hummed.

"But your teacher said there are five, didn't she?" he pointed out. "Today, in class."

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She blanched. "Void?"

"Ether, Void. Either or. Both mean essentially the same thing where I come from."

Louise lit up like a Christmas tree and her face turned a very interesting shade of cherry red.

"D-don't be ridiculous!" she sputtered. "Saying something like that — like I could use the Void! That's blasphemous, familiar!"

Shirou arched an eyebrow. "Blasphemous?"

"The Void is the element of the Holy Founder, Brimir!" she told him furiously. "It's sacred! No one else can have it! Don't even joke about me having something like that!"

"I never said you did," he held his hands up in surrender. "But you can't know unless you've tried, Master."

She huffed and slumped over, arms crossed.

"I can. I don't," she declared moodily, as though it were an indisputable fact. "Just — just, something else, okay? I can't have the Void. What else could I have, then?"

He frowned, but let it drop. "A nonstandard affinity. There's really no way to know without testing it or using some complex ritual that I'm really not familiar with — but, ah, didn't you say that mages can use different elements? That should mean that affinity is just what you're best at."

"Not exactly," she shook her head. "Mages can use more than one element, yes, but it's much, much harder and more tiring to cast an elemental spell that's different from your affinity. Just because she can mix Earth-Earth-Fire doesn't mean Mrs. Chevreuse can use fire spells easily. She can still cast fire spells, but it's much more effective to use it to strengthen her earth spells."

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"I see," Shirou hummed thoughtfully.

He really wasn't an expert on this stuff, not even the stuff from his home world. Rin had always been better — the meager things he *did* know were things he had learned from Rin and her lectures in the first place. He only knew as much about the Grail as he did because he had specifically researched it.

"The familiar a mage summons corresponds to his or her affinity, right?" Shirou began slowly. "Like Miss Kirche and her salamander, a creature of fire to match her fire affinity."

"That's right," Louise nodded. "And that other girl, the one who poured wine on Guiche, Montmorency, she's a water mage and she summoned a frog."

Shirou allowed himself a small chuckle. "Naturally."

"And Guiche summoned a mole," Louise went on, "because he's an earth mage. Tabitha summoned a dragon, and, um, I *think* she's a wind mage, but I'm not sure."

"Of course," Shirou agreed. "But no one else summoned a human, did they? If it were simple, I might just say that summoning a human would be summoning a mage with the same affinity, but considering my elemental alignment is nonstandard..."

He let it hang, hoping that she might jump in with a bit of information that he hadn't known before, but her thoughts seemed to head in an entirely different direction.

"What do swords have to do with explosions, anyway?" she murmured gloomily.

"You'd be surprised," Shirou told her. She blinked owlishly for a moment, then scowled, probably thinking that

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he was teasing her. "At any rate, Master, do you know if anyone has ever summoned a human before?"

"Not that I know of," she replied. "But if there's any record of something like that, it would probably be in the library."

"The library?" Shirou asked.

"The Tristain Academy of Magic's library," Louise clarified. She sat a little straighter and puffed out her chest a little. "It's one of the foremost libraries in Halkeginia and contains information about magic and history going as far back as the time of the great Founder, Brimir. It's almost as extensive as the library at the Oriz Magic Academy where Éléonore works."

She said it with great pride, as though it were a truly incredible accomplishment, and it probably was. Unfortunately, Shirou would simply have to take her word for it — since he had nothing to compare it to in this world, there was no way he could say whether it was any better or worse than any other library.

But this was a perfect opportunity. If this library was as extensive as Louise said it was, then it just might contain the very information Shirou was searching for about how he'd been brought there in the first place.

— o.O.O.O.o —

The library was located in the Academy's centermost tower, the same tower that contained the Alvis Dining Hall that Louise had showed him to earlier in the day, and as she led him into the library proper, Shirou had the not unreasonable thought that the reason why the centermost tower was the tallest in the entire Academy was because it contained the library.

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It was a thought that solidified into a certainty when, curious about exactly how tall the humongous bookshelves were, he reached out and used Structural Grasping on one.

Thirty meters. In Western Imperial, about ninety-eight-and-a-half feet. To put that kind of number in better perspective, the average Gundam from those mecha TV shows that were so popular in Japan when he'd been a teenager was only sixty feet tall. In other words, each of these bookshelves was taller than a Gundam.

Upon that realization, the first thing out of Shirou's mouth was, "This is an accident waiting to happen."

"Only for a commoner," Louise corrected with a little disdain, and then her shoulders drooped and her head dropped and she added, miserably, "or...or a mage who can't cast Levitation."

"You needn't concern yourself, Master," Shirou told her. "With luck, perhaps I'll find something in this library that will clarify the nature of your affinity and why it was you summoned me."

"Right," she said, "right. Um, how long — that is, how much time are you planning on spending down here, Shirou?"

Shirou hummed. "I thought I would stay here while you're in class and see if I can't find anything."

"While I'm in class?" she repeated. "Wait, you don't mean every day I'm in class for the next *year*, do you?"

Considering the size of the library, he wasn't ruling that idea out.

"If necessary," Shirou hedged. "As long as you have no need of me for something important, I figured I'd look through here until I found something."

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Louise slumped and let out a soft groan.

"A year, he says," she mumbled miserably. "If necessary, he says. Am I really going to have to wait that long before I find out why I can't do magic properly?"

Shirou couldn't stop the slight quirk of his lips.

"Have faith in your Servant, Master," he said a little sardonically. "If this situation is as rare as you say, then even in this library, finding the right book should not take nearly so long."

After all, such a rare situation would definitely stand out, right? Finding a book on that sort of thing should be easy, because it would be the sort of thing that really stood out. It shouldn't take more than a few days.

A week later, however, Shirou was starting to think — to his dismay — that his original estimate might have been more accurate than he'd really thought it would be.

Searching was made somewhat easier by the fact that whatever had summoned him had provided enough of a linguistic understanding for him to actually read the books in the library, but being able to read them didn't mean that he would magically find the right one. Moreover, when Louise had said that the library contained the entire history of the country since the time of the Founder, this Brimir figure, she hadn't explained exactly *how long ago* that meant.

If it was perfectly analogous to Christianity, or even any other religion in his home world, it would have been rather young — most religions didn't last more than a few thousand years before a newer, stronger, more logical belief came and took the old one's place. The Church of the Founder, however, was *old* — *older* than the story of Gilgamesh, actually, and from what he'd gathered based upon the books he'd read

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or skimmed through, Brimir's tale was a little over six *thousand* years old.

Six thousand years of magical development and history was a lot to go through.

Further complicating the issue was that a lot of the older stuff skimmed over most of the details, and even worse, contained such an obvious religious slant that it was hard to determine which parts were fact and which parts were biased religious propaganda. On top of all of that, he'd found nothing that talked about human familiars.

When he'd looked through the books on magic, he'd had similar luck — there was some mention about Brimir, "in his infinite wisdom," creating the magic system that all mages had followed since and still followed now, but as best Shirou understood, that was just inscribing the Magical Foundation onto the world. He didn't know much about that sort of thing, and the little he did know came from research he himself had done on Reality Marbles when he had spent that short stint at Clocktower with Rin.

Other than that and the apparent uniqueness of Brimir's Void magic, there was nothing in the library about unusual affinities or anything that described Louise's problem. There was nothing that described any sort of cause for the difficulty she had with performing magic, nor any solution.

No handy guide that said, "This is what you're doing wrong," and "this is how you do it right."

Just about the only thing useful he'd discovered was that the system they used to summon familiars, the "Springtime Familiar Summoning," was a sacred rite that had also been invented by the Founder — or so the book detailing it had claimed, but there was enough religious slant that Shirou

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thought it might just be easier to say, "it was made around that time."

It didn't give any real details about the system itself, just that it sought out a mage's most appropriate familiar, selected specifically to suit the mage's needs, affinity, and personality, and pulled it across time and space to bring familiar and mage together.

Of course, it didn't really offer any detail about how this ritual accomplished what it did, so Shirou was still at square one, but it did mean that he had more direction than he had originally.

Shirou spent most of the week combing through the library section by section, building a mental map of what subjects were where, and he got quite a few stares from the students who came into the library for their own research — mostly, it was a bit of awe, a bit of fear, and a healthy dose of nervousness, and he did his best to ignore them.

Gossip traveled faster than light, so it was only natural that the entire student body had heard about his fight with Guiche within a day of its occurrence. Sometimes, it was distracting, the stares and the whispers, but it was usually pretty easy to tune out and ignore. Those sorts of distractions were the easy ones.

"Go away, Flame."

But one determined salamander was proving to be a hard one.

Three days after he'd started his research, Flame had started waddling in at odd hours and trying to drag him away. He had little trouble guessing where — Kirche hadn't exactly been subtle about her interest that first morning — but Shirou had no intention of dating or bedding a girl fifty years

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his junior, so he kept a rolled up newspaper (filched from one of the teachers) that he used to swat Flame on the nose.

For the most part, it worked.

A burst of fire leapt through the air and set the newspaper ablaze before Shirou could bring it down on Flame's snout, and Shirou dropped it with a grimace.

And then, there were days when Flame decided not to play along and just torched Shirou's weapon before he could put it to any use.

"Trace, on."

Another rolled up newspaper appeared in Shirou's hand as the remnants of the first faded into motes of light, and Shirou brought it down on Flame's nose with a meaty smack.

Fortunately, Shirou was more than capable of replacing his weapon of choice when it was destroyed.

Flame let out a little whine, then turned around and waddled away, sulking and defeated. No doubt, it was disappointed to have failed its — his — master, but Shirou didn't particularly feel like indulging the carnal fantasies of a little girl young enough to be his granddaughter. He turned back to his book, a thick tome that he'd taken from what he'd dubbed the "history" section of the library.

It went into more detail than the other books and talked about the history of the summoning rite, about how, before the Founder, Brimir, had revolutionized the system, inscribing the familiar runes had been done by hand rather than automatically.

Unfortunately, it didn't really give him much more than that. There was no talk about how the summoning system had been set up, either before or after Brimir had

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revolutionized it, and nothing about how it worked or what its selection criteria were. It had a list, too, of relatively common familiars throughout the ages (dragons, manticores, griffins, and other things that Shirou really thought were too dangerous to be familiars), but there was nothing on it about human familiars at all.

Another dead end.

Shirou snapped the book closed with a sigh and leaned back in his chair.

He'd gone through all of the most obvious books in each of the sections that he thought might contain the information he wanted, but there was nothing. All of the information was too general or too biased, so he hadn't yet found anything that was worth finding, save those few bits and pieces that might be useful later on.

There was one section, however, that he hadn't been through, yet.

It was locked off and separated from the rest of the library, guarded by a large, brassy-looking gate that had been locked shut. "Fenrir Library" had been written on a plaque across the bars, and from the fact that it was, actually, locked, Shirou understood it to be sort of a restricted section, one that only teachers could access whenever they liked. It probably contained more information, more detailed information, than the main library, and it was probably locked off because it contained information or spells that the teachers didn't want the students perusing.

If there was anything in the library that could answer the questions he needed answered, he had little doubt that it was located in that section.

But he hadn't tried to enter it yet.

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No, of course not. Even though the gate looked flimsy enough and the lock even flimsier, there was no doubt in his mind that there was some enchantment on it that prevented any students from using an unlocking spell to get inside. There was probably some sort of trick, some sort of specialized spell that would disarm whatever traps protected the gate, and it was probably something only the teachers knew about.

Perfect. It just couldn't get any more perfect, could it?

He was sure he could just bust it down — B+ Strength was like that — but he was equally sure that there was some sort of alarm that would go off if he did, and the last thing he wanted to do was cause trouble for Louise, *especially* if he wasn't going to get a chance to find anything either way.

Shirou sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

How he so very dearly wished Rin was there. *She* probably could've gotten into that section within two minutes of observing what kind of spell kept it locked, *without* setting off whatever alarm or ward was placed on the door. Then, she would've berated him for not being able to do it himself.

"Really, Shirou, it wasn't that difficult," he could imagine her saying. "Even *you* should've been able to handle *that* much."

"Sorry, Rin," he would reply, "but we can't all be geniuses like you."

"Genius has nothing to do with it," she'd shoot back. "It was a ridiculously simply trip lock with a reactionary ward that only responded to the correct unlocking spell. It wasn't that hard!"

"If you say so."

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"Hey! What's *that* supposed to mean?!"

"Nothing, nothing. I'm just remembering why it was they made you a Department Head. You really are the brightest of our generation, Rin. Even better than Luvia."

"That's right! And don't you forget it!"

"Never," he whispered.

"Mister Shirou?" a familiar voice asked.

Instantly, the imaginary Rin he'd been talking to vanished and Shirou was jolted suddenly back into the real world, where Siesta was standing a little nervously next to him with an odd look on her face.

She'd seemed a little more distant once she'd found out that he was so much older than he looked, but Shirou hadn't paid it much mind. Her reaction was rather normal, he figured — not everyone could be as easygoing as Louise and Rin had been upon finding out how much more slowly he aged.

"Siesta," Shirou said politely. "Was there something you needed?"

"Um," she started, "Miss Vallière asked that I come and get you for dinner."

"Of course, Siesta," Shirou made sure to give her a smile. "I'll be along in a moment, just as soon as I return these books."

— o.0.O.O.0.o —

"I must confess, Master, that I *still* don't understand why we're doing this."

It was Void's Day, according to Louise, which Shirou took to be this world's equivalent to Sunday. There were no

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classes, and shortly after they'd eaten breakfast, Louise had declared her intention to take him into town to go shopping.

It was after a three hour ride on horseback (and Shirou very much wished he had stored something more comfortable, like a Mercedes or a motorcycle, inside of his vault) that they reached the town — and Louise had yet to tell him its name — and its white, cobblestone streets. After leaving their horses at the town gate, Louise led him down the bustling streets, weaving with obvious ease through the people out and about.

The buildings were made of brick and the roads rather narrow; looking around, at the old-fashioned windows and doors, at the stands set up along the edges of the roadways, selling meats and fruits, at the sort of uniforms and clothing worn, Shirou felt as though he were walking through nineteenth or eighteenth century London, or perhaps even earlier.

"I already told you, didn't I? I'm going to buy you a sword."

And she had, in fact, already told him that she intended to buy a sword for him. It was a nice gesture, to be sure, but still...

"And I've already said that it's not necessary. I already have a great many swords, Master."

"I know," she said, undeterred. "You have that one, you called it a Last Phantom or something, and that other one you used against Guiche — Auger-next or something — and probably a whole lot more in your vault thing. But still!"

"Ogrenix, Master, and a Last Phantasm," Shirou corrected, "and yes, many more besides that. Which is why you don't need to buy another one for me."

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"And I'm sure that all of those swords are really nice, Shirou," she said, "especially if they're all like that Ogarnax —"

"Ogrenix."

"— Right, Ogrenix. Especially if they're all like that Ogrenix. But a mage takes care of her familiar!" Louise declared importantly. "That's why I'm going to buy you a sword!"

Shirou sighed.

"It's a waste of money," he tried to tell her. "I already have more than enough swords to make do, so there's no reason to spend your allowance on something like this. You do realize that, don't you?"

"S-so?" a faint blush colored her cheeks. "I refuse to be outdone by anyone!"

She stomped her foot imperiously, but to Shirou, she just wound up looking so very cute. "I'm a Vallière! I can't be upstaged by anyone else! I don't care who gave you those other swords, Shirou —"

"Mostly, I collected them by myself," he muttered.

"— but I'm going to buy you an even better sword!" she promised. "And then you'll use that sword, and whenever anyone sees it, they'll ask you where you got it, and you can tell them that your wonderful, kind, generous master bought it for you!"

Right, he thought sarcastically, because a small shop in this town is going to have Noble Phantasms for sale.

"Somehow, Master," he said instead, "I don't think this shop is going to have a sword that meets my usual standards."

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She stumbled a little, and Shirou realized that she probably hadn't given that any thought when making her plans.

"W-well," she stuttered, "we won't know until we get there, will we?"

"As you say, Master," he conceded, unconvinced.

She led him past several other shops and stands, guiding him through the rest of the crowd to a turn into an even narrower street, littered with garbage and trash and all sorts of refuse. Shirou's nose wrinkled on reflex — he'd been to some third world countries before, but you never really got used to the stench of sewage, rotting food, and unwashed bodies, even if you learned to ignore it when there were more important things to worry about.

She led him further through a maze of lefts and rights and straightaways, muttering to herself every now and then and glancing each way at each intersection.

"It should be near Peyman's Potion Shop," she mumbled to herself. "I remember it being somewhere around here..."

Her eyes caught something, and Shirou watched as her face lit up. "Aha!"

He followed her gaze to a shop with a bronze sign that dangled a second, sword-shaped sign.

"Found it!" Louise declared.

She marched to the door and threw it open, and Shirou followed her up the stone steps and inside.

Immediately, the bright sunlight that bathed the streets disappeared and Shirou was plunged into a dark little shop lit only by a handful of gas lamps. It bore a disturbing resemblance to some of those dingy bars that always showed

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up in American gangster movies, and the similarities were a little uncomfortable — someone always *died* in those dingy little bars.

Manning the shop was a fifty-something-year-old man, a lit pipe — the old fashioned kind that used to be popular in the Western world in the Industrial Era — hanging from his lips. He eyed Louise suspiciously as she and Shirou entered, until, that is, he saw something that evidently pleased him greatly.

The old man pulled his pipe from his mouth and flung out his arms invitingly.

"My lady!" he welcomed her. "My good, noble lady! Come, come. All of my wares here are real and reasonably priced!"

"Thank you," Louise said with a polite sort of imperiousness. "I've come here to buy a sword."

"A sword?" the shopkeeper parroted. "If you don't mind me saying so, milady, that's quite strange. A noble buying a sword — quite strange, indeed."

"Oh?" Louise arched one delicate eyebrow and Shirou stifled a smile — either she had been on the receiving end of it quite often, or she had been practicing in the mirror for years. "How so?"

"Well...priests wave sanctified staves, soldiers wave swords, and nobles wave wands. Isn't that how it usually goes?"

"Oh, I'm not the one using it," Louise said with a wave of her hand. Her tone was the perfect blend of cool, airy condescension and disinterest — again, Shirou got the feeling she had probably either seen it often enough or had practiced

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it to perfection. "It's a gift for my Servant" — Shirou felt his own eyebrow raise — "so he'll be the one picking it out."

"Ah, your servant, eh?" the shopkeeper grinned and looked over at Shirou. "That would be you, then, would it, good sir?"

"It would," Shirou said with a short, neutral nod.

"I'm afraid I'm not very knowledgeable about swords," Louise cut back in, "so please show me anything that is reasonable."

"Of course, of course," the shopkeeper said it politely enough, and he even bowed before leaving to pick out a sword, but Shirou saw something in his eye that didn't seem as nice and congenial as his tone suggested.

The shopkeeper returned shortly with a longsword about a meter in length, decorated exquisitely and designed very obviously for a single-handed grip style — the hilt was too short for anything else. The blade shone like silver and gleamed with a fine, mirror finish, and the hilt looked crafted from gold. A large, egg-shaped ruby was embedded in the bottom of the pommel and two more were fitted into either end of the cross-guard. Very neatly patterned scrollwork was etched into the ricasso and all over the guard and grip and wound like vines around the quillons.

It was, all in all, a very nice piece of work.

"It seems as though a lot of nobles are letting their servants and vassals carry swords nowadays. They're all worried about that thief that's been going around stealing treasures and artifacts from nobles, that Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt person," the shopkeeper explained. "The last time one of them came to me for a sword, this was the kind they picked."

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"This one?"

"Yes, that's right. This is a sword made by the famous Germanian Alchemist, Lord Shupeï. It's got spells and incantations on it that let it cut through ordinary metal like butter! You can't get this cheaper anywhere else!"

Louise grimaced. "How much?"

"As I said, this is a high quality item," the shopkeeper said. "Normally, it'd be much, much more expensive. However, I'd be willing to sell this to you for three thousand ecus."

"What?!" Louise sputtered. "You could buy a whole estate with that kind of money!"

"A sword of this quality is worth more than a castle, milady," the shopkeeper insisted. "Even an estate is less expensive than something like this."

Louise frowned miserably and seemed to think about it for a moment, then turned, with obvious reluctance, to look at Shirou. "Shirou?" she asked, as though begging him to turn it down and fearing that he might not.

Shirou smirked and held out his hand. "May I?"

"Of course," the shopkeeper said politely. He handed Shirou the sword, hilt first. "See for yourself the quality of this priceless sword."

Shirou took the sword and stepped back, then pretended to give it a few test swings for good measure. In reality, of course, he didn't need to — he'd already known exactly how good this sword was the moment he'd laid eyes on it.

"It's a very nice sword," he said after a long moment of silence. Louise's face fell and the shopkeeper beamed. "It would make quite the display piece. But I would never take it into battle."

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The shopkeepers smile dropped (Shirou could swear he heard the man's hopes and dreams crashing to pieces) and Louise looked at him, halfway between relieved and confused.

"The scrollwork is exquisite and detailed," Shirou explained, both for Louise's benefit and for the shopkeeper, "but it makes the ricasso inordinately long and removes the possibility of a fuller to make the sword lighter."

He ran his finger down the broad side of the blade to illustrate his point.

"Further," he went on, "the ricasso itself reduces the functional edge of the blade to half of what it should be, which decreases its value as a weapon. The tip is weighted and the foible is heavier than the forte — that ruins the balance and makes fighting with it awkward and difficult."

The two of them were watching him, riveted, without blinking, and Shirou flipped his grip to show them the hilt.

"The guard is heavier than it should be because it has to support the jewels in either end," he continued, "and the pommel is loose because it attaches awkwardly to the rest of the hilt. The grip is too small to balance the weight of the weapon, which is further ruined by the shorter, narrower tang. On top of all the other problems, this sword would probably snap after a week or two of serious use."

He handed the sword back to the shopkeeper, who took it dumbly.

"Like I said," Shirou concluded, "it's a good display piece, but I would never take it into a battle."

There was a moment of stunned silence as Louise and the shopkeeper both stared at him, dumbfounded, mouths hanging open slightly.

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"Bwahahaha! He got you there, you old coot!"

And then, a deep, masculine voice echoed from nowhere to interrupt it.

The shopkeeper groaned and dropped his head into his hands, and Shirou looked out across the shop to try and find the owner, absently cataloguing every weapon he saw along the way, but there was no one there except more swords, spears, and the like. Nothing but ordinary, if magical —

His brain stopped. The entire world came to a halt. Shirou's eyes alighted onto a sword, one sword, one very specific sword, and Unlimited Blade Works reached out, analyzed it, sympathized with its existence, recorded the experience of its growth, matched its craftsmanship, excelled the manufacturing process, duplicated the component materials, reproduced the accumulated age...and stopped.

Stopped, not because the sword was an alien existence, a crystallized prayer crafted by the planet; stopped, not because it had been forged from something as ridiculous as a fallen star; stopped, not because the sword was made from something that was beyond Shirou's ability to comprehend, but stopped, because the sword had something that Shirou could not replicate anyway.

"Seems like this guy knows what he's doing," the sword cackled. "You're not going to fool him with a pretty show piece like that!"

Sentience.

No, some swords did have sentience, at least enough so to choose a wielder that suited them. That was what such swords as Gram and Caliburn had — a limited sentience that allowed them each to choose the most appropriate wielder, the king.

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No, what this sword had wasn't *sentience*, but *sapience*.
Intelligence — vis-à-vis, a *soul*.

"Shirou," Louise asked quietly, "I'm not hallucinating, am I? That sword actually just talked, didn't it?"

"Indeed, it did, Master," Shirou confirmed.

"Oi!" the sword jiggled in place as the cross-guard and quillons wiggled like a mouth. "What's the matter, kiddo? Never seen a talking sword before?"

"Can't say that I have," Shirou said a little faintly. Every instinct in him was screaming that this was a once in a lifetime chance and he *shouldn't* pass it up.

"Derf!" the shopkeeper shouted. "Shut up, Derf! I have *customers* to take care of!"

"Looks more to me like the customer is taking care of you!" the sword shot back. The quillons jiggled as it laughed again.

"This sword...it's sentient?" Louise asked the shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper grunted. "Aye, it's sentient, all right. It's a magical, talking sword. I wonder what sort of mage could make a sword talk like that...but he's got a rotten tongue, he does, always mouthing off to my customers. Hey, Derf! Keep it up, and I'll ask this noble lady here to melt you down for scrap!"

"Someone like her? Melt *me* down?" the sword chortled. "She's a thousand years too young to do something like that!"

A growl, so tiny and soft that Shirou almost missed it, rumbled up Louise's throat.

"Fine!" the shopkeeper snarled. "Then *I'll* do it!"

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"That's even worse!" the sword cackled gleefully.
"You're *two* thousand years too young to even *try*!"

"It's fine," Shirou cut in, trying to curtail the argument.
"This sword will do."

The shopkeeper grunted. "You sure about that, sonny?
It's not that I won't be glad to see him go, but if you take him,
I ain't acceptin' him back."

"Shirou," Louise looked a little pained, "there *must* be a
better sword in here."

"No, Master," Shirou told her with a little smirk, "there
really isn't."

"Oi, oi," the sword chimed in. "Who said I wanted to go
with you, anyhow?"

"Shirou," Louise asked reluctantly, "are you sure?"

"Positive, Master."

She sighed. "Very well." She turned to the shopkeeper.
"How much?"

The shopkeeper grunted. "One hundred. Good riddance
to it, so I'm giving it to you for cheap."

"Hey! I'm worth *way* more than a measly one hundred!"

"Deal," Louise declared. She reached into her wallet and
handed over a pile of gold coins, which the shopkeeper
counted carefully before nodding and giving her a big, bright
grin.

"Pleasure doing business with you, milady." He sheathed
the sword and handed it over to Shirou, who took it with a
quiet "thanks."

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"If it gets noisy, just shove it back in the scabbard and it'll shut up," the shopkeeper advised.

The sword slid an inch or two from the sheath of its own volition, quillons wiggling. "Oi! Treat me with some respect, you old coot! I'm Derflinger, after all!"

Shirou slid Derflinger, as it called itself, back into its sheath and gave the shopkeeper a smile. "Thank you for your time."

As he followed Louise out of the shop, the shopkeeper called after them, "Thanks for the business! Come back anytime!"

The door shut behind them and the bright sunlight that had been absent while they were inside beamed down at them as though welcoming them back. Shirou lifted a hand to shield his eyes and looked up at the sky — by his estimate, it was about two or three o'clock in the afternoon, *maybe* as late as four.

"I still don't see what's so special about that sword," Louise murmured. Shirou let his hand drop and fell into step behind her as she started back to the main road.

"I have seen many swords in my time, Master," Shirou explained, "indeed, many magical swords as well, but never one that talks. By that alone, it's worth more than the rest of the swords in that shop combined."

Derflinger popped out of its sheath again. "Hmph. Glad to see someone appreciates me!"

"But it's a dirty, rusted old piece of junk," Louise protested. "Even if it talks, wouldn't a cleaner, sharper sword have been a better choice?"

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"You needn't worry, Master," Shirou assured her. "After all, my affinity is swords. It would be child's play for me to return this rusty sword to its former glory."

"Hoho," Derflinger crowed. "Looks like my partner this time around is much more competent than usual. I knew I made the right choice by picking you!"

"*He* picked *you*, you dumb sword," Louise mumbled.

"Semantics!" Derflinger waved it off with a wiggle of one quillon.

"But there is something that concerns me, Master, that I'd like to address with you," Shirou changed the subject.

"Oh? What's that?"

"Back there, Louise," Shirou said solemnly, "you called me your Servant."

"Ah," she flushed and glanced over at him, then turned away and refused to look at him.

"It isn't that I think you made a mistake," he assured her, "nor that it's wrong to refer to me as such, despite the differences between what brought me here and the magic that I explained to you. But I would have you tell me why, Master, you would refer to me like that."

Louise grew steadily redder with each word, and there was a short moment of silence where he watched her marshal herself and threw back her shoulders confidently.

"Well," she began, sounding confident and in control, even with her cheeks stained red, "I decided that, since you know more about the-the human familiar thing, I would use your terminology. It...It didn't seem proper to keep calling you a familiar when you're not a regular familiar. And besides, the spell *is* called *Summon Servant*, after all."

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"I see," Shirou allowed himself a small smile. "Yes, Master, I don't think I could argue with that logic."

— o.O.O.O.o —

After stopping at an inn for a short but filling lunch, Louise and Shirou returned to their horses and traveled back to the Academy (and Shirou found himself wishing, once again, that he had a more comfortable ride stashed in his vault). Another three hours later, having returned the horses they had been loaned by the campus, they started together for the tower that Louise called home. The moons had risen into the night sky.

"Ugh," Louise moaned as they walked, "I'm hungry. I haven't eaten anything since lunch."

Her stomach let out a rumble as though to support her claim, and Shirou admitted that he himself was rather hungry as well.

How was it you could work up an appetite just by riding a horse?

"If you would like, Master," Shirou offered, "I could see if Siesta would be willing to put together a plate to bring to your room."

Louise groaned.

"No thanks," she said. "I just want to crawl into bed."

She yawned. "Where did the day go? It seemed like we were just leaving not that long ago."

"Time is like that, Master," Shirou said with a wry chuckle. "When you let your guard down, years can pass before you realize it."

She groaned again.

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"No wisdom right now, Shirou," she told him, feet dragging, "I'm too tired for it."

"As you say, Master."

He stepped forward, looped one hand under her knees, the other around her shoulders, and lifted her up into his arms, ignoring her surprised, indignant squawk.

"Shirou!" she squealed. "What are you doing?! Put me down, put me down!"

"If you're too tired to accept wisdom, Master, then, you're certainly too tired to walk back to your room on your own."

"Put me down, Shirou! I'm a noble! This isn't dignified!"

"In combat, dignity is the first casualty, Master."

"This isn't a battle, Shirou! We're not fighting anything! Put me down! Put me *down!*"

"Indeed, we are, Master. When not in battle, one must find sleep wherever they can. Fatigue is the enemy."

"I don't care, Shirou! Put me down! I refuse to be carried like some helpless peasant when I'm perfectly capable of walking myself!"

Shirou chuckled. "It's the job of the Servant to protect his Master. However, since it seems that there are no other Servants for me to fight, hunger, fatigue, and ignorance are the enemies. Therefore, it is the duty of this Servant to protect you from each."

For a moment, Louise said nothing.

"Hunger, fatigue, and ignorance, huh?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, Master, exactly that."

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There was another moment of silence, so much longer than before that Shirou thought perhaps she had fallen asleep in his arms. When he glanced down at her, however, she was wide awake and staring at something in the distance, gaze unfocused, lost in thought.

"We sure have a lot of enemies, don't we?" she asked.

Shirou laughed. He couldn't help it — the memory of that very line, spoken to his own Saber so many years ago and repeated now, struck something inside of him that he hadn't felt in a long time. So he laughed a deep belly laugh that rumbled up his chest and broke free from his mouth.

"Indeed," he said between laughs, "we are besieged from all sides."

Louise sighed.

"Fine," she conceded tiredly. "Take me back to my room —"

But she didn't get to finish, because Shirou flung himself backwards, Louise in his arms, fifty feet, just in time to avoid the large foot made of rock that slammed down where he'd just been standing.

"Sh-Shirou!" Louise yelled. "What is *that*?!"

"It appears to be a large golem, Master," Shirou replied solemnly.

The large rock foot was attached to a leg, and the leg to a torso, and the torso to another leg, two arms, and a head. The creature that had nearly stomped them into paste was a tall creature made of rock and dirt, a monstrosity riddled with moss and grass and splotches of green. It was as though someone had reached into the earth and molded what had

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been gouged out into a rough facsimile of a man, only sixty feet tall.

"Th-that's," Louise stuttered, "got to be at *least* Triangle-level magic!"

Atop the golem's shoulder stood a cloaked figure, no doubt the caster, who pointed at the center tower's wall, and the golem's right fist gleamed, shiny and metallic, as it became steel instead of rock and punched the tower. The ground rumbled with the force of the blow, and chunks of stone went flying.

The golem had punched a hole in the wall.

The cloaked figure let out a cackle that Shirou could hear even without reinforcing his ears and ran down the golem's arm and in through the hole in the castle wall. A moment later, the figure returned, lugging a long staff that it seemed he could barely carry up along the golem's arm after burning a message onto the castle wall.

"I got your Staff of Destruction — Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt."

Shirou's eyes narrowed.

"Ruyi Jingu Bang."

Louise looked at him. "What?"

"The staff of the Monkey King," Shirou explained. "A Noble Phantasm that could grow or shrink to any size, could make any fighter a master martial artist, and was so heavy that only the Monkey King himself could lift it like a normal staff. The question is, *why was it in the Academy?*"

"The Academy has a vault," Louise told him matter-of-factly. "It's protected against all kinds of magic and safeguards a number of Tristain's ancient magical artifacts."

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Shirou couldn't stop himself from snorting. "You keep some of your country's most valuable artifacts in your *school*?"

"It's one of the safest places in the country!" Louise protested indignantly.

"Nonetheless, Master, this is a fight you cannot win," Shirou handed her Derflinger. "Please, stay back."

"What —? Shirou!"

"Oi! Partner! Why are you leaving *me* behind?!"

He kicked off the ground, unsheathing Gavilain in a flash of gold as the thief — Fouquet, apparently — dragged himself up to his golem's shoulder with the Staff of Destruction (Ruyi Jingu Bang) trailing behind. The golem rumbled into motion again as Shirou cleared the fifty foot distance in a flash, his golden sword gleaming as he cleaved clear through the golem's leg.

"WHAT?!"

Fouquet, standing on its shoulder, wavered and let out a panicked shriek as the golem tried to step forward and stumbled without its right foot. Shirou moved for the follow up blow as the golem fell to one knee and flung out its hands in a surprisingly human motion to stop its fall.

A flash came from the golem's shoulder and bullets of sharpened rock the size of Shirou's arm sped towards him. Shirou aborted his attack and leapt out of the way — the rocks crashed to the ground and shattered like glass.

A mage — an earth mage — of the Triangle class, which was apparently this world's equivalent to a first rate magus. Since Square was considered the highest, and would thereby be the rarest, those would most probably be the equivalent of

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someone like Rin or Barthomeloi Lorelei — the geniuses who were head and shoulders above even the first raters.

Of course, that was just general skill level. Since this world was in a Pseudo Age of Gods era, they could do incredibly high ranked magic with ridiculous ease, hence the golem in front of him. Something on that level was about the same as a Grand Ritual, an intensely draining piece of magic that should have required an entire group of magi.

He had just proven, however, that it wasn't sturdy enough to withstand B+ Strength. It seemed that what this world had in versatility, it lacked in strength.

Shirou burst into motion again, weaving around the spells Fouquet was flinging at him as he rushed towards the golem a second time.

The golem hadn't broken apart from the first attack when Shirou had severed its right foot, nor had it lost any coherency when it had been forced into a kneel that had shaken ground. For all that it was fragile enough to that he could hack it to pieces, it was also sturdy enough that he would literally have to hack it to pieces to destroy it.

The right hand was severed as Shirou rushed past it, carving through the wrist with Gavilain as though a knife through butter. The golem destabilized and teetered sideways as the severed wrist slid away from the dismembered hand and struck the ground with another thud that sent quivers across the courtyard.

"Why, you!" Fouquet screamed, sounding surprisingly feminine.

Shirou said nothing, merely continued on his path and carved through the left leg just above what counted as the golem's knee. The golem leaned even farther to the side,

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falling closer and closer to the already-damaged wall that it had punched through just minutes ago. Fouquet was wobbling, trying desperately to gain purchase on her crumbling golem and clutching desperately at the Staff of Destruction — Ruyi Jingu Bang — with one hand as the other scrambled wildly for a grip.

This was his chance.

Shirou leapt upwards as the golem tilted over and ran up its back, aiming to defeat Fouquet once and for all with one blow. He raised his sword, ready to cleave apart the shoulder that Fouquet was standing upon — take the footholds out from underneath her feet, force her to the ground, and while she was stunned, disarm her —

But a sudden burst of magical energy from Louise, still halfway across the courtyard, sent all of his instincts tingling, and he flung himself up and into the air.

"Fireball!" Louise's voice called.

There was a moment's pause, so minute that an ordinary human would only have had time to blink, and then the golem's head exploded with such force that Fouquet, still unstable from the golem's stumbling, was flung from her golem's shoulder and tumbled to the ground as her creation slammed sideways into the tower.

Shirou landed halfway between Fouquet, who was trying to pull herself to her feet, and Louise. He glanced back for an instant at his Master — her face was flushed from a combination of exertion and, judging by the grin pulling at her lips, success. Derflinger sat on the ground, completely silent, and her wand was raised in the air, still pointing at where the golem's head had once been.

Good for her.

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Even if that hadn't exactly been a fireball.

He turned back around and started walking towards Fouquet, who was scrambling and trying to stand as she wheezed for breath. The air must've been knocked out of her lungs from the fall, but to survive a twenty-foot drop relatively unharmed, she must've been wearing some kind of body armor.

"Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt," he called out as he walked. The hooded face, no doubt disguised by some sort of spell woven into the cowl, looked up at him. Beneath the cloak, the body shape gave away what Shirou had already determined. "Yes, the shopkeeper mentioned you earlier today. You're the thief who has Tristain's nobility running around like a chicken with its head cut off."

"S-stay back!" Fouquet wheezed, brandishing her wand. "D-don't come any c-closer!"

"I have no love for this country and its nobility," he told her firmly. "For all that it matters to me, rob them blind. My quarrel with you doesn't begin until tonight, when you decided to endanger not only my Master's life, but the lives of every person on this campus for no other reason than your own selfish gain."

"I-I'm not afraid t-to kill you!" Fouquet rasped her warning. She wagged her wand threateningly. "I'm w-warning you!"

Shirou glared at her darkly.

"Before you even recite a single word," he promised grimly, "I will have snapped it clean in half —"

A deafening BANG cleaved through the air, and it was the only warning Shirou had — he leapt backwards and landed beside his Master, and no sooner had he vacated his

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spot than did the ground he'd been standing on explode, gouging a crater ten feet wide and six deep. Bits of dirt and grass flew every which way, scattering all over the place.

BANG, BANG — two more sounded, and this time, Shirou heard the whistle as the projectiles screamed through the air. He scooped up Louise, ignoring her startled squawk, and thrust himself backwards again, then again. With unerring accuracy, the ground where he had stood with Louise, and then again where he had first leapt away to, exploded like the first.

The distance separating Shirou and Fouquet had increased to three hundred feet.

No more bangs went off, allowing Shirou the first moment to still himself and look up at the enemy — and there, silhouetted against the bigger waning moon, was a large wooden ship, floating in midair. Aboard it, standing astride the bowsprit, Shirou could just barely make out a tall figure.

"Trace, on."

His vision enhanced and the figure became clearer, but in the faint light of the moons, silhouetted as the figure was, it was impossible to make out any details. The best he could make of it was a coat, either red, black, or blue, and a pair of pants, either white, grey, cream, or beige. A head of long hair swayed in the wind, and the coat curved inwards at the waist and out at the hips and chest — so it was a female.

"OI!" the figure called down. "YOU COMIN', OR WHAT?"

Fouquet stood, still gasping a little, and glanced once at Shirou, then rose slowly into the air with what Shirou recognized as Levitation magic. Before he could think of what he was doing, his foot stepped forward to go after her

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and another bang resounded through the night, softer than the last. Something small and metal passed through the space in front of Shirou's nose, barely missing him.

He turned towards the figure in the sky. Somehow, he knew she was grinning.

"NONE OF THAT, NOW!" her voice called down. "YOU'LL BE STAYIN' WHERE YOU ARE, YA HEAR?"

Shirou frowned and stepped back in front of Louise.

"Shirou!" she whispered from behind him. "What's going on?!"

"Not now, Master," he murmured back to her. He raised his voice. "TO WHOM DO I OWE THE PLEASURE?"

A musical laughter drifted down from the ship, even as Fouquet rose higher and higher into the air.

"WHERE BE THE FUN IN TELLING YOU?" the other woman called back. "I'M SURE A HERO AS FAMOUS AS KING ARTHUR CAN FIGURE IT OUT HIMSELF!"

"King Arthur?!" Louise hissed. "Shirou, what is she *talking* about?!"

"Not *now*, Louise," Shirou hissed back at her.

Fouquet had finally reached the ship and boarded it.

"ALAS, IT SEEMS WE'LL HAVE TO FIGHT AGAIN SOME OTHER DAY!" the woman called down. "FAREWELL, YOUR MAJESTY!"

The ship lurched — "HO!" — and flew off and into the night, leaving Shirou alone with Louise and his thoughts.

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"It seems I underestimated this place," Shirou said quietly to Louise. "For there is no doubt in my mind that that woman was a Heroic Spirit."

That heavy presence, that uncanny precision with a flintlock pistol, manning an entire ship by herself — no, there was no doubt that the long-haired woman who had shot at him four times, thrice with her cannons and once with a pistol, was one of the vaunted Heroic Spirits.

That she had mentioned King Arthur, that she had mistaken him for that lofty king, for Saber, a hero that did not exist in this world's history (and he had checked, just to be sure), meant that she could only be a hero from the Throne, and a hero from his world, at that.

"Oho?" Derflinger spoke up seriously, devoid of all humor. "So one of *them* kind is a player on this board, now, too, eh?"

"Shirou," Louise started, "what does that mean?"

Shirou stared off at where the ship had flown away, flown as easily and as swiftly as though it had been sailing through water — a galleon, if he remembered the term right, a European warship from the era when Japan had still been fighting itself during the Warring States period. And he had just come face to face — if at a distance — with a Heroic Spirit who had such a thing as her Noble Phantasm.

"It means," Shirou said solemnly, "that our situation just became a whole lot more complicated."

Around them, in the quiet of the night, the students and teachers were rushing out of their beds and through the halls to see what all of the commotion was about, and the felled golem crumbled back into dirt.

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CONTINUE?

[YES/NO]

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #3

Ilya blinked and waved. "Welcome back!"

The camera panned over to Rin, who was frowning and looked to be thinking about something really hard.

"Huh?" Ilya looked over at Rin. "Tohsaka-sensei, aren't you going to say hi?"

"...Is it weird that I'm not sure I should be excited about actually getting a role in this story?" Rin asked.

"Eh," Ilya said, letting out an exaggerated sigh, "Tohsaka-sensei is impossible to please. She's the only other character to show up from the original story so far, and she's whining about how small her role is. I guess Tohsaka-sensei just gets stricter in her old age instead of mellower."

Rin growled. "What did you just say?"

"N-nothing!" Ilya said as innocently as she could.

Rin huffed and turned away. Ilya breathed a sigh of relief.

"Anyway," Rin said, "today's lesson is a continuation of the subject of Familiars."

"Huh?" Ilya asked incredulously. "But I thought we already covered all the stuff about the Familiar Runes!"

"We did," Rin answered. "That's why we're going to cover the Familiars themselves and their specific skills."

She wrote **Known Familiars** on the board.

"Oh," Ilya said. "I was wondering about that. The familiar system seems different from what I'm used to — more like the Servant system than regular familiars."

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Rin adopted her famous lecture pose.

"Of course it does. But the reason why is something that we're not allowed to explain right now, so we're just going to cover the known familiar classes, today."

She wrote **Gandalfr** beneath the previous heading.

"First up, Gandalfr."

"Shirou's class!" Ilya said excitedly.

"That's right," Rin explained. "The Gandalfr class, also called the Left Hand of God and the Shield of God, is a Familiar of the Void element, which means only a Void mage can summon a Gandalfr. However, even then, the Gandalfr is specifically aligned to Tristain, which means only a Tristainian Void Mage can summon a Gandalfr as a familiar. It seems like Old Man Brimir was really paranoid about the balance of power, so he set it up like that."

"So that each country could only summon one specific Void familiar, you mean," Ilya clarified.

"Right." Rin nodded. "Albion gets Lifthrasir, the Heart of God, Gallia gets Mjodvitnir, the Mind of God, Romalia gets Windalfr, called the Right Hand of God or the Flute of God, and Tristain gets Gandalfr."

"So what does Gandalfr do?"

"Gandalfr gets a special class skill called 'Master of Arms.'" Rin wrote **Master of Arms** underneath **Gandalfr**. "Basically, it's a skill that lets the familiar use weapons with master-like skill, even if he or she has never held it before in his or her life. For a proper Gandalfr, the average rank in this skill is **A**, which boosts strength and allows the familiar to use any weapon intended for combat as though he or she had

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practiced with it his or her entire life. With the exception of Noble Phantasms, of course."

Ilya grinned. "But Shirou's is much higher than that, isn't it?"

"Shirou's rank in this skill is **EX**," Rin went on. "That means he gets a boost in speed, Agility, and Strength, and he can use any weapon intended for combat, whether it's a vehicle, sword, spear, or even a Noble Phantasm, as though he had spent his entire life honing his abilities with it. The Gandalfr class ability will provide him with everything he needs to wield them, including knowledge of how to use them and "permission" to use them, in the case of Noble Phantasms. He's even capable of reproducing weapon skills as long as he has a basic grasp on how the technique works — of course, the average Gandalfr can do that part, too, so it's not that special."

"EX skills are so overpowered," Ilya added smugly.

"Blame Shirou," Rin said with a shrug. "He's just too compatible with the class, so his ranking in the Master of Arms skill is naturally of the highest value."

"And what about that guy whose place Shirou took? Saito something or other? What would he get?"

"A+," Rin answered succinctly. "It's really pretty remarkable. Normally, someone like him wouldn't even get **A**, because he's so incompatible, but he has a skill that makes up for it."

"Yay for the power of plot!" Ilya enthused sarcastically. "Why is it that Saito gets such a powerful skill as Instinct, anyway?"

"Because he had it in the original Familiar of Zero story? Kind of, anyway," Rin explained. "It was mentioned

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somewhere in one of the Light Novels that even without the Gandalf class abilities, Saito had an instinctual grasp of battle...or something like that."

"Gandalfs are so *bax*," Ilya sing-songed. "Anyway, we're running out of time, Rin —"

"That's *Tobsaka-sensei* to you!"

"— so we need to cover the other known familiars! Next?"

Rin grumbled something under her breath about "disrespectful lolis," but sighed and said, "Next, Windalfr, or Vindalfr, it's pronounced the same either way. This guy is the one with the skill called **Master of Beasts**. He can use it to communicate with and command animals, which means it's pretty much **Riding** and **Animal Dialogue** combined into one, with some extra perks. At the higher levels, it can even endow the animals he's commanding with human or near-human intelligence, and in some cases, lets them equip skills like **Discernment of the Poor**."

"Windalfr, too?" Ilya asked. "Geez. Are all Void Familiars this ridiculously overpowered?"

Rin shook her head.

"Don't worry, the *Miracle of Zero* Windalfr is only average, so he doesn't get those amazing bonuses. If it were someone like Siegfried or Kintarou, who already have an **Animal Dialogue** skill, it'd be different."

"So what about...what's it, Mjodvitnir, the Mind of God?"

Rin unscrewed the cap of her marker and wrote **Mjodvitnir** on the board. "Mjodvitnir," she explained, "also known as the **Mind of God**. These guys get a really

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powerful ability called **Master of Artifacts**. It lets them use and create anything that can be classified as a **Magical Artifact**. At the higher levels, this includes other Heroic Spirits' Noble Phantasms, and at the highest levels, they can even make Divine Mysteries on the level of things like Excalibur."

"That's kinda scary," Ilya said. "You're telling me that a powerful enough Mjodvitnir could make something on the level of a Divine Spirit's magecraft?"

"Well, they need the appropriate materials," Rin hedged. "But even with substandard components, it's certainly possible to make something like a one-shot Excalibur, though it would probably fall apart as a result. Without the very best resources, handling that kind of power and that much prana without bursting at the seams is pretty much a pipe dream."

"That's a bit of a relief," Ilya said. "Not much, but still... You know, though, it's kind of funny that Mjodvitnir is almost always a woman."

"Isn't it? I guess woman are just better mages than men."

"So," Ilya began, "the last Void Familiar, Lifthrasir."

"Right." Rin wrote **Lifthrasir** on the board, then wrote **Twilight of the Gods** beneath it. "Lifthrasir, also called the **Heart of God**, is the Void Familiar assigned to Albion. Unlike Windalfr and Gandalfr, both of whom have some class-based **Magic Resistance**, and Mjodvitnir, who has skills with magecraft to negate others' magic, Lifthrasir is usually the one most susceptible to magical effects."

"Sucks to be them, I guess," Ilya added irreverently.

"It gets worse," Rin told her. "Aside from usually being the hardest hit by magic, Lifthrasir is also usually the hardest hit by the runes, making them more susceptible to developing

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intense romantic feelings for their summoner. On top of all of that, the Lifthrasir class possesses the skill **Twilight of the Gods**, which basically turns them into living bombs. The average rank in this skill is **C**, which is usually only enough to destroy small squads, though you might manage a larger group if they're gathered close enough together. Though higher rankings can insulate Lifthrasir from the negative effects, the average Lifthrasir dies upon utilizing the class skill."

"...*Really* sucks to be them," Ilya corrected herself. "Lifthrasir sounds like a really sucky class to be."

"Unless you've got a really high ranking in the class skill," Rin went on. "Then, you can basically bomb the hell out of whoever you want without worrying about atomizing yourself in the process."

"Yeah," Ilya agreed. "But you'd have to be a mud doll made by the gods or have a ridiculous True Nature like a Dragon or something in order to have a really high ranking in *that* class skill."

"Pretty much," Rin said. "But we're almost out of time, so let's wrap this up."

"Yes, Tohsaka-sensei!" Ilya cheered.

Rin gave Ilya a look and Ilya deflated. "Too much?"

"Just a little," Rin said. "Anyway, the last things we need to cover are the more standard familiars. Now, we're not going to cover averages or the dozens of variants, we'll just handle the more powerful standard classes. It's easier, that way."

"Standards, like Fire, Water, Wind, and Earth type familiars?" Ilya asked.

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"Exactly," Rin answered. "They each have a skill that gives significant buffs to the corresponding magic element. For Fire mages, the most powerful Fire element familiars are called **Salamanders**. For Water mages, it's **Undines**. For Wind, they're called **Sylphs**. For Earth...well, they don't currently have a name."

"Why not?"

"Probably partly because there aren't really that many really powerful Earth element familiars. But mostly, it's because the author doesn't want to go and call them **Gnomes**, because most people think of gnomes as those little porcelain or ceramic or...whatever the hell they're made of, those little statues with pointed hats that you put on your lawn."

"Ah." Ilya nodded. "That makes sense. I wouldn't want to call them gnomes either if it meant risking a reviewer asking if Earth element familiars were little men with beards and pointed hats."

"I'm surprised you know what those lawn ornaments even are," Rin commented.

Ilya huffed. "You do realize that each of those familiars is named after a type of Elemental from classical Alchemy, right?"

"Ah, right."

"Anyway," Ilya turned to the camera, "that's all for today! Join us next time! We're going to cover something really exciting!"

"Are we really?"

"I don't know. I just said that to get their attention —"

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #3: End

Chapter IV: Secret Maneuvers

Despite the damage and commotion Fouquet had caused, the teachers ultimately decided to wait until the morning to discuss everything and get Louise's testimony, so she and Shirou were allowed to return to her room for the night.

Louise had seemed very grateful for the reprieve — the door had barely closed behind them before she'd collapsed face-first into her mattress and sheets. Shirou had had to change her into her pajamas, her nightgown, because she'd fallen asleep almost immediately, and he hadn't the heart to force her awake long enough for her to change herself.

Ironically, he had finally completed that task she had assigned him his second day in this place: dressing her.

Sleep did not come as easily for Shirou as it did for Louise, however, and some hours later, he found himself lying awake on the spare mattress that Louise had had Siesta and a few other of the castle staff move into the corner of her room, staring up at the ceiling with his hands folded behind his head. Derflinger was propped up against the wall a few inches from the edge of the mattress and hadn't spoken since Fouquet had made good her escape.

What kept Shirou awake was restlessness and unease. He had just come face to face (in a manner of speaking) with a Heroic Spirit, after all. To meet such an enemy, to realize and know exactly what you had to face, exactly how *strong* the guy across from you was, would have troubled even the calmest of minds.

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The problem Shirou faced, however, was not worry over the strength of his new enemy, but rather what that enemy's very presence *meant*.

From the start, Shirou had assumed that he was alone in this world, that there was no one who possessed the sort of knowledge and abilities he had access to, and he had concluded that he could leave, then, as soon as he had prepared his new little Master sufficiently. It minimized the time he would have to spend away from his own world, from the people he cared for, from the responsibilities that had been left empty because he was no longer there to fill them. It meant that he could leave just about as soon as he found out how.

But the presence of a Heroic Spirit — one native to his world rather than this one, at that — changed everything.

Whoever it was, her allegiance was to someone else, and whoever it was she was loyal to, that person had been interested in Fouquet, which automatically made both that person and the Heroic Spirit an enemy — assuming, of course, that the Heroic Spirit wasn't Fouquet's Servant in the first place, which was certainly a possibility.

Of course, Fouquet hadn't been expecting backup, had she? If she had entered the castle with the knowledge of what kind of firepower that Heroic Spirit could bring to bear, there would have been no need to construct that golem — that Heroic Spirit could have just blasted the wall apart with a barrage of cannon fire.

So the Heroic Spirit probably wasn't Fouquet's Servant. Probably. It was still possible, he supposed, so for now, he'd

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have to work under the assumption that either option was right.

Either way, whoever was in charge, whether it was Fouquet or some mysterious benefactor, they were dangerous and hadn't cared one bit about putting the lives of innocent children and school teachers at risk. That immediately made them a threat and someone Shirou couldn't allow to do as they pleased; to let them continue to endanger people for their own selfish means and goals was a denial of Emiya Shirou.

Beyond that, they were also a threat to his diminutive little Master, so he couldn't let them go either way.

He wished he had had the convenience of Master's Clairvoyance — the skill that, in the Grail Wars, had allowed Rin to see the parameters and skills of the enemy Servants (Shirou hadn't been a very good Master, so he hadn't had the same luxury), because it would've made it much easier to see where he stood compared to that hero.

In the end, battles like that came down to special skills and Noble Phantasms, yes, but it still would've been useful. Plans worked best when you knew how strong you were and how strong your enemy was, because then you could account for those strengths when deciding how to fight. Knowing how he compared to her would've made it easier to know what he had to watch out for and what he could relax on.

But what bothered him even more than all of that was a simple question that had echoed in his head all night.

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If there was one Heroic Spirit wandering around this world, then could there be more?

It was a troubling thought. If Fouquet's ally, a Heroic Spirit in her own right, had a Noble Phantasm that allowed her to sail the skies as easily as the seas and belch out a virtually limitless barrage of cannon fire, then what other sorts of Heroes might have been called into this world as well?

"Hey, partner," Derf spoke up quietly.

Shirou turned his head to the side to look at his new sword — how ironic that he had, in fact, come across something of Noble Phantasm quality in that dingy little shop. "Something the matter, Derflinger?"

"Derf is fine," the sword assured him. "But that's not it — partner, that was some pretty amazing stuff you did out there against that golem."

Shirou snorted. "When you compare a lion to a flea, *everything* seems more amazing about the lion."

For all that it was complex magic, the golem itself hadn't been particularly powerful or threatening. Sure, for the average mage, it might have proven some trouble, but someone like Shirou or a high class magus like Rin could take it out relatively easily. It was just a matter of having the right amount of firepower.

"That's not it," Derflinger denied. "Or rather, that's not *all*. Partner, what you did out there is something ordinary humans couldn't have done, and that sword you wielded — let me tell you, partner, I've seen many swords, and no mage

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could make a sword like that. You were too fast, too strong, too good, and it didn't have anything to do with those runes on your hand."

Shirou felt his eyebrow rise and shifted around a little so that he was lying on his side. He lifted his left hand; on his skin, cast pale in the moonlight, the runes looked like fire.

"You know about these runes?"

"Some," Derf hedged, "but it's been a while, so I don't remember too much — but that's still not the point. Partner, all of that was amazing and everything, but when that Heroic Spirit showed up, you didn't so much as flinch, and you even knew what it *was*. These mages here, they've gotten too comfy. They don't know stuff about Heroic Spirits and Noble Phantasms. But you *do*."

There was a long moment of silence. Shirou stared up at the sword, haloed in the moonlight and still rusty, and despite the fact that it had often cracked jokes and had an irreverent, saucy personality, thought then that it was also worthy of the sort of age and wisdom it must have.

Six thousand years — what an existence that was. Shirou had fought heroes that were younger than that, had fought the *first* hero who was *still* younger than that. He had seen weapons that had been forged, used, rusted, and broken in a *fraction* of that time — had *wielded* such a weapon himself, once upon a time.

"Ask your question, Derflinger," he said gravely.

"Partner," Derflinger started just as gravely, "are you a Heroic Spirit, too?"

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Shirou smirked and chuckled. It was a flattering question, but, "I'm afraid not. I'm simply a mage with an impossibly strong body."

"Oho?" Derflinger asked. "Saying that despite the fact that you're carrying around a Noble Phantasm?"

For a moment, Shirou was going to say that he carried around a lot more than just *one* Noble Phantasm, but changed his mind before he even said the first word.

"A Noble Phantasm is, by definition, an object of legend wielded by a Heroic Spirit that encompasses a feat or deed that hero accomplished in life," Shirou told Derf instead. "That sword I used tonight is indeed a sword of such quality that no mortal, human or otherwise, could have crafted it, but it is not a Noble Phantasm."

"...Carrying around something like that, a sword could feel inadequate," Derf mumbled.

"If it helps, it can't talk."

"That's a shame. It would've been nice to have another sword to talk to. You know, to have an intelligent conversation."

Shirou couldn't help the small chuckle that broke free of his lips. Derf's quillons wiggled and let loose a rusty sound that *might* have been laughter.

It was remarkable, really, how easy it was to get along with Derflinger, and it was also incredibly surreal to be having a conversation with a talking *sword*.

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But there were things that Shirou wanted to know — needed to know. There were problems that needed solutions, questions that needed answers, and this talking sword might just be the only one who could solve those problems and answer those questions.

"You know, though, Derf," Shirou said slyly, "that does bring up a question of my own."

"Lay it on me, partner."

"Just how is it that you know about Heroic Spirits, anyway?"

Derflinger gave what must have been his equivalent of a snort. "You don't get to be a sword my age without seeing one or two of them, partner, let me tell you. Things might be relatively calm *now*, but there have been a few crises through the ages where mankind need a little, ah, *extra* help."

An answer without an answer.

"I suppose so," Shirou allowed. "You *are* six thousand years old, after all."

"Damn straight."

"Now that I think of it, though, wasn't that Brimir's time six thousand years ago? A sword as old as you, did you ever get the chance to meet him?"

"Eh," Derf hedged. "Six thousand years is a long time, Partner. It's been a while, so my memory's a little fuzzy. Sorry."

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"I would think it hard," Shirou said carefully, "to forget something like the figurehead of the oldest religion on the continent."

"You'd be surprised," Derf said easily. "After the first thousand years, everything starts to flow together. I can't even remember what I had for breakfast yesterday."

Shirou felt his eyebrow twitch and the sense of disbelief coiling in his stomach almost made him want to laugh. "You're a sword, Derf. You don't eat breakfast."

"Exactly!"

Shirou sighed and rolled back onto his back. He'd let it go for now. He needed to get some sleep, and there was a whole host of other problems that would be waiting for him when he got up.

"If you don't want to talk about it yet, I understand," he told Derf. "For the moment, holding back such information from someone you've just met is only natural. As long as it doesn't endanger my Master, it can wait."

"Partner," Derf began seriously — all trace of joking and evasion had left his voice, "we're not quite done yet."

Shirou shifted again and settled his gaze on the wiggling quillons; it was the closest he could get to staring Derf in the eyes.

"I'm not sure I believe you," Derf told him solemnly. "You say you aren't a Heroic Spirit, and maybe you aren't. Maybe that means you're a different *kind* of spirit. Maybe that means you're a Vengeful Spirit and maybe that means you're

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something else entirely. Either way, that Heroic Spirit up there seemed to recognize you — called you King Arthur."

Shirou snorted again. "The comparison is flattering, but I'm not King Arthur," he explained dryly. "Though I imagine she would have taken it in good humor, Arturia would've set that woman straight if she were here."

"You knew this King Arthur fellow, then?" Derflinger probed.

"I did," Shirou confirmed shortly. "She was the one taught me how to wield a sword."

"Oho," Derf laughed mirthlessly. "So my partner has had the rare fortune of meeting at least *two* of those Heroic Spirits, both women at that. I guess this King Arthur person was a woman in disguise, am I right? Now *this* sounds like a story I wanna hear."

"Unfortunately, it's not one I want to tell."

Shirou rolled over onto his other side, facing the wall and away from Derflinger. The sword jiggled in his sheath.

"Don't be like that!"

Shirou didn't move.

"Good night, Derf."

"Partner! Hey, partner! Come on! Don't leave me hanging like this!"

— o.O.O.O.O —

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It was immediately after breakfast the next morning when Shirou and Louise were escorted up to the headmaster's office at the top of the centermost tower, where they found the majority of the teaching staff fidgeting, pacing, and otherwise acting nervously. The only one who seemed completely unbothered was the old man sitting behind the desk near the back end of the room, his beard and mustache trailing solemnly down his face and front as he watched everyone else.

The cause of all the commotion, of course, was the theft of the magic Staff of Destruction (Ruyi Jingu Bang, as Shirou knew it to be), and the way and person who had conducted the felony.

Fouquet. As the blacksmith had explained the day before, Fouquet was a thief notorious for striking rich nobles and stealing their most valuable treasures — silently, in the middle of the night, without getting caught.

Or so it seemed, at least. If she had but timed her attack a bit better, Fouquet would have escaped everyone's notice, even Shirou's. She could've been in and gone before anyone was ever the wiser.

So why hadn't she?

If she could have timed her attack perfectly, then perhaps she *had*. Perhaps, in attacking when she had, she had intended to accomplish a secondary goal simultaneously.

For example, eliminating a fighter who could destroy four bronze golems in one swing, someone who could,

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conceivably, be a threat to her or whoever was pulling her strings.

Or perhaps, whoever was pulling her strings had used her to try to measure exactly how powerful Shirou actually was.

In his head, Shirou created a graph. The top was shrouded in mystery, but connected to it were two figures: Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt and the Heroic Spirit who had rescued her.

"This was Fouquet!" one of the teachers said angrily. "That thief came in here and made off with the Staff of Destruction! You saw it, didn't you? He left a note on the wall to make sure we knew!"

"But Fouquet robs nobles!" another protested. "Why would he rob the Academy?"

"Does it matter why, you dolt?" the first asked scathingly. "We were robbed! The why doesn't matter!"

"Where were the guards?"

"What would guards have done? Commoners can't beat a mage like Fouquet! That's like trying to douse a forest fire with a single bucket of water!"

"Well, then which of us was supposed to be on guard duty last night?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Shirou noticed Mrs. Chevreuse twitch and fidget.

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"Mrs. Chevreuse!" one of the others called immediately. Mrs. Chevreuse jumped a full foot in the air, startled. "It was you who was supposed to guard the vault last night!"

"I'm sorry!" Mrs. Chevreuse cried, sobbing pitifully. "I'm so very sorry...!"

"Sorry doesn't change the fact that the Staff of Destruction has been stolen! How do you intend to make up for this mistake? Can you *pay* for it!?"

"Oh no," sobbed Mrs. Chevreuse, collapsing to her knees. "I...I just paid off my house!"

The old man behind the desk stood, and immediately, everyone stopped talking.

"I think it best if we all keep our heads about us," the old man said calmly.

"But Old Osmond!" the teacher who'd been blaming Chevreuse protested. "Mrs. Chevreuse failed in her duty, and as a result of her neglect, while she was sleeping soundly in her bed, a valuable artifact was stolen from the Academy!"

Old Osmond pierced the man with a cool stare. "Blaming each other won't get anything done, Mr. Gimli. The more time you waste pointing fingers at one another for this tragedy, the more time Fouquet has to disappear with the staff. Besides, can we all honestly say we have always guarded the vault with the diligence you now blame Mrs. Chevreuse for lacking?"

His piercing gaze swept over all of the assembled teachers, all of whom, except for Mr. Colbert, who was watching

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everything with an unreadable expression on his face, dropped their heads in silent shame.

"That is our situation," Old Osmond continued. "Getting angry and placing blame won't solve anything. We are all of us responsible, even me, because we never considered the possibility that a thief might make his way into our Academy. We allowed ourselves to grow complacent and believe that we were untouchable because there are so many mages employed here. That sort of thinking is the reason why we're in this sort of mess."

Silence greeted him, and Shirou allowed himself to feel respect for the unassuming old man in front of him now. Whatever else this Osmond fellow did, however powerful he turned out to be, he was someone worth respecting.

"Now then," Old Osmond cleared his throat. "Who was it that witnessed the attack?"

Mr. Colbert, who had remained motionless like a statue up until now, suddenly came to life and sprang forward.

"It was Miss Vallière and her familiar," he said, gesturing to Louise and Shirou.

"Oh," Osmond sounded somewhere between amused and interested, like someone who'd just been given a key piece of a puzzle he was putting together. "Interesting. Tell me, then, about the event. Leave nothing out."

Shirou's foot was barely an inch off the floor before Louise took one quick step forward and rattled off a report. She'd beaten him to it.

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"My Servant and I were returning to my room following a day of shopping in town," she said clearly. "An Earth golem appeared and nearly crushed us before breaking a hole in the wall with its fist. A hooded figure riding on the golem's shoulder entered through the hole, came back out with a staff, and left that message on the wall. Also, she seemed to have trouble lifting the staff, so she had to drag it behind her."

She sounded like a soldier, Shirou thought. Where had she learned to give reports like that?

"The Staff of Destruction weighs approximately nine tons, Tristainian Imperial," Osmond broke in, stroking his beard and eyeing Louise shrewdly. "Even with a spell to make it lighter and easier to carry, it would still be far too heavy for any mage below Triangle to move. Carry on, Miss Vallière."

Eight point nine one, to be exact, Shirou amended mentally. *Shirou* might be able to pick it up, but he doubted that he could put it to any good use, considering its weight. It'd be easier just to Trace a copy and rely on the Monkey King's copied stamina and strength than to try wielding the original himself.

"My Servant and I confronted the thief," Louise started again dutifully. "After a short altercation, we managed to knock Fouquet off her golem. My Servant was about to apprehend her when an unknown accomplice atop a flying ship came to Fouquet's rescue and helped her escape with the staff."

"Fouquet's a woman?"

"Flying ship?"

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"Albion," someone muttered.

"Just a moment, Miss Vallière," Mr. Colbert interrupted. "I'm afraid I don't understand something. You say that you had a servant with you, but was it not this man, your familiar, who was with you last night?"

Louise blinked owlishly and then grimaced, floundering for a moment as she tried to decide on what to say. The uncertainty was written across her face when she finally turned to Shirou with a pleading look.

Right. Shirou to the rescue.

"If I may," Shirou said politely, "a Servant is a term for a type of human familiar. While I technically don't qualify, Louise uses the term as a sign of respect. Please treat it as though she were saying nothing out of the ordinary."

A lie, probably one of the best he'd ever told. He stopped the wry grin that wanted to form on his lips; he really *had* spent too much time with Rin when he was younger.

Nonetheless, everyone bought it and Colbert's eyes lit up with understanding and something else, something Shirou couldn't quite identify.

"Miss Vallière," Old Osmond spoke up, "you say it was a flying ship? Like a galleon or a ship of the line?"

"U-um, yes, that," Louise answered with a nod. "Like a regular ship, only flying in the air. It had cannons and sails and everything."

"I see." Old Osmond stroked his beard again. "And did you happen to see what sort of colors she was flying?"

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Louise blanched. "Colors?"

"Was it an Albionese flag? Or Germanian? Or Gallian?"
Mr. Colbert clarified. "Anything that could identify which country it belonged to?"

"U-um, I-I don't think," Louise stuttered. She shook her head. "I mean, I didn't really get a g-good look..."

"It's an airship," someone muttered. "Albion's the only ones who'd dare do that sort of thing right now."

"Blasted Reconquista," someone else cursed lowly. "To rebel against Albion's Crown is one thing, but to attack *us*, now, too?"

Old Osmond shook his head. "No matter who it was the ship belonged to, there's no way they could possibly make it out of the country without being seen. We'll just have to ask in the nearby cities if anyone saw anything. With any luck, we'll be able to send someone out after them before they can make it back to whichever country they report to."

"Will that really work?"

"Sounds kinda flimsy..."

"Even if they went as fast as they possibly could, they would still need to stop somewhere to rest before the night was through," Mr. Colbert agreed with Old Osmond. "If not after, then they would have had to stop in a town before the attack in order to eat and feed the crew. An operation this delicate would require everyone be ready and awake. Even if no one saw anything last night, there has to be evidence

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somewhere — they had to stop to get supplies and food so the crew could be fed and well equipped —"

"There was no crew," Shirou said it before he could stop himself.

Everyone stopped.

"Mister Familiar?" Old Osmond asked curiously. "What exactly do you mean by that?"

Everyone looked at him expectantly.

Shirou grimaced, then sighed and stepped forward, conscious of all the eyes on him.

"That ship isn't like any other ship you'll have ever seen," he explained solemnly. "Because of that, the captain doesn't need a crew to sail — the ship will respond to whatever she commands of it because it's a part of who she is. It's as much a part of her as your wand is a part of you. Tell me, do you need a crew to cast your spells?"

For a long moment, no one answered.

"You sound as if you are familiar with this captain and her ship, Mister Familiar," Mr. Colbert said shrewdly. "Perhaps you could find her if you tried."

"Not on my best day," Shirou admitted shamelessly.

Old Osmond sighed. "In that case, I suppose we'll simply have to send someone out to see if they can find Fouquet and her mystery helper. With any luck —"

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"If you do," Shirou warned, "and by some miracle, they manage to find Fouquet and that captain, then you should be prepared to write a letter of condolences."

Again, Shirou was suddenly the center of attention as everyone in the room turned to him, alarmed.

"The enemy you'd be facing," Shirou continued, "has a range advantage, can fly on her ship, and can bombard you with virtually limitless cannon fire. If you actually managed to get in close enough to render her ship ineffective, she can probably shrug off anything short of a Triangle level spell, and even if she doesn't use her pistols to pick you off at medium range, if she lands a single punch on you, you're as good as dead."

Various looks of surprise and disbelief greeted his statement.

"Surely you jest —" someone started.

"In the time it takes you to hear what I'm saying," Shirou cut him off, "she can cross a forty yard distance and punch you hard enough to knock your head clean off your shoulders."

All of the teachers turned suddenly either sickly green or pale white, and a tense, uncomfortable silence settled over the room as the gravity of what he said registered. Good. If they didn't take this seriously, then someone would die needlessly.

Pursuing a Heroic Spirit was foolishness for an ordinary human. He would save them from such stupidity.

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"You mean," Mr. Colbert spoke up at last, eyeing Shirou narrowly, "like your duel with Mister Gramont, Mister Familiar?"

Shirou looked over at Mr. Colbert, and found that he wasn't surprised that Colbert knew of his fight with Guiche, or perhaps had even witnessed it in some manner. Scrying wasn't exactly an unknown art, even amongst modern mages, though as far as he knew, it also counted as witchcraft.

Like Levitation, which was considered a basic spell in this world. Right.

"Worse," Shirou corrected grimly. "I never intended to do Guiche serious or permanent injury, so I had to hold back to stop from maiming or killing him. She will have no such qualms — every attack will be aimed to kill, and no magic short of Square rank will be able to kill her. Even then, even if you hit her, a single spell might not be enough."

The last part was mostly a guess, but until he knew what had summoned him and what sort of magic had been employed, it was safer to assume that the enemy was a full-blown Heroic Spirit rather than just a pale shade stuffed into a Servant container, especially in light of his own situation. In that case, what was walking around with that ship was basically a god wearing human skin — if not high Magic Resistance, then she'd have rather high endurance. Even if Square ranked magic was the equivalent of a Ten Count in power — and it was hard to estimate, so he could be wrong — it was entirely possible that a Heroic Spirit could survive magic like that.

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After all, there were one or two Dead Apostle Ancestors who were strong enough to withstand an attack from Excalibur.

And Excalibur could destroy a *mountain*.

"Mister Familiar," Mr. Colbert began; he and Osmond seemed to be the only ones unaffected by everything Shirou had so far said, "could *you* defeat her?"

For a long moment, Shirou didn't say anything. He wondered at the wisdom of revealing the truth, at the wisdom of trying to convince these mages, stuck in their ways, of something that went against everything they believed they knew. His Master was one thing — as he would be working with her for the foreseeable future, it was in his best interests to make sure she knew what he could do and what he knew of magic — but these other mages would be harder to convince by simple virtue of being older and more set in their ways.

He hesitated and looked at Louise, who caught his eyes and gave a slow, short nod.

Shirou turned back to Colbert.

"If I could get in close and if I'm physically stronger than her, then maybe," he explained. In a fist fight or sword fight, he was fairly confident he could defeat the unknown Heroic Spirit, but there was no way to be sure until he tried it, and there was no way to be sure that he was stronger than her until he fought her. "Collateral damage would be minimized and bystander casualties would be low."

He let that sink in for a moment.

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"But her...*ship* gives her a range advantage," he went on. He had almost called it a Noble Phantasm. "It allows her to control how close I could get at any given time. It means that I would have to exert more effort to defeat her. To summarize it, wherever she and I fought would be wiped off the maps."

The Shining Sword of Salvation, a weapon on the same level as Excalibur — if it came down to a fight of Noble Phantasms, and as long as they were both sufficiently prepared, it would indeed come down to that, then he might have to utilize his sword. No, there was no better option — if she could keep him moving enough that he couldn't Trace another Noble Phantasm and fire it at her as an arrow, then he would definitely have to use his sword.

If that happened, then it wasn't an exaggeration. Wherever they happened to be fighting, it would be wiped off the map.

"Preposterous!" someone sputtered.

"Impossible!"

Low mutters of similar disagreements rumbled throughout the room.

Mrs. Chevreuse tittered nervously. "Please don't make jokes like that, Mister Familiar."

"It's not a joke," Shirou told her. Everything stopped again. "A fight of that magnitude would definitely result in the destruction of the surrounding area. Any standing structure would either be obliterated or damaged beyond

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repair. If it was in a city, the number of civilian casualties would be almost total."

Another long stretch of silence followed. Most of the teachers were staring at him, watching him with something strange in their expressions, as though they didn't quite know what to make of him.

"We've gotten quite off topic," Old Osmond said finally. "Mister Familiar, disregarding all you have so far said about this mysterious woman who helped Fouquet escape, could you capture Fouquet herself if you went after her?"

Shirou looked Osmond in the eyes. "No. By now, Fouquet is long gone. Retrieving the Staff of Destruction is nothing more than a fantasy."

Old Osmond closed his eyes briefly. "I see." He cast a look out at everyone else assembled in the office. "Then you are all dismissed, for now. We will concentrate on repairing the damaged wall and fixing everything that was broken in Fouquet's attack. Classes will be canceled until further notice."

He gave them all a strong look. "The Staff of Destruction is beyond our reach, now, so the best thing we can do is try to prevent another such theft and go on with our lives."

For a moment, nothing happened, and then, one by one, the teachers began to file out of the room, muttering amongst themselves and shooting Shirou glances as they passed. For now, they seemed to have believed him, to have understood the gravity of the situation, but he had no doubt that they would return to their rooms, and before the day was out, they

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would convince themselves that it was impossible, that it was all lies and exaggerations.

Louise made to leave, too, and Shirou fell into step behind her, but they were stopped.

"Miss Vallière, Mister Familiar, please remain behind," Osmond said.

Shirou and Louise shared a glance, then frowned and moved back to their original spots as everyone else left. Then, it was just the four of them — Osmond, Colbert, Louise, and Shirou.

"Mister Familiar," Osmond said once the last teacher had left, "I notice you've been spending quite a bit of time in the library. Might I guess that you've been researching those runes etched upon the back of your hand?"

"Among other things," Shirou answered vaguely.

"Might I also guess that you've yet to discover anything of value in the process?"

"You'd be right."

"The main section of the library is open to the students," Mister Colbert joined in. "Any book containing what you might call 'sensitive' material is removed and placed in the Fenrir Library that only we teachers have access to."

"There are some books that would be quite hazardous in the hands of an ill-prepared student," Osmond agreed.

It was as he'd estimated before, then. Of course. You didn't leave out a bunch of books that students could misuse.

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"The reason why you have found nothing in the main section of the library is because the information you're looking for is... shall we say, against church doctrine. An ordinary student doesn't understand the value of unbiased academic information, so if they read something like that, they might be inclined to report it to the church."

"In other words," Shirou translated, "it's useful information that doesn't have that blatant religious slant, but whatever this is doesn't fit neatly and tidily in what the church preaches, so if they knew about it, you could be excommunicated or tried for heresy."

"Exactly," Colbert nodded.

"Wh-what?" Louise squeaked. "Heresy? *Excommunicated?*"

Colbert walked over to Osmond's desk and picked up a book. "Immediately following the summoning ceremony, I started researching the runes on the back of your hand," he explained, flipping through the pages. "The translation was a bit difficult, but in the end, this is what I managed to come up with."

He showed Shirou the page he had turned to. "Gandalfr."

"The legendary familiar of the great Founder Brimir himself," Osmond cut in. "As long as it was a weapon, Gandalfr could wield it as naturally as if he had done so all his life. That is what you are, Mister Familiar. Through whatever means, you were brought into this world and made Gandalfr."

Shirou read through the entry in the book and felt suddenly as though everything was starting to make sense. It

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wasn't a complete answer, no, but at the very least, it gave him more to work with than the other books had.

"You said that Gandalf was Brimir's familiar," he began. "And according to the runes on my hand, *I* am Gandalf. Brimir is famous and revered as a mage who used Void magic. Does that mean that Louise...?"

Osmond and Colbert shared a look.

"It's a possibility," Osmond admitted gravely, "but as Brimir himself is the only known one, there is no way for us to know. Additionally, the Church would not take kindly to the idea that there might be someone like that out there, so it would be best to keep it to yourself, for Miss Vallière's sake."

"Shirou?" Louise asked confusedly.

Shirou allowed himself a small smirk. "It's as I told you, Master. You can't know for sure unless you've tried."

— o.O.O.O.o —

"This is the third day in a row. Even the Ball of Frigg was canceled!"

They were sitting in Louise's room doing essentially nothing. For the time being, all students had been confined to the castle while the teachers returned the damaged wall back to its original condition.

"Fouquet's golem did quite a bit of damage," Shirou reminded Louise. "It's not something you can fix very easily. The teachers can't very well teach if they're busy trying to repair that giant hole in the wall, can they?"

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"Well, no, but..."

If he were honest, it was partly his fault, too. The golem had done some damage by punching the wall, but when it had careened sideways after he had dismembered it, gravity and the golem's mass had taken that relatively small hole and made it much, much bigger.

One way or another, Servants managed to do serious collateral damage.

"And if the students were able to go outside as they pleased," he continued, "wouldn't that distract the teachers who are trying to get everything back together?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Then there's nothing you can do."

Louise shot Shirou her best venomous look. "I hate it when you have to be all logical and right like that," she grumbled.

Shirou tried his best not to smile. Louise really was too cute.

"Anyway, Master," he changed the subject, "have you given any thought to what we discussed the other day?"

She scowled at him. "I have."

"And?"

"And I still don't believe it!" she declared stubbornly. "Void is a sacred element! Only the Founder Brimir could use Void magic! To say that I could be a Void mage is blasphemous!"

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She had said much the same each time he tried to discuss it with her. Each time, she stubbornly refused to accept even the possibility that she had the ability to use Void magic.

"You must admit that it makes sense, Master," Shirou argued. He held up his left hand. "These runes mark me as Gandalf, and Gandalf is recorded as the familiar of the Void mage known as Brimir. It should only make sense that you, as my Master, are also a Void mage."

"That — that doesn't mean anything!" she insisted. "It's a coincidence, Shirou! Just a coincidence! I...c-can't be a Void mage!"

Louise looked away uncomfortably. "...can I?"

It came out in a whisper, uncertain, childish, and desperate. She didn't want to believe, didn't want to dare to hope that she could have that sort of power and the prestige that would come along with it, so she did the only thing that made sense: she rejected the possibility.

But Shirou couldn't allow it. Allowing it would be stagnation; she wouldn't be able to move forward as long as she tried to protect herself from pain and failure. Like that, she wouldn't be able to grow.

Shirou opened his mouth, but Derfänger beat him to it. "You should listen to Partner, girly."

"Derf?"

"I was around back then, so I know what I'm talking about," Derf explained. "Ya got all those other familiars, right? Frogs and stuff are Water familiars. Dragons? If it's a

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Wind dragon, it's a Wind familiar. Salamanders and Fire dragons are Fire familiars. Moles and badgers and the like, those are Earth familiars. But Gandalf's a familiar of the Void."

"Void?" Louise squeaked. She glanced frantically at Shirou's left hand.

"Then," Shirou began, "Brimir?"

Derf snorted. "It's been a while since one showed up, but you ain't the first Gandalf, Partner — you ain't even the second. Brimir might've been the *first* Void mage, but he's definitely not the *only* one to ever live."

"Th-then," Louise started, her voice filled with fragile hope, "I'm n-not...the only one like this?"

"Oh, they're a rare thing, Void mages," Derf said. "But there've been several over the years. Funny thing, though, they always seem to show up when stuff's about to blow up."

There was a pause as that sunk in, and Shirou translated it to mean that Void mages were often born in times of great upheaval. Louise seemed torn between denial, vindicated satisfaction, and pride.

"Or maybe stuff blows up *because* there are Void mages," Derf added. "Huh. You know, I never thought of it that way."

And, suddenly, the tentative pride in Louise's shoulders sank into misery.

"I'm never going to get any better," she despaired. "All of my spells will just blow up on me. That's the only thing I'll

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ever be good for. Need something destroyed? Just call Louise the Zero. All she has to do is try to cast magic and it'll get blown up either way!"

"Louise..."

Derf let out a rusty chuckle. "You didn't think it would be that easy, didja, girly? Void magic is powerful stuff. Ya can't just wave your wand around and hope it works. If you don't know what you're doing, then all your spells are just gonna go boom!"

Louise sank lower in her chair, shoulders drooping and head hung. He couldn't leave her like that, stewing in her own misery.

He turned to Derf.

"A sword as old as you, who knows so much about Void magic, must know how to learn to control it, right?" Shirou tried.

Derf's quillons wiggled and he let out another rusty laugh. "I'm just a sword, Partner! What do I know about casting Void magic?"

Shirou frowned. "Of course."

Derf's laughter died down. "In all seriousness, Partner," Derf said solemnly, "I can't help. I could tell you all sorts of stories about what Void magic can do and stuff, but teaching the little missy here how to cast it? That's just out of my league. At this point, the only things she can really do are practice until she gets it right or find one of Brimir's old books."

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"Right." Shirou sighed. "Because none of those past Void mages thought it would be a good idea to write a book about Void magic. Of course not, that would make it too easy."

Derf snorted. "Of course they wrote books. But the Church, see, they ain't too fond of that sort of thing. You start talking about Void magic, they start getting antsy and screaming things like 'heresy' and 'blasphemy.' Any books about Void magic that don't belong to one of the royal families are either in Romalia's vault, or they were burned."

It was Shirou's turn to snort.

"The parallels are almost frightening," he said dryly. "This Church, my world's Church...the similarities are ridiculous."

Book burning and the like had been a common practice by religious and governmental establishments who had been afraid of allowing dissenting opinions amongst the people or who had viewed the material as a threat to their beliefs or authority. People like Hitler had done it, the Church had done it, and so had many, many other groups with political power. In the case of the Church, what they hadn't burned, they'd locked away in vaults and safes to keep it from the public without losing the knowledge.

In that case, it only made sense. This world's Church, which held the Founder, Brimir, as a holy figure who used his great and powerful Void magic to perform miracles, would undoubtedly do whatever it took to keep the existence of other Void mages from becoming public knowledge.

No, they wouldn't have any other choice, at least if they wanted to maintain legitimacy. If someone showed up using

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Void magic, it would be child's play for that person to set him or herself up as the second coming of the Founder, or his heir, or his descendent, or something else like that. A Void mage like that could take over the Church, could make him or herself into an emperor or god-king and inspire people to follow simply because he or she had Void magic.

Naturally, the Church couldn't let something like that happen. Ignoring the ramifications to their power base, a Void mage setting themselves up as some sort of living saint would destabilize the balance of power and send all people of the Brimiric nations into chaos.

That would be bad.

"Well —"

At that moment, the door burst open, and Siesta, heaving for breath with an excited smile on her face, stood in the doorway.

"Did you hear?" she asked breathlessly. "Miss Vallière, Her Highness, Princess Henrietta, will be stopping by the Academy on her way back from Germania!"

Louise gave a start. "The Princess?"

Siesta nodded.

"Everyone's preparing for her!" she said excitedly. "They're decorating the Alviss Dining Hall, setting up at the school gates, and — oh!"

She fidgeted a little. "Miss Vallière," Siesta began, "Mister Colbert asked me to help you prepare. You're supposed to wear your formal wear."

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"Prepare?" Louise parroted. "When's the Princess supposed to stop by?"

"Oh!" Siesta exclaimed. "Um, today, Miss Vallière. Within the hour."

There was a long moment of silence. Then...

"WHAT?!"

— o.O.O.O.o —

Rows of students raised their staves and wands in unison as the Princess' carriage came through the front gate and passed them by. It drove on to the door of the centermost tower, where it stopped and turned so that its side faced the wood and stonework.

From the rest of the procession, a group of servants raced out of the other carriages and swiftly laid down a red carpet that reached from the Princess' carriage to the doors of the tower, and just as swiftly left. The guardsmen all tensed and bellowed out:

"Presenting Her Royal Highness of the Kingdom of Tristain, Princess Henrietta!"

The first out of the carriage, however, was an old man in his fifties with snow white hair and wearing court robes that looked almost priestly. He stepped down from the carriage and to the side, holding one hand out to help another figure, a rather shapely young woman, down onto the carpet.

Around the courtyard, the students broke out into ecstatic applause. The young woman, perhaps a year or two older than Louise, lifted her head, crowned with a beautiful

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silver and diamond tiara, and favored the crowd with a polite, radiant smile, and long, elegant wave.

She was certainly beautiful, Shirou could readily acknowledge that. She had a similar sort of beauty to Saber, but it was, at the same time, altogether different.

Saber's beauty had been unearthly, regal, magnificent, but cold and hard, a distant, gallant figure that one could not help but admire. She was an ideal, something that could not be touched or tainted by human hands, a figure so radiant and splendidous that she seemed almost unreal — a surreal beauty befitting someone of her nature.

The Princess, while just as beautiful and just as regal, was a warm, welcoming figure. She was distant as well, but the distant sort of beauty that enraptured you precisely because you couldn't feel worthy of it. She was a wondrous figure that seemed inhumanly warm and loving, as though she carried in her a love for everyone and everything she saw, no matter how lowly.

"So," Shirou mused, "that's Princess Henrietta."

"Yes," Louise agreed, "that's Princess Henrietta, heir to the throne of Tristain."

"Oh, how wonderful!" Guiche's voice cried from somewhere nearby. "How radiant! How lovely! Oh, the Princess is surely the most beautiful rose in all of Halkeginia!"

He let out a sudden howl, which Shirou took, with a smirk, to be Montmorency stomping on his foot.

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"*That's* Tristain's beloved Princess?" Kirche asked with a low chuckle. Shirou suspected that she had chosen her spot specifically to be close to him. "Ha! I'm *way* more beautiful than her!"

She turned to Shirou and offered him her best sultry smile — Shirou's heart didn't even skip a beat.

To reiterate, there was no way he could be attracted to a girl young enough to be his granddaughter.

"What do you think, Darling?" Kirche asked. Her words oozed with honey and sex appeal, and she folded her arms under her chest to accentuate her bust — it should have been a tantalizing sight, but the problem remained that Shirou could not ignore the enormous age gap. "Who do you think is more attractive?"

"The Princess," he answered immediately, without hesitation.

"*What?!*" But even though Kirche's face fell disappointedly and her arms sagged back down to her sides, it was Louise who hissed the question at him. "*Shirou!* You better not even *think* —"

"No need to worry so, Master," Shirou assured her calmly. "Though she is indeed beautiful, the Princess is not my type. You have no reason to concern yourself."

Of course not. Shirou didn't have a type — not unless you counted a single woman as his "type." Though his body had often betrayed him around beautiful women when he was younger (hormones were such a *pain*), no other woman he

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had ever met had resonated with his core, with his soul, with his very *being*, the way Saber had.

Could you call it "having a type" if only one woman fit the criteria?

He expected some kind of rebuke from Louise — Louise was the type, after all, who wouldn't have been satisfied with any answer Shirou had given her regarding the Princess — but she had turned back to the procession and seemed to have quite forgotten all about him. Instead, she was staring at someone, at something among the Princess' entourage.

He followed her gaze to a rather handsome nobleman wearing a wide-brimmed gray hat who rode atop a winged beast with an eagle's head and a lion's body — a griffin. Louise watched him go, enthralled and oblivious to the world around her, a faint blush coloring her cheeks pink.

Ah. Shirou smiled. So his little Master had herself a crush, did she?

How cute.

— o.o.O.O.o —

Louise spent the rest of the day in a sort of daze, and though Shirou had initially been unbothered with it, as he sat cross-legged on his mattress in the corner, he felt the first stirrings of worry.

She seemed to be in a sort of trance; every now and again, she would get up from her bed, pace across the floor for a few minutes, then sit back down and stare off into the

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distance, clutching her pillow to her chest. He wasn't sure she had even blinked since they had returned to her room.

Definitely worrying.

"Is something the matter, Master?" he asked. "You seem...troubled."

Louise didn't answer. She just continued to stare out into space with a vaguely glazed look in her eyes.

Shirou had heard the expression "getting lost in thought," but he'd never thought it was *literal*.

Rin would've made a joke, here. He was sure of it.

Shirou stood up and took three long strides over to her bed, then spread his fingers and waved his hand in front of Louise's face. Still, no reaction, not even a blink.

"Wow," he imagined Rin saying, "I've heard of getting lost in thought, but I never expected to see someone *literally* get lost in thought. You meet the weirdest people, Shirou."

"Doesn't that mean that you're weird, too?" he would've replied.

"Oh, I'm immune to all of that," was what she would say. She'd brush it off so easily with a careless wave of her hand. "I grew up with Kirei, remember? You get used to weirdness after that. Stick around that sort of person long enough, and it gets to the point where you don't even realize it anymore."

He chuckled. "But that's the *definition* of weird."

She flushed, but otherwise, didn't let it get to her.

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"Well, if *I'm* weird," was her rebuttal, "then what does that make *you*?"

Shirou grinned. "I don't count," he said. "You can't call people with Reality Marbles *weird*, Rin. There's no point. It's not an insult or an adjective, it's a statement of fact."

Rin huffed and crossed her arms. "I hate it when you do that, Shirou."

"What? When I'm right?"

"Yes, the rare few times that it's happened."

They shared a laugh, and for a long moment there was just that companionable silence. Then, Rin stopped smiling and gave him a hard, serious look.

"Shirou," she started, "you need to —"

A knock on the door interrupted her — two long knocks, then three short ones — and Rin vanished as Shirou blinked. Next to him, Louise suddenly came to life, too, and snapped out of her trance.

"Someone at the door...?" she muttered.

She stood up and dropped her pillow back into its place on her bed, then walked over to the door and opened it with a twist of the knob. Standing in the doorway was a girl, cloaked in a hooded black robe that disguised her features.

Louise recoiled and gaped. "You are...!"

The figure seized Louise by the shoulders — Shirou tensed and prepared to act — and pressed a finger to its lips beneath the hood.

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"Shh!"

The figure looked around cautiously, then hurried into the room and closed the door. From within the folds of the cloak, she — and Shirou could see quite clearly now that it was indeed a woman — produced a small staff and whispered a spell that Shirou didn't recognize.

The walls gleamed for an instant, glimmering as though they had been sprinkled with glitter, then faded back to their normal color.

"A silencing spell?" Louise asked incredulously.

"There might be someone watching," the woman said. "It doesn't hurt to be careful."

She slowly lowered the hood and revealed an elegant, beautiful face framed by short, shoulder-length dark hair and accented by her big blue eyes.

"It has been a while, hasn't it, Louise Francoise?" Princess Henrietta favored Louise with a smile.

Shirou blinked and suddenly found that he didn't know what to do as Louise fell frantically to her knees in a bow.

"Oh Louise!" Princess Henrietta grasped one of Louise's hands and tried to pull her to her feet. "Come now, Louise! There's no need for that!"

"Please, Your Highness," Louise began; she allowed herself to be pulled to her feet, but kept her eyes down and her head bowed. It was a bit strange to watch, such deference from such a spitfire. "This isn't proper, coming to visit such a humble place..."

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"Louise Francoise!" Henrietta cupped Louise's chin and lifted her head. "Come now, Louise Francoise! There's no need for such formality. We *are* friends, are we not?"

"I am not worthy, Your Highness," Louise said in a strained and shaky voice. It was as nervous and uncomfortable as Shirou had ever heard her.

Henrietta scowled. "Stop that! Neither the Cardinal, nor my mother, nor any of those greedy court aristocrats with their fake kindness is here! We are *friends*, Louise Francoise! Can I not talk candidly with my old childhood friend?"

Louise bit her lip. Indecision was written all across her face. "Your Highness..."

"When we were children," Henrietta started, "did we not chase butterflies together in the palace courtyard? We used to get so muddy!"

Louise gave a small, tentative smile. "And Sir La Porte, the chamberlain, scolded us for getting our clothes dirty."

"Yes!" Henrietta exclaimed joyously. She smiled a broad, radiant smile. "Yes, that's right, Louise! We were arguing over those puffy cream cakes, and oh, did we scuffle! Oh, but it was always me who lost those fights, wasn't it? You would take hold of my hair and I would just start crying."

"Not true, Your Highness," Louise's smile became more confident, and Shirou found himself fighting his own grin. "There was at least one occasion..."

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"Yes, I remember!" Henrietta laughed a little. "Looking at the two of us then, you might have called that the Siege of Amiens!"

"That was the fight over the dress in Your Highness's room, wasn't it?"

"Yes! We had a fight over who would play the part of the princess in our make believe court! And it was only when I hit you in the stomach that I finally won."

"I fainted right away," Louise agreed, and like that, they both burst out into laughter.

"Oho," Derf muttered, so quietly that Shirou was sure he was the only one that heard, "looks like girly here's friends with the Princess. Ain't that interesting?"

Shirou silently agreed and felt relieved. It seemed that Louise did indeed have someone else besides him. She was not entirely alone and friendless.

A burden that Shirou had not really noticed the past few weeks lightened and disappeared from his shoulders.

"Much better, Louise," Henrietta declared as the laughter died down. "Ah, but those were the times, weren't they?"

"Your Highness," Shirou interrupted, "exactly how is it that you know each other?"

"Oh." Henrietta looked at him as though she had not noticed him until that moment.

"I had the honor of being Her Highness's royal playmate back when we were younger," Louise explained. She turned

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back to Henrietta. "And I am deeply moved that you would remember me, Your Highness. I had thought you would forget such things..."

Henrietta gave a deep sigh and sat down on the bed. Shirou stepped away and seated himself in one of the chairs around the table, crossing his legs and arms as he leaned back against the back of the chair.

"How could I forget?" she asked quietly. "Those were such fun days, Louise Francoise. We had no worries and no responsibilities. We were completely and utterly free. And now..."

Henrietta smiled sadly. "How I envy you, Louise Francoise, here at this Academy. Such freedom you have."

"Please don't say such things, Your Highness," Louise replied uncomfortably. "You're a royal princess, aren't you? You're the envy of every girl in Tristain."

"And yet, a princess is like a caged bird," Henrietta said. "You can only go where your master pleases, can only do as your master says..."

A long, uncomfortable silence stretched on between them. Shirou thought about saying something, but felt that this was not his conversation, so it wouldn't be right to interrupt. Louise simply seemed to not know what to say.

"I..." Henrietta started at length. "I'm getting married," she revealed.

Another short silence followed.

Finally, Louise said: "Congratulations, Your Highness."

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It contained none of the joy or well-wishes that would normally accompany such a statement, perhaps because Louise, as Shirou had, had picked up on the note of melancholy in Henrietta's voice.

Shirou imagined that Louise wasn't surprised — he wasn't either, to be honest. Royalty did not often marry for love, they married for connections. Saber had not been any different — even though she was a woman, she had been masquerading as a man, and so she had needed to marry a woman, Guinevere, to solidify an alliance that would benefit her kingdom.

Henrietta's case was probably similar. He couldn't say with certainty — he was not familiar with the political climate of this place, so any of his guesses would probably be wrong — but it was the nature of being royalty to have to put aside personal considerations for the betterment of the country. Personal whims and desires, wants and needs, love and affection — all of it had to be sacrificed for the greater good of the people.

At least, the good kings and queens did that. The sad part was that the ones who decided to be selfish were often the ones remembered most as unconscionable tyrants and evil kings who destroyed others for their own gain.

Henrietta sighed a deep sigh again and turned to Shirou with something of a solemn expression.

"You are Louise's familiar, am I right?" she asked.

"I am," Shirou said with a short, shallow nod. "Shirou Emiya, Your Highness."

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"I see. And you are the one who confronted the thief, Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt, four days ago when she stole the Staff of Destruction from the Academy vaults?"

Shirou eyed her shrewdly. So, she knew about that, did she?

"I am."

"And you are also the one," Henrietta went on, her voice becoming a little harder, "who destroyed Fouquet's golem before she could escape?"

"Mostly," Shirou said. He glanced at Louise and added, "with some assistance from my Master."

Louise swelled a little with pride and a small smile crossed her lips.

"And yet, despite having beaten Fouquet, you could not apprehend him?" There was definitely something sharp in Henrietta's tone, something dangerous and filled with warning, as though the wrong answer would be a mistake.

Shirou felt a glimmer of respect grow for Henrietta, a glimmer that had nothing to do with how grateful he was for her being Louise's friend.

"Fouquet was not overly difficult to defeat," Shirou admitted plainly. "The ally that came to her rescue, however, was a significantly larger threat. If I had tried to pursue and capture them, my Master's life would have been in danger. It was not a risk I could take."

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"I see," Henrietta nodded and relaxed a little, apparently satisfied with his answer. "Very well, then, Sir Shirou. You have my thanks for protecting Louise Francoise."

She sighed again and turned away from him and back to Louise. She seemed to be sighing a lot.

"Your Highness?" Louise asked uncertainly.

"Louise Francoise Le Blanc de La Vallière," Henrietta began solemnly, "I have a favor to ask of you."

"And the plot thickens," Derf murmured in Shirou's ear.

So it does, Shirou agreed silently.

Louise blinked. "U-um, sure."

"You must not speak of this to anyone outside of this room," Henrietta warned. "This is a matter of national security, Louise."

Louise, who appeared taken aback by the sudden seriousness, said, "I promise, Your Highness."

She shot a meaningful glance over at Shirou. He knew at once what she wanted.

"I, as well," Shirou added.

Henrietta glanced at him, but turned immediately back to Louise.

"I am to marry the emperor of Germania," she revealed.

"Germania?!" Louise gasped. "That nation of barbaric upstarts?"

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"Yes, Louise," Henrietta replied solemnly. "I'm afraid it is a necessity to solidify our alliance with them. You see, the insurrection in Albion, that group of rebel nobles calling themselves 'Reconquista,' will almost assuredly overthrow their rightful king soon. My advisors have predicted that the Royal Family will not last much more than perhaps another month, if that. At that point, Reconquista will consolidate their assets and turn their attentions to Tristain."

Which could mean only one thing, Shirou thought grimly.

She closed her eyes and paused a moment, then opened them again, and her bright blue irises had turned icy cold. "Within a month, we will be at war with Albion."

Louise gasped and Shirou grimaced, letting out a breath through his nose.

It was as he had guessed, then. Another war. Another pointless conflict for land or for wealth, where a bunch of greedy, powerful men would send soldiers to their deaths under a banner of self-righteousness when all they really wanted was more power.

And Tristain, so much smaller than the other Brimir nations (at least, as of the most recently drawn map in the library), was to be the target.

"War, eh?" Derf mused. "And where does that put you, Partner?"

If he was honest, Shirou didn't know.

"But that's...!"

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"That is why we need the treaty with Germania," Henrietta explained. "Alone, we would be outmatched, so we need Germania's help to fend off Albion. For that reason, it was decided by the Cardinal and my mother, the Queen, that I must wed the emperor of Germania in order to seal our alliance."

Louise looked as though she had just been told one of her pets had died. "That's so..."

"Louise," Shirou said, drawing their attention to him, "respect Her Highness's decision. Even though it isn't what she wants for herself, she has decided to sacrifice her own desires in order to save this country. Even if it's sad, even if you feel that she shouldn't have to, respect that it's her decision and that she has made it for a good reason."

Louise grimaced and looked away. "You're right, Shirou," she said in a small voice.

"Ya should pay better attention to Partner, girly," Derf told her. "He's right more often than ya realize."

Henrietta blinked. "Did that sword just talk?"

Louise groaned. "Yes, and he can be really helpful sometimes, but he's got a foul mouth and the absolute *worst* timing!"

She lanced a glare at Derf, who merely let out a rusty chuckle.

"Yes, well, um. Thank you, Sir Shirou." Henrietta gave him a respectful nod, but pointedly ignored Derf. "But this is why I must ask a favor of you, Louise."

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Louise set her mouth into a firm line and looked straight into Henrietta's eyes. "Name it."

And she meant it.

"Reconquista will do whatever they can to undermine and stop this alliance," the Princess began. "They will do whatever it takes to accomplish that, find whatever blackmail or evidence they need to ruin its legitimacy. And I'm afraid that they will not have too much difficulty, should they actually defeat the Royal Family. Should they defeat Albion's Royal Family, they will undoubtedly discover exactly what they need."

Right, standard tactic. Reduce the advantages of your enemy by working at whatever weaknesses you could find; when it came to alliances, all it usually required was one shred of information, no matter how small, blown up and inflated to seem more significant than it was. As long as you sowed distrust, the alliance would fall apart on its own after that.

Shirou had seen it used a couple of times, often to great effect.

"What is it?"

Henrietta sighed. "I was young and foolish and in love... Louise, there is a letter I wrote some time ago. I cannot tell you its contents, but if Reconquista were to find it and send it to the Germanian emperor, I'm afraid that the marriage would fall through and our alliance would be ruined. We would have to stand alone against all of Albion's might."

"A love letter?" Shirou couldn't stop himself from asking.

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"A love letter?" Derf parroted. "Oho! So you want us to go and retrieve of love letter to prevent war? Now I *have* heard it all!"

It wasn't quite as ridiculous as it first sounded. Tristain's alliance with Germania was to be cemented with a marriage, but if the letter were to come to light, if it was revealed that Henrietta was in love with someone not her husband, then the legitimacy of any royal heirs would be in question.

They didn't have paternity tests in this world, so as long as there could be the smallest bit of doubt, it would be enough to throw succession into chaos. And Germania would know that, so if the letter came to light, the only choice was to break off the wedding.

That had been half the problem with Lancelot loving Guinevere, after all, the reason why their adultery was such a big deal. If it was possible, or even worse, probable, that the heir to King Arthur (should a child be born of such a union; Mordred proved that it was *possible*, no matter that it was *unlikely*) was not Arthur's son, then the line of succession would be thrown into disarray — had, in fact, been thrown into disarray by Mordred claiming the right to the throne as Arthur's "son," bastard or not.

Henrietta flushed, but did not back down and nodded. "Exactly that, Sir Shirou. You must understand, if Germania's Imperial family reads that letter, then our efforts to secure an alliance will be for naught. The emperor would assuredly cancel the wedding."

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There was a moment's pause as the information sunk in, then Louise squared her shoulders and visibly steeled herself. "Where is this letter, Your Highness?" she demanded strongly.

The Princess closed her eyes and grimaced, looking at once both grateful and dismayed. Shirou did not imagine it was easy for her to send her childhood friend into a warzone.

"In Albion," she said solemnly, "in the care of Prince Wales Tudor of Albion's Royal Family."

She looked at Louise with something unreadable in her expression, something halfway between regret and resignation.

"If I could trust another with this task, I would," Henrietta started, "and it pains me dearly to ask such a cherished friend to undertake a task like this while there is still fighting going on in Albion, especially now that the rebels have all but cornered the Royal Family and control most of the country, but..."

She squared herself. "Louise Françoise Le Blanc de La Vallière," she asked formally, "will you accept this request of mine for the good of our country and its people?"

"Of course!" Louise leapt forward and fell to her knees, grasping Henrietta's hands. It looked vaguely reminiscent of a knight kneeling before his queen. "Your Highness, I accept!"

Henrietta sagged with relief and let out a sigh. "Oh, Louise," she said fondly, "you truly are a better friend than I deserve."

Shirou cleared his throat. Both girls jumped, startled, and had apparently forgotten that he was in the room. He reined

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in the snarky comment he wanted to make about how flowery and poetic the entire scene had been and focused instead on the important part.

"How urgent is this task, Your Highness?" he asked.

Henrietta frowned. "It must be done with the utmost haste. A month is the longest my advisors gave it, but reports say that Prince Wales and the Royal Family have been cornered near Newcastle by the rebels. Barring a miracle, it could be a matter of days."

So, it was pretty urgent, Shirou mused. Time critical, as it were. They would need to make it all the way to Albion, then find the prince, retrieve the letter, and get out, all before the Royal Family was beaten. If they wanted to make it without running into serious complications, then they had to leave soon, and the earliest they could reasonably leave was —

"Then we'll head out tomorrow morning," Louise decided. She turned to him. "Shirou?"

He didn't really like it. He didn't want to jeopardize Louise's life for a letter, especially since it was a *love letter*, but Louise was set on going, and something in Shirou was excited — excited because this would mean saving a country, if only obliquely, and preventing a war. Excited, because by completing this mission, Shirou could save so many lives before they were even truly in danger.

So, he shrugged and told a little white lie. "I have no concerns for this country, Master. My only obligation is to you. If you will set out for Albion tomorrow morning, then I, as your Servant, will follow."

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"Thank you, Louise," Henrietta said gratefully, "and thank you, Sir Shirou, for protecting my dearest friend, and for continuing to do so."

"It's not—"

The door suddenly slammed open and a tall woman, whose blonde hair, calm and cool expression, and brilliant eyes looked so heartrendingly familiar that Shirou, for a fraction of a second, thought she was someone else and felt his heart give a traitorous shudder of excitement.

But she was too tall, her hair too short and too flaxen, her eyes too blue, and her body too womanly to be the person Shirou had almost mistaken her for, and he chastised himself for letting his hopes rise.

In one hand, the woman held Guiche de Gramont up by the back collar of his black cloak.

"Agnés!" Henrietta exclaimed, startled.

"Your Highness," the woman said imperiously, "I found *this* —" she gave Guiche a shake as though he were a pile of rubbish rather than a person — "eavesdropping outside the door."

She dropped him to the floor, where he landed with a breathless, "Oof!"

"Guiche!" Louise howled, hackles raised. "You! You...!" She trailed off impotently, mouthing syllables silently as she struggled with words.

"How much did you hear?" Shirou asked shrewdly.

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Guiche scrambled to his feet and took a pose, imitation rose in hand.

"When I saw the lovely Princess out in the halls in disguise, I knew I had to investigate!" Guiche declared grandiosely. "So I followed her here and waited to discover why it was she had come!"

He held a hand to his forehead theatrically. "And when I heard about her plight through the keyhole, my heart cried out for my beloved princess, and I decided, therefore, that I must come to her assistance! Have no fear, Your Highness! I, Guiche de Gramont, will secure this letter from the hands of those fiendish Albionians!"

He bowed low from the waist.

There was a moment of silence that followed this declaration. Louise was blinking incredulously, Henrietta looked like she wasn't quite sure what to make of it, and the woman, Agnés, hadn't changed her expression at all.

Shirou almost wanted to laugh.

"Should we kill him?" Agnés asked flatly.

Guiche jumped straight, let out a startled squeak, and glanced fearfully at her. Louise looked torn between vindictively satisfied and appalled. Shirou bit his tongue to keep from making another snarky comment.

"Too much trouble," he imagined Rin saying disdainfully. "Disposing of the body is one thing, but blood is so hard to clean up. It's not worth it."

He choked back the laugh that wanted to break free.

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For a long moment, Henrietta said nothing. Then, she asked, "Gramont? As in, General Gramont's son?"

"I am, Your Highness," Guiche gave a reverent bow. Shirou had to give him credit; if nothing else, Guiche had a mastery of theatrics.

"Then, Guiche de Gramont, are you saying you wish to go on this mission?"

"It would be a most gracious blessing, Your Highness!"

"I see." Henrietta closed her eyes again and let out a sigh through her nose. "Even though I don't want to send another student away on such a mission as this... Very well, Sir Guiche. As you have inherited your father's bravery and nobility, please accompany Louise Francoise and Sir Shirou on this mission."

"Yes, Your Highness!" Guiche said ecstatically, and then, a moment later, he wobbled and let out a rapturous sigh.

"Her Highness has called my name!" he whispered dreamily.

This time, Shirou didn't bother to stop himself. He snorted.

So then, Guiche would be joining them.

On a mission to Albion.

During a civil war.

...How was this a good idea, again?

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"I liked the first idea better," Derf opined. All three girls turned to him with varying looks of unease. Guiche was still living in some kind of fantasy.

"Is that a talking sword?" Agnés asked, sounding far less surprised that Shirou thought she ought to be.

"Oho! So, you noticed! I'm flattered!" Derf called dramatically. "Oh, but talking isn't all I can do, you know! I can stab, I can slice, I can cut, I can do basically anything a regular old sword can do, only ten times cooler! I can even sing and tell dirty jokes! Want to hear —"

Shirou reached over and shoved Derf forcefully back into his sheath.

"He can talk just fine," he told Agnés drily. "The trick is getting him to shut up."

Agnés snorted and both Henrietta and Louise smiled and giggled a little.

Derf popped out of his sheath again. "Hey! I take exception to that!"

Shirou reached over again and shoved him back in. "See what I mean?"

"Must be a riot at parties," Agnés agreed.

Henrietta turned back to Louise and produced a letter from the folds of her cloak. She pressed it into Louise's hands and said, "Please, take this, Louise Francoise. Give this letter to Prince Wales, and he should return the letter I am sending you to retrieve. And this..."

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She pulled a large ring off of her right ring finger and gave it to Louise as well.

"Take this, as well. If Prince Wales asks you to prove who you are," Henrietta explained, "then show him this ring, the Water Ruby. It is the symbol of Tristain's royalty, and even if he doubts the seal on that letter, he cannot doubt this."

Louise took the letter and ring and held them tight. She looked down at them for a moment, as though weighing the gravity of what she had just agreed to, and then looked back up at Henrietta, shoulders set and stance firm.

"Please put your mind at ease, Your Highness," she said strongly. "My Servant and I will accomplish this task without fail."

Shirou allowed himself a small, proud smile.

She was growing.

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CONTINUE?

[YES/NO]

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner

IMPORTANT MESSAGE: Actually, Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner is on break, this chapter. We're going to take a break every fourth chapter, so please be patient! We'll return to your regularly scheduled broadcasting next chapter, okay?

Plus, next lesson, we're going to cover something really exciting!

Please join us next time for "Onegai! Oshiete kudasai, Tohsaka-sensei!"

Oh, wait, that's right, I decided to call it "Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner" instead.

Anyway, please join us next time for the next lesson on Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner! We're going to cover something really important!

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner: End

Chapter V: The Strongest Steel

It was barely after dawn when Louise, Shirou, and Guiche packed up all of the gear they would need onto their horses. Derflinger was slung over Shirou's back — he was really too long to wear at the hip like a normal sword, and it was more convenient besides — and Louise was dressed in her school uniform but for a pair of riding boots as she saddled up the horse she had been loaned by the school.

Shirou had not taken much time to pack his equipment himself, owing mainly to the fact that he didn't have much to pack in the first place, and had taken instead to observing Guiche, who, a short ways away, was speaking with Montmorency, whose long blond hair hung around her head in loose ringlets rather than her usual tighter, more complex style. Evidently, since it seemed that she had only bothered to put on a pair of shoes and a thin cloak over her nightgown, she had rushed out from her room to make it in time to see Guiche off.

"Must you go?" Montmorency asked. "Guiche, Albion is dangerous!"

"I must." Holding her hands, Guiche said, "This mission is of great importance! The whole of Tristain's future may be riding upon my success in this venture!"

"Tristain's *future*?" Montmorency asked incredulously. "That's...But even so, Guiche! Right now, Albion is in a civil war! Guiche, you could...!"

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She trailed off, biting on her bottom lip. She feared for Guiche's life — rightly so, as this would be a dangerous mission indeed — but Shirou had no intention of allowing any of the people he would be protecting to die.

As long as it was within his power to save them, he would.

"It is for the Princess, sweet Montmorency!" Guiche declared fervently. "There is no cause greater than that! I could not refuse a request from our beautiful princess!"

"Couldn't refuse...?"

"Of course not, Montmorency!" Guiche declared grandly. "For the wonderful Princess, for Tristain's grandest rose, no quest is too great, no undertaking too dangerous, no distance too far! To serve Her Highness, the Princess, is the greatest honor I could ask for!"

But Montmorency's mood suddenly changed. The concern evaporated and was replaced by something dark and jealous.

"Oh?" Even from his distance, even without enhancing his eyes, Shirou could see Montmorency's hands tighten around Guiche's. "Are you sure it isn't because the Princess is beautiful, Guiche?"

"Eh...heh-heh..." Guiche tensed and tittered nervously. "Of course not, Montmorency! Why would you think something like that?"

"You're not lying, are you, Guiche?" Montmorency asked dangerously.

"N-no, no, no, of course not!"

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"Guiche..."

"I-I promise you, Montmorency, it's not like that!"

He held up his hands in a placating gesture to diffuse her anger, but she appeared to have trouble believing it. It wasn't hard to imagine why; even now, more than a week after that duel, Guiche still had something of a reputation as a playboy. Of course, as far as Shirou could tell, Guiche had remained mostly faithful to Montmorency (though he seemed to have relapsed the night before with Henrietta) — the duel had definitely shaken him.

But, it seemed like Guiche was coming along anyway, even if he "fell off the wagon" (so to speak) every now and again.

Shirou couldn't stop himself from smiling.

"They're cute, don't you think?" Rin's voice asked.

Shirou, who had gotten used to imagining Rin's presence, thought nothing of her sudden appearance in his head.

"They are," he agreed. "It's always nice to remember that I don't have to kill people in order to bring this sort of happiness."

"There is that," Rin giggled. "I think they'll do alright. He's a little wishy-washy right now, but in a few years, he'll be the kind of man she needs him to be. It was a little rough, there, in the beginning, but... You did good, Shirou."

He snorted. "Glad to know you approve."

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"Mm," she hummed. He imagined her standing next to him with her hands on her hips, watching as Guiche and Montmorency awkwardly said their goodbyes. She heaved a sigh. "That could have been us, you know."

That startled a laugh out of Shirou. "What?"

"Oh, come on!" the image of her scowling at him, as she had so many times before, popped into his head. "Don't tell me you actually never noticed? I had, like, *the* biggest crush on you when we were younger!"

"You did?" he asked, bewildered.

"Why did you think I allied with you during the Grail War?" she demanded. "Or saved your life? Or helped you out and taught you what I could and everything else? What, do you think I did that for every random stranger I only knew for two weeks?"

"Well, I mean..." When she said it like *that*, yeah, he could see it, but he'd always thought that she did all of that stuff because, "weren't we friends?"

Rin scoffed.

"Weren't we friends, he says. Ugh!" she blew out another sigh and was silent for a moment, then she chuckled a little. "You really are totally oblivious, you know that?" she asked fondly.

He laughed quietly. "If I wasn't me, who would I be, Rin?"

"You're right about that!" She laughed too. "Don't ever change, Shirou."

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"I don't plan on it."

Rin let out another long sigh. "So," she began, "it looks like you're going on another adventure."

"So it does," Shirou agreed.

"Any plans, so far?"

"You mean, other than get there and back with Louise in one piece?"

She snorted. "*Besides* the obvious, Shirou."

He hummed.

"Well, not really. It shouldn't be too hard, though. As long as I don't run into another Heroic Spirit, I should be able to take care of any threats relatively quickly and easily. Besides, I've done harder missions, right?"

Rin made a funny sound in the back of her throat. "You mean like the war with —"

"Sir Shirou."

Rin vanished again and Shirou blinked back into the real world, where Guiche was waiting. Montmorency had apparently gone back to her room at some point.

"What is it, Guiche?"

"U-um," Guiche fidgeted a little, "I would like to...to make a request."

Louise approached them, leading her horse by its bridle and reins. "What do you want, Guiche?"

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Guiche startled. "Oh," he said, "Zer — erm, Louise. I'm sorry," he glanced at Shirou as though afraid he might be attacked if he didn't show proper respect, "I didn't see you there. Forgive me."

"Skip it," Louise said flatly. "The request, Guiche?"

"O-oh, yes. Well, if it's not too much trouble," he glanced at Shirou again nervously, "I'd like to bring my familiar along."

Shirou arched an eyebrow. "Your familiar?"

Louise frowned. "It's a mole, right?" she asked.

Guiche rose up indignantly. "My cute, loveable, adorable Verdandi is not *just* a mole!" he said angrily. "Any fool with eyes and taste can see that she's the most wonderful, most beautiful — erm..."

He glanced fearfully at Shirou again and trailed off.

"Sorry, Louise," Guiche apologized again meekly. "Yes, she's a mole."

He looked physically pained, as though he were straining to hold in all the praise he wanted to lavish on his familiar and struggling to contain it. Shirou decided to take pity on him.

"Can your familiar keep up?" he asked. Louise shot him a glare that seemed to say, 'don't encourage him!'

"Of course she can!" Guiche declared passionately. He tapped the ground with his foot and a great, big, brown creature roughly the size of a small bear burst from the grass

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and dirt an instant later. "My Verdandi is the most amazing familiar! She can outpace even the Academy's finest horses!"

He threw his arms around the mole, rubbing his cheek against her cheek, blubbing, "Yes, you can! Yes, you can!"

Shirou thought it was vaguely disturbing. What was even more disturbing was that the mole was rubbing back and making pleased, keening sounds.

"But we're going to Albion!" Louise burst out in protest. "We can't take a creature that moves underground! Albion's in the sky, remember?"

"Oh, but I can't bear to be separated from my dear Verdandi!" Guiche cried. "Oh, it's unthinkable! Just imagining leaving her behind while I go on such a long trip...! The pain! It's agonizing!"

Guiche gave a theatrical sob that didn't seem to sway Louise at all, but Shirou, though he thought it overly dramatic and bordering on pathetic, remembered, unbidden, that moment when he had said goodbye to Saber, when he had stood upon that hill and watched her fade into the sunrise. He remembered how he'd felt then, about how he had felt so empty and alone, filled with only the faint echo of her presence in his memories.

True, Guiche being separated from his mole could not compare to the bond he had shared with Saber (unless, his brain supplied sickeningly, these nobles practiced some *very weird* fetishes), but even if the bond between Master and Familiar in this world was only a fraction as powerful as his bond with Saber had been, it would still be a powerful one,

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and it would still be painful to leave one half of that bond behind.

If it were entirely up to him, he would have left Guiche behind. It was probably the better idea, actually. That way, he'd only have to protect Louise, which would make everything so much easier and more convenient. But something inside of him reminded him that he himself had not truly come into his prime, had not truly understood what it was to do the things he had dedicated his life to doing, until he had had to face enemies that could kill him, monsters that could have destroyed him.

Without the Grail War and the hardships therein, Emiya Shirou would never have made it as far as he eventually had.

You did not learn exactly what was necessary to succeed until you had faced the possibility, or even the inevitability, of failure. It was not until you faced defeat that you understood what you needed to become in order to achieve victory.

Yes. Guiche wanted to come on this mission for two main reasons: to prove himself in some way, and because it was a mission for Princess Henrietta. Undoubtedly, Guiche was not considered overly important in the grand scheme — unless he did something drastic and incredible, he would not get great rewards or flowery compliments from the Princess he so coveted. But more than simply earning her favor, he wanted something else, something desperate and sorrowful, the same thing that all men desired.

Guiche wanted glory.

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Very well, then. In this instance, while he could be there to save Guiche from whatever enemy they might face, he would show Guiche what was necessary to attain glory. He would allow Guiche a taste of the sacrifice and hardship needed to achieve that distant dream that all men strove towards.

"Louise," he began; both Louise and Guiche froze and turned to look at him, "let him bring his mole. If such separation pains him so, then let him bring his mole and take responsibility."

So he said, but if it came down to it, he wouldn't abandon that mole. Coddling, however, never got anyone anywhere.

Louise frowned and huffed, but finally said, "Fine."

"Oh, Verdandi!" Guiche flung his arms back around the mole. "Did you hear that, Verdandi? You're coming with us!"

Verdandi squealed happily and rubbed her round cheek against Guiche. Guiche, who did not seem overly bothered by the mud and grime that was starting to stain his shirt, rubbed back, laughing, and Shirou, though a bit put off by the sheer peculiarity, found himself strangely warmed by the sheer, pure happiness in every line and curve of Guiche's face.

Louise scowled and purposefully looked away, rummaging through her pockets to pull out the letter Henrietta had given her, folded neatly and unwrinkled, and the silver, blue-jeweled ring, the Water Ruby (and how could you call it a Ruby when the gemstone was blue?). First, she checked to letter for rips and tears, and then, as Shirou watched, she checked the ring for scuffs and scratches.

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The moment the blue gem was visible, Verdandi suddenly stopped keening and turned curiously towards Louise, sniffing once, twice, three times.

"Verdandi?"

Verdandi broke free from Guiche and flung herself at Louise, and, as Shirou watched, unsure of what to do, tackled his little Master to the ground.

"Verdandi!"

"Shirou!" Louise shouted, holding the Water Ruby aloft as Verdandi scrambled about and tried to pry it away.

"Shirou! Get this thing *off* of me!"

If he were honest, Shirou didn't really know what to make of it all. A part of him wanted to laugh, and a part of him insisted he help his Master.

"Verdandi!" Guiche cried again. He rushed over to try and tug his mole off of Louise. "No, Verdandi! That is the Princess's ring! You mustn't!"

It was to no avail. Verdandi simply ignored him and went on trying to snatch the Water Ruby from Louise's hands.

"She's not normally like this!" Guiche promised. He shot Shirou a look that was halfway between apologetic and fearful. "It's just that my dear Verdandi does so ever love jewels!"

"Stupid mole!" Louise spat like a furious cat. "This is the ring the Princess gave me! There's no way I could give it to you! GET OFF! IRRITATING PEST!"

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"How dare you!" Guiche began, outraged. "My cute little Verdandi isn't stupid or a pest, you ignorant — erm, that is to say, don't refer to my beautiful familiar like that, Zer — I mean, Louise, please don't talk to her like that!"

Twice more, Guiche stopped halfway between what he was going to say to glance at Shirou, then tried to rephrase his indignation in a more acceptable way. It was almost amusing, but it was also getting old.

Sighing, Shirou decided to take pity on them and stepped forward. "Hold still for a moment, Mast —"

There was almost no time to react to what came next. The burst of sudden magical energy, the scent of ozone that assaulted Shirou's nose out of nowhere, and the gust of wind that exploded in their direction — they all happened so quickly that they were almost simultaneous, and an ordinary human would not have been able to react in time.

Shirou leapt into motion, picked up Louise, Guiche, and Verdandi, and flung himself out of the way of the spell as it whipped past them, close enough to send the hem of his jacket fluttering. He landed shortly in the grass, feet planted and one leg bent in case he had to dodge again.

"My apologies," a voice called out. "I'm afraid I saw my fiancée being assaulted and I feared the worst. I'm sorry if I frightened you."

Shirou allowed himself to relax and set his three passengers down as he turned to face the voice. It belonged to a rather heroic-looking figure who dropped down out of the sky on a lion with wings and an eagle's head — a griffin

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— and dismounted gracefully with what was obviously years of practice.

Shirou recognized him immediately.

Not by name, of course, but rather his appearance. The wide-brimmed feathered hat, the long, grayish hair, the lean, muscular figure, and the thin, neatly-trimmed beard and mustache — they all belonged to the man Louise had been mesmerized by the day before, one of Princess Henrietta's retinue.

"S-Sir Wardes!" Louise gasped.

It seemed Louise, however, *did* know him by name.

Of course, that wasn't the point. He didn't know exactly how powerful that spell was — the system of Dots, Lines, Triangles, and Squares was still a little confusing — and by the looks of it, it had only been blunt force rather than razor sharp blades, but using magic so casually and without a care for the consequences...

Either this person was dangerously careless, or supremely confident in his skill. With mages, the only way to know the difference was to engage them in battle (which definitely wasn't an option here).

Either way —

"Magic shouldn't be used so lightly," Shirou said carefully. "If you had made a single mistake, you could easily have killed my little Master."

"Shirou!" Louise hissed, tugging on his jacket. "What do you think you're doing?!"

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"It's alright, Louise," the man, Wardes, assured her easily. "His concern is only natural. It's a familiar's duty to guard his master, after all, even from his master's fiancé."

Wardes smiled. "Ah, but where are my manners?" He swept his hat off and bowed steeply at the waist. "I am Viscount Wardes, captain of the Griffin Knights and Louise's betrothed." He straightened and put his hat back on deftly. "Her Highness, the Princess, worried about sending your group to Albion alone, especially as two of you are students and the other a foreigner. Since an armored retinue would be too conspicuous and would defeat the point besides, I am to accompany you at her request."

"V-V-Viscount W-Wardes," Guiche sputtered incredulously, "and *Louise*?"

"Fiancé?" Shirou glanced back at Louise with a raised eyebrow. She met his gaze, then turned away, face flushed embarrassedly.

"We are promised to each other," Wardes explained simply. "Now, Louise, aren't you going to introduce your companions to me?"

"O-oh!" she squeaked. "F-forgive me, Sir Wardes! Um — this is Guiche de Gramont, a classmate of mine," she gestured to Guiche, "and this is my...my Servant, Shirou Emiya."

"Servant?" Wardes parroted. "Ah. Yes, the Princess told me about this. It's a term for a human familiar, correct?"

"That's correct," Shirou answered shortly.

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"I see. Then thank you, Shirou Emiya," Wardes swept into another bow, "for protecting my fiancée. As her familiar, her Servant, you have done your job admirably."

"It's nothing," Shirou assured him. "As a Servant, it was my duty and responsibility to protect my Master. There's no need to thank me for something that is only natural."

"Indeed," Wardes chuckled good-naturedly. His keen, blue-gray eyes glinted with something — perhaps approval? "Like congratulating an eagle for flying or grass for being green, yes?"

Shirou felt his lips pull into a smirk. "Exactly."

For a long moment, there was silence as Wardes eyed him up and down subtly, taking in the cloth armor and the swords — one sheathed on his back and the other at his hip — with nothing more than slow, almost imperceptible movements of the eyes. Shirou felt himself being appraised, the way two warriors did when they met — the single question that all men asked in such a situation: am I stronger than him?

There was no need for Shirou to ask that question about Wardes. No, for something with an inhuman level of strength, capable of going toe to toe with Servants and Dead Apostle Ancestors, a question like that was pointless. From the beginning, humans could not defeat something that was inhuman, not without an extraordinary ability or high class armaments. For someone like Shirou, the only sorts of mages who could threaten him were the highest sort, the kind who did A-Rank magic as easily as breathing. In this world, that meant Square-class mages, this world's versions of Barthomeloi Lorelei.

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"Well," Wardes said at last and turned away, "we need to be off. It's six days' travel to La Rochelle by horse, so we must make all haste if we don't want to make it ten. Come, my Louise." He held out one hand in offering and patted the rump of his griffin with the other. "You shall ride with me."

But Louise did not immediately reach out for the hand of her fiancé. She turned instead to Shirou, face flushed, and gave him a lost, desperate look, as though searching for approval or begging him to intervene. Even though Shirou did not entirely trust Wardes, however, there was a certain advantage in allowing his decision to carry Louise.

"It's fine, Master," Shirou told her. "In fact, it's better that you ride with him. Should we come across that other Servant again, it will be easier for me to fight if I know the Viscount can carry you to a safe distance on his griffin."

Louise grimaced a little and looked back at Wardes. Her face flushed again and she bit nervously at her bottom lip — it was a war between embarrassment and practicality, and the victor would decide whether or not she could risk making a fool of herself while riding with her fiancé on his griffin.

By the set of her face and the grim, determined line of her mouth, practicality won.

"V-very well!" she said as importantly as she could manage. It was ruined by the violent blush that still stained her cheeks from ear to ear. "Then S-S-S-Sir Wardes! E-escort me!"

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Wardes laughed and lifted Louise into his arms, ignoring, or perhaps not noticing, the tiny, embarrassed squeak she let out.

"You haven't changed a bit, my little Louise!"

"V-Viscount!" Louise cried, face aflame. "N-not here! N-not in f-f-front of o-others!"

"Very well," Wardes said reasonably. He set her down astride his griffin and climbed on after her. "Let's make haste, then. La Rochelle awaits."

Shirou allowed himself a small smile and mounted his own horse. As the sun started its slow climb into the sky, Shirou led both his horse and Louise's after Wardes' griffin, and the journey to Albion, and the mission that awaited there, began.

And yet, despite the generally peaceful and carefree air that clung to them, particularly Louise and Wardes, Shirou could not help the odd feeling in his belly — as if his body was reminding him that no mission was easy, that this slow and gentle start was nothing more than the calm before the storm, and a typhoon awaited them.

This time, when Louise squeaked embarrassedly at something Wardes said or did and Wardes let out a loud, cheerful laugh, Shirou didn't smile. He frowned.

— o.O.O.O.o —

It was late into the night after almost eight days of travel when they reached the narrow mountain pathway that led to La Rochelle. On either side, buildings had been carved into

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the rock to make houses — the work of Square-rank mages, the books had said. La Rochelle was a mountaintop port city because Albion was a country that floated in the air. Thanks to the supply of windstones in the ground, one day, Albion had just lifted up from the rest of the continent and drifted away.

And that was as much as Shirou had read before he'd set that particular book aside. History like that could be interesting, but it hadn't been what he'd been looking for.

"An island in the sky, huh?" Shirou muttered to himself. "Well, I've certainly been to some strange places, but that'll be a first for me."

The moonlight was their only guide as Wardes led the way. They might have made better time if they had continued straight for six days, but when Louise had started to sway atop Wardes' griffin after the first day of travel, Shirou had insisted on taking enough time to rest themselves and their horses. Wardes hadn't exactly been happy about stopping, but had given in when Louise let loose a large, jaw-cracking yawn.

That was why it was dark as they started up the mountain pathway. Because Shirou had insisted on stopping to rest, they had no light to guide them but the moonlight, which cast everything into shades of gray and left long shadows on the rocks around them. Though he knew it would have meant another day of travel, Shirou wished they had stopped for a rest and waited until daylight before traversing the mountain path — in the darkness, the shadows danced with every motion and beneath every cloud that drifted in front of the moon. For someone watching for enemies and ambushes,

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there were too many to know which were enemies waiting to strike and which were simply tricks of the light.

A mountain pathway had nothing on a sprawling city, of course. During those Dead Apostle hunts Shirou had joined, discerning what shadows were just shadows and what shadows were the Apostle's minions waiting for the opportune moment had been much, much harder in the pitch-black narrow alleyways than here in this mountain pass.

Behind him, Shirou heard the echoing clip-clops of Guiche's horse entering the pathway. Ahead, Wardes' griffin continued at the same pace as when they had begun and seemed no more tired than it had when they left the academy six and a half days prior. Truly, Shirou wondered, was that the difference between a normal animal and a familiar, or were griffins naturally that hardy?

It happened as soon as they were too far in to back out. From the cliffs above, several torches, alight with fire, fell down and landed at their mounts' hooves, hissing like vipers and spitting sparks. Shirou's horse jerked and reared back, letting loose a loud neigh as it bucked and tried to get away from the flames — Shirou himself was nearly unseated and thrown off, but he managed to stay on, gripping tightly to the reins.

In front of him, Wardes' griffin squawked and flared its wings wide, then flapped once, twice, three times to send the torches away. Behind him, there was more neighing and a loud thud of something hitting the ground bodily.

"Wha-what's happening?!" Guiche cried fearfully. His own mount had flung him off.

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Arrows shot through the air a moment later, and Shirou unsheathed Derf with a ring of steel as he deflected them, and, with a long sweep of his sword, the ones aimed at Guiche, too. Wardes deflected the arrows aimed at himself and Louise with a small gust of wind with a swish of his wand-sword.

The light from the flames, the difference between the light that painted them as targets and the darkness of the cliffs above, made it impossible to see where the arrows were coming from, and so impossible to see the archers who were firing them. It was a solid tactic that had been performed with practiced efficiency to blind Shirou and the others from their attackers, which could only mean one thing.

"It's an ambush!" Shirou alerted the others.

"It's most likely thieves or bandits!" Wardes called back. His wand-sword glowed and knocked away another wave of arrows.

"Could it be...those rebellious nobles from Albion?" Louise asked over the neighing of the horses.

"Nobles would not use arrows," Wardes answered confidently.

More arrows came and were deflected again. Derf hissed as he cleaved through the air, sending arrows off course, and Wardes' wand-sword flashed. In the intervening moments, Guiche had managed to create a golem that was protecting him with expert, mechanical efficiency and covered behind it with his hands on his head as its bronze joints creaked.

Shirou frowned.

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It depended, of course, on how many archers there were and how many arrows they had between them, but any well-prepared group would have more than enough to last. That meant that they could keep going for as long as they liked — or for as long as it took one of them to get in a lucky shot. It wouldn't take much, just a single moment of inattentiveness, and one of their group (probably Louise, the only one who couldn't defend herself) would be maimed or killed.

So, then, his options. First, he could wait them out in a war of attrition. He himself would be able to mostly defend himself and his reaction time was good enough that most arrows would be useless. It meant that no one would have to die, or more accurately, he wouldn't have to kill anyone. He wouldn't have to stain his hands with yet more blood.

On the other hand, that also meant that Louise would be open and vulnerable. Unable to cast wind spells herself and unable to craft a golem to defend her, it would only take a single mistake from Wardes for her to be seriously injured or even killed, and Shirou didn't know much healing magic, certainly not enough for a serious wound like that. Not only would their mission be sidetracked or even fail, but his little Master might die, and all pragmatism and all his ideals aside, he was beginning to grow attached to her.

Right. That was a bad idea. He wasn't going to be risking Louise.

Option two, he attacked back using his magic, revealed himself as a mage before Wardes and Guiche, and would probably kill every single one of those archers, but Louise would be safe, and so would any others who came through this path in the future. By killing these archers now, he could

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save others who might otherwise have been injured or killed by them, and all in the process of saving his little Master, too.

It meant staining his hands a little more, but no one in his group would be hurt.

Shirou was only slightly ashamed that it was an easy decision, but he had known from the start that he couldn't save everyone, no matter how hard he tried. Even though he tried anyway, he had never been so ignorant that he thought he would never have to kill a few to save the many.

He centered himself, let out a breath as the hammer in his head cocked back and his Circuits flipped on, and reached into his alien perception, the Unlimited Blade Works.

"Trace —"

But he stopped.

Something large and heavy swooped through the air in the darkness above — Shirou could hear the giant wingbeats and realized suddenly that he knew what creature made them, had seen it before, in fact, silhouetted against the moon on his first night in this world. Up on the cliffs, screams echoed out into the night and the arrows that had before been aimed at them and their horses were suddenly aimed at something else.

A dragon.

A blast of wind magic deflected all the arrows as effortlessly as Wardes had, and after a moment's pause — incanting, Shirou realized, the rider was incanting — a small hurricane swept through the sky above and tore the archers,

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who screamed all the way, up and away from their perches and into the air.

For a handful of seconds, they just hung there, suspended by the spell that was holding them up, and then, when the spell died, they dropped like stones and tumbled down the sides of the cliffs to land, battered, bruised, and groaning, on the pathway in front of Wardes.

"That was wind magic," Wardes commented unnecessarily.

"But who...?"

A large form swooped down low from above them, and astride the back of the wind dragon were Kirche and a small girl with glasses — she must be Tabitha, since that appeared to be her dragon. Kirche, smiling, gave a large wave as the dragon landed. With a flourish and a flip of her fire-red hair, Kirche dismounted gracefully.

Absently, Shirou sheathed Derflinger.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

"Sorry to —?!" Louise sputtered indignantly, hopped down from Wardes' griffin, and marched up to Kirche. "What do you think you're doing here, you redheaded Germanian tramp?!"

"Certainly not helping *you*," Kirche said with a flip of her hair. "I saw you leaving the academy with my darling a few days ago and decided I had to follow you and rescue him from your prudish clutches."

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She gave Shirou a wave and a sultry smile, tugging the collar of her blouse down a little to reveal a few more inches of brown skin. "Hi, Darling!"

Shirou wasn't even tempted to look anywhere but her eyes and said nothing, giving her only a frown. She pouted and pulled her blouse back into its proper place.

"That girl certainly has it out for you, doesn't she?" Derf mumbled into Shirou's ear.

"Indeed," Shirou replied flatly.

"Anyway," Kirche continued, "I enlisted Tabitha here —" she jerked her thumb at the dragon, where the short, glasses-wearing girl, Tabitha, as Shirou had guessed, glanced up briefly from her book at her name being called — "and followed you all the way out here."

Tabitha gave a silent, tiny, very unenthusiastic wave, which consisted of nothing more than raising her hand, holding it in the air for a second, and then letting it drop. Oddly, she was still in her pajamas. Kirche must've woken her up without giving her a chance to change clothes.

"You...! You...!" Louise raged incoherently.

"Kirche," Shirou began. Louise shot him a venomous look for interrupting her, but he ignored it.

"Yes, Darling?"

"You shouldn't be here." Her face dropped into another pout. "This is a personal request from the Princess. The entire point was to send only a small, fast group that wouldn't receive much attention. Adding you and Tabitha to our group

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will only make things more complicated and more difficult, and walking around with a dragon will only make us stand out all the more."

With a stern expression, he delivered the final blow. "You should leave. Go back to the academy and forget we were ever here."

"That's right!" Louise jumped in, scowling. "This is a secret mission for the Princess, Zerbst! You're not welcome!"

But Kirche did not seem deterred, nor even bothered, and it rankled Shirou a little that she didn't seem to understand what he'd just said.

No, of course she didn't, Shirou berated himself. She was a schoolgirl, not one of the soldiers he had given orders to during one of his interventions or the Enforcers he had led during some of those Apostle hunts. She didn't truly understand the scope of what was going on, here, and even if she did, her teenage pride and sense of invincibility would keep her from leaving.

He'd been spoiled, Shirou decided. He'd spent so much time over the last few years working with experts and professionals that he wasn't used to dealing with teenagers again.

"Secret mission?" Kirche drawled slowly. "Oh, so you Tristainians are up to something, are you? Well, you should have said so sooner! I can't take part in a secret mission if I don't know that it exists!"

Well, Shirou thought sardonically, *can't argue with that logic*.

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Derf gave a low chuckle.

Louise fumed again. "You —!"

"Anyway," Kirche cut her off, "you should be thanking me. See those guys?"

She pointed to the archers, who Guiche had gone to interrogate at some point. They didn't seem to be in any condition to resist.

"I saved you from their ambush, didn't I? I don't think a little gratitude is out of the question."

Louise scowled and glared at her as though hoping she would spontaneously burst into flames, but said nothing.

"And I didn't come here to help you," Kirche added. She walked briskly past Louise, who eyed her furiously all the while, pausing only to give a salacious and suggestive wink at Wardes (who recoiled with a frown), and strode right up to Shirou and grabbed his hand. "I came to see my beloved, my darling. I was so worried when I woke up to find you gone. I thought maybe you'd left! Oh! Or maybe Louise was dragging you off and forcing you into marriage! Just the thought that you could be bleeding out somewhere, or worse, that you might be making Louise a woman instead of me! It tore me apart! Oh, I was so worried! Can't you feel how fast my heart is beating?"

She moved his hand as though to rest it over her heart, but with that saucy, sultry smile of hers, pulled it a little too far down to rest atop her left breast. The fabric of her shirt had barely touched his fingertips before he'd pulled away,

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scowling at her, and she stumbled backwards and fell from the sudden motion.

She looked up at him, skirt askew and bunched up so high that her underwear was almost visible, and pouted. "Oh, my beloved darling has rejected me again. I think I might just cry!"

"ZERBST!"

Louise's voice echoed off the cliffs around them, high and shrill, as she started towards Kirche with her hackles raised like an angry cat. Shirou paid it no mind — Louise being angry wasn't especially new or concerning — and turned his focus instead to the girl on the ground, who, despite her words, did not look anywhere near the point of crying.

But it could not continue. No, even beyond the fact that it was disturbing to watch a teenage girl some forty or fifty years his junior throw herself at him, it was tiresome and a little annoying to have to reject her advances every time she came within earshot. The old Shirou, as he had with Sakura, would have simply pretended to be oblivious

This, however, was not the old Shirou, nor was Kirche as subtle and as deeply infatuated as Sakura had been. There could be no pretending not to notice, not when she was so forward and blunt and not when the constant bids for his attention could be so disruptive. He would have to be direct with his rejection, blunt and truthful. As long as she thought she had a chance, she wouldn't stop.

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Besides, there was one even more important fact. The old Shirou had not yet met Saber, had not yet fallen in love himself; the Shirou of the now *had*. He had met Saber, had fallen in love with her, and had carried her image, her memory, and his love for her within him for nearly fifty years.

Compared to that, Kirche couldn't even hope to compete.

"Even if my heart didn't belong to another, I could never date someone so young," Shirou told Kirche solemnly. "Your efforts are wasted on me. You should save yourself and invest your love in someone who can love you back."

She would be better off that way. A lifetime of chasing after him would only end in heartbreak — heartbreak because she could not follow him, heartbreak because she could not understand him, heartbreak because she was not strong enough to take up his cross.

Yes. With his power, Shirou had granted many people salvation and had performed many miracles. When people spoke of him and the things he had done, his name was always half-whispered and uttered reverently. It was the nature of being a hero — to be worshipped as something alien, inhuman, and godly.

It certainly seemed a glamorous sort of reward from the outside. That was how Heroic Spirits were born, after all: the people saw someone do incredible things and worshipped them, were inspired by their deeds and legends. Other heroes would aspire to do the things that so many heroes had done before and etch their names into history.

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What few people understood was what it took to achieve those deeds, what was lost to make those legends. Salvation could only be achieved through sacrifice, and miracles were born out of people's misery. Always, you had to carry with you the knowledge that you could not save everyone, that you inevitably had to take lives and choose someone over another, that being needed meant that people still suffered.

Sacrifice one to save ten. Sacrifice ten to save a hundred. Sacrifice a hundred to save a thousand. No matter how hard he tried, Shirou would never be able to save everyone. Someone would always die, and his efforts would never truly be enough. And yet, he would continue to try. He would strive for that Utopia, even knowing that it was an impossible dream.

Could this girl live with that? Could she understand what it meant to seek a dream, knowing it could never come true, and to seek it anyways?

No. It was not something regular people could do. Always, though they might hold onto that dream deep within their hearts, an ordinary person would abandon the impossible for what they could achieve with their own two hands. It was only the heroes, like King Arthur, like Cúchulainn, like Alexander the Great, who strove for their impossible dreams without wavering.

A strange look crossed Kirche's face, something resembling determination, and she opened her mouth to say something, but was cut off by Louise, who had stomped over, "Zerbst, you...! You...!"

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Before she could start, however, Guiche jogged back from the archers he had been interrogating and called out for Wardes.

"Viscount!" Guiche said urgently. "Viscount!"

Louise bit back her tirade and turned instead to Guiche. "What?!"

Guiche flinched as though slapped and cast a fearful look first at Shirou, then again at Wardes, and seemed suddenly afraid to say anything. Shirou thought that it was really getting out of hand.

"Speak," Wardes commanded.

"O-oh!" Guiche gave a little jump. "Um, yes. That is, they're just robbers. That's all. They weren't looking for us, specifically, they were just looking to get whatever they could from whoever came along the road."

In other words, their secret mission was still a secret. Well, as much as it could be, anyway, with Kirche and Tabitha standing right there.

Wardes frowned. "I see." He hummed. "Leave them, then. We would probably be doing everyone a favor by executing them, and at the very least, we should turn them in. However, I don't want to expose my fiancée —"

"Fiancée?!" Kirche parroted disbelievingly. "You mean *Louise*?"

"— to such violence and we have no time to escort them all to the proper authorities," Wardes continued as though

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she hadn't spoken. "Therefore, we'll leave them here and inform the authorities at the earliest opportunity."

He turned to Louise and held out a hand in offering. "Come, my little Louise."

Louise flushed embarrassedly at the way he'd called to her, but didn't protest or otherwise comment on it, and with one last glare at Kirche, she turned and stomped back to Wardes, who took her hand and helped her back up onto his griffin. He settled her in front of him and reached over her shoulders to grasp at the fine leather reins, and then he looked back at Shirou and Guiche, who still hadn't gotten back onto his horse.

"We'll spend the night in La Rochelle," Wardes announced. "In the morning, we'll take the first ship to Albion."

He dug his heels into his griffin's side a little and the beast started forward again with a great squawk, lion's tail swishing behind it. Shirou glanced back at Kirche, who looked like she very dearly wanted to climb onto his horse with him, and dug his heels into his steed's side a little before she could attempt to wiggle onto the saddle behind him. With a chuff, the horse beneath him started after Wardes' griffin, and Kirche was forced to share with Tabitha again.

Shirou imagined they must have looked very strange — two men riding horses, one man riding a griffin with a petite girl, and two girls riding a dragon, all heading in the same direction. It sounded kind of like the beginning to a bad joke.

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"You're not gonna force them girlies to go home?" Derf asked quietly.

Shirou hummed. "There's no point. The smaller one, Tabitha, would probably listen, but Kirche's the type who'll be more motivated the more you try to stop her. It's frustrating, but there's nothing I can do."

"Oho?" Derf chuckled again lowly. "The great and mighty Shirou Emiya can face down Heroic Spirits without flinching, but a pair of teenage girls can make him surrender without a fight?"

"Exactly," Shirou replied to the joke seriously. "Teenagers don't listen, no matter what you say. If they want to do something, then there's nothing you can do to stop them from doing it. One way or another, they'll get what they want — the creative ones, anyway."

He paused for a moment and glanced back at Kirche, who perked up and waved cheerily when she noticed him looking.

"Even if I took her back to the academy and locked her in her room, she'd still break out and follow us," Shirou went on. "It's better to just let her come along now so that I know exactly where she is and can keep an eye on her. It'll be easier if I have to rescue her if I don't have to travel halfway across the continent to do so."

"Guess you're right," Derf conceded. "Of course, I suppose it doesn't have to do anything with the fact that that one girl is practically throwing herself at ya, does it?"

"You're right. It doesn't."

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Shirou regretted the forcefulness in those words almost the moment they left his mouth. He sighed.

"I'm sixty-five years old, Derf," he explained. "Ignoring the fact that I already have a woman who holds my heart, there's almost fifty years' difference between Kirche and I. How could I fall in love with a girl who's less than a third my age?"

Derf's answer was surprisingly solemn. "You'd be surprised. It might not be too common nowadays, but back in Brimir's time, it wasn't that strange for elves to fall in love with humans and vice versa. And elves live a *really* longtime. Age doesn't mean you can only love someone as old and experienced as you are, it just means you have a better idea of what you want."

Shirou allowed himself a small, ironic smile. "What I want hasn't changed since I was seventeen, Derf. And Kirche isn't her."

Derf said nothing, and after a long moment of silence, slid quietly back into his sheath. Shirou was somewhat grateful — he hadn't really wanted to continue that line of conversation.

It was only a short while later, after about twenty more minutes of riding, when their strange procession crested the slope and looked out at the city below. Like a thousand dazzling diamonds, the buildings of La Rochelle glowed.

— o.o.O.O.O.o —

Wardes led them to the fanciest hotel in the city, a place called "The Goddess's Temple," which was possibly the most

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opulent building Shirou had yet seen. Everything was carved of shining marble, and everything, including the floor, was so perfectly clean that Shirou could have used them for a mirror.

The moment all their luggage had been carried inside (and dropped like trash unceremoniously on the floor near the table they wound up claiming), Wardes had turned around and declared he was going to the pier to see when the next ship was leaving while they waited for their food.

The rest of them relaxed into their chairs, though Shirou found it not quite as easy as Guiche and the girls did — riding a horse was *hard*. He was sore in places he hadn't known he had before, especially around his hips and his other lower extremities.

Riding for three hours to and from the capital was much, much different than riding almost nonstop for nearly eight days.

Shirou sighed and got as comfortable as he could in his chair, all aches considered. Beside him, Guiche, whose head was pressed against the table, gave a groan.

"I'm tired," he complained, "and hungry. How long must we wait for the food?"

Shirou grimaced as his own stomach rumbled.

He'd brought it up during the trip, about how they should've taken time out to stop to eat instead of just traveling straight through the day. Wardes had insisted on just continuing straight on through, and since Louise hadn't come to his defense and Guiche had, in a moment of rare bravery, agreed with Wardes, Shirou had been outvoted.

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He could have forced it if he'd wanted to, he supposed, but since neither Guiche nor Louise had seemed bothered at all, he'd let it drop.

Undoubtedly, Guiche was regretting his decision, now.

"Shut up, Guiche," Louise ordered tiredly. It was muffled because she was resting her head in her arms with her eyes nestled in the crook of one elbow. "We're all tired, we're all hungry."

"You need to man up, Guiche," Kirche said with a smile. She slid a sultry glance at Shirou, who just barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes. "You need to be more like my darling. He hasn't complained one bit! Why, I bet he's not even hungry!"

And, like a peal of thunder, a loud groan split the air as though to punctuate her remark and stopped whatever else she might have said. Shirou felt his cheeks flush and coughed embarrassedly into one hand.

Guiche, who had been startled by the loud noise, was looking at him bewilderedly. Kirche, with her mouth hanging open, seemed stuck between surprise, dismay, and some strange sort of pride. Tabitha continued reading as though nothing had happened, although the slight raising of her eyebrows gave her away.

Louise, who had not reacted immediately, lifted her head and favored Shirou with a tired, but wry smile.

"Hunger is the enemy?" she offered.

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Shirou felt his lips twitch and tried his best to fight off the grin. "Exactly so."

The click of leather boots along the marble floor announced Wardes' return a scant moment later, and as he sank into an empty chair with a slight sigh, he said to them, "The ship to Albion leaves the day after tomorrow."

Louise's brow furrowed. "But...this is such an important mission..."

"Why isn't there a ship to Albion tomorrow?" Kirche asked. She fluttered her eyelashes. "I mean, I've never been to Albion, so I don't understand. Could you...explain it to me?"

Wardes frowned at her and looked like he knew exactly what her game was, but answered anyway: "If the moons are overlapping tomorrow, then Albion will be closest to La Rochelle. If so, then no captain would risk his ship during an eclipse."

He said nothing more, like that answer explained everything, but Shirou didn't really get it — eclipses and solar flares could mess with tides and magnetic fields, so modern electrical appliances might malfunction somewhat, but with magic, how did that mean anything to a flying ship?

Instead of explaining more, Wardes set out three keys.

"We'll retire for the night," he informed them; it sounded more like an order. "Miss Tabitha and Miss Kirche will take one room and Mister Guiche and Sir Shirou will take the other." Shirou felt his eyebrow begin to raise as he realized what that implied. "As we are engaged, Louise and I will obviously share the third room."

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Louise rocketed up in her chair, back ramrod straight as Guiche sputtered and Kirche gaped at him. Tabitha's only response was to pause just slightly before turning the page of her book.

"Sir Wardes!" Louise squeaked, face flushed. "B-but we're not even m-married!"

But Wardes shook his head. "We're engaged, so it's fine. Besides, who better to look out for you than your fiancé?"

Louise floundered and her mouth flapped wordlessly. She looked as though she were trying to find the right words, but Shirou chose that moment to jump in.

After all, he had something to say about this, too.

"Sir Wardes," all attention turned to Shirou, "how much do you know about the night Fouquet robbed the academy?"

"I read the report the Magic Academy sent to Her Highness," Wardes answered, looking like he wasn't quite sure where this was going, "so everything, including my little Louise's testimony."

Louise flushed again at the apparent pet name, but Shirou pounced.

"So let me see if I understand your proposal, then," he said as casually as he could manage; he distinctly ignored a giggle in his head that sounded like Rin. "You want my Master to stay the night with you, away from me, when there's an enemy walking around whose allegiance appears aligned with an anti-Tristainian faction who has no problem with targeting a school full of innocent children?"

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Wardes adopted an appearance reminiscent of a bird whose feathers had been ruffled. "I don't see what —"

"Allow me to clarify," Shirou cut him off; it was harder to ignore the giggle that had erupted into a cackle. "This enemy, a powerful being who could very well be capable of enduring even a Square-level spell, who is capable of attacking us from range with sustained cannon fire, who is essentially a god in human flesh, would have no compunctions with crushing you and Louise like bugs under her boot. Of the six of us, I'm the only one who could conceivably fight her, and Louise, the Master I am sworn to protect, holds the letter and the ring we are supposed to deliver to Prince Wales."

He ignored the sharp gasp from Kirche and Guiche's very faint and very weak "blasphemy," as well as the fact that he had mentioned critical mission details to those who weren't supposed to be on the mission (since they were coming along anyway, there wasn't much reason to hide it anymore), and focused solely on Wardes, who looked like he'd swallowed something sour.

"While this enemy is on the loose and while Louise carries mission-critical items, you want me to sleep in a separate room from her when I am the only one who can defend her?"

Wardes stood suddenly and snarled furiously, but Shirou merely regarded him with a calm, cool stare. Wardes may have been the nominal leader of this mission, Wardes may have better understood the climate of this world — political and literal — but Shirou had not strode across countless battlefields, had not fought inhuman monsters like Dead Apostle Ancestors, had not saved and sacrificed countless

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lives for the sake of his ideals, only to risk something so important, to risk his *Master*, because a nobleman wanted to cuddle up with his fiancée before the wedding.

"Fine!" Wardes spat. Guiche gasped and Kirche gaped, Tabitha had stopped reading her book, and Louise looked stricken, but Shirou didn't so much as flinch. Wardes grimaced and breathed in deep through his nose.

"Fine," he said again, much more calmly. "I will concede the issue this night. Shirou and Louise will room together, Kirche and Tabitha will take the other, and Guiche and I shall take the third."

Shirou refused to allow himself to smile. Success.

"However," Wardes stressed the word, "tomorrow, Sir Shirou, I demand a duel to rectify this slight to my honor. On the outcome of this duel, I will wager my right to room with Louise at any point on the rest of this mission. Should you win, I will not bring this issue to light again in your presence, but should I win, you will not contradict me should I make a decision such as that again. Do you agree to these terms?"

Shirou held Wardes' gaze for a moment longer, but Wardes showed no fear or indecision, even knowing, as he had to know, exactly what he would face in a duel like that. There was really nothing for Wardes to gain, only lose — was he that confident in his skills that he would challenge someone like Shirou, someone who was vastly stronger and more experienced, or was his honor that deeply wounded that he could not let it pass, even knowing that he couldn't win?

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"I'll accept," Shirou said simply. It was the pragmatic choice, really. "Tomorrow, after breakfast but before lunch. You choose the place."

Wardes nodded with a grim satisfaction, then spun around, and with a flourish of his robes, walked away.

"Ah — w-wait!" Guiche cried. "S-Sir Wardes! You'll miss...!"

Wardes turned up the stairs and was gone.

"...dinner."

— o.O.O.O.o —

The room Shirou shared with Louise was one of the best in the hotel — no doubt, Wardes had intended to share it with Louise, as there was only a single large, four-poster bed with lacy drapes hanging from the top and a large bottle of wine had awaited them when they came in.

Shirou, however, had not intended to stay in the same bed with Louise, and he had been perfectly prepared to sleep in the floor in the corner, but Louise had insisted that he sleep more comfortably. They had ended up in a compromise and had asked the hotel staff to bring in another bed (and Shirou had watched from the corner of his eyes as Louise quietly handed off a few gold coins to the movers as thanks).

So, about an hour after eating, the two of them had settled into bed quietly and bade each other goodnight (Shirou, who had done it just about every night since the duel with Guiche, was pleasantly surprised when Louise had

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responded in kind). Derf, who had been surprisingly quiet, was propped up by the headboard of Shirou's bed.

Stretched out across the mattress, Shirou took in a deep breath through his nose and closed his eyes.

"...Shirou?"

But Louise's voice, quiet and tentative, broke the silence.

"Yes, Louise?" he asked softly.

For a moment, she didn't answer, and he thought perhaps she might have fallen asleep, but then, hesitantly, she said, "It was arranged, you know."

He sat up halfway and turned over to his side. Louise's burgundy eyes stared back at him.

"Your marriage to Wardes?"

In the dark, he watched her nod.

"Our parents decided it," she told him, "back when we were younger. Back then, I...couldn't cast magic, no matter how hard I tried. Everyone compared me to my older sisters, Cattleya and Éléonore, so..."

She fell quiet for a moment.

"My family's a very important noble family," she explained. "I'm the youngest daughter, so since I'm not likely to inherit, I either have to make a name for myself as a mage or marry into a good noble family."

"And so, Wardes," Shirou concluded. She nodded again. "Do you *want* to marry him?"

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For a long moment, she didn't say anything, and if her eyes weren't wide open and she wasn't biting her lip uncertainly, he might have thought she had fallen asleep before she could answer.

"I," she started slowly, "I don't know." She looked at him again. "I don't dislike Sir Wardes, but...I wanted to become a great mage, first. I wanted to...to make a name for myself, to do something great and amazing, something that everyone would recognize me for, just like my mother. And I just..."

"You haven't done that, yet," he finished for her.

"I don't want to settle down and be someone's wife, yet," she agreed. "One day, when I'm older and when I've made it that far, yes. Yes, I want to get married and have children and everything, but not yet. I haven't done everything I want to do, yet."

She paused again.

"Sir Wardes asked me to marry him after this mission is over."

Shirou raised an eyebrow. She flushed.

"What should I do?"

He shrugged, as much as one can shrug when situated as he was. "If you're not ready to marry him, don't marry him," he told her. "You're a Void Mage, Louise. I am your Servant. Inevitably, everything is your decision, and I can do nothing but follow it."

Her brow knitted together and she frowned. It probably wasn't the answer she'd been looking for.

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"However," Shirou added, "the fact that you summoned me, of all people, means that the events to come are trying and full of hardships. If you marry Wardes, then you may well avoid those troubles, but if they find you anyway, do you think you could face them as Wardes' wife instead of as a formidable Void Mage? More importantly, do you think you could be happy if you abandoned all your other ambitions for the sake of being Wardes' wife?"

For a long moment, she didn't say anything at all, she just lay there thinking deeply about what he said. He wondered if it was really such a hard decision that she would be so uncertain. He wondered if, perhaps, she actually loved Wardes, or was at least infatuated with him. Had she not been out of sorts for nearly the entire day after Wardes had escorted the Princess to the academy?

Maybe she *did* love Wardes.

Then, with a little smile, she turned away and onto her back.

"I've decided," she declared strongly. "I'm not going to accept! Maybe someday, I'll marry Wardes, but before then, I'm going to become the best mage possible and earn the respect of everyone in Tristain! Shirou, as my Servant, will you follow me?"

Shirou gave her his own little smile and turned back onto his back. "Of course, Master."

Louise reoriented herself and turned over onto her other side to go to sleep, so Shirou closed his eyes and let out a

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deep breath. A few hours of sleep would definitely be welcome to his sore hips and ass.

He *had* to get a better mount. At the very least, if he couldn't, he needed to get comfortable with riding a horse, because getting sore whenever they traveled wasn't an option.

Well. Either way, sore or not, he would be dueling Wardes tomorrow. How should he handle it?

No matter what, he couldn't afford to seriously injure Wardes, so he'd have to hold back enough not to do any real damage. At his level, it wasn't a matter of what weapon he used, but rather how much he regulated his strength and speed — choosing Ogrenix to fight Guiche had been less about weapon power and more about not using a weapon whose effects as a Noble Phantasm he might activate if something pressed him more than he expected.

With Wardes, it wouldn't be so different, with the exception of the fact that he didn't need to pull out a new sword when he could just use Derf. If he was careful, used Derf's dull side, and brought his swing to a virtual stop right before hitting Wardes, the damage would be minor — bruises at worst.

Right. That was the plan then.

Shirou relaxed and let out a slow sigh. Everything else could wait until morning. For now, sleep.

Louise broke the silence.

"Thank you, Shirou," she mumbled quietly.

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Shirou smiled. With a flick of his wrist, he set up a very basic bounded field that Rin had taught him to alert him to intruders. Odds were, he'd notice the presence of an enemy Servant before the ward was ever tripped, but it never hurt to be too careful.

"You're welcome, Louise."

— o.o.O.O.o —

"The hotel used to be a castle meant for repelling Albion invaders. This parade ground, though it would have also been used in celebrations and for practicing, would have been a battlefield. Beneath our feet, this ground has undoubtedly tasted the blood of many unfortunate soldiers who gave their lives for Tristain."

Wardes gave Shirou a small smirk. "A fitting place for a duel, no?"

Shirou eyed the debris scattered hither thither, the crates and empty wine and beer barrels, and though it was difficult to imagine that such an abandoned and ill-kept place once held banners and flags bearing the royal image, felt that it was indeed a proper place. Where better to understand the gravity of combat than in a place where so many had died fighting?

"Indeed," he acknowledged.

Over on the edge of the area and well away from where the action would be taking place, standing as their witness, Louise looked on anxiously. She seemed as though she wanted to cheer for one of them but couldn't decide who, or perhaps she could and didn't want to offend the other. Next to her, Guiche, Kirche, and Tabitha had all come to watch.

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Tabitha had even set aside her book and was staring at him and Wardes unblinkingly.

"Back in the reign of Phillip III, this was also a place for Nobles to conduct duels, much like we are now," Wardes continued. "Back in that time, when kings still had the right to accept and participate in duels, back when the Nobles were truly noble, when they risked their lives for fame and honor...but that is a time long past. Today, duels are fought over petty things and for petty reasons, such as women or minor insults."

Wardes drew his wand-sword and held it lightly in an almost rapier-like style.

"I'm afraid I cannot promise to hold back," Wardes explained. "With my honor at stake, and with the terms of our wager, my pride would accept nothing less than facing you at my very best."

"I understand," Shirou said solemnly. He drew Derflinger with a loud ring of steel. "Even I have that wretched thing called pride."

He flipped Derf over so that the broader blunt side faced away from his body, where the sharp edge would normally go.

"However," Shirou went on, "I'm afraid I must promise the opposite, Sir Wardes. Because my Master is fond of you and because it would be pointless to maim or kill you, I shall hold back from doing any serious damage as best as I am able."

Wardes frowned. "Even now, you would mock me?"

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"Not at all," Shirou answered easily. "It's simply pragmatism. If I fought you with all I am, neither you nor my Master would survive, and if I did not take care to keep from doing too much damage, then I might kill you, in which case both my Master and the Princess would be cross with me."

Wardes still frowned and hefted that peculiar-looking wand-sword that resembled more the dulled and round-tipped fencing foil than a real sword. Ten meters — 32.8084 feet — still separated them.

Then Wardes' legs tensed and, more briskly than even the best Olympian athlete, he dashed forward and closed the distance with incredible speed. To Shirou, however, he was still moving slow — too slow and too sluggish to take advantage of the momentary thrill of surprise that shot through Shirou's belly and brain.

With a simple flick of his wrist, Derflinger deflected Wardes' stab up and away while Shirou reached out with his free hand and, gently enough not to do any serious damage, pushed Wardes away with his open palm.

Even despite his taking it easy, Shirou's push still sent Wardes flying backwards as his feet skidded along the ground. For a moment, Wardes did not move or attack again.

Shirou frowned.

The simple fact of the matter was, ordinary humans of this day and age, even in this strange world, could not naturally reach even half of E-Rank on the scale. In Shirou's world, not even with Reinforcement.

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Despite that, Shirou had once before seen a modern human with the capability to physically match blows with a Servant. Yes — despite the fact that Kuzuki Souichirou had not even been a mage, he had been able to move with the speed of a Servant and hit with the strength of one.

How? By having a magus from the Age of Gods use magic to reinforce his body and fists.

That he hadn't considered it, that he hadn't realized that this world, stuck as it was in a pseudo Age of Gods, would have mages capable of similar abilities was a failing of his that he would have to work on.

Even still, Shirou was faster and his reflexes greater, made only better by the Gandalf class abilities. An army of swordsmen coming at him so quickly might prove a problem, but against a single swordsman, the only thing that might have doomed him was the surprise.

And when you faced monstrosities who fought on a level well beyond humans, surprise was the first thing you learned to overcome, or else you died.

Wardes came at him again with a flurry of attacks, each aimed at a critical target on the body — groin, hand, jugular, eyes, temples, stomach, heart, all the targets swordsmen were taught to aim at — but Shirou deflected and parried them all with ease.

Wardes was good, but Saber was so much better that it wasn't any comparison.

He considered reaching in and pushing Wardes away again, but he admitted to being curious about how good

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Wardes was as a mage, and if he kept pushing Wardes away, Wardes might think he was pressed or nervous about fighting up close. No, the better idea was to let Wardes struggle for a little bit to get in a hit at close range, then come to the conclusion it was pointless himself.

Shirou had barely decided on it when Wardes seemed to understand that he was outmatched as a swordsman and flung himself back and away, panting only slightly.

"I see," Wardes said. "Yes, the Gandalf's legendary speed and agility are surely not exaggerated. I'm not fast enough to defeat you with a sword."

He hefted his sword again. "Very well, then. I am Viscount Jean-Jacques de Wardes, Wardes the Lightning. I am called that because my attacks are fast and require only short incantations...and also because —"

He thrust the wand-sword forward.

"— I have mastered the Triangle Wind Magic, Lightning!"

Shirou understood the implications immediately, before the magic was even cast, and understood what it meant: lightning, like all electricity, sought out the nearest conductor to hit and ground it. Any conductor would do, but stronger conductors, like metals and water, would be hit harder and carry the charge better.

Humans, like Shirou, were about seventy percent water.

The moment Shirou understood that — shortly after Wardes' words met his ears — he kicked off the ground,

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destroying the scuffed marble in the process, and rocketed toward Wardes before the spell could be completed.

But Wardes had predicted his reaction, and two spells leapt from the tip of his wand-sword almost at the same instant Shirou had started moving.

The first spell was only blunt force wind, but it propelled the second spell, a razor-sharp blade of air, much faster than it would have gone on its own, and Shirou was forced to stop and cleave it in half before it reached him.

The sheer force of the swing, with nothing held back, tore apart the wind blade like it was paper.

But it was only a distraction, and Shirou knew it as he felt more magical energy build up in Wardes like a fountain. The time it took for him to deal with the blade of wind was enough time for Wardes to finish a third spell, and a flash of blue lightning leapt from the tip of the wand-sword towards Shirou, who held Derf in front of him to intercept the bolt before he'd even realized that his arm had moved.

He expected to be jolted by the electricity as it flowed down the steel sword and into his arm, then up his arm and through his body before it exited through his feet into the ground, but the flash of blue hit Derflinger, engulfed the entire blade, and...disappeared. There was no sting of electrocution that numbed his fingers and set his skin ablaze, no jolt that raced through his chest and stopped his heart, no hot-cold stab of pain that sent his muscles seizing.

The spell simply hit Derflinger and was gone.

Wardes looked as surprised as Shirou felt.

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"Ah!" Derf declared brightly. "That was pretty shocking, wasn't it? Who knew I could absorb spells?"

Would've been nice to know yesterday, Derf, Shirou thought.

"Her Highness said it was a talking sword," Wardes mumbled faintly, "but she never mentioned that it could absorb magic..."

Shirou frowned and turned himself back to the duel. "That spell was a finishing move, wasn't it?"

"Ah." Wardes focused back on the duel as well and his face became serious again. "Yes. Lightning spells are generally high-level magic that is meant to defeat the enemy decisively. Whenever I used it before, it was always an attack that finished the fight. I warned you, Sir Shirou, that I wouldn't hold back."

"I see." Shirou considered it. Wardes, it seemed, was at least a Triangle mage, and unlike Fouquet, whose golem had been more bark than bite, Wardes' magic was potent and dangerous, and Wardes had just tried to hit him with a finishing move, magic designed to end the battle.

Given that it was a lightning spell, Shirou was more inclined to believe that its usage was often fatal. He was also inclined that a spell of that level might just have been enough to endanger his life, or even kill him.

Shirou's body was hardier than an ordinary person, but he was still human.

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If Wardes was going to take it that seriously, seriously enough to use a spell that might have killed him...well. He could only respond in kind, couldn't he?

But what should he...?

Ah. That would work.

Shirou stepped into a stance and made sure that Derf's dull side was still positioned so that the attack would be dulled and not sharp.

"Then if you attacked with such a spell, I will show you something comparable," Shirou said solemnly. "I promise you, I won't kill you. With this, however, I will show you the gulf that exists between you and I...between you and the enemy that might attack us during our mission."

He rocketed forward again, too fast for Wardes to stop, too fast for Wardes to cast a spell, and stopped once he was in range. The technique he had in mind was not something he could have replicated with Derflinger — in the first place, even Saber wasn't good enough to do it, and she was still a better swordsman than him — and was only useable if he had Traced the appropriate sword, the Monohoshizao, but with sheer speed, it would be visually similar and just as striking.

A facsimile, a fake that would look almost identical to the untrained eye — that was all he intended to do. But as he tensed his muscles, everything changed. His legs moved into position almost on instinct, and his arms carried through with a technique that he had not known before, that he could not have hoped to do before, that Shirou, as a swordsman, could never have hoped to replicate.

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One strike — Shirou almost forgot to hold back before it hit, he was so surprised, but at the last second, he reigned in enough of his strength that Wardes would suffer nothing worse than a bruise.

Two strikes — concurrently, he swung from the opposite side, removing the ability to block. Even if he'd had the presence of mind to try, Wardes would not have been able to defend against both at the same time. The only way to avoid the sword, coming at him from two different angles at once, would have been —

Three strikes — occurring simultaneously with the other two, the third swing came down from above, caging in the only escape — upwards — and arcing down for Wardes' head, the nail in the coffin. Unavoidable, unblockable, it dove downwards, cleaved through his hat, and...stopped, mere centimeters above his head.

Three swings completed simultaneously, an attack on the level of Multi-Dimensional Refraction. Utilizing no magic or magecraft and done through sheer martial skill, it touched upon the Kaleidoscope, the Second Magic of Kischur Zelretch Schweinorg, and attacked three times in the same instant. With the effort of a single swing, three were made instead, occupying the same place in time-space.

Tsubame Gaeshi: the pinnacle of swordsmanship perfected by a nameless farmer in pursuit of cutting down a fleeing swallow, trained and trained and trained over a lifetime of dedication and so powerful that it touched upon the realm of gods. It was a technique Emiya Shirou had never actually witnessed himself, but which had been recorded in

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the Blade Works alongside the sword that had been used to unleash it, Monohoshizao.

Without the sword that had had the skill ingrained upon its very existence, Emiya Shirou should never have been able to complete it.

It was impossible.

For a Faker whose own sword skills were leeching from the memories of a sword carried by a powerful knight, the idea of actually doing it was nothing more than a pipedream.

And yet, he had done it.

The runes on the back of his hand glowed.

There was only silence as the technique completed, and neither Wardes nor Shirou moved. Everything seemed to have frozen. No one breathed, no one quivered — even the wind seemed to have stopped cold. Shirou felt as though even his heart had stopped.

It was Guiche who broke the silence.

"Th-three swings," he stuttered, "w-with one attack! I-I didn't know Sir Shirou could do such a thing!"

Neither did I, Shirou thought with a sort of detached amazement. This wasn't his own skill — no, he would never think himself so capable as to reproduce through sheer skill a technique he had never seen in person — so it had to be the runes.

He had thought, before, that they only increased his strength, agility, and speed when he was holding a sword.

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Those were the obvious effects, after all, and they were easy to see whenever he so much as touched Derf's hilt or brushed his fingers along the sword sheathed at his hip. There hadn't been anything else.

Until now. Just now, when the runes had pushed his body forward into a technique that Shirou should not have been able to do, had not had the practice or the skill to complete. And yet, they had given him the ability to perform it, and he had performed it so flawlessly that, if he'd been watching and unaware, he might have mistaken himself for its creator and master.

Just now, these runes had let him do that.

If they could let him recreate Tsubame Gaeshi...then what exactly were the limits?

"Darling," Kirche breathed rapturously, "you're so *cool*!"

"Sh-Shirou..."

Wardes' wand-sword fell limply from his right hand and clattered to the ground as his arms dropped bonelessly to his sides.

"Three swings simultaneously," he analyzed quietly, "and yet, you slowed each strike almost to a stop before you hit me...If you had used all your strength and the sharp side of that blade...I would be dead."

"The best swordsman I know, who could have otherwise defeated me handily, wouldn't have been able to survive," Shirou agreed.

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If Tsubame Gaeshi were completed without flaw and without mistake, then even Saber would have been defeated. It was not an attack that could be blocked with a sword or dodged with pure speed. The only way to avoid it was to simply stop it before it was used or be outside of its considerable range.

"I see."

Yet, despite his pain, Wardes grinned.

"Yes, I was defeated, so I must concede. You have won, Sir Shirou, so as per our wager, I will not ask to room with Louise again."

Wardes turned his keen eyes to Guiche. "Mister Guiche. Please return to the hotel and find a Water Mage. If I am to be of any use for the rest of this trip, I will need my arms healed."

Guiche startled at being called on and blinked stupidly for a moment, then snapped his gaping mouth shut and immediately went to fetch a Water Mage for Wardes. Shirou relaxed out of his stance and pulled Derflinger away, who whispered, "Now, *that* was one helluva ride!" before he was sheathed.

Wardes, defeated, bent down and picked up his wand-sword, wincing all the way, and then sheathed it at his belt. As he looked back up, his eyes met Shirou's for a moment, and between them passed a silent understanding.

Without saying a word, Wardes told Shirou, "I'll leave her in your care."

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— o.O.O.O.o —

The rest of the day passed rather lazily — Wardes had been away for most of the afternoon experiencing the tender healing care of a rather pretty Water Mage who dealt with his bruises. Guiche had remained mostly silent, staring at Shirou with not a little bit of awe, while Tabitha had gone back to reading and Kirche was gushing every now and again to whoever would listen about how awesome Shirou was.

As a result, dinner was a bit awkward, but mostly a normal affair. Wardes, who had had a tailor stitch his ruined hat back together, favored both arms. Though the Water Mage had apparently healed them perfectly, it appeared they were still a little tender and sore, so he couldn't use them as easily or as well as he might have liked. Shirou felt a little bad for him, but wasn't sorry.

Lightning was dangerous, after all.

Louise seemed to be stewing about something and hadn't said more than a few words since the duel. Shirou suspected that she had still believed that Wardes might win, even knowing the sort of things Shirou was capable of — but that was only natural. When you had someone you looked up to, someone you were infatuated with the way Louise was Wardes, you tended to build them up and make them something more than what they were.

That was how heroes were born. That was how gods were born.

Even in modern schools and such, the same occurred. Hadn't Rin been the school idol, someone who was so

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perfect and so beautiful that she was an untouchable dream to everyone else? Hadn't everyone in school been so infatuated with her and so in awe of her that they'd placed her on a pedestal?

It was only natural, so Shirou didn't blame Louise for thinking so highly of Wardes — if nothing else, it was a leftover of her raising, the belief that the magic-wielding nobility were above everyone else.

Guiche, still silent, was eating sedately and looked like he had a lot on his mind. Tabitha had her book propped up on her legs and was alternating between taking bites of food and turning the pages. Kirche was quiet, too, but kept throwing Shirou looks when she thought he wasn't looking.

Shirou ignored all of it as he ate his own food, but kept a small portion of his attention on the others situated around the table. Sure, everything was peaceful *now*, but how often had he been in a similar situation? How often had things been calm and nice and jovial, only to suddenly be interrupted by an enemy assault?

Worse, you could expect that sort of thing if you knew who your enemy was, but it was much harder to predict if you didn't know who was giving the orders. Fouquet, that Heroic Spirit — they both answered to someone higher up on the chain, some mysterious, shadowy figure whose name and identity were completely unknown. How could you know whether you would be attacked if you didn't know what kind of person the enemy truly was?

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You couldn't. You had to be prepared to act and defend yourself at any moment. You had to put yourself in a state of constant readiness.

Shirou had had much practice, so he could split his attention between his food and his companions, and he was ready to move at a moment's notice. After all, the best time to stage an attack was when your enemy was most unguarded, when they were relaxed and unfocused. In other words, when they were asleep or eating.

So —

An arrow whizzed by Shirou's ear. It came without warning and virtually without a sound and embedded itself into the marble table, splitting a piece of fruit in half on its way. For an instant, everything stopped and Louise, Guiche, Tabitha, and Kirche merely stared uncomprehendingly at the swaying feathered end.

Something heavy slammed into the front wall and made a big, gigantic hole right where the doors had been.

"My wall! My doors!" the owner cried, standing up. Another arrow whizzed through the room and landed in his shoulder, and, with his face etched with surprise, he fell backwards to the floor.

Shirou leapt to his feet, which startled the others, and said, "Down!"

The others dove out of their chairs and to the floor as Shirou hefted the entire table up at once and flipped it over, food flying all over the place. He set it heavily on the floor,

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legs sticking out and towards the new hole like spears, just in time to catch the third arrow.

With the table between them and the door, Shirou ducked behind his makeshift barricade as the others in his group scrambled to join him. Wardes took up space at the left edge of the table with Guiche next to him, and then Shirou, and on Shirou's other side were Louise, Kirche, and Tabitha. Somehow, they all managed to squeeze behind that one table while the other patrons ducked underneath their own tables or else behind the counter at the other end of the room.

More arrows came — some soared up over the table and landed in the floor and some slammed home into the table itself with a loud thud, quivering. It was efficient: there was never enough time between volleys for one of the mages to stand up and take aim with a spell, so all they could do was simply sit there as arrows poured out of the darkness outside and pinned them to that one spot.

Then, everything stopped. Silence stretched out through the air, and for an instant, it seemed like it was all over.

Guiche made to stand and peer over the table, but Shirou pulled him back down and gave him a shake of his head. He leaned forward the look past Guiche to Wardes.

"Wardes," he whispered, and jerked his head upward. Wardes mouth thinned into a grim line and he nodded.

Taking off his newly repaired hat, Wardes slowly and steadily held it up over the edge of the table. It was an old, cliché trick, but for those who were looking for just the slightest hint of movement, it was a trick that worked.

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Immediately, a volley of arrows came through the hole in the wall and tore Wardes' hat from his hand as they carried it away and pinned it to the floor.

It was as Shirou suspected, then. The first volley had been designed to get them behind cover and limit their available space. Now that they had, the enemy would wait until one of the mages of the group stood up to incant a spell, and then hit that mage with enough arrows to guarantee a kill.

It was a simple plan, but it was efficient and it worked. It also meant that it wasn't just bandits — bandits were more interested in items and money than killing people — it meant that their attackers were here for blood, and since the only ones who might be interested in killing Shirou and his group were enemies, either from Albion or Fouquet's master...

"How troublesome," Wardes muttered. Shirou silently agreed.

"Could it be those Nobles from Albion?" Louise asked quietly. "Reconquista?"

"Possible," Wardes answered. "If they had any idea what we our mission was, then there's no doubt Reconquista would try to stop us. On the other hand, I am a bit famous — it comes with being the Captain of the Griffin Knights. It's also possible that they want to kill me — if, as we suspect, Reconquista will turn its attentions to Tristain after the Royalists are beaten, then I would undoubtedly be a target of some value."

"But I don't think they're going to tell us either way," Shirou added. "The fact that they're attacking from a range

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means they know we have mages, but they probably have close-range fighters, too."

Guiche straightened a little and adopted a very serious expression. "Then," he began, "then my Valkyries can protect us —"

"They have too many men," Kirche pointed out with a shake of her fiery-red hair. "You can only make seven Valkyries, Guiche, against a group of at least twenty. Mercenary bands tend to become very large, after all."

"Listen to Zerbst," Louise told Guiche flatly. "She's a barbarian from Germania, so she would know."

Kirche huffed and crossed her arms under her chest — Shirou suspected she did it purposefully to emphasize her bust, because Louise flushed, looked down at her own chest, and scowled.

"Well, we won't know if we don't try," Guiche said a little hotly. "It couldn't hurt —"

"Except it's probably what they're waiting for," Kirche argued back. "Pin us down with arrows, shoot us when we stand up to incant, and if we manage to actually cast a spell, then overwhelm us with numbers and force us to exhaust ourselves! If you summon your Valkyries, they'll keep pressing until you're too tired to fight back!"

She huffed again. "Honestly! Don't you Tristainians know anything about tactics and strategy?"

"I am the son of General de Gramont," Guiche began indignantly, "how could I —"

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"Quiet," Wardes ordered sharply.

Guiche's mouth snapped shut and even Kirche fell completely silent.

"Listen carefully," Wardes said quietly. "The mission doesn't require all of us to go. It counts as complete as long as the objective is fulfilled."

Tabitha's book snapped closed — Shirou hadn't even realized she'd still been reading the entire time — and she turned to Wardes with a closed-off dead stare that gave nothing away.

"Bait," she declared softly.

"Exactly," Wardes nodded.

Tabitha turned and pointed with her long staff at Shirou, Louise, and Wardes. "Go to the harbor," she ordered in the same tone. "We'll cover you."

"When?" Wardes asked.

"Now."

Wardes gave another nod. "Alright. Sir Shirou, Louise, we'll need to be quick or else this will all be for nothing —"

"Shirou," Louise's voice cut off everything. Wardes, who had been halfway to standing, stopped.

"Louise," he said, "we don't have time to argue —"

Louise ignored him and was focused entirely on Shirou. "Can you defeat them?"

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Shirou allowed himself a very, very small smile. "Is that an order, Master?"

Louise smiled back, humorless. "Yes, it is. Shirou, defeat these mercenaries."

"Very well." He quirked an eyebrow. "Now that I think of it, I've never done magic in front of you before, have I, Louise?"

He sighed and closed his eyes, reaching into his inner world, into the Unlimited Blade Works.

"Magic?" Guiche asked.

"Darling is a mage?" Kirche asked, too.

He ignored them. "*I am the bone of my sword.*"

Shirou snapped to his feet and threw out one arm even as another volley of arrows came flying.

"RHO AIAS!"

A wall sprang into existence, an invisible force field that blocked all the incoming arrows effortlessly. Marked only by seven pink petals, shaped like a hyacinth flower, it was a barrier seven layers strong, and each layer had the strength and fortitude of a fortress wall. It was the Rho Aias, the shield of Ajax of Telamon, sublimed into a conceptual weapon that could stalemate even Cúchulainn's Gáe Bolg.

"My affinity is swords," Shirou explained without looking away. More arrows came and struck the shield, all for naught. The mercenaries kept firing them, despite the fact that they weren't even denting the Aias. "With it, I can recreate nearly

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any weapon — swords, especially, but with a little more effort, spears, arrows, bows, warhammers, just about anything you could imagine. It's a bit more difficult, but I can even reproduce defensive items like shields."

Wardes, Louise, Guiche, and Kirche had all been struck silent, and even Tabitha, who was normally silent anyway, was staring up at him with her eyes wider than normal. None of them seemed to know what to say.

At last, the barrage of arrows stopped. Shirou walked out from behind the table and through the hole in the wall, dismissing the Aias with a gesture of his hand as he passed. He stepped out into the darkness of the night, and on the road before him, there was a group of armored men with assorted weaponry, obviously intent on fighting him if they had to.

He reached up and unsheathed Derflinger, ignoring the mercenaries as they tensed, and he glared out at them with a scowl.

"This is your only chance," he said loudly, making sure his voice carried to the archers who had no doubt hid themselves among the rocks and rooftops around him. "You attacked us unannounced without declaring grievances and came with the intent to kill, so I will give you this one chance."

Shirou pointed Derf's tip at the group on the road, all of whom flinched as though expecting him to attack.

"Leave," he barked the order. "Retreat now, and you won't be pursued. You have my word that none of you will come to harm."

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For a moment, there was only silence. Then, the group on the road and the archers waiting in the wings all started laughing, lowly at first, then louder and louder until it echoed all around him.

"Leave?" one of the road group asked, taking a brave step forward. "There's only one of you and a whole bunch of us. We can beat you all on our own and step over your corpse!"

The brave one gestured with his hammer. "Kill him!"

The road group let out a warcry as one and charged at him, weapons all drawn. Shirou didn't waste any more breath and lifted his free hand. With a loud click, he snapped his fingers.

From nowhere, swords rained down out of the sky, each twice as tall as an ordinary man and nearly as wide. They came down from above and sank easily into the ground, and the warcry turned suddenly into panicked screams as the road group tried to get away from the blades. They huddled together as more and more swords came, cutting off each avenue of escape until they were completely and entirely surrounded, trapped behind a cage of steel twice their height and nearly as wide as they were.

It was a simple trick, one he'd used several times before against heretic magi and Dead Apostles alike. To separate cooperating enemies, cage in familiars so they couldn't help their masters, or cut off an angle of escape, he created a wall or cage of steel, leaving only enough space to squint through — trying to squeeze an arm through the razor-sharp blades ran the risk of being cut, or worse, losing the arm.

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This was what Shirou had done to the group on the road. First, he had blocked the front, and then the sides and the rear as they tried to escape. The end result was a cage with barely enough room for all of them to stand and not enough space for them to escape. Each blade was thick and at least ten times as strong as an ordinary sword — that was only natural, because each sword was about ten times as big as an ordinary sword.

The swords would last about fifteen hours, more than enough time for the authorities to come and get these mercenaries and prepare cells for them. Before that, however, there were also the archers to take care of, so Shirou turned away from the captured brigands and closed his eyes.

"Resonance," he incanted. "The sword cries out. A thousand siblings answer."

A wave swept out from Shirou, ruffling his coat as it did so, and moved on and away with him as its center like a ripple. To an observer, it would look, perhaps, like nothing special, but it was actually a spell.

You couldn't always fight with your eyes. Shirou had learned that the hard way, after an experience with a particularly nasty Ancestor. Some creatures had powerful ocular abilities called Mystic Eyes which let them do things like bend the minds of those who met their gazes or infatuate anyone who looked in their direction. To fight those kinds of enemies, or really any enemy who you couldn't observe visually for whatever reason, you needed something that let you see that which you could not look at.

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That was what this spell did. It worked on a principle similar to echolocation used by creatures like bats and sent out a wave that observed his surroundings and reported them back as visual information. If he were better as a mage, he probably could have gotten that visual information in color and great detail, but since he wasn't, it came back as basically grey blobs. The only details the spell really showed him were general shapes.

But it was enough. With the spell, he found the location of the archers, who showed up as human-shaped blobs crouched around the place.

Right. Time to knock them out.

"Trace, on."

In the air, yet more swords formed — no, more accurately, a single sword formed several times. With a sleek, slender shape, a white-wrapped grip, a simple circular guard, and a tiger-striped talisman dangling from the pommel, no less than two dozen copies of Torashinai appeared in the air, and with a mental command, shot off into the dark.

Several cries of pain echoed out as they found their marks and slammed into the heads of the archers. It would definitely be a painful blow, but Shirou had specifically blunted the effects, and even more specifically used a practice wooden sword rather than the real thing, to keep from killing anyone unnecessarily.

Shirou let out a sigh and flicked his Circuits off, sheathing Derflinger ("I didn't even get to do anything!"). He allowed himself to relax; the threat was dealt with.

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"It's alright!" he called back into the inn. "You can come out, now!"

He turned back towards the captured mercenaries and wryly thought that if he didn't face an actual threat sometime soon, then he was going to get rusty —

"Shirou! Behind y —"

But the warning wasn't fast enough. Even as Shirou started to turn around, something sharp bit into his side and dragged through the skin and muscle, erupting into agony. A dark shape fluttered past him like a ghost, and a splash of red blood splattered onto the ground.

Shirou's hand immediately flew to his wounded side as he turned to face his attacker. Behind him, he heard the footsteps of Louise and the rest of the group come to a halt.

The dark shape was a man, relatively tall and shrouded in a black cloak. Silvery armor peeked out on his feet and a scraggly mane of wavy red hair hung from his head, but the face was guarded by a mask with ornate symbols and tribal lines painted onto it. In one of the figure's hands was a long polearm with a wickedly curved blade.

"Yes," the figure said in a calm voice. "Having seen it up close with my own eyes, I can say this with certainty: that sword is not Excalibur, and you are not King Arthur."

The figure shifted. On his feet, little wings fluttered at the ankles of his armored sandals.

"That woman was mistaken," the figure declared. "Though it looks similar, you do not carry with you the

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pinnacle of holy swords, a divine miracle crafted from the glory all warriors seek. Yours is a mere facsimile. It would trick idiots and incompetents, but not a real Heroic Spirit."

The polearm came up and pointed at Shirou. "You are a pretender, hiding in the shadow of a true hero, grasping at whatever fame and glory you can using the name of a great king."

Shirou grunted and observed his hand — it was covered in blood.

"I never claimed to be King Arthur," he declared calmly, "nor did I attempt to use that name to further myself. I simply didn't correct that woman when she assumed I was Arthur. It was a pragmatic decision to provide me a psychological advantage over the enemy — much like you decided to wear a cloak and a mask to hide your own identity."

The figure didn't flinch or otherwise react to the accusation. Shirou filed that away — it meant that this Heroic Spirit, for he could not be anything else with that presence, had no compunctions with using whatever he could to his own advantage.

"But it's pointless anyway," Shirou went on. "Even with your face hidden behind that mask and your armor and distinguishing features hidden by that cloak, I can tell your name with but a single glance at your sword, Heroic Spirit *Persesus*."

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For a long moment, the figure said nothing, and then, slowly and calmly, the other hand came up and pulled away the mask to reveal a handsome face.

"In another time, in another place, I would have to fight you because you knew my name," Perseus acknowledged. "However, my objectives here tonight have been fulfilled, so there is no reason for me to stay here any longer. We will meet another time, nameless hero."

He leapt backwards and off the cliff, and though it might have been suicidal for others, Shirou knew Perseus had no reason to concern himself — the winged sandals, Talaria, would let him fly.

Shirou turned away immediately and back to the others. "Grab our stuff and head for the harbor. We need to get going."

"S-Sir Shirou!" Guiche protested. "You're wounded!"

"Zerbst!" Louise ordered. "Find a Water Mage!"

"Don't bother, Kirche," Shirou countermanded. "Get our luggage. We need to get out of here quickly."

Louise bristled. "Shirou, you're wounded! We're not leaving until it gets looked at! That's an order!"

"There's no point, Louise —"

"Darling, I know you're trying to be manly and everything, and it's really cute, but —"

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"Sir Shirou," Wardes interrupted, "a wound will only slow you down. Better to take a few minutes to get it treated now rather than lose so much more time along the way."

"Exactly!" Louise agreed. "You need to get it treated before it gets worse!"

Shirou grimaced and let his hand drop away from his side.

Everyone stopped. Wardes recoiled. Louise's skin turned the pale color of milk and Kirche looked a little green. Tabitha's eyes went wide, which Shirou suspected was her way of screaming in surprise, and Guiche swore faintly.

The wound Shirou had been given had never been especially deep or life-threatening, but it was far more serious than a paper cut. Immediately after the attack, it would have been red and raw and you could probably have seen the rings of severed muscle where he'd been cut. Now, the sliced skin still bled a little sluggishly, but beneath it, where the injured flesh should have been, there was only a mishmash of interlocking swords that tied it all together.

"It's not healing," Shirou explained to them. "Even if you went and found the best Water Mage in Tristain, she couldn't heal this injury. Right now, this magic is holding the wound closed, but it won't heal it. This has to heal on its own."

There was a short silence.

"Wh-what do you mean?" Louise asked shakily. Her eyes were still glued to his side.

"The sword that inflicted this wound is one that possesses a curse," Shirou told her. He watched them all flinch, except,

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curiously enough, Wardes. "Any wound it inflicts cannot be healed by any magic, but only by the body's normal processes. That is the effect of Harpe: All Life is Equal."

He brought his hand back up to his side. "But you do have something of a point. Guiche." Guiche startled. "Go get our luggage and bring it here. Use your Valkyries if you need to, just make sure you get all of it as quickly as you can."

He nodded and left, scrambling through the hole in the wall and tripping once or twice on his way.

"Kirche." Kirche startled, too.

"Yes, Darling?"

"Go back inside, check on the others. If you can, get us some bandages so I can wrap this." He gestured to his wound. "Take Tabitha with you."

She nodded, grabbed Tabitha, and went back inside. Shirou turned to the last two members of their group. "Sir Wardes."

Wardes straightened.

"I need you to go to the docks and see if you can't find us a ship. We should leave as soon as possible."

Wardes, though Shirou expected him to comment about who was leading the mission, only nodded, said "Of course," and made for the docks.

That left Shirou alone with Louise.

For a long moment, there was only silence as they stared at each other. Shirou expected perhaps questions about his

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skills, or even for Derf to interject with a dry comment, but when it was finally broken, it was Louise who quietly asked, "Are you okay?"

Shirou grimaced and pulled his hand away for a moment. He was still bleeding, and it wasn't that good. If it wasn't for the mesh of swords holding the wound closed, he might have bled out within a couple more minutes.

He wasn't about to tell Louise that, though.

"I've had worse," he settled for instead.

She frowned, took a few steps closer, and reached out as though to touch him, but hesitated and dropped her hand at the last few inches.

"Does it hurt?"

Shirou chuckled a little. "It's a sword wound, Louise."

She scowled at him and took a stance, hands on her hips. "I was just trying to be nice!" she said angrily. "You don't need to be sarcastic about it!"

Shirou laughed again. Indignant, with her cheeks red and her eyes narrowed, she looked cute.

"My apologies, Master," he said, bowing a little (and hiding a wince when his wound protested). "I'll keep that in mind from now on."

She kept up the scowl for a few moments longer, then dropped it, sighed, and looked over at where Perseus had stood.

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"I was expecting it to be much easier than this," she confessed. "I thought...I don't know. I guess I thought we'd just go in and grab the letter without running into any trouble."

Shirou hummed an agreement. "That was the plan. There's a proverb in my homeworld, though. 'No plan survives contact with the enemy.' Or something like that."

"I guess not," Louise lamented. "So far, *nothing* has gone according to plan. First, those bandits, and then Zerbst and Tabitha, then those mercenaries, and now, another one of those crazy strong guys. How are we supposed to fight a *pseudo god*?"

"You're not," Shirou said immediately. "I am. I'd be a pretty horrible Servant if I actually expected you to fight an enemy like that."

"But you're wounded!" she pointed to his side. "He did that to you! What if it's more serious, next time? What if he cuts off your arm or your head? If you can't heal those injuries with magic, then you could die, Shirou! For real!"

"Which is nothing new," Shirou said a little more harshly than he'd intended. She flinched. "Any experienced fighter goes into battle knowing that it could be his last. Any experienced fighter knows that he could be killed by the enemy. I told you that I've had far worse injuries than this, Louise — that is the truth. If I shied away simply because I could die, then I could never accomplish anything. If you're always afraid of failing, then you can never move forward."

Louise flinched again. "But —"

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"I'm back!" Kirche announced, stepping out of the inn with a roll of bandages brandished in one hand. Tabitha was next to her.

"Good," Shirou said. "Bring them over here. I'll need some help with this..."

It only took a few minutes to take off his coat and shirt (and he ignored both Kirche, who stared at the exposed muscles gained from years of practice and dedication, and Louise, whose eyes jumped from scar to scar as though she were just now realizing all he'd been through) and start bandaging his side. He could technically have done it himself, but it would wind up neater and better off if he had someone else to wrap them.

Fortunately for the sake of his sanity, he'd enlisted Tabitha to help him instead of Kirche. Unlike Kirche, who probably would have taken the chance to feel him up as much as she could get away with, Tabitha neatly and efficiently bandaged his wound. Her nimble fingers and careful system of up and down circles belied experience — obviously, she had done something like this before. But for who, he wondered?

Well, either way, he was thankful to have her. If this was any indication, then this mission to Albion might prove more dangerous than he had first estimated.

With two Heroic Spirits out there, both of them hostile, someone to bind their group's wounds would be invaluable.

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CONTINUE?

[YES/NO]

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #4

"Waaaaa!" Ilya cried loudly. "Tsubame Gaeshi! The super ultra-rare ultimate sword technique that touches upon the Second True Magic and completes three swings simultaneously that only one guy has which is so powerful that it's considered on par with a Noble Phantasm! Onii-chan, you're so cool!"

"I'm surprised you managed all of that in one breath, considering how small your lungs must be," Rin said flatly. "Oh, the curse of being an eternal loli!"

She gave a sardonic gesture of her finger. Ilya didn't seem to have heard her.

"Onii-chan is so cool!" Ilya was saying over and over again.

Rin gave a snort. "You'd think I hadn't explained to her just last lesson that Shirou's Gandalf class abilities let him recreate any weapon skill as long as he has a decent grasp of its workings."

"I know," Ilya said to Rin. "But it's one thing entirely to talk about it and another to see it in action! Onii-chan is so cool!"

"You realize that any Gandalf could do it if they knew what Tsubame Gaeshi was, right?" Rin deadpanned.

"Don't ruin my moment, Rin!" Ilya snapped back.

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"Too bad. Moment ruined. Can we get back to what we're supposed to be talking about? If you don't get back on track, we'll use up all of our allotted space. Last time, we went at least three hundred words longer than we were supposed to, but the author's a generous guy, so he didn't cut us short before we finished."

Ilya sighed.

"Fine," she huffed petulantly. "Let's go."

"Thank you." Rin said politely. Then, she wacked Ilya across the back of her head with a rolled up newspaper.

"Ow!" Ilya whined. "That hurt, Rin!"

Rin wacked Ilya again. "Tohsaka-sensei, *student*."

Ilya scowled and looked about to protest, but she bit back whatever retort had been on the tip of her tongue and said instead, "Fine. Tohsaka-sensei."

"Good." Rin nodded. She pulled out a marker. "Now, we're going to cover a really exciting topic, today, or we're going to start it, at least. We probably won't finish it. In fact, we might need another three lessons to cover it all."

Ilya perked up. "So we're finally going to cover the —"

Rin covered Ilya's mouth with her hand. "No," she said, "we'll cover that next. For now, we'll be covering magic — specifically, how these backwards, backwater mages cast their spells and stuff, and —"

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Rin's face suddenly twisted into an expression of disgust and she jerked her hand away from Ilya's mouth. Ilya grinned at her like a cat who'd eaten the canary.

"That was disgusting!" Rin snapped. She wiped her hand on her skirt.

Ilya stuck out her tongue, which she had just used to lick Rin's palm. "It got you to move your hand, didn't it?"

"What are you, ten?!"

"Of course I am," Ilya said innocently. She gestured down to her body. "Couldn't you tell?"

Rin growled and her hand twitched as though she wished for nothing more than to reach over and wrap her fingers around Ilya's neck. Visibly, she reined herself in.

"Anyway," she said loudly, "we're going to cover Halkeginian magic today."

"Right!" Ilya declared cheerfully. "Please teach me, Tohsaka-sensei!"

"You're a bit over the top again, Ilya."

"Stop being an old lady, Rin."

Rin's eyebrow twitched, but she very purposefully cleared her throat and adopted her infamous lecture pose. "To begin with," she started, "Halkeginian magecraft does not require the same system of incantations that Fate/Stay Night and Tsukihime fans will be familiar with. They don't need long chants to produce effects of great scale or versatility. Unlike the magi of the Nasuverse, Halkeginian mages can do some

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fairly large scale and incredibly versatile things with nothing more than a flick of the wrist or a short, one-word chant."

"Why's that?" Ilya asked.

"Mystery," Rin answered. "It all comes down to Mystery. Because magic has become commonplace in Halkeginia, the need for long chants and incantations to enact a sort of self-hypnosis to "convince" oneself that magic is possible and connect to the Magical Foundation is very much reduced. This allows them to perform high level magic regularly and with fairly little effort."

She cleared her throat.

"*However*," she stressed the word, "by the same token, the lack of Mystery saps a significant portion of the power behind the spells, meaning that the effects are much weaker, despite being much easier to accomplish. Moreover, the disappearance of Mystery has also negatively affected the native fauna, so creatures that would normally be incredibly powerful Monstrous or Phantasmal Class beasts have been reduced to pets and familiars as though they were common animals."

"Even Dragons?" Ilya asked.

"*Especially* dragons," Rin answered. "In fact, dragons were hit the hardest by the reduction in Mystery. Incredibly powerful beings that would normally have been worshipped as existences light years beyond anything humanity could hope to match now possess a mere fraction of their original might. The only sort of dragon that might be as powerful as something from the Nasuverse is a Millennial Class dragon,

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something that's lived for *thousands* of years. Other than that, Rhyme Dragons come the closest, but they're still leagues behind even a Monstrous Class dragon from the Nasuverse, and worse still, they're virtually extinct."

"Virtually?"

Rin shrugged. "Well, there's still *one*, right? That Tabitha girl's familiar, Sylphid."

"Right, right," Ilya said. "But...you were saying? Something about incantations?"

"Yeah," Rin nodded. "Incantations have never been incredibly important, not since magic was so commonplace. As a result, since the usage of words was never important, things like the Divine Words that Medea uses never existed in Halkeginia. Instead, incantations have always been a method of focusing one's self and one's magic in order to produce the intended effect, which means they can be shortened with practice and continuous use. The only magic where incantations are actually necessary is Void Magic, because the incantations themselves have meaning in Void Magic. It's sorta like Divine Words, but different at the same time."

"So the more they use a spell, the easier it gets to cast, which means the smaller they can make the incantation?" Ilya clarified.

"That's right," Rin answered.

"That's how Guiche made those golems so easily in chapter two!"

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"Yup! Magecraft like that would normally take a long time to complete and require a Grand Ritual, but the Halkeginia system makes it easy, so Guiche just needed to practice over and over again until he only needed a flick of his wand to make them."

"These guys have it so easy," Ilya lamented. "Can you imagine how much more devastating they'd be if they were more like *our* mages? You'd have Karin the Heavy Wind class mages all over the place!"

"No, they wouldn't," Rin corrected her, "and there's a reason why."

"Ah," Ilya nodded, "the Magic Circuits, right?"

"Right," Rin agreed. "They don't have any. That means they have free access to their Prana, their Od, which allows them to cast freely without needing to switch Circuits on or off. On the other hand, that means they can't really process the free-floating Mana in the air — can't, or they don't know how to."

"And that means?"

"It means that they're limited to their Od," Rin explained. "Everything they cast has to use their own personal Od to be cast. If they all had reserves like me, then hey, there'd be Karin-class mages all over the place, but it doesn't work like that. The numbers are generally the same as they are for us, which means the average Halkeginian mage has somewhere between 20 and 30 Od, a few stronger mages have double or triple that, and only the high class geniuses like Karin have

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upwards of 100 or so. It's only Void Mages who have anywhere near as much as someone like me."

Rin stuck her nose up proudly.

"But Old Man Brimir was Ciel class," Ilya pointed out. "He had, like, 2000 or 3000 Od, didn't he? That means he was better than you, right?"

"Hmph!" Rin huffed. "Magical energy isn't everything!"

"But you just said —"

"Anyway," Rin cut her off, "we'll finish this up next time. We've used up our allotted space, so the author is telling us to hurry and wrap things up."

"Oh, right!" Ilya turned to the camera. "We'll definitely cover the rest in the next session! And after that, we'll have a super special Question and Answer session, where we answer some of the burning questions that people want answered! Until then, stay tuned!"

"You mean we'll answer some of the questions from the forum."

"They don't know that. Besides, as long as they feel like their questions are answered, does it matter whose questions they are?"

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #4: End

Chapter VI: Lapse From Virtue – Part One

“ Louise, where are you? Come out, now!”

Louise Francoise Le Blanc de La Vallière was the third and youngest daughter of the de La Vallière family, a very important family of magic-wielding Nobles who were held in very high esteem by the Queen's court. They even owned a rather large duchy, an incredibly large estate covering acres and acres of the best land in Tristain.

Cattleya and Éléonore were Louise's elder sisters, and though Cattleya had a rather fragile constitution, both were skilled and accomplished mages who had inherited the strong magical lineage of the de La Vallière family.

Louise, however, had not. Constantly compared with her much more skilled and much better sisters, Louise had always known that she didn't measure up, and she had always known that her mother was disappointed in her for it.

That was why Louise had run away, why she didn't respond as her mother called out for her so sternly. That was why she was hidden among the bushes, with silent tears streaming down her round cheeks — because, once again, she had failed, and she had disappointed her mother again.

Louise saw a pair of shoes beneath the bushes, and knew that she would be found out in a moment. A second's indecision stopped her; was she ready to be found, yet?

"Miss Louise is so bad at magic!"

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"I know. Why can't she be more like her older sisters?"

Louise's little heart, already so low, plummeted again, and an uncomfortable feeling twisted in her belly, and while the two servants were distracted, she skirted out of her hiding place and ran off to the central lake on her family's property, which she referred to (if only to herself) as the "Secret Garden."

It was the only place where Louise felt truly at ease. It was tranquil and isolated, and though it had once been a hotspot quite some time ago, no one ever came to it anymore. Flowers grew everywhere and birds perched themselves on the old wooden benches on the shore. And smack in the middle of the lake was a small island where a little house made of white marble stood.

Resting on the shore was a small boat, derelict and forgotten. It had once been used for leisurely rides out onto the lake, but since her sisters were now grown and practicing magic and her father spent his time politicking, Louise was the only one who ever came to this forgotten lake anymore and the only one who remembered that small boat.

That was why, whenever she was feeling sad or had been reprimanded for her poor magic skills, Louise came out to this lake, where no one and nothing could bother her.

She jumped into the boat and pushed off the shore, snuggling into a blanket that she had left there the last time she had visited. Already, she was starting to feel a little better.

Little Louise flinched as a sudden gust of wind sent her pigtailed fluttering, and when she looked up again, a handsome

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nobleman clad in a cloak was sitting opposite her in the boat. The nobleman, a sixteen-year-old Viscount Wardes, offered Louise, a six-year-old who thought him to be quite charming, a smile.

"Have you been crying, Louise?"

"Sir Wardes?"

Louise hurriedly dried her eyes on the corner of her blanket — she couldn't let the man of her dreams see her in tears.

"I was invited by your father today to discuss the engagement," Wardes explained gently.

Louise's cheeks flushed red. It was only the natural reaction of embarrassment, of the complicated feelings one has when faced with the one she admires who speaks to her so tenderly and so intimately.

"But," Louise protested, "but, Sir Wardes!"

Wardes regarded her gently. "Do you dislike me so, my dainty little Louise?"

Louise flushed redder. "N-no, that's not..." she protested stutteringly. "I mean, I'm so young..."

Like the chime of a bell, Wardes laughed and held out a hand in offering. Louise, unsure, hesitated. Was she ready? Was she prepared?

Could she abandon everything else to fulfill one dream she wasn't sure she was ready for?

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Perhaps that was why Shirou was seeing this scene. Louise, who put on an act of maturity and sturdiness, a mask of confidence in everything she said and did, was not sure if it was worth it. She was not sure if she was prepared to abandon all her other hopes and dreams in order to marry the man who she had fantasized about since she was a little girl.

It was only natural. Everyone had hopes and dreams and everyone wanted to chase those dreams. When one dream, the dream of marrying and falling in love, conflicted with another dream, a dream of success and glory and making a name for oneself, it was only natural that one dream would have to be sacrificed.

The question was, which dream would Louise sacrifice?

It seemed that even she wasn't sure. She couldn't decide whether to take Wardes' hand or refuse. She couldn't decide whether she wanted to sacrifice the possibility of a future filled with glory and praise and renown for marriage and the possibility of a great love, or if she wanted to sacrifice marriage and the possibility of a great love for glory and praise and renown.

The question, then: a surety of marriage, where she never had to concern herself with any other troubles, or a future of hardship for a dream that might never come true? Which was worth pursuing?

Two paths diverged in a yellow wood...right, Rin?

The scene faded into inky blackness before Shirou could see whether or not Louise took Wardes' hand, and he was suddenly sent spiraling down, falling through an empty void

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that pressed against him on all sides, that squeezed the breath from his lungs and compressed his body into a tiny speck —

And he woke up. Slowly, groggily, so that, at first, he wasn't quite sure where or when he was. Dazed and confused, with the remnants of the dream, vision, *whatever-it-was* playing about in his head and a high-pitched whistle chiming in his ears, he tried to sit up — and fell back into bed before he made it even an inch as the wound in his side flared up angrily.

Wound in his side...? When did he...?

Ah, yes, he thought as the ringing in his ears started to fade. Louise, Kirche, Tabitha, Wardes, Guiche, the mission from Princess Henrietta, the ring and letter, the duel with Wardes, the attack on the inn they'd been staying at...

Perseus.

Right. Perseus had taken him by surprise and gotten in that cheap shot with Harpe. The wound was mostly superficial, but it was deep enough that it would take quite a while to heal, so he'd be subpar for a while until it had a chance to close up (and Shirou found himself missing Avalon's healing powers). It probably hadn't helped that he'd used his Reality Marble to keep the wound closed until proper bandages could be found — that likely set his recovery back by a few days, which meant that it would be even longer before he could move without worrying about tearing it open again.

Sloppy, Shirou cursed himself. He'd gotten complacent without anyone to give him a serious challenge. If he'd been

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paying better attention rather than patting himself on the back, Perseus would never have gotten close enough to wound him like this.

He would have to rectify that, soon. He couldn't afford to leave himself so open — what if Perseus had been smarter and gone for his head?

Right. No more taking it easy.

Shirou took in a breath and braced himself, preparing to get up off the comfy bed (when had he gotten into a bed?) when he finally heard something over the damnable ringing in his ears.

"— saw it too, right?"

It was Kirche's voice, hushed only so much so that she didn't wake him. She must be in the room with him, he realized.

"...Yes."

It was Tabitha's voice that answered, as soft and as monosyllabic as always. So, Kirche wasn't alone. Were Louise and the others nearby?

"So, it wasn't just me? I didn't imagine it or anything like that?"

"...No. Saw it, too."

"What kind of magic..." the thud of feet walking back and forth along a wooden floor. Kirche must have been pacing. "That wound...it was being held together by a metal mesh. It looked...sort of like that old scale armor they used

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to use almost two thousand years ago, only thicker and sharper and pointier. Like...like swords or something."

"...Swords."

Ah, so that's what they were talking about.

Perhaps that hadn't been such a good idea, showing it to them, but, well, his patience had been short and he wasn't ashamed to admit that Perseus's sneak attack had shaken him.

One Heroic Spirit was one thing, but two, working together on top of that?

It didn't bode well. Little could stand against some of the things Shirou could bring to bear, and Shirou was confident enough in his own abilities to hold them off, but both times those Heroic Spirits had attacked, Louise had been nearby. As long as she was anywhere close, it wouldn't be difficult, nor would it be unlikely, that those two Heroic Spirits would take advantage of her importance to him.

Shirou was capable of a lot of things, but beating two Heroic Spirits while protecting Louise was...not impossible, but certainly very difficult.

"I knew that Darling was different, but...I never imagined..." Kirche muttered, more to herself it seemed than to Tabitha. "I mean, a strange name and strange hair...but I've never even *heard* of something like that before!"

"Strange," Tabitha agreed seriously.

"Earth magic?" Kirche proposed. "Maybe...I don't know what else it could have been, but something like that...Can it even be called Earth Magic?"

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"No. Too different."

"You're right," Kirche agreed as though Tabitha had given a very in-depth answer. "Earth Magic of that level is...Well, I don't know if that sort of magic is even *possible*, except that I saw it myself. If it *was* Earth Magic, it'd be Square level, easily. Only Square Mages have the sort of control and power to do something like that."

There was a huff and some more thuds as Kirche paced across the floor again.

"But I thought it wasn't possible to summon mages with the Summon Servant spell. Isn't it? I mean, the whole point was to avoid a political scandal if one mage were forced to be another's familiar, so it shouldn't be possible, should it?"

"...Impossible."

Kirche gave another frustrated huff. "But Louise the Zero seems to have done it anyway."

A rusty chuffing sound suddenly rang out through the room; it came from somewhere to Shirou's left near his head, and he recognized it immediately as Derf laughing.

"Oh, it's just you," Kirche said with a bit of disdain. "That talking sword my Darling carries around. What's so funny?"

"Yer not givin' Brimir enough credit, girly," Derf said with a chuckle. "Yer thinkin' too narrowly. Why does it hafta be Earth Magic? Why does it hafta be Square magic? For that matter, why does it hafta be any magic of this world at all?"

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Kirche huffed again. "Just what are you trying to say? Not Earth magic? Not Square magic? Not magic of this world? You're not making any sense!"

"...other worlds."

Derf let out a rusty chuckle again.

"What she said." Shirou imagined one quillon wiggling towards Tabitha. "The Summoning spell you kids use to summon yer familiars, it reaches across time and space, right? But what if yer proper familiar ain't in this world? Not in the past, the present, or in the future? Yeh'd get nothin', right? So of course a spell capable of reaching into the past or the future can do somethin' like reach into other worlds. Ol' Brimir *built* it that way."

There was a moment of stunned silence.

"That's why yer thinkin' too narrowly," Derf concluded. "Earth magic? Square magic? Them's the way *we* classify magic. But if partner's from a different world, why should his magic be anything like ours?"

There was another moment of silence. Around them, the ship creaked with motion.

"...It's starting to make sense," Kirche said at last. "Strange hair, strange name, so utterly *clueless* about how things work here...I thought maybe he was from one of the distant countries on the other side of Rub' al Khali, because otherwise it didn't make sense, but...from another world?"

"Yeh think it's so strange?" Derf asked. "The things yeh've seen since partner got here...whaddya think that guy

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from last night was? I tell you, missy, this isn't the first time someone's summoned a familiar from another world."

"So then...Louise the Zero isn't the first person to do something like this?"

"And she won't be the last."

"Who —"

A knock on the door interrupted her before it swung open.

"Sir Wardes wanted to speak with us," Guiche's voice said. "He asked me to come and find you."

"Wardes, huh?" Kirche asked sultrily. "Oh, I knew it was only a matter of time. Even a man like Wardes would naturally choose me over a girl like Louise. He's fallen for my womanly charms!"

"...Unlikely."

"Don't ruin my fun, Tabitha —"

Their footsteps crossed the room and the door closed with a creak and a bang behind them. For a moment, there was only silence.

"Yeh plannin' on getting up anytime soon, Partner?"

Derf broke it.

"Thought I'd give it a minute," Shirou replied. "You know, take a few moments to just lie here in the ambience of silence..."

Derf snorted. "You? Enjoying ambience?"

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A laughter that sounded like Rin's echoed in the back of his head.

"You're right," Shirou agreed with a smile. "It's a little bit out of character, isn't it?"

"How does the saying go?" Derf asked. "A leopard can't change his spots?"

"Something like that."

For another moment, they fell into silence again. Shirou, careful to mind his wound, sat up and swung his feet out of bed onto the floor.

"Why did you tell them that?"

"What? That yer from another world?"

"Yes, *that*."

"They were gonna find out eventually, Partner. Better do it now before they start comin' up with a whole bunch o' conspiracy theories. Nip it in the bud, so ta speak."

"You couldn't let *me* do it, when I was ready?"

Derf snorted. "When were yeh gonna be ready? Sometime next year?"

"I don't know. At the very least, I would've liked some time to prepare myself. If I'm going to give Kirche an explanation, then it should be a good one, a proper one, and besides all of that, I'm not sure telling them was a good idea anyway. The mages here have no idea what True Magic is."

"So, tell 'em," Derf said simply.

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This time, Shirou snorted. "Right. Try to explain to a bunch of stuck up nobles that everything they understand about the world is wrong. If I wanted to get Louise excommunicated, there are better ways than that, Derf."

"Listen, Partner, I'm just a sword," Derf said. "My job is ta stab things, that's all. What does it matter to me who I'm stabbing? Things like morals and ideology don't really mean anything to me. But even I understand that yeh can't keep things like this from the people yeh spend the most time with. Eventually, it's gonna come out, and if yeh wait too long, it ain't gonna end well."

"...The maddening thing is that you're right," Shirou conceded at length. "The further into this mission we get, the more it seems like Tabitha and Kirche are going to find out anyway. Already, we've run into a Heroic Spirit. If we run into another..."

Derf chuffed. "Trouble seems to follow you everywhere, Partner."

"Unfortunately," Shirou agreed. He sighed. "I worry, Derf. So far, neither of the Heroic Spirits we've encountered were a grave threat — each was powerful in their own way, but I could defeat both if it came down to it — but if another shows up, a much stronger one, at that..."

Gilgamesh would be the worst. No, in the first place, the only reason Shirou could beat him was if Gilgamesh didn't take him seriously. Without Avalon to protect him from Ea, there was no way to win if that impossible sword were unleashed in full. Gilgamesh was the very worst enemy that could have been summoned.

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Lancelot was second. Naturally, the compatibility was horrid — Lancelot's Noble Phantasm, Shirou didn't know the name, let him take any weapon he grasped with his hands and give it the property, "Lancelot's Noble Phantasm." Anything Shirou Traced would naturally be vulnerable, and it would take some truly incredible maneuvering to negate Lancelot's advantage.

Yes. Gilgamesh and Lancelot were the worst two possibilities, and when one considered that the two Heroic Spirits he had encountered so far were a pirate from the middle ages and a hero from ancient Greece, separated in history by at least 1500 years, the idea that one of those two heroes could be summoned as well wasn't nearly farfetched.

Moreover...two so far, and how many more would come?

That was why the sword sheathed at his hip was a very cold comfort indeed.

"ALBION IN SIGHT!" a voice bellowed down from above deck.

"Well," Shirou stood slowly, careful not to aggravate his wound, "I guess we're about there."

He grabbed Derf and slung the sheath over his shoulder. He crossed the room in three long strides and went through the door and out of the room; it creaked and closed shut with a click behind him as he started up the steps that led to the main deck.

"You know, Partner," Derf murmured; Shirou paused, one foot hanging in the air halfway to the next stair, "you

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worry too much. If the girly summoned you, then you're the one best suited to protect her. Remember that."

Shirou felt his lips curl into a smile. "Indeed."

He stepped up and out into the day. Golden sunlight streamed down from a clear blue sky — they were so far up that they had actually crested above the clouds, leaving nothing but an expanse of boundless azure above them. On the deck, all over the boat, the crewmen worked like a well-oiled machine, hoisting sails and keeping everything in working order.

Shirou tilted his head back — above the ship, looming out of the sky in the distance, gigantic and overwhelming, was the floating island country, Albion. Streaming off the mountains that reached up to scratch the sky were rivers that ran off the edge of the island and shimmered into mist beneath it, cloaking the bottom of the island in a glimmering cloud of sparkling white.

Shirou could understand why someone might think it beautiful.

He walked out onto the deck, and there, standing at the...portside, he thought it was called, at the rails arranged along the portside of the deck were Guiche, Tabitha, Kirche, Wardes, and Louise. He made to join them —

"SHIP APPROACHING STARBOARD SIDE!" the voice from before shouted.

Shirou's head swiveled to the right of its own accord and he looked up: there, silhouetted against the blue sky, was another large ship, easily at least twice as large as the one they

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were flying, and it was painted entirely black. From the one side, more than a dozen gunmetal gray barrels gleamed in the sun.

A warship.

They were about to be attacked.

"ALL HANDS, BRACE YOURSELVES!" another voice called — probably the captain or the first mate.

"THE SHIP ISN'T FLYIN' ANY COLORS, CAPTAIN!" yet another voice bellowed.

"PIRATES!" someone screamed. "THEY'RE PIRATES!"

"ALL AHEAD, FULL, MISTER SPARROW!" the captain's voice echoed.

"ALL AHEAD, FULL!"

"ALL AHEAD, FULL!"

"FULL CANVAS!" the captain roared again.

"FULL CANVAS!"

"SIR WARDES, IF YOU WOULD BE SO KIND!"

The sails, which had been only half unfurled, fell fully open on the masts. Beneath Shirou's feet, the ship lurched suddenly and began to pick up speed. The pleasant breeze that had been playing across the deck transformed into a swift wind that whipped Shirou's hair around and sent the loose ends of his clothing aflutter. Wardes had disappeared from the portside railing and was undoubtedly helping to speed up the ship.

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But even Shirou, who knew virtually nothing about ships, flying or otherwise, could tell that it wouldn't be enough.

The black warship sped up and twisted around to flank them, gaining with each second, even as the sails, unfurled to full canvas, bent outwards in the wind. Their ship simply wasn't fast enough — it took only a matter of minutes for the pirates to catch up.

Shirou, knowing what was about to happen, quickly placed himself between Louise and the pirate ship and turned his Circuits on. He'd offer the chance for surrender first; he'd rather not spill blood today, if he could help it. But if it came down to a fight...if he had to kill these pirates...

Well, the lives of a few pirates could not compare to those of his Master and an entire country.

"Shirou!"

"Stay behind me, Master," he ordered Louise.

"But Darling, you're injured!" Kirche protested.

"Injured," Tabitha agreed.

"The Water Mage said you shouldn't aggravate your wound, Shirou!" Louise added. "You shouldn't even have gotten out of bed! She said you needed rest!"

Water Mage? So they'd employed a healer to look at his wound despite his saying that it was pointless, huh? But still

"Your safety is far more important, Louise."

"Shirou —"

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"Sir Emiya," Guiche began, "your courage is admirable, but —"

A loud BANG echoed through the air. There was no way the others could see it, but Shirou watched as the cannonball moved, almost in slow motion, and soared over their heads and into the clouds. On the center mast, the black warship flew a signal comprised of four colors; Shirou had no idea what it meant, but he could guess: stop, or we'll blow you out of the sky.

"THEY'RE ORDERING US TO STOP, CAPTAIN!"

"That was a warning shot!" Wardes' voice called. "The next one won't miss!"

"Orders, Captain?!"

"All my magic is focused on keeping us in the air! I can't stop them!"

"Orders, Captain?!"

Shirou risked a glance to the helm, where the captain was looking about wildly for an escape. For the ship, there was none: they were outmatched and outgunned, and the ship wasn't fast enough to escape the pirates' ship. The moment of surrender was obvious — he could see it in the resigned slump of the captain's shoulders.

"Wrap sails!" the captain ordered. "Stop the ship!"

The billowing sails were pulled tight and wrapped up within moments, and with a great lurch, the ship slowed and sputtered to a stop. Beside them, the pirate ship kept pace as

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closely as they dared, cannons still posed to tear the much smaller ship to pieces.

"Don't resist!" someone on the pirate ship called. "Or we'll blow you out of the sky!"

A dozen figures lined up along the warship's side and used bows and rifles to attach grappling hooks to the rigging, and with a single swing, flung themselves onto the deck with Shirou and the merchant crew. Shirou tensed — they all wielded axes and sabers, cutlasses that looked surprisingly well cared for, and were carrying them menacingly as they rounded the crew up on the deck.

It took only a few short minutes — no one tried to fight back, and even Wardes quietly did as told as the pirates gathered the crew into one big huddle on the main deck. It was only natural, Shirou figured; this crew was a merchant crew, not soldiers on a warship.

A final man came last as the rest of the pirates circled around the captured crew, and he was a tall, lean-muscled figure who wore clothes that might once have been rather nice and well-kept. He wore a patch over one eye and a long black cloak over a tattered blue cloat that must have been a uniform of some kind at one point. By his bearing, the way he strode across the deck confidently as though he were untouchable, he could only have been the captain of the pirate ship.

The man's good eye swept over the captured crew.

"Who's the captain of this vessel?" he demanded gruffly.

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"Me." The captain, shaking a little, stepped forward. The man took three long steps over to him.

"What's the name of this ship and what does she carry?" the pirate captain asked.

"Tristain's *Marie Galante*. The cargo is sulfur."

A pleased rumble rippled among the pirates and the pirate captain smiled a cold smile.

"Then it seems I'll be needing to commandeer this vessel," he said almost conversationally. "I'll even pay you. I'll be very reasonable about it, too. In fact, in exchange for this ship's cargo, I'll allow you all to keep your lives!"

The pirates all laughed uproariously. The captain shrank back as the pirate captain turned away from him and swept his gaze across the rest of the crew. At the back, separate from the others, Shirou tensed as that one keen, blue eye landed first on him, and then on Louise.

"Oho!" the pirate captain chortled. "It seems we have Noble guests!"

He strode through the crowd, which parted like the sea around him, and came up to Louise and Shirou. With the carelessness of a man who knew he'd won, he leaned towards Louise and eyed her appraisingly.

"We have a beauty, here." He reached a grubby, dirty hand out to lift Louise's chin. "Tell me, miss, how would you like to be —"

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The hand never made it to Louise's chin — Shirou grabbed the wrist, first, careful not to break it just yet. The laughter stopped.

"So long as I breathe, you won't lay a finger on my Master," Shirou threatened. "If you leave now without a fight, then no one will get hurt, but if you insist on trying to force your way, then I'll simply blow you away."

"Sh-Shirou," Louise whispered.

The pirate seemed somewhere between surprised and amused.

"Outnumbered and outgunned, and still so confident?" he asked with a strange smile. "Is it courage, loyalty, or stupidity that drives you, I wonder?"

"Darling..." Kirche began.

"He can do it," Guiche spoke up suddenly. Both the pirate captain and the rest of their group turned to Guiche, who looked both frightened and sure of himself. "S-Sir Shirou doesn't exaggerate. If he says he'll do it, he can do it."

"Well, what confidence your friends have in you," the pirate's lip curled. He pulled his arm free, or tried to, but Shirou held on for a moment longer, watching the certainty and sense of superiority drain from the pirate's face before letting him go.

The pirate rubbed his wrist tenderly. Beneath the sleeve, Shirou had no doubt that a hand-shaped bruise was already forming.

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"I suppose we'll just have to —"

"SHIP APPROACHING, STARBOARD SIDE!"

The pirate captain spun around, face ghostly white.
"What?!"

BANG, BANG-BANG — three cannon shots rang out, and gigantic splinters of wood suddenly erupted from the far side of the pirates' warship, which jerked sideways towards the *Marie Galante* and smashed against its side. Beneath their feet, the ship rocked back and forth and shuddered from the collision. The pirate captain stumbled.

"Who's firing on us?!" he demanded furiously.

"DON'T KNOW, CAPTAIN! I DON'T RECOGNIZE THEIR COLORS!"

"Darling!"

"Shirou, what's going on?" Louise asked frantically.

Shirou frowned. "I don't know, Louise."

And he really didn't.

"ORDERS, CAPTAIN?!"

"Fire back!" the pirate captain roared. "Damn it, we can't lose the *Eagle*! Fire —"

BANG-BANG-BANG — another three shots rang out and slammed into the pirates' warship before they could mount a counterattack. The pirates still on the warship screamed as more splinters, some the size of a person, went

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flying into the air. With an ominous creak, one of the masts gave a last shudder and fell, taking another two with it.

Beneath their feet, the *Marie Galante* shuddered as well as the pirates' warship slammed into its side again. Louise reached out and grasped Shirou's arm to steady herself. He grabbed her hand to give her some stability.

"Are you alright, Master?"

"Fine," Louise mumbled. "I'm fine."

"No!" the pirate captain moaned. "The *Eagle!* The *Eagle!*"

Shirou looked back out — the pirates' warship was riddled with gigantic holes and was missing entire sections where the cannonballs had torn into it and through it like paper. It was a miracle that, holes aside, it was still in one piece. With so many great chunks gouged out of it, any other ship would probably have broken up into a bunch of tiny pieces.

But even that warship wasn't strong enough to survive with such grievous wounds — as they watched, the great black hull was starting to sink down out of the sky, dropping rapidly like a stone.

"Who?!" the pirate captain demanded. "Who attacked us?!"

"HAHAHA!"

A chill went down Shirou's spine — he recognized that laughter. And, as the black warship sank down into the clouds to reveal a large galleon in the distance, his fears were realized.

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"It's her!" Louise gasped.

"Her?" Guiche parroted.

"Vallièrre, you know that ship?" Kirche asked bewilderedly.

The pirate captain spun around, a mad look on his face.
"Tell me! If you know who that is, tell me, now!"

Louise took a step back nervously.

"Well, not by name," she hedged. "Um...That is to say, I've seen it before, but..."

"It's the same ship that attacked the academy," Wardes rescued her. "That's the ship that helped Fouquet escape with the Staff of Destruction."

In other words, their enemy was now a Heroic Spirit.

"LONG TIME NO SEE, *ARTHUR!*" the woman called. How she had the lung capacity to shout so loudly over such a distance, Shirou didn't know. "THAT WAS A NASTY TRICK YOU PULLED, LETTIN' ME THINK YOU WERE KING ARTHUR! WISH I HAD TIME TO CHEW YOU OUT, BUT I NEED TO BE KILLIN' YOU, NOW!"

The other ship's cannons came to bear, and Shirou rushed forward, ignoring the pain of his wound, to do the only thing he could in the amount of time he had.

"RHO ALIAS!"

Half-made, weakened because of a lack of preparation, the shield of Ajax the Greater, sublimated into a barrier-type Noble Phantasm, appeared to protect the ship as a four-layered fortress wall. At the same time, both Wardes and the

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pirate captain rushed up beside him and incanted — their words tumbled together, so he couldn't tell what they said — and a barrier of wind joined the Aias.

The first cannon shot tore into the barriers and slammed into the Aias, but didn't break through. Shirou stepped back as a bruise appeared on his arm and plotted out his course of action.

He'd only have a moment, a brief reprieve as the cannons reloaded, as evidenced when the other warship had been attacked. There wouldn't be time to charge up his sword — in the first place, using something like that here was irresponsible at best — so it would have to be something fast and powerful.

Like an arrow.

The second cannonball tore straight through the first layer of the Aias and stopped at the second — Shirou grunted as a gash was torn into his left arm. Flecks of blood splattered over his cheek.

That was the curse of the Aias: the shield became as his body, so that any damage done to the shield was reflected upon him.

The third cannonball ripped the second layer apart and was stopped by the third — two of Shirou's ribs cracked, but thankfully didn't break. A quick spell was applied to his wounds — one of the first things Rin had made him learn at the Clock Tower was some healing magic to keep him from tearing his body apart like this. As easily as breathing, a Curse of Self-Healing — powerful, but nowhere near as potent as

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Avalon — settled on his body and started to mend the damage.

Shirou dismissed the Aias with but a thought and Traced the bow the hero Emiya had once used during that Grail War so long ago. Long, sleek, and black, it appeared in his hand like a shard of midnight.

"Step back," he ordered Wardes and the pirate captain. They both glanced at him as though he were crazy, but obeyed, taking a few steps away — enough not to get caught in whatever he was about to do, but close enough to interfere if needed.

He drew back the bowstring and took aim.

"My core is twisted in madness," Shirou incanted.

Upon the bowstring, settled like an arrow, a long sword forged into the shape of a spiral appeared — Caladbolg II, the sword of Fergus Mac Róich, modified into a screw-like appearance to be more aerodynamic. It narrowed into the form of an arrow, sleek and perfect, as he molded it with Reinforcement, and then began to glow as he flooded it with Prana.

The Noble Phantasm, for it couldn't be anything else, became suddenly fragile and dangerous. That was only natural — unlike normal objects, a Noble Phantasm did not immediately shatter when filled with too much Prana. No, instead, it transformed into a Broken Phantasm, a fragile weapon that would explode whenever it hit its target and do more damage than the original could have ever hoped to. Among the Heroic Spirits, it was considered an act of

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desperation to Break one's Noble Phantasm, because it could only be done once, and the Noble Phantasm was the pride of the Heroic Spirits, the crystallization of their feats and legends.

But the sword Shirou had just Traced and molded into an arrow was not his Noble Phantasm, nor was it the original; it was just a copy, a copy that could be remade again and again and Broken again and again. There was no point in worrying about doing so when it could simply be replaced.

He heard gasps from his audience, surprised exclamations, but he had already tuned them out and focused entirely upon the shot. It had to be perfect. He couldn't afford to miss.

"Caladbolg II."

The bowstring was released. The sword that had been forged into an arrow, Caladbolg II, shot forward like a bullet, twisting the air around it so that it almost seemed to warp, and the backlash from its sudden and violent acceleration nearly sent Wardes and the pirate captain flying as it sped away at hypersonic speeds.

The explosion seemed to come before the hit — the sword, transformed into an arrow, slammed into the enemy ship and exploded into a ball of golden light that engulfed it in a storm of flames like a second sun.

There was a moment where there was nothing but that brilliant flash, then the thunderous crack of the explosion rattled his ears and the ship beneath his feet, and only after the light began to fade did the shockwave finally sweep over them, sending Shirou's hair whipping about his cheeks. In the

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distance, the ship, missing its front half and utterly crippled, sank slowly down into the clouds like the pirates' warship.

"...By the Founder..."

Sound returned and Shirou took a breath in as the ache of his wounds returned tenfold.

"Shirou!"

"Darling, that was amazing!"

"Sir Emiya, you...you...!"

Shirou grunted.

"I could use that Water Mage right about now," he remarked sardonically.

"By the Founder," the pirate captain said, sounding suddenly a lot more eloquent as he took a few steps forward to watch the other ship fall, "I've never even *seen* something like that before!"

"Well, *I* have," Derf spoke up.

The pirate captain startled.

"My god!" he exclaimed. "A talking sword!"

"Oh, trust me!" Derf laughed. "I'm *definitely* not the strangest thing yeh've seen all day! After all, you just got ta see Partner Break his Noble Phantasm — compared ta *that*, I'm pretty ordinary!"

"Noble Phantasm?" the pirate parroted.

"What's a Noble Phantasm?" Kirche asked.

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"It's —"

A loud thud stopped everything — a flash of red landed on the deck and sent the boards shuddering and shaking. A curtain of burgundy hair fluttered down and settled over the shoulders of a tall, slender figure, and a pair of keen blue eyes flashed as the figure — a woman showing an almost indecent amount of cleavage — stood, her entire frame quivering furiously.

"A Noble Phantasm," she seethed, "is the pride and joy of a Heroic Spirit. It symbolizes her accomplishments as a hero, the magnitude and greatness of her legend, and all the things she did that were etched into history. AND YOU JUST *DESTROYED* MINE!"

She lifted her hands, snarling, and brought her guns, a pair of flintlock pistols, to bear, but Shirou was already moving, already rushing forward, Derf in hand, and slashed upwards — her shots went wide, barrels deflected upwards and away from Shirou. The Heroic Spirit glared down at him, lips curling furiously, eyes flashing — she knew, as he did, that she wouldn't be fast enough, that before she could bring her arms back down and take aim again, he would have her skewered.

Derf came back around, steel singing as it cleaved through the air, and Shirou, ignoring the pain of his wounds, took aim at her heart. With a single blow, in close range, Shirou would end it, would defeat this threat — that was only natural. From the beginning, Shirou had known that any battle at close range with this Heroic Spirit would end in his victory.

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It was simply fact. An enemy who excelled at range but was only average close up had a weakness for melee.

Something whistled through the air. Shirou aborted his attack and flung himself away from the Heroic Spirit, skidding back ten feet. A sword shot through the space he had just vacated and stabbed point-first into the deck, cutting through the boards like butter — if Shirou hadn't dodged, it would have probably cleaved his head right off his shoulders.

Shirou took several more steps backwards and placed himself defensively in front of Louise as a figure, cloaked in blue, landed in a crouch next to the sword. The figure stood slowly, blue cloak rippling like waves on the shore, and grasped the hilt of the sword with one hand. It came free easily, and the figure turned to face Shirou, sword in hand.

Another enemy.

Shirou frowned. The sword — it wasn't a sword.

The sword was — it wasn't a sword.

The sword was crafted — it wasn't a sword.

The sword was made of — it wasn't a sword.

The sword was used by — it wasn't a sword.

The sword —

The sword —

The sword —

The sword —

The sword —

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The sword — was not a sword.

The frown turned into a scowl. For some reason, Shirou could not read the sword — it wasn't a sword — in the figure's hand. No, even more, everything about the sword and its wielder were shrouded — the sword itself seemed to be crafted from shadows, insubstantial and wavering, and the figure's face, hidden behind the cowl of his cloak, was cast in an unnatural darkness, despite the sunlight streaming down over the ship.

It was impossible to make out any features, let alone determine an identity. Like the sword, the figure's face seemed to be sculpted from shadows and darkness, so that the features were indistinguishable from each other. Shirou had only seen something like that once before, and never in person.

Lancelot du Lac.

But the figure, who took two slow steps towards Shirou, was too short to be Lancelot and the body was too stocky. Lancelot was tall and lanky, an impressive physique of lean muscle that belied just how strong he was. This figure was not, was shorter and brawnier with a physique more befitting a modern soldier than an ancient knight.

Which meant that Shirou had no idea who it could be.

The figure suddenly stopped, staring at something past Shirou's shoulder, and tensed up. Every muscle in his body seized and became stiff and rigid, and every fiber in his body thrummed and vibrated like a plucked guitar string.

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The figure hissed out something, but it was too low and too quiet for Shirou to make out what it was. Then, he tore himself violently away and turned back to the Heroic Spirit, leaving his back wide open.

Shirou knew better than to try and take advantage of it.

Despite that the figure had turned his back to Shirou, Shirou could tell he had not once dropped his guard or shown a vulnerability. Doubtlessly, the moment anyone tried to attack him, the figure would defend himself as fully and as competently as if he had never turned his back at all.

To put it simply, this was a swordsman of truly incredible caliber. Without a doubt, it could only be another Heroic Spirit.

"We're going," the figure said in a raspy voice that clearly hadn't seen much use.

The female Heroic Spirit stiffened and snarled. "*What?! But that bastard destroyed my ship!*"

"Orders," the figure rasped. "From *her*."

The woman tensed up for a fraction of a second, then relaxed. "Fine," she said, sounding a lot calmer all of the sudden, "let's go."

The blue cloaked figure sheathed his sword and walked over to her, but she stopped him a moment and took a step towards Shirou, snarling.

"This isn't over, *Arthur*," she said acidly. "I *will* see you again, and you can bet your life that I'll take my revenge for

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what you've done today. On my name, on the name of Sir Francis Drake, I *will* repay you for destroying my ship!"

She spun around on her heel, and together, she and the mysterious cloaked figure both leapt over the side of the ship. Shirou crossed the distance in an instant and looked down over the side rail just in time to see the two of them land on another smaller ship, not a galleon but still a warship, and sail away beneath the clouds.

"Damn."

There was nothing more to say than that.

— o.O.O.O.o —

"...Done," Tabitha said softly and backed away.

Shirou grunted.

"My thanks," he said to her as he slipped his shirt and jacket back on. He was acutely aware of Kirche's eyes on him, roving over the contours of his chest and back and staring hungrily at each scar.

"Not necessary," Tabitha assured him.

"Maybe not," Shirou conceded, "but I'll thank you anyway."

It turned out that Tabitha was a Water Mage — or, at least, had some skill with Water Magic — and she had seen to the gash on his shoulder and his cracked ribs once they'd started sailing again. The gash would still scar (unfortunately, because it seemed like Kirche *liked* scars), but it was healed, which was what mattered.

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A real Water Mage, Tabitha had informed him, would have been able to heal it *without* scarring.

Shirou stood back up as he fastened the last button. They'd had to redress the wound from Harpe, which has opened up again during the fight.

"I'm still not sure I believe it," the pirate captain, who, divested of his wig and his fake beard, mustache, and eyepatch, turned out to be Prince Wales himself, admitted. "I mean, I saw it all with my own eyes, and I *still* have trouble believing it."

Around them, the crew of the *Marie Galante* had gone back to work and was steering the ship to Newcastle, where Wales had said the remnants of the Royalists were headquartered. Wardes, Louise, and the rest of their group had gathered around Shirou as he explained the situation to Wales.

"Whether you believe it or not doesn't change what it is," Shirou said gravely.

"I know, but...by the Founder — *Pseudo Gods?*" Wales shook his head. "It's not that I don't believe you, Sir Shirou, but everything I've been taught all my life about Brimir and this world —"

"— could still be true," Shirou finished. "Or most of it, at least. I don't know enough to tell you that everything is wrong. I can only tell you what I *do* know."

"If it helps, I can vouch for him," Derf offered.

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"Vouch for him?" Prince Wales asked confusedly. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Derf claims to have known Brimir," Louise told him. "He says he's six thousand years old."

"...I see," Prince Wales hedged doubtfully.

"Oi! I can hear the doubt in yer voice, yanno!"

"Wait," Kirche said, "let me see if I understand this right. That rusty old sword is supposed to be six thousand years old?"

"Doubtful," Tabitha agreed.

"Oi!"

"You do realize that shop owners will tell you just about anything to get you to buy their stuff, right?" Kirche asked.

"Um," Guiche jumped in a little nervously. "Kirche, I don't think you should —"

"The shop owner didn't know!" Louise said angrily, face flushed. "He didn't say anything about it when we bought the sword, Zerbst!"

"Then the sword himself told you," Kirche concluded. "And you believed him?"

"Zerbst! You...! You...!"

"Miss Kirche, I would appreciate it if you didn't talk to my fiancée that way."

"Oi! Girly! You didn't have so much trouble believing me earlier!"

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"That's because —"

"This sword is indeed six thousand years old," Shirou interjected seriously. "To be exact, he's five-thousand-nine-hundred-and-fifty-one years old and has had a total of six-hundred-ninety-two different owners. Two-hundred-eighty-five of those owners were swordsmen, and of those swordsmen, two-hundred-and-three were right-handed."

Silence and looks of surprise greeted his announcement. Even Derf seemed to have been stunned into silence.

"I told you," he smiled grimly, "my specialty is swords."

"Hohoho!" Derf laughed. "I underestimated you, Partner!"

Louise turned to Kirche. "See?" she said triumphantly.

Kirche huffed. "I was just having some fun," she said sourly. "You don't have to get your feathers so ruffled."

Louise scowled.

"If we can get back to the matter at hand," Wales began, "why exactly are you here? Surely you're not here to sightsee, not with Albion currently embroiled in rebellion."

Louise startled. "Oh! Forgive me, Your Highness, I forgot!"

She rummaged around in the folds of her cloak ("Where is it? I know I had it somewhere in here.") and produced from one of her pockets the letter and ring, the Water Ruby, that Princess Henrietta had given her just a few short days ago.

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"I am Louise Francoise Le Blanc de La Vallière, and as Her Highness, Princess Henrietta's, personal ambassador, I have been tasked with delivering this letter to you," Louise declared formally. She held out the letter, a little crumpled, for Prince Wales to take.

"Personal ambassador?" Kirche parroted disbelievingly.

"Personal ambassador, eh?" Wales asked with a fond smile. He took the letter and carefully peeled it open. "My dear Henrietta, you haven't changed at all."

As he read, his expression changed from fond and smiling to serious and troubled. His brow slowly knitted together and his lips thinned into a line. After he was finished, he sighed and hung his head for a moment.

"Marrying?" he said wearily. "My dear, beautiful Henrietta, getting married?"

"It's her choice," Louise burst out suddenly. She flushed when Wales turned to look at her, one eyebrow raised. "That is, I-I mean, she chose to get married, Your Highness. F-for the good of Tristain. Even if you don't agree with it, Your Highness, you must respect her decision."

Wales chuckled. "I can see why dear Henrietta sent you, Louise de La Vallière. You do far better as her personal ambassador than any of those stuffy politicians that are so much more common."

He sighed again.

"I have the letter she wants me to return to you," he said at length. "However, I don't have it on me — it's in

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Newcastle, where we're heading right now. I'm afraid you'll have to bear with me for a little while longer."

"Wait," Kirche interrupted. "Personal ambassador? *Louise?*"

Louise flushed. "Yes, Zerbst! The Princess asked this of me personally! Stop acting so surprised!"

"But why you?" Kirche asked. "I mean, you're just a student, and not a very good one at that!"

The splotches of red on Louise's cheeks grew darker and spread, and her mouth opened as she prepared a retort, but Guiche beat her to it.

"She was Princess Henrietta's childhood friend," he stated. Kirche turned to him, bewildered, and he blushed, too. "I, ah, might have...overheard them talking about it?"

Louise scowled. "I'm starting to think that Agnès woman had the right idea," she said acidly. Guiche flinched and glanced again at Shirou, as though expecting to be skewered. It was really starting to get annoying.

"Regardless of the reasoning," Shirou added, "Louise was chosen as the Princess's representative. Whether or not you agree with the choice doesn't change anything, Kirche."

It was a little harsh, but no part of it was untrue.

"Just so," Wardes agreed. "It is not your place to question the Princess, Miss Kirche."

"NEWCASTLE IN SIGHT!"

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Wales smiled. "Enough of this seriousness. Come. There's something I have to show you."

— o.o.O.O.o —

The sprawling castle that was Newcastle ran along the edge of the Albion island, situated rather precariously close to the cliff. Within the walls, which were a patchwork of dull gray stones that look solid enough to withstand even the most virulent of siege weapons, was a city that had clearly once been much larger and more populous, but appeared to have been whittled down over the course of the rebellion.

But even more striking than the castle was the burned and obliterated wreck that was lying on the open ground about half a mile outside the castle, a blackened and charred husk of what had once been an enormous ship that could dwarf even the *Eagle* that Wales had been sailing upon before. It looked as though someone had blown it up with some sort of missile, because the pieces that remained, those that hadn't been reduced to ash, were the brittle black-gray of charcoal.

Shirou could imagine what it must have looked like before, a truly gigantic warship with over a hundred cannons and at least twice as many sails as the *Eagle* had had. The hull would've been painted black, and the deck would've been a bright, honey brown with pure white sails that fluttered in the wind. It would have been an elegant work of art, a ship of premium design.

In other words, it would have been a state-of-the-art ship with tons of new technology painstakingly crafted to be the pride of a fleet.

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And all that remained of that ship was a broken shell.

"Amazing," Louise breathed from beside him.

"Who could do such a thing?" Guiche murmured incredulously.

"Oh my," Kirche whispered, shivering. "Such *power*."

"Incredible," Tabitha agreed.

"The *Royal Sovereign*," Wales informed them. "It was stolen from us, from our navy, and repurposed and renamed *Lexington* by the rebels in honor of their first victory. It kept a constant blockade on Newcastle from the sky, firing upon us every now and again just to let us know that they hadn't left."

"Attrition," Wardes commented absently. "They must have intended to starve you out."

"How clever," Guiche muttered.

"Probably," Wales agreed. "We had simply gotten used to it, coming and going through a port beneath the island instead of trying to make it past that ship. But a few days ago, in the dead of night after everyone had gone to sleep, someone or something attacked it and destroyed it in one blow."

He pointed out at the blackened husk. "*That* is all that's left."

"Someone or something?" Shirou asked, a suspicion forming.

"What could do *that*?"

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"No one knows for sure," Wales told him. "Some claimed to have seen a flash before it was destroyed, like a blade of sunlight. Others said they saw a shooting star rain down from the sky and strike it — they called it 'Brimir's Wrath.' My advisors think these are just preposterous rumors and that someone must have snuck aboard with explosives and sacrificed his life to destroy it."

"But you think otherwise?" Shirou concluded.

"I didn't know what to think," Wales admitted. "But what you told me before...I think now that it must have been one of those Heroic Spirits you were talking about, and that the attack that destroyed the *Royal Sovereign* was one of these Noble Phantasms."

"It's possible," Shirou affirmed. He could think of several different Noble Phantasms that could do the job; Caladbolg, Gáe Bolg, Excalibur Galatine, Bellerophon, Brahmastra and Brahmastra Kundala, Gram, Vasavi Shakti — really, any Anti-Army Noble Phantasm possessed enough power to destroy a ship like that. "There are a number of Noble Phantasms that fit the criteria, so it's difficult to say. Anything definitive?"

Wales shook his head. "Only the rumors. Whoever they are, though, we owe them for removing such a large threat, but I fear it is only a temporary reprieve. The loss of the *Royal Sovereign* must have the rebels confused for now, but when they pull themselves together, an entire fleet will be sent here to replace it."

Shirou said nothing — rather, there wasn't much of anything for him to say. Deep inside, he wanted to offer his assistance to take down the rebels, that he would annihilate

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the enemy for them if they so desired, and like that, he could save this Prince and his dying government.

But how much did he know? In taking the Prince's side, what guarantee was there that he was taking the side that would inevitably lead to the least bloodshed?

Ignorant of these people, ignorant of this world, ignorant of who was right and who was wrong, how could Shirou offer help to what very well may be a tyrant?

Moreover, if the Prince's suspicions were right, then there was yet another Heroic Spirit in play, and Shirou had no idea who it could possibly be. Enemy? Friend? It could even have been Perseus — unlikely though it seemed, Shirou didn't know enough about the motivations of the Heroic Spirits and their benefactor to know what side they would take or why. It was impossible to know who was trustworthy in Albion, if indeed anyone was.

What Shirou did know was that Louise needed him. And so, at the risk of sacrificing so many other lives, he would protect her and follow her.

In his situation, there really wasn't much other choice.

— o.O.O.O.o —

There was a murmuring crowd awaiting them at the port when they tethered themselves up. Wales was the first down the gangplank, with Shirou, Louise, Wardes, and their group following shortly behind. From amongst the crowd, a tall and wizened old man came forward and greeted them.

"What about the *Eagle*, Your Highness?"

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"Alas, the *Eagle* was lost, Paris," Wales greeted the old man. "When I met our guests —" he gestured to Shirou and the others — "we were attacked quite suddenly and without warning. I'm afraid she was sunk. Doubtlessly, her remains are resting at the bottom of the ocean by now."

"Truly?"

"I'm afraid so."

"The *Eagle*!" Paris, the old man, moaned. "Our finest ship!"

"Our enemies seem only to multiply," Wales told him regretfully. "We exchanged the *Eagle* for some Sulfur and our new friends, as well as a new enemy. Ah — but that isn't something to discuss here. The King should hear of it first."

"And with the impending attack," Paris lamented. "At the very least, the sulfur will come in handy tomorrow. These old bones of mine are trembling with anticipation."

Wales clasped Paris by the shoulder and smiled. "With our last breath, we will etch our struggle into history. These rebels will learn not to underestimate the King and his men, nor the royal family of Albion."

Paris smiled back and turned to Shirou and the others. "And who are these folk?"

"Ambassadors on business for Tristain's Princess Henrietta," Wales explained smoothly. "They are here as representatives of Tristain's crown."

"Paris Chamberlain, at your service," Paris introduced himself. He offered his hand to Shirou. "I must say, I've

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never seen an ambassador like you, sir. If you don't mind my saying so, you're a bit unusual looking."

Shirou coughed awkwardly and gestured to Louise, who was flushed with a mixture between embarrassment and anger.

"My Master is the ambassador," Shirou clarified. "The Princess picked her personally."

"Oh!" Paris blinked. "My apologies, miss, I'm afraid I never expected Tristain to send such a young woman as an ambassador."

"It's fine," Louise ground out as politely as she could manage.

"This is Sir Shirou, Miss Louise's protector," Wales introduced him. "I've found him most knowledgeable about this new enemy we face."

"Pleasure to meet you."

"And this is Sir Wardes, an agent of the Crown and Captain of Tristain's Griffin Knights."

"How do you do?"

"I'm well, thank you."

"And the others are Miss Kirche of Germania, Miss Tabitha, and Sir Guiche de Gramont, son of the famous General de Gramont."

Wales pointed them each out in turn.

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"Welcome to Albion," Paris said pleasantly, "or what's left of it, at any rate."

"I'll see you at the feast, Paris," Wales said. "In the meantime, I'd like to take care of this business. I'll leave the unloading of the sulfur up to you."

"As you say, Your Highness."

Wales led them up the port and into the castle, stopping for a moment to have a short, friendly chat with the guards at the front gate, then led them further into the castle and down past the kitchen, where his room was located.

It turned out to be rather ordinary-looking, very plain and utilitarian, which Shirou figured was only natural — in war, you couldn't be picky about how nice or how well furnished your room was. It was your room — you slept in it, you had moments of privacy in it, but it wasn't very personalized, and there was no point in personalizing it when the money might be better spent securing supplies.

The Prince sat down on one of the two chairs and pulled a long chain off his neck — a small key dangled from it, which Wales used to unlock a strongbox on the desk. Shirou could make out a portrait of Henrietta set in a place of honor inside of it.

The Prince pulled out a well-worn letter that had clearly been read several times, placed a kiss upon the wrinkled and frayed paper, and offered it over to Louise, who took it.

"This is the letter Henrietta asked I return," he explained. "I entrust it to your care."

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"I will take care of it," Louise promised solemnly.

"That's it?" Kirche hissed in the background. "All this over a *letter*?"

"Shh!" Guiche shushed her.

"Important," Tabitha agreed quietly.

"The *Marie Galante* will be resupplied tonight and leave tomorrow before the battle," Wales informed her. "I ask that you leave upon it. There's no point in you dying with us, tomorrow."

Louise's brow furrowed and her lips thinned thoughtfully.

"Your Highness, you're..." she began, "that is to say...you plan on dying tomorrow?"

"Yes," Wales said matter-of-factly. "I have only 300 men here in this castle. The armies of Reconquista number at least a hundred times ours. Victory in that scenario is impossible, so the only remaining option is to evacuate as many of the civilians as we can and go down fighting. Reconquista will not be satisfied in this country until they have killed Albion's Royal Family, and tomorrow, they shall do exactly that."

"But," Louise's brow furrowed, "the letter from Hen...I mean, the letter from the Princess. Doesn't it ask you to —"

She gestured with one hand.

"Even if it did, I wouldn't," Wales told her solemnly. "But it doesn't. Henrietta may not like it, but she understands what it means to be royalty, to place oneself in the service of the

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kingdom. She knows that there isn't any other option for me but to die for my people."

"But..."

"There is nowhere left to run and nowhere left to hide. If we must die anyway, then I can think of no better way to die than fighting for our people and what we believe in."

"But..." Louise turned to Shirou. "Shirou...!"

For a moment, Shirou said nothing.

He knew what she was asking. He knew what she wanted. He knew what she wanted to hear and what she wanted him to say.

And he was tempted. Oh, he was so very sorely tempted. He knew, as Louise knew, that it was within his power to save the Prince, and perhaps even defeat the army that was coming to obliterate them. He knew that he could save all these people from death, that he could choose a side and make a difference, save lives, save a country.

But...

But...what about Louise?

Going into battle like this, fighting a large army without holding back — that meant he would have to take his attention away from Louise and leave her unprotected. What if, in the process, she was hurt, injured, or killed? It didn't even need to be a deliberate attack — simply being at the wrong place at the wrong time would be enough. A stray arrow, a stray spell, collateral damage; it would all be enough to kill her without meaning to kill her.

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And for that matter...it would be the perfect opportunity for Perseus to strike.

Perseus, who had proven he had no qualms with being sneaky and underhanded.

The risks outweighed the gains.

So, he said: "Our mission was to retrieve this letter and report back to Princess Henrietta. That was the mission we were given. If we stay here and help, there is the inevitable chance of failure, in which case the mission will also fail and Tristain will have to face Reconquista alone."

He watched her face fall, but he steeled himself and continued. "If we leave tomorrow before the fighting starts, we can make it back without endangering the success of the mission, in which case we will have achieved what we set out to do."

It was the logical choice — choose the path that could guarantee the best possibility of success. Rather than fighting a battle you could not hope to win, or even one that you might win but the odds were stacked against you, choose the best possible choice for victory.

To put it a bit more simply, Shirou had no doubt that he could annihilate even an army thirty-thousand strong, but it would be a pyrrhic victory. Even if everything went as planned, there was still the undeniable fact that the land left behind would be too scarred and too damaged to be of any use.

In other words, he could destroy the army, but it would ruin the land they marched upon.

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What would be left for the people of Albion to live upon if that happened? No, letting the Prince and three hundred soldiers die was better than slaying thirty-thousand men and scorching the land barren.

"When did you get so cynical?" a voice that sounded like Rin asked.

What other choice was there? Shirou thought helplessly. There was no path to victory that did not require some kind of sacrifice.

"Shirou..." Louise whispered, looking betrayed.

"He's right," Wales told her. "Even if you could help, even if you could change the battle in our favor, it would simply be one battle. Reconquista won't stop — they'll keep going until either we're dead or they are, and to mount a campaign against their forces is not something a girl your age should be doing, Miss Vallière."

He paused and smiled at her sadly. "All of us have resigned ourselves to dying in this fight. We have neither the manpower nor the resources to keep fighting. This battle will be the end of us, whether we win or not. Cromwell has made sure of that."

"Then...!" Louise said, sounding frustrated. "Then come back with us to Tristain! There's no need for you to die here —"

Wales shook his head of blonde hair.

"I cannot abandon my people," he said firmly. "Even if you beg me for the rest of the night, Louise Françoise, my

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answer will remain the same. It isn't my destiny to return with you. I was born for Albion and so I will die for Albion. Tomorrow, my people will be cut down, and I will be cut down with them."

"But the Princess!"

"Henrietta will understand."

"But...!"

"Louise," Wardes interrupted, "such is unbecoming of a Noble of Tristain."

Louise scowled and flushed but didn't speak, only looked furiously away.

Wales smiled. "Well. Enough of this depressing talk. There is a feast to be had tonight, the last of its kind to be had in this sort of company, so I would be honored if you would join us."

But Shirou was not hungry.

No, there was no way he could eat with the feelings of unease and guilt rolling around in his belly.

Because there had to be a middle ground. Back then, so many years ago, he had said that he wouldn't stop striving, that he would pursue his impossible dream no matter what, no matter how hard things got. He would make it happen, even if it hurt, even if he stumbled.

Except here, he couldn't. He wanted to help. He wanted to make a miracle that could turn the tide in Wales' favor. He wanted to save them all.

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But he couldn't.

No, from the beginning, there hadn't been a way to save Wales from Reconquista. After all...

How could you save someone who didn't want to be saved?

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CONTINUE?

[YES/NO]

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #5

"Welcome back!" Ilya said with an enthusiastic wave. "We're here for another edition of Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner!"

Rin gave a groan. "You're way too chipper for this time of night."

Ilya hummed and looked at her curiously. "I already knew Tohsaka-sensei wasn't a morning person, but I thought she worked better at night."

"Go die in a wood-chipper, you flat-chested, undead, albino *loli*," Rin said.

"Ooh, *someone's* in a bad mood," Ilya smiled slyly. "Your old age catching up to you, Rin?"

"Age is a measure of experience," Rin said matter-of-factly. She lanced Ilya with a glare. "At least I made it out of my twenties. There are some people I could name who didn't even make it *that* far."

"Ouch, that hurts." Ilya feigned an injury and clutched her hands to her chest. "What are you gonna throw at me next? Dying a virgin?"

"That's a bit too low, even for me," Rin waved it off. "Besides, the only one who was interested in stripping down jailbait like you was Kirei."

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Ilya scowled for a moment, then sighed. "That *was* kinda creepy," she admitted. "I mean, I was unconscious and totally out of it. What was the point of undressing me like that, anyway?"

"It's Kirei," Rin said it as though it explained everything. "He was the villain. Why do they do anything?"

"Because they're evil?"

"I guess. But then, Gilgamesh had a *Chaotic Good* alignment, didn't he? Though, he was a villain, too..."

Ilya groaned. "You're making my head hurt! Good, evil...let's just stop talking about it and get back to what we're supposed to be discussing!"

"Right, right...What was that, again?"

"The magic system, the magic system! You explained about how the Mystery was practically gone and that they didn't need long, complicated incantations to do spells! You left off with Brimir, remember, and his Ciel class Od?"

"Yeah, I remember, now."

Ilya huffed. "Geez, Rin. Are you really that out of it just because it's nighttime?"

Rin held out her hand. "Trace, on."

A rolled up newspaper appeared in her palm and she calmly wacked Ilya with it without even looking.

"Ow!" Ilya cried. "How the hell did you do that?! That's Shirou's magic, Rin!"

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Rin wacked her again, backhanded, this time, and sent her sprawling to the ground.

"Two-hit combo! It's super effective!" someone off screen said. "K-O!"

"If you can use Avalon, then I can do Tracing," Rin said matter-of-factly. "And it's Tohsaka-sensei to you."

She cleared her throat and adopted her lecture pose. "Anyway," she began, "with that out of the way, let's pick up where we left off. If you'll recall, I did indeed explain a good portion of the magic system and how it works compared to the one you might be familiar with from Fate/Stay Night and Nasu's other works. If you need to refresh your memory, feel free to go back and look at it again. For the rest of us, we're going to continue from there."

She got out a marker and wrote **Dot**, **Line**, **Triangle**, and **Square** on the board.

"Those of you who already know the Familiar of Zero system should recognize these, but I'm going to go a bit more in-depth," Rin explained. "In the original Light Novels, Louise Francoise Le Blanc de La Vallière explains that this system is about how many elements a given mage can add to their spells. She further explains that whereas a **Dot** mage might expend 8 "willpower" on a given spell, a **Line** mage would expend 4, a **Triangle** would use 2, and a **Square** would only need 1. For the most part, this system has been followed faithfully in *Miracle of Zero*."

She raised one finger.

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"*However*," she stressed the word, "the mechanics have been changed slightly. Willpower is simply another name for Od, in this case. Further, the Dot, Line, Triangle, Square system isn't about gaining more Prana, but rather about becoming "closer" to one's Od, learning to use it more efficiently, and having a sort of mental breakthrough about one's magic. Generally, these mental breakthroughs have to do with how to add another element to one's magic, and when these factors combine properly, a mage graduates from Dot to Line, Line to Triangle, or Triangle to Square and is able to use magic appropriate to their level. To compare it, it's sort of like a Reality Marble user finding an incantation more appropriate to his activation aria. It's something both mental and literal, a breakthrough about how to combine more elements, or aspects thereof, to their spells, making them more powerful and increasing effectiveness. Naturally, the more elements put into a spell, the more powerful it is."

She took a deep breath. "As a result, the spells become more powerful and it becomes easier to do lower-ranked spells for less energy. To be honest, it's a bit of a convoluted system, but I'm kinda jealous about how easy they have it."

She turned back to the board and wrote **Affinity**.

"**Affinity**," Rin explained, "known to us as **Elemental Alignment** in the Nasuverse, is a bit less restrictive in Halkeginia. Rather than confining them to the usage of a single element, Affinity is simply what element a given mage is best at. Mages aligned to the Fire element are naturally better at Fire magic, while mages aligned to the Water element work best with Water magic. As I said, it's certainly possible to cast magic of an element outside of one's natural

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Affinity, but it's also harder, which is part of the reason why it's pretty difficult to rank up from Dot to Line and so on. Of course, as a result, the phenomenon known as Average Ones doesn't exist in Halkeginia, and only Void mages can use Void magic."

"Wow. You actually managed to cover everything without going over the limit."

Rin jerked. There, standing next to her, was Ilya, completely unharmed.

"Wha — you — how — !?"

"Avalon," Ilya sing-songed. "If you get to use Tracing, then I get to use Avalon."

"That's not...!"

"Anyway," Ilya cut across her, "that's it for this segment! Wow, we finished on time! Rin can actually get her beauty sleep, now!"

"YOU!"

"Tune in next time for our special Question and Answer segment! You won't regret it, I promise!"

"I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!"

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #5: End

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Chapter VII: Lapse From Virtue – Part Two

The party was held in the great hall, a large, high-ceilinged room decorated with musty, ill-kept banners displaying what must have been the royal family's crest. Once, they had probably been a brilliant gold color, but age and lack of care had reduced them to a dusty, dirty brown. Shirou imagined that, amongst everything else that these people had gone through, taking care of the drapery must have been of little concern.

The rest of the room, however, seemed to have been cleaned neatly in honor of their last feast, and was festooned with what remained of the finest linens and silverware. Great gold goblets, encrusted with large jewels that twinkled like stars, had been set aside for the King and Prince, and silver goblets, etched with some of the finest scrollwork Shirou had ever seen, had been placed out for everyone else. Each fork, knife, spoon, and plate bore the royal emblem, and every bottle of the oldest and best wine sat uncorked for all to enjoy.

At the back of the room, sitting upon his throne, there was an old man who could only be the reigning king. He eyed them all with an unreadable expression, radiating...something? Perhaps approval. Yes, he seemed like he approved of the merrymaking going on, the final radiant huzzah.

It was the last party of its kind that they would see, and each and every person in the hall knew it. And yet, despite the burden of that knowledge, despite knowing that tomorrow

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would be their last day and that these were their last hours, they all carried on merrily as though they hadn't a care in the world.

It was almost painful to look at.

"Are you really willing to let all of these people die?" Rin's voice asked him seriously.

Shirou closed his eyes, let out a breath through his nose, and silently grieved for each and every person in front of him, so brilliant and bright, that he could not save.

"Louise must come first," he said solemnly. "If her safety means sacrificing all of these people...then yes."

She made a strange noise in the back of her throat.

"So the King of Miracles," Rin said, "can't make a miracle here?"

Something inside of him resonated with her words.

But Louise, something else protested.

Save them, the first part demanded with a presence like steel.

Louise, the second part, all fluid and emptiness, insisted.

Save them!

Louise!

Save them!

Louise!

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SAVE THEM.

LOUISE.

SAVE THEM!

LOUISE!

His head spun around and around, and his skull seemed suddenly two sizes too small to contain his brain. The world was swirling about him like a merry-go-round, and it was only by reaching out to press one hand against the cool flagstones of the castle wall that he managed to remain standing.

"There will come a time when you find yourself in my place, he said," Rin reminded Shirou. "Have you, Shirou? Is this the moment where you forsake your ideals? Heroic Spirits are those who change fate and bring about miracles. With the strength, resolve, and courage to match even those brilliant existences, can't you make one, too?"

He...wanted to — *save them.*

He...wanted to — *protect Louise.*

He breathed. "I..."

"Is something the matter, Sir Shirou?" Wardes voice interrupted.

Shirou latched onto his voice like an anchor and used it to drive the indecision away from the forefront of his mind. Not now. There would be time for such a decision later.

"...It's nothing," he said, though he suspected from the look on Wardes' face that he had taken a few seconds too long to answer. "Just thinking. About how all of these people

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are celebrating so raucously, despite knowing what awaits them tomorrow."

Wardes hummed and gave a nod.

"They celebrate joyfully, putting off the horror of their fates to fully enjoy the present," Wardes commented. "In some ways, it is admirable...but in others, it is incredibly sad."

"A fire burns brightest just as it's about to be snuffed out," Kirche muttered with a shiver.

"Truly," Guiche agreed.

"This isn't right," Louise murmured restlessly. "We could...we could *save* them..."

"And doom the rest of the countryside," Wardes told her. "The rebels won't stop until they find and eliminate whatever remains of the royal family and their supporters. If we save them now, and with such odds against them, it isn't even *close* to a guarantee, then all those innocents along the country who live without participating in this war will become targets as Reconquista tries to drive out the Royalists. It will be a long and bloody war where thousands would be killed if the rebels so much as *thought* they were harboring the Prince and his allies."

He shook his head. "Better for the Prince and the Royalists to die here, with glory and honor, and end the conflict before innocents are involved."

Louise's brow furrowed. "But," she began and looked at Shirou.

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But Shirou didn't have anything to say to her — how could he, when he was still conflicted himself?

Save them.

Protect Louise.

Wales appeared at that moment, heralded by joyous greetings from the partygoers and rapturous sighs from the younger women — it seemed he was rather popular. Shirou watched as he greeted everyone he passed with a kind and generous smile and made his way through the throng to the throne.

The king tried to rise to greet him, but, old and gray and frail, nearly collapsed on his wobbly knees. Several people in the crowd laughed.

"Your Majesty! Now isn't the time to fall!"

"Indeed! Wait until tomorrow!"

The king didn't seem insulted and let loose his own laugh, smiling broadly at the room.

"It's nothing!" he insisted jokingly. "My legs simply went numb from sitting too long!"

Wales approached the king and helped him to his feet. The king wobbled a little, but with Wales supporting him, he managed to keep himself up. He drew his chest out as much as he could manage, and suddenly, the chuckles died away.

The king was about to give a speech, Shirou realized.

"By now, most of you have heard that Reconquista will be bringing their full might down upon us tomorrow," the

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king began thunderously. "No doubt, they want revenge for the insult paid to them by the destruction of that wondrous ship, their "*Lexington*" — that they stole from us, no less!"

Cries of agreement rose up among the crowd. If nothing else, Shirou mused, the king could speak rather well.

"You have fought for and followed this frail old king of yours as bravely and unwaveringly as any I have had the pleasure to know," the king went on. "We have made those cowardly rebels pay for every inch of ground they have stolen from us — we fought courageously in battle after battle, taking as many of them as we could before we were forced here, where we could only hide and wait while they amassed their forces to finally silence us.

"But tomorrow will not be a battle," the king said gravely. "We are but a mere three hundred. Reconquista brings to bear nearly three full divisions. It will not be a fight we can win — no, it will be nothing less than a one-sided slaughter. We will be like sheep fighting a pack of wolves; there will be nothing we can do to save ourselves once the battle begins."

He paused to let it all sink in. Shirou doubted that most of the civilians truly understood exactly what they would be facing.

"But it's asking too much, I think, for you civilians to risk your lives in a battle we can't win," the king continued at length. "Thus, tomorrow morning, the Tristain vessel, *Marie Galante*, will take the women and children and anyone who wants a future away from this forsaken island. For those who decide to leave, I will not think lesser of you for pursuing a future."

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For a moment, only silence greeted him. There was a quiet rumbling amongst the crowd. Then —

"Nice speech."

There was no time to react — the voice that came out of nowhere set into motion three things simultaneously.

At once, a figure dropped down from the ceiling, cloak billowing, to deal a debilitating blow to the king, who had only enough time to push Wales out of the way before a sickle sword carved open his chest mercilessly. Blood splattered all over the mask, which was painted with tribal lines and etched in the likeness of a face.

Perseus.

At the same moment, another figure, cloaked in blue, landed in the center of the crowd as though he had appeared from thin air and rushed forward, sending people flying about as he dashed towards Shirou and his group. His face was hidden by a hood and his sword was cloaked in shadows — no, it was *made* of shadows.

The mystery man from the fight earlier.

At the far end of the hall, another figure, masked and lacking the distinct feel and presence of a Heroic Spirit, cast a blast of wind with a flick of his wand-sword, bowling people over as he strode casually towards Wales, who was staring at his father, the king, in shock.

There was only one real choice for Emiya Shirou to make.

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He burst into motion — Harpe came down again, but Shirou had already flung himself between the blade and Wales, using Derf to deflect the strike up and away.

Save them.

Shirou's free hand leapt immediately to his sword, his main sword, the Last Phantasm that had been given to him by the Lady of the Lake, and he drew it from its sheath, stabbing the pommel into Perseus' armored chest.

Hard.

Perseus stumbled backwards and Shirou incanted swiftly — "RHO AIAS!"

In an instant, a four-layer barrier, the crystallization of the legend of Ajax the Greater blocking Hector of Troy's unblockable spear, appeared between Perseus and the rest of the hall, pinning him between the throne and the back wall.

It would not hold long.

Naturally, he'd rushed it, so it wasn't as powerful as it should be, and Perseus, as a god in human flesh, possessed enough power to simply punch through it within minutes, but Shirou didn't need it to last too long anyway.

Shirou fully unsheathed Gavilain, swapping it to his dominant hand and grasping Derf with his left. He spun around, stepping carefully over Wales to meet the blue-cloaked swordsman with Derflinger — the resounding clang of the two swords meeting echoed throughout the hall, a loud boom as two swordsmen whose blows could shake the earth

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met, stalemated for a moment, then Shirou's superior strength sent the figure flying backwards.

Out in the rest of the hall, the mages in the crowd had started slinging spells at the masked mage who had appeared at the far end, but he deflected it all as easily as breathing and flung his own spells back at them. To attack like that, so effortlessly — Shirou wasn't an expert, but he imagined that it was probably at least a Triangle Mage, probably a Square.

The party room had become a battlefield.

With his reprieve, Shirou spun around to his group, to Louise and the others.

"Wardes!" he roared at Wardes. "Get them out of —"

But Wardes, who had turned to look at him at that moment and had started to open his mouth, was hit by a stray spell from somewhere in the chaos, had a single second to look surprised, and then...vanished. The moment the spell hit, Wardes vanished as though he had been nothing but an illusion.

Shirou's brain tried to make sense of that, and he likely would have remained ignorant if the mage on the other end of the hall had not staggered at the exact moment when the fake Wardes had been dispelled.

All of the little bits and pieces fell together. Everything that Shirou hadn't considered suspicious at the time, like how Wardes hadn't been surprised when Shirou told the group about Harpe's curse, like how a soldier like Wardes had tried to insist on something that would endanger the mission just so that he could spend the night with his fiancée, suddenly

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came to the forefront of his mind as evidence to damn Wardes as a traitor.

Anger, hot and furious, and betrayal, cold and chilling in his belly, shot through Shirou. His grip on his swords tightened.

Shirou wanted to kill him. He wanted to flay that bastard alive for betraying Louise, for betraying his country, for being involved in something that would probably end hundreds or even thousands of lives.

But now was not the time. Now was not the time. There were other things that needed to be taken care of.

"Guiche!" he barked instead. Guiche startled. "Make as many Valkyries as you can! Evacuate as many people as possible to the ship and get ready to leave! Go!"

"But Sir Shirou!" Guiche protested. "We can't leave you —"

"GO!" Shirou roared, patience gone.

Guiche flinched, but pulled out his wand — Shirou didn't see what happened after that, because he had to turn around again to meet the blue-cloaked swordsman a second time and push him back a second time.

But this time, Shirou didn't need a moment of reprieve. He didn't need to take a second to order an evacuation. Instead, he could keep going, so he flung himself forward as the blue-cloaked swordsman landed and swung down with Derflinger — he was blocked, then deflected, and Derflinger

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bit into the floor beneath their feet. A great crater was left behind as chunks of the floor flew up and out.

Shirou scowled. He was fighting an expert, then.

The shadow sword came around and Shirou met it with Gavilain, sending sparks of lit Prana dancing around. The shadow sword flew backwards, as was only natural — Shirou was stronger than this enemy, and they both knew it — but instead of stumbling or falling off balance, the swordsman maneuvered fluidly with the motion and came around again, swinging. Shirou blocked.

The figure growled. "In the way," he rasped angrily.

Shirou snarled. "That's...*my* line!"

He planted his foot in the figure's chest and pushed as hard as he could — the swordsman was sent soaring backwards, skidding and stumbling across the floor as he tried to halt his momentum and wheezing from Shirou's kick.

But it wasn't a reprieve for Shirou, because the moment the blue swordsman had been pushed away, a familiar buildup of magical energy surged from the masked mage — the traitor, Wardes — and Shirou glanced over to see him aiming, not at Shirou, but at Guiche and Louise, who were standing at the far end of the hall and guiding the screaming civilians to safety.

In that instant, Shirou had two choices. First, he could fling something at Wardes to stop the spell, but even if he unleashed his fastest attack in that instant, Wardes would already have gotten his spell off and it would surely hit its target — *fatally*. Second, he could sacrifice his utility and

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block the spell with something that could absorb or redirect it, like the sword in his hand.

Time slowed down. Shirou hefted Derflinger, grasping the hilt in such a way that would make for the best throw. Wardes' mouth curled around the final syllables of his incantation. Across the room, Guiche looked over at that moment and saw what Wardes was about to do.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. Wardes finished his spell and lightning lanced out from the tip of his wand-sword. Across the room, Guiche flung himself in the path of the spell, arms spread wide to cover Louise and the civilians as best as he could. Derflinger whistled through the air, a glint of silvery steel.

Guiche shut his eyes and grimaced. The lightning spell lit up brightly and carved across the distance. In a moment, it would reach Guiche, who had heroically placed himself in its path in order to protect Louise and the unprotected civilians, and kill him instantly.

At the last second, Derflinger swerved into its path and absorbed the spell, sinking into the flagstones halfway to the hilt.

The reprieve was over. The blue swordsman rushed back to Shirou, who blocked with Gavilain and struck back with another blow that echoed throughout the room. He was blocked, too, and they struck at each other again and again — Shirou was just the slightest bit faster and the slightest bit stronger, but the figure in front of him was moving swiftly and easily as though he could predict where Shirou would strike.

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It was maddening — Shirou could compare it to fighting Saber, whose powerful Instinct gave her near-precognitive abilities in battle. No matter where he swung, no matter what he did, the figure across from him seemed to know exactly how and when to block and exactly how much strength was needed to do so at exactly which angle to prevent himself from being overwhelmed.

The figure fought with the same level of skill as Lancelot, but could not possibly be Lancelot. But who else was so famed for his skill in combat? Who else was could wield the sword so well that his skills could make up for even his physical disadvantages? Who else possessed a Noble Phantasm that hid his identity so completely that even the true nature of his sword was shrouded?

Damn it — if he could just know who he was facing, he could make a plan accordingly. If he just knew his enemy, he could pull out the right Noble Phantasm to defeat him or use the right skill to overwhelm him. He needed to see who it was. He needed —

"Show me your face!" Shirou snarled and swept out with one hand.

The figure ducked, but not quickly enough — the wind behind Shirou's hand blew back the hood, revealing the face.

But Shirou only had a moment. The second the figure realized his identity had been compromised, he leapt back and away, and Shirou caught only a glimpse of black hair and blue eyes before the hood had been pulled back up and the features shrouded once more.

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BOOM — the castle suddenly rumbled and shook beneath their feet. Shirou looked back; Perseus, rather than bust through the shield Shirou had constructed to box him in, had simply destroyed the wall behind him instead. With a flutter of the tiny wings on his sandals, he fled back and out of the enormous hole he had created.

Across the room, lightning flashed from Wardes' wand-sword again, but a bronze Valkyrie leapt in the way of the spell and was destroyed. Shirou looked back over at the blue-cloaked swordsman, prepared to continue the fight, but he was gone, had vanished from the spot where he'd been just a moment before —

"Aaaaaaah!"

The scream tore out across the hall and everyone stopped and turned to look. The wand-sword tumbled from Wardes' fingers, who was staring, as transfixed and surprised as Shirou was, at the shadow sword protruding from his chest.

...It didn't make any sense. Shirou tried to wrap his head around the facts before him, but no matter how he approached it, it seemed as impossible as a math problem that said two plus two equaled sixteen.

The blue-cloaked swordsman had stabbed Wardes through the chest, and Shirou couldn't understand why.

"Wh-what?" Neither, it seemed, could Wardes. "B-but...allies!"

Wardes coughed violently and specks of blood flew from his lips. The front of his gray robes was darkening to an ominous black.

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"N-no," Wardes gripped the sword protruding from his chest as though to pull it out, ignoring how the blade cut into his fingers. "I-I was...going to rule the world!"

The sword was pulled free — the blue-cloaked figure savagely yanked it out of Wardes chest and with cold, practiced efficiency, flicked the blood off the blade.

Wardes stumbled forward and fell, first to his knees and then to the floor, eyes wide and grasping at his wound as red blood spilled over the stones. The blue-cloaked figure watched him dispassionately.

"Revenge," he rasped.

"C-can't die," Wardes gasped, unhearing. He tried to pull himself to his feet, but couldn't. "R-Reconquista...H-holy Land...I was...g-going to rule the world...!"

He looked up and reached out for Louise with one shaking hand. "L-Louise! M-my Louise! I-I...!"

The shadow sword came down mercilessly and stabbed straight through Wardes' neck, severing the spine — the outstretched hand spasmed once, twice, then the entire body fell limp.

Dead.

Shirou was frozen in his spot, unsure of what to do. The blue-cloaked figure had just killed Wardes, who was supposedly his ally, after having kept Shirou busy while Wardes bowled through the mages that had been gathered for the party. Where did that put them, then? Was the blue-cloaked figure a double agent working for Shirou's side? Was

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it simply a personal disagreement? What was it? Where did they go from here?

"She warned me you might do this."

Perseus, unmasked, dropped down from the ceiling and landed next to the blue-cloaked figure, who didn't seem at all bothered by his presence. Shirou tensed and prepared himself to fight.

But Perseus ignored him and simply looked down at Wardes' corpse, scowling. He lifted a foot and kicked the body only hard enough to roll it over, revealing Wardes' face, permanently etched into a rictus of terror, and the two gaping holes — one in the neck, and one in the chest. Blood was splattered all over the pale cheeks and mingled in with the gray beard and hair.

"Well," Perseus hedged, "I suppose he wasn't especially useful since his cover was blown, anyway. She'll probably be upset with you, though."

Unlike Drake, who had reacted as though the mysterious "she" who had been mentioned three times, now, was some sort of god to be worshipped, the blue-cloaked figure seemed entirely unbothered by the idea that whoever "she" was might be displeased with Wardes' death.

"Worth it," he rasped.

Perseus gave a long, dramatic sigh.

"She won't be pleased," he said as he bent down to pick up Wardes' body, "but at this rate, we're going to be pushed

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back. Achieving the second half of our objective would be difficult, at best. We should retreat and regroup."

He hefted Wardes' body up onto his shoulder and reached into the folds of his cloak for something else, only to pull out a roughly-hewn green crystal about the size of his palm.

"You've won for now, fake hero," Perseus said to Shirou. The blue-cloaked figure reached out and laid his hand over the crystal in Perseus'. "But we won't underestimate you like this again. Next time, we'll bring a more suitable enemy for you to play with."

The crystal, hidden behind Perseus' and the figure's hands, glowed brightly — and then, quite suddenly, they were gone, leaving behind only the drying pool of blood on the floor.

— o.O.O.O.o —

"My father," Wales said hollowly. "My people. Gone. Dead. *Murdered.*"

At the end of it, a meager ninety-three people had survived the battle, most of them civilians. Everyone else had been slaughtered, killed mercilessly beneath the cutting wind and raging lightning Wardes had used to destroy even the best mages in the group. Their corpses, some sliced to bits and others fried by electricity, had been strewn all over the castle floor. The guards, they had discovered on their way out, had all been cut down silently — Shirou suspected it had been Harpe.

No one had walked away from it unaffected. Wales had had tears dripping down his face, crying silently for all those

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who had been slain. Guiche had emptied his stomach on the ground, unable to look at all of the mutilated bodies. Kirche had fallen silent and lost her usual vibrancy, hands shaking. Even Tabitha had solemnly put away her omnipresent book.

Of course, Shirou knew. How could anyone look upon such senseless violence and not be moved?

The only one who had not seemed disturbed by it all had been Louise, who had only looked about with a surreal look on her face, as though the lengths to which people could be driven had only then hit home for her. But she hadn't cried, she hadn't revisited her last meal, she hadn't quivered and shaken like a leaf in the wind. She had simply walked through it all, looking at everything as though she wanted to etch it into her memory so that she could never forget that devastation.

And though he respected the strength of her nerve, Shirou wondered what she had seen to prepare her for something like that.

"Are you happy, Reconquista?" Wales asked the sky. "Have you ruined enough lives, now? My people are dead. My soldiers, my loyal comrades, are all gone. Are you satisfied that you've crushed me? Or do you desire still more of my royal blood, first?"

He let out a shaky sigh. "Such pointless carnage..."

"Um," Louise started, "Your Highness —"

"Your Majesty," Wales corrected her faintly. "It's 'Your Majesty,' now."

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"Long live the king," Guiche said quietly.

"Your Majesty," Louise corrected herself, "does this mean...you'll be coming back with us to Tristain?"

For a long moment, Wales was silent, simply gazing back at the castle they had vacated as the *Marie Galante* made its way into the night sky as swiftly as possible.

"I have no other choice, now," Wales lamented. "My father is dead. My loyal comrades are gone. There is no heroic end that awaits me in battle, no kingdom for me to return to, only the slow death of exile."

He took in a deep breath through his nose, then turned to Shirou and said, "Do it."

Shirou nodded and lifted his hands. The switch turned on — in the back of his head, the hammer of a gun cocked back and fired. The Magic Circuits activated.

"Trace, on."

The sleek black bow, once belonging to the hero Emiya, formed in his hands like a shard of midnight, bowstring pulled back and tense.

"My core is twisted in madness."

Caladbolg II, the modified sword of Fergus Mac Róich, formed along the bow, notched like an arrow, then streamlined into a thin, narrow shape as Shirou modified it with Reinforcement magic.

But this was not enough. Simply turning the sword into an arrow was not enough. Shirou took it one step further and

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flooded the sword with Prana, making it fragile and dangerous — a Broken Phantasm.

The bowstring was released. Like a rocket, like a shooting star, the sword-arrow streaked across the sky as a beam of golden light and slammed into the castle in the distance, carving through the battlements as it exploded into a brilliant glowing ball like a second sun. For a moment, that flash illuminated the sky by itself, bright and shining gloriously, and then, ignited by the initial attack, the sulfur that had been left behind inside the castle caught flame and detonated.

The fireball created dwarfed Caladbolg II's by at least thrice as much and consumed the entire castle, lighting up the night sky as though it were midday. The shockwave from the explosion rippled outwards, and moments later, swept over the *Marie Galante*, whipping Shirou's hair back away from his face.

It was a funeral pyre, created not only for the people who had fallen within the castle walls, but also to mark the end of the nation that had died this night. Wales, as the last true king of Albion, was now a government in exile.

This was the plan they had made, thrown together on their way out of Newcastle. There was no time to bury the dead — in the first place, the only ones who had the stomach necessary to handle the gore inside the castle were Shirou, Wales, and a handful of the survivors; Guiche, Louise, and the others were unprepared for that sort of thing — because Reconquista's army was still headed their way. There simply wasn't enough time to collect all of the corpses and all of the pieces of what had once been *people* and find a plot of land to bury them under.

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So, if it wasn't possible to bury them, then the only remaining way to give them a proper funeral was to build a pyre.

Wales, who knew Newcastle best, had set up the sulfur the *Marie Galante* had been carrying in all of the right places so that it would ignite when Shirou hit it with Caladbolg II. The result: the entirety of Newcastle, and the two-hundred-some bodies contained within it, was wiped off the map and reduced to ash.

"What will you think of me, dear Henrietta?" Wales asked into the quiet. "When you see this face again, beaten into submission, crying bloody tears for the land and the people lost tonight, will you still think it as handsome as you did that day so long ago?"

Shirou said nothing and remained respectfully silent.

"She'll cry with you," Louise burst out.

Wales turned to her and looked at her with something akin to bewilderment. Louise flushed, but soldiered on.

"If you cry for the people killed tonight, then the Princess will cry with you! If the burden is too heavy, if you can't shoulder it on your own, then she'll help you carry it!" Louise said passionately. "That's... That's what being in love is about! Walking together, side by side, carrying each other's burdens together, putting your faith in each other — that's what it means to be in love!"

She took a short breath. "If the Princess loves you and you love her — no, the Princess *does* love you, just as much as you love her, so don't try to do everything on your own!

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Trust her, put your faith in her, and let her help you carry those burdens! As long as you have each other, then even if you can't always be together, you'll always have someone to rely on in the hard times!"

She flushed again and very obviously tried not to look in Shirou's direction. "Someone very wise taught me that."

It was a very nice sentiment, Shirou thought, and it sounded rather familiar, but he didn't recall ever telling her anything like that.

Wales smiled and looked at her gratefully. "Someone very wise, indeed," he said. "Thank you, Louise de La Vallière. I can see now why Henrietta chose you for this mission."

"Meaningful," Tabitha agreed.

"Oh," Kirche moaned, "how poetic, how beautiful! Darling!" She turned to Shirou and flung her arms open invitingly. "Give them to me, Darling! All of your burdens and troubles — put your faith in me and I'll help you carry them —"

"Denied," Shirou said flatly.

But the damage was already done — the air of sincerity and meaningfulness had evaporated like so much water in the desert.

Louise grumbled. "Can't you go a day without ruining the atmosphere, Zerst?"

"I can't help it," Kirche said with a shrug. "Darling is just so...*manly* and *powerful*. Something about it awakens the

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woman inside of me, the *passion* — I am called 'the Ardent,' you know. It's not just a pretty title."

"Wish you'd learn to keep your 'passion' under your skirt," Louise muttered.

"Don't be jealous," Kirche said, thrusting her chest out, "just because I've got higher quality assets than you, Vallière. We Germanians are just built like that — higher quality all around."

A strange growling sound rumbled across the deck, and it took Shirou a moment to realize that it was coming from Louise, whose back had arched like a cat's.

"*Zerbst*," she ground out, face flushed a brilliant red. Shirou half expected steam to start pouring out of her ears.

Shirou cleared his throat to cut off the impending argument. "Anyway. Guiche."

Guiche jumped, startled. "A-ah," he stuttered, "yes, Sir Shirou?"

"You have my thanks," Shirou told him. "For protecting Louise against Wardes' lightning spell."

"O-oh," Guiche smiled and looked down sheepishly. "Well, I mean..." he shrugged. "What else was I going to do? Louise was unprotected and there wasn't time to do anything else, so..."

"Indeed," Shirou agreed. "And that is why I thank you, Guiche, because you were willing to sacrifice yourself to save someone else."

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"A-ah. W-well..."

"Really?" Kirche asked. "Guiche did that?" She grinned. "Well, I guess you're a bit manlier than I thought you were, Guiche!"

"H-hey!" Guiche protested indignantly.

"Mean," Tabitha added.

"Just teasing, just teasing!" Kirche laughed.

"Yeah? Well, what did you do, Zerst?" Louise butted in. "While Guiche and I were evacuating the civilians, I bet you went and hid in the corner!"

Kirche snorted. "I'll have you know that Tabitha and I came to get the ship ready while you were doing all of that heroic stuff, Vallière! It might not be the most glorious task, but someone had to do it!"

"Necessary," Tabitha agreed, turning to the next page in her book.

"So you say! I, for one, don't believe a word of it..."

Shirou smiled as he watched them devolve into pointless bickering, arguing about who did what better than the other. He wondered, was I ever like that?

"Oh yeah!" Rin said, laughing. "Back when we were their age, we got into fights like that all the time!"

"Fights that *you* usually started," Shirou reminded her, "*Tsundere*."

Rin huffed. "I refuse to acknowledge that term."

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"Your refusal doesn't change the fact that it exists," Shirou told her. "*Tsundere.*"

"It doesn't exist unless I say it exists, no matter what you say!" she argued. "So you can't use it in an argument, Shirou!"

"Getting into a philosophy debate, now? How exactly does Existentialism mesh with magecraft?"

"Fairly well, actually. I'm just surprised that you actually know what Existentialism is!"

"Hey, I might not be as bright as you, but I'm not stupid!"

"That's up for debate. I mean, if you define intelligence based upon survival instincts, then you're about as smart as an amoeba."

"This argument again? I thought you gave up on that years ago!"

"I lied. No matter how unfair it is, I'll keep using it, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Then I'll just keep using that term, *Tsundere.*"

"Wha — hey! I said I don't acknowledge that term!"

"And I said that it exists, even if you don't acknowledge it."

"Shirou! You — !"

She suddenly broke off, laughing.

"What?"

"W-we just got into an argument!"

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"So?"

"Shirou, what were we talking about before this started?"

"...Oh."

She burst out laughing again, and even Shirou couldn't help but smile along with her.

"I'm going to miss this," she sighed.

"Miss it?" he asked. "What? Have you lost faith in me already? I'll find a way home eventually, you know."

For a long moment, she said nothing. He thought maybe he'd said something wrong and wondered what he'd done to offend her, exactly, because he never really understood what he did that caused her so much frustration on so many other occasions. It wouldn't be the first time she'd been bothered by something he'd said.

"Shirou," Rin began sadly, "when are you going to —"

"Are you alright, Sir Shirou?"

Shirou snapped back into reality, where Wales was looking at him with a bit of worry. He blinked once, twice.

"It's nothing," he promised. "Just...remembering when I was their age."

Wales smiled and looked back at the others, who were still arguing amongst themselves. Guiche was holding back Louise from tackling Kirche, who was smirking like she'd gotten the upper hand. Tabitha was still reading, undisturbed.

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"Yes," Wales said, "they certainly are rather energetic, aren't they?"

"That's one word for it," Shirou said. He looked at Wales. "What about you? Are you alright?"

The smile fell and Wales sighed. "No," he admitted. "No, I'm not alright. After what happened tonight, it will be quite a long time before I'm anything close to alright."

He gave Shirou a tired smile. "But I will be eventually, I think. Maybe not tomorrow. Maybe not next week. Maybe not for a few months and maybe not for even a year or two. But eventually."

Shirou hummed.

"It doesn't do to dwell on the past," Shirou said wisely. "What you could have done, what you might have done, how things might have changed if only you'd done this or if only you'd done that. If only, if only, if only — the past is the past. Even if you had the power, you shouldn't try to change it. Those people suffered and those people died. If you change that, if you stop that tragedy from happening, then those who suffered and died will have done so for no reason."

He gave Wales a solemn look. "That catastrophe happened, and it is the duty and responsibility of Wales, survivor of that event, last true king of Albion, to carry the weight of that tragedy on his shoulders."

Wales offered Shirou a small smile. "Indeed. You are wise beyond your years, Sir Shirou."

Shirou snorted. "I'm sixty-five."

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Wales blinked. "Truly?" he asked. "But you don't look much older than me."

"It's a blessing — or a curse, depending upon your point of view," Shirou said. "In order to fulfill my dream, I made a contract, and until I've fulfilled that contract, this body of mine won't age. I can still be killed, of course, but since I can't age, it means my death must inevitably be on the battlefield."

Wales was silent for a long moment.

"I see," he said at last. "Yes, I understand why that would be a curse. To have to stand by and watch as everyone you cared for withered away — I don't think I could do that. You are much stronger than me, Sir Shirou."

"No." Shirou shook his head. "Just different."

Wales just smiled. "If you say so, Sir Shirou. If you say so."

— o.O.O.O.o —

It was three hours later, after everyone but the midnight crew had gone to bed, when Louise approached Shirou, who was looking out at the vast sky from the rail of one of the ship's sides. She came up next to him, placing her hands on the rail and looking at the sky with him, and for a long moment, she was silent.

Then, in a quiet voice, she asked, "Does it always hurt this much?"

Shirou took in a deep breath and let it out through his nose. "Betrayal, you mean?"

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"Yes."

For a moment, he didn't say anything. He wasn't sure exactly what to say. Should he talk about his own betrayals? Should he talk about how many people had betrayed him? Should he talk about being betrayed by ideals, as the hero Emiya had been?

Should he talk about how the pain never really left you, only became a bitter poison that soured even the best memories you had of the traitor?

"I think half of it is the surprise," Shirou told her at last. "When you're expecting it, it still hurts, but you can tell yourself that you knew it was going to happen anyway. When it just comes out of the blue, when there's no warning or clues beforehand, there's nothing to soften the blow, so it hurts a whole lot more."

He let the pause hang for a moment.

"Betrayal always hurts," he continued. "Betrayal by friends, betrayal by ideals, betrayal by expectations — the only way to keep it from hurting is to simply have no friends, have no ideals, and have no expectations. If you don't have anything to betray you, then you can't be hurt by betrayal."

"But that's..." she began, sounding frustrated.

"That's no way to live," he agreed. "That's just how it is, Louise. Life is about risks, and trust is one of the biggest risks out there."

"But..." she started, as though to argue, then she heaved a great, defeated sigh. "Does it ever stop hurting, at least?"

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"Eventually," he said. "It'll stop hurting, and you'll stop feeling angry, and at some point, the mere mention of their name won't bother you nearly so much. But before that happens, every happy memory you have of that person will be tainted. You'll wonder, when did he stop being my friend? When did he start planning to stab me in the back?"

He paused again, and he remembered Matou Shinji, who had once been his friend, and who had once tried to sacrifice all of their classmates for a selfish goal.

"Eventually," he went on, "you'll stop being upset about it, and you'll look back on all those happy memories and decide, this is how I'm going to remember him. The person who betrayed me was someone else. This was the person who was my friend."

Louise sighed again. She'd started doing that a lot ever since he'd come here, Shirou thought.

"Well," she said grouchily, "I'm a *long* way from that. I don't think I can ever forgive that...that...*bastard!*"

She slammed her fist against the rail. Shirou arched an eyebrow. "Wardes?"

Louise nodded.

"I just don't understand it!" she exclaimed. "He was Captain of the Griffin Knights! He was a Viscount in Her Majesty's court! He was handsome and...and kind and...and...and well-respected! He had everything a man could want out of life! And Princess Henrietta, who's so gentle and compassionate and generous, who — who even remembers and cares for a friend she hasn't known since

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childhood, trusted him! How could he betray her like that?! How could he...!"

She sobbed and her shoulders shook, and two tiny tears dropped down onto her hands.

"How could he betray *me*?" she demanded, halfway between anger and despair.

Shirou sighed. "Louise..."

"He was my *fiancé*," she said shakily. "I...I thought he *loved* me. I...I almost gave up my *dreams* for him. We...we were supposed to get married, maybe not today and maybe not tomorrow, but *eventually*. And...and we'd have kids and grow old together and I...I..."

She sniffed. "...I don't know..."

"Louise..."

He put a comforting hand on her shoulder, but she brushed him off and spun around to face him, then threw herself full force into his chest. He winced, just a little, at the suddenness of the sharp twinge that shot through his side — apparently, she'd forgotten that he was wounded.

"M-maybe it was me," she said into his shirt. "M-maybe...he f-found someone else...an-and he h-hated me, because w-we were still engaged! O-or maybe...maybe it's because I d-decided not to marry him yet! M-maybe, maybe that's all h-he wanted, and I...! I...!"

'*Maybe I drove him away,*' hung, unsaid, in the air.

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Shirou gently wrapped his arms around Louise's shoulders and let her cry into his chest. She shook beneath his hands, sobbing quietly and trying, it seemed to him, very hard not to make much noise at all.

Of course. Her pride wouldn't let anyone else know she was crying.

He felt very much like a father or an older brother, then. Ilya had been much different — she was such a spoiled, carefree princess that it couldn't compare to the feeling of responsibility he had right then and there with Louise. No, Ilya hadn't required gentle love and care or a role model, only affection and someone to clean up after her when she made a mess.

But Louise...Louise needed all of that.

So he held her as she cried, pretending not to notice the wetness on his front or how long he stood there with her in his arms, shaking. Of course — hadn't he known from the first day that what Louise needed most from him was patience?

And as he held her, Shirou thought to himself that there were now three people he could claim to have well and truly hated. Oh, he'd certainly been very angry at other people, at Dead Apostle Ancestors and reckless magi who had endangered and destroyed countless lives, but he hadn't hated them, he hadn't wished with every fiber of his being to utterly destroy them until nothing remained. He hadn't even hated Angra Mainyu — how could you hate something that was the way it was simply because that was its default state? Actually,

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in some ways, Angra Mainyu was more deserving of his pity than his contempt.

But there'd been only two people he'd truly hated: Gilgamesh, the King of Heroes, and Kotomine Kirei. For Gilgamesh, it was simply because they were fundamentally opposed — a completely selfless person could never agree with someone so selfish — but for Kotomine Kirei, it had been a natural reaction; of course. If he hadn't hated Kirei, Shirou thought that perhaps he might have found himself liking him.

Now, there was a third person Shirou could add to his list of people he hated: Jean-Jacques de Wardes, who had so very badly betrayed Louise.

Such a callous, cold-hearted man with delusions of grandeur. Really, he shouldn't have affected Shirou so much — Wardes' type of person was so dreadfully common that Shirou imagined he must have killed at least a dozen during the course of his lifetime — but for some reason, what should have been a casual dislike — a dislike born simply on principle rather than from any emotional response — was instead a burning hate.

How ironic, Shirou thought, that all three men he had well and truly come to hate were also all dead.

— o.O.O.O.o —

Riding on a dragon, Shirou decided, was much, *much* more comfortable than a horse.

They had all agreed that the quickest and simplest way to reach the Princess and report the events of the past few days

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was to ride on the back of Tabitha's dragon (who was apparently named "Sylphid") and fly over to the Royal Palace. That way, they didn't have to worry about tired horses or taking a certain pathway — they could just take the straightest route to the capital and fly right to the palace, bypassing the busy streets of the town around it.

Shirou had to admit, though; he hadn't actually thought that Sylphid could carry all of them at once — a group of six? They would have had a hard time fitting them all into a nicely-sized car, and the back of a flying lizard hardly seemed as accommodating as a car. And yet, somehow, he, Louise, Tabitha, Kirche, Guiche, and Wales had all managed to situate themselves atop Sylphid's scaly, blue, surprisingly broad back without crowding each other.

Compared to the two-and-a-half days it had taken to reach La Rochelle from the Academy on their original trip, it took only a few hours atop Sylphid before Tristain's capital, Tristainia, came into view in the distance.

"We can't waste any time," Wales was saying over the wind. "We have to meet with Henrietta as soon as possible. It won't take long for Reconquista to figure out what happened, and if those fighters —"

"Heroic Spirits," Shirou interrupted. Wales glanced at him. "Aside from Wardes, the mage in the mask who was slinging spells around, those other two were Heroic Spirits, without a doubt."

"Heroic Spirits," Wales allowed. He continued, "If those Heroic Spirits report to Reconquista, then Cromwell will know for sure that I survived the battle at Newcastle and that

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I've fled to Tristain. It will provide him the perfect excuse to mount an army and attack. The sooner we tell Henrietta, the quicker she can muster her troops and prepare a defense, which means —"

"Minimization of civilian casualties," Louise concluded with surprising clarity. "The sooner a defense can be mounted, the less likely it will be that noncombatants might be caught in the crossfire."

"Vallièrè!" Kirche exclaimed as though she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Louise!" Guiche said, astonished.

Shirou didn't blame them. He was rather surprised himself. After all, he'd thought his cute little Master was rather ignorant of things like that — as a member of the nobility, knowing how to fight and wage war didn't seem like something she would need to know, so he hadn't thought she would.

But here she was, talking about minimizing casualties among noncombatants as though she'd gone to some sort of military academy.

When had Louise learned about tactics and strategy like that?

"That's...right," Wales finished a little awkwardly. "Um...Anyway, the sooner we tell Henrietta, the more prepared we can be for the inevitable attack. Not only will it reduce the number of civilian and innocent casualties — as you said, Miss Vallièrè — but it will also give us a stronger position to fight from."

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"Which means higher chances of winning," Shirou added, but he was staring at Louise, whose brow was furrowed in thought.

"Just so," Wales agreed.

The palace gate came into sight, and beyond it, there was the royal palace, tall, white, and majestic, where Princess Henrietta would be waiting for news of their mission. At the same moment, however, a group of men surged up from the ground mounted on lion-like creatures with wings and tails like scorpions.

They shot up into the sky, and with practiced ease and expertise, they swerved into a formation around Sylphid — like fighter pilots in his world, Shirou thought, coming up alongside a plane and forcing it to land.

"Halt!" one of them shouted at Shirou's group. "This is a restricted flight zone! Turn away and land at the designated area for inspection!"

"Keep going!" Wales ordered.

Sylphid let out an obedient keening sound and swooped down low, through the circling leonine mounts, into a steep dive that sent a strange thrill through Shirou's stomach. Beside him, he heard both Guiche and Louise screaming like children on a rollercoaster. Below, the palace courtyard became bigger and bigger, growing so much larger with each second that, for a moment, he thought that they might crash.

But Sylphid straightened out at the last moment, flaring its (his? Her? Shirou wasn't sure) wings wide like a parachute

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to slow them to a gentle glide before landing with surprising softness.

They all ambled off the moment Sylphid folded its wings against its sides, and Shirou helped a shaking Louise down from its scaly blue back.

"Never again," she promised him. "I'm never riding on a dragon again!"

Behind her, Sylphid let out a sound that Shirou very much suspected was the dragon version of a chuckle.

"As you say, Master," he agreed.

"What's the matter, Louise?" Kirche hopped easily off of Sylphid's back, sure-legged and smirking. "Never ridden on the back of a dragon before?"

Louise scowled and turned away, out of Shirou's arms, to glower at Kirche.

"Kirche," Guiche said, "I don't think you should —"

"Now, now," Wales interrupted, climbing down with practiced ease. "This isn't the time for squabbling. We must —"

Without warning, the mounted guards who had tried to order them away landed heavily all at once. The ground shook beneath the paws of the monstrous leonine beasts, who all hit the ground at speed one after another without slowing to a stop. Six men threw themselves off of their mounts, wand-swords drawn and pointed at Shirou's group, and from the shouts in the distance, another dozen or so reinforcements were on the way.

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"DROP YOUR WANDS!" one of the men, a tall and burly figure with a rough mustache, bellowed.

Louise, Guiche, and Kirche all tensed, wands drawn, and looked prepared for battle, and Shirou shifted just the slightest so that he could protect Louise, if necessary. But Wales, who seemed unperturbed, strode in front of them with a calm "I'll handle this."

He walked forward as though to greet the guards, but the man who had bellowed simply raised his wand-sword threateningly.

"No further, now!" the guard declared strongly. "Drop your wands, or we will detain you by force!"

"I am Wales Tudor," Wales said importantly, holding up his finger with a silver ring set with what looked like a yellow topaz gemstone, "Crown Prince —" he grimaced and corrected himself — "that is, *King* of Albion. I'm here to see Princess Henrietta. I bring news of the rebellion."

The guards shifted a little and hesitated. Shirou could see the indecision that was suddenly set along their shoulders. But the leader didn't look convinced.

"Prince Wales, are you?" the mustached guard asked skeptically. "I've heard that one before! Drop your wand, *Your Highness*, or *I'll drop you!*"

Wales' mouth fell open, and he looked flustered at being so easily and swiftly rejected.

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Louise stepped forward, and Shirou very reluctantly stayed behind as she approached the guard, who turned his wand-sword to her instead.

Unperturbed, she pressed one hand to her chest and declared, "I am Louise Francoise de La Vallière, third daughter of the Duke de La Vallière! I am here for an audience with Her Highness, the Princess, in regards to a sensitive issue she requested I resolve!"

The mustached guard was silent for a moment, looking Louise up and down appraisingly, and Shirou's hand itched to reach for Derf when the quiet stretched uncomfortably long.

"You have your mother's eyes, Miss de La Vallière," the guard said at last, and as he relaxed a little, so too did the rest of the guards. "Be that as it may, however, I'm afraid I still can't let you pass without reason. What is it you need to speak to Her Highness about?"

Louise gave a frustrated scowl. "I can't tell you. It's a secret."

"Then I can't let you pass. It's as simple as that."

Louise's face scrunched up. "It's a secret," she said, sounding like she was talking to someone who was being purposefully difficult. "I'm *sworn* to secrecy. It kind of defeats the point of being a secret if I tell it to you!"

The guardsman snorted and glanced over at Shirou, then Kirche, Guiche, and Tabitha.

"Somehow," he said sardonically, "I think my clearance is a bit higher than a couple of schoolchildren."

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Louise growled and stomped her foot. "It's not about 'clearance' or 'rank' or anything like that! I'm under orders to keep it a secret! The Princess trusts me with this! I refuse to betray her like that!"

The guardsman scowled now, too, mustache drooping downward as his brow furrowed.

"I think I see what's going on here," he said at last. "You may be Karin de La Vallière's daughter, but you are neither an adult nor does your word carry much import. To come here claiming you have a message for the Princess, that you were on some sort of...of *secret mission* or some such tripe — preposterous! The Manticore Knights, the Griffin Knights, the Musketeer Knights — if the Princess needed some deed carried out, she had only too many who would have gladly done so! Trained men, who have been instilled with discipline and learned how to fight, not a teenage schoolgirl who hasn't even finished her lessons! If you're not going to tell us why you're here, then I don't have any other choice, Karin's daughter or not!"

He lifted his wand-sword. "Guards!" he barked. "Arrest them! We'll see if they aren't feeling more talkative about their *real* intentions once our interrogators have had a word with them!"

Around them, the other guards lifted their wand-swords, too, prepared to cast, while Kirche, Wales, Guiche, and Tabitha all tensed. It would be a long fight that might result in casualties, where people might be unduly injured over pride and zealous fulfillment of duty.

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Except Shirou, who was already moving to place himself in front of Louise, could stop it.

"Trace —"

"STOP!"

A voice cried out to stop them, and it belonged to a woman clad in white rushing down from the palace gates, her long, voluminous skirt held up so that she could run. Shirou recognized her immediately — it was the Princess.

The guardsmen all hesitated, turning to their leader, who himself looked rather flabbergasted.

Next to Shirou, Wales' face broke out into a radiant smile. "Henrietta!"

"Wales!" the Princess cried.

Wales started forward, too, pushing past both Shirou and Louise and the mustached guard as though he had forgotten they were even there, and ran towards Henrietta. The sheer joy on his face, the pure affection and happiness that radiated out from him — that, Shirou thought, made the entire trip worth it.

"Henrietta!"

"Wales!"

Henrietta flung herself into Wales' chest, and Wales grabbed her in a tight hug, laughing as he spun her around like they were normal teenagers rather than a Prince and Princess.

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Yes. He hadn't been able to save all of those people at Newcastle and so many had senselessly lost their lives, but this moment made up for it. Being able to see those smiles, being able to see that joy, being able to know that he had saved someone, that he had brought salvation and happiness like this — of course it was good, of course it was amazing, even if he hadn't been able to save all those others.

You couldn't save everyone. Shirou had known that for a long time, and yet he tried to do it anyway. Even though he failed, even though it was impossible, he still strived to fulfill that dream.

But there was something else Shirou had learned, too, much later on.

You couldn't save everyone, and you should never forget those you couldn't save...but you should carry that weight, that responsibility, without wallowing in it. Even if you can't save everyone, take comfort in the fact that you've saved at least one person. Even if you couldn't save everyone, even if there were so many other people who died, that one person was proof that you had made a difference, even if it was small.

And so, despite that so many people had died so senselessly, Shirou was satisfied that he had at least saved this one person.

"Shirou, you're smiling."

Shirou blinked and looked down at Louise, who was staring up at him with an odd look on her face.

"Oh?" he said, still smiling. "So I am."

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As if he had given her some great and detailed explanation, she nodded, turned away, and said nothing else.

Henrietta broke away from Wales and, still smiling a broad, almost goofy smile, looked towards the lead guardsman, who still seemed as though he had no idea what was happening.

"These people are my guests and are welcome at this palace," she declared formally. "Forgive me, Sir Knight, for not informing you sooner, but I was not expecting them to arrive back this quickly from the task I had entrusted them with."

The guardsman, although he clearly had no idea what was going on and was very far out of his comfort zone, bowed deeply to the Princess.

"Of course, Your Highness," he said, mustache twitching. "I am but a humble servant. No apologies are necessary."

He sheathed his wand-sword, and after a gesture with one of his hands, all of his men did, too.

"Nonetheless, I apologize," Henrietta said. "As you were only doing your duty, if I had instead confided in you that I expected them, this whole situation might have been more swiftly and easily resolved. That I did not inform you that they were to report to me and so to be welcomed into the palace is only a fault of mine. Please forgive me."

"It was no trouble, Your Highness," the guardsman insisted.

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"Speaking of," Henrietta segued and turned to Louise, "Louise Francoise, you have my thanks for doing me this favor. You are my truest and dearest friend."

Louise flushed. "I-it was nothing, Your Highness," she said politely. "I-I was merely doing...what any proper Tristainian should do for her Princess!"

Henrietta smiled at her and looked about to say something else, but Wales gave her a subtle nudge, and as she glanced over at him, she very visibly reigned herself in before turning back to Louise.

"With that said," she began, "we have much to discuss, now, and I would have you inform me of the details of your mission somewhere where we won't be interrupted or overheard. Sir Guiche?"

Guiche straightened. "Yes, Your Highness?"

She gestured to Tabitha and Kirche. "Please lead Miss...?"

"Tabitha," Tabitha said simply.

"Kirche von Zerbst," Kirche declared proudly.

"Please escort Miss Tabitha and Miss Kirche to the guest rooms and take a well-deserved rest." She turned to the lead guardsman. "Sir Knight, if you would be so kind as to have one of your men lead the way?"

"Of course, Your Highness," the guardsman said. He spun around and pointed immediately to one of his men. "Moreau! You just volunteered. Show these three to the best guest rooms we have available!"

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The other guard, Moreau, snapped to attention and shouted, "Yes, sir!"

He came up, dressed as the other knights and sporting a mop of unruly brown hair, and turned to Kirche, Tabitha, and Guiche.

"Please follow me," he said politely, and then led them away. As she left, Kirche spun around, blew Shirou a kiss, and said, "Bye, Darling!"

A moment later, they were all gone, and the doors snapped shut behind them.

"One of these days," Louise said flatly, "I'm going to kill her."

Shirou stopped another smile. "Of course, Master."

"Now," Henrietta said, "Sir Shirou, Louise Francoise, if you would follow me...?"

— o.O.O.O.o —

Henrietta led the three of them — Louise, Shirou, and Wales — to a large, lush bedroom that could only have been hers, passing a vigilantly patrolling Agnés along the way, and, after making sure the doors were closed and locked, turned with her wand and cast the same silencing spell she had used in Louise's room on that night that had started it all.

"There," she said with a sigh as the walls shimmered with her spell. She smiled at them and then sat down at a small tea table, gesturing to another three chairs arrayed around it. Wales and Louise sat down immediately, and Shirou hesitated

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for a moment, considering the safety and the defensibility of the position, before taking the remaining seat.

"I assume," Henrietta began without preamble, "that something happened to Viscount Wardes, since he didn't return with you?"

For a moment, Louise remained silent and glanced at Shirou, who decided to let her tell the story and said nothing. She turned back to the Princess and squared her shoulders.

"Wardes was a traitor, Your Highness," Louise declared solemnly.

"Henrietta," Henrietta corrected her. "When we're alone, I would have you call me Henrietta, Louise Francoise, as you are my friend. But...the Viscount? A traitor? Are you sure?"

"Well..." Louise grimaced and looked over at Shirou, and Shirou decided that he could handle this part, at least.

"The Viscount was among the assailants who attacked Newcastle and killed the previous king," Shirou explained. "I can't claim to understand how it works, but he had some sort of illusion or doppelganger stand in for him while he attacked Newcastle in disguise."

Henrietta worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "Then if the Viscount is a traitor, Reconquista will know of the letter regardless."

"No," Wales said suddenly. "The Viscount Wardes was killed before my eyes. He won't trouble us anymore."

"Which means nothing," Shirou told him. "We still don't know whether or not Perseus, Drake, or that third Heroic

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Spirit were allied with Reconquista, but up until he was betrayed, Wardes was allied with them. There's no way to know for sure right now, but the possibility remains they were all working for or with Reconquista."

"But then, why would Reconquista be after the Staff of Destruction?" Louise asked. "It was that woman, Francis Drake, who helped Fouquet escape, after all."

"It's a weapon," Shirou said as though it should be obvious. "What does anyone want with a weapon?"

Louise shook her head. "The Church would want any artifact belonging to the Founder, regardless of whether or not it was a weapon. Besides, even with a spell to decrease its weight, it's still too heavy for a normal person, even a mage, to wield, right?"

"I suppose," Shirou allowed. Although, when he thought about it, hadn't Wardes used a spell to increase his strength and speed during their duel? Wasn't it possible to combine a lightening charm with that reinforcement spell (that was the only magic that made sense to him for that increase in speed and power) in order to wield it without the burden?

Of course, that *did* sound like a whole lot of trouble to go through just to wield an artifact that wasn't especially impressive, ignoring that it was a Noble Phantasm.

"And those Heroic Spirits already have their own Noble Phantasms, right?" Louise reasoned. "What would they need the Staff for, then?"

"Fair point."

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"So —"

"Excuse me, Sir Shirou, Louise Franchoise," Henrietta interrupted, "but, Perseus? Francis Drake? Noble Phantasms? *Heroic Spirits*?"

Wales blinked and turned to Shirou and Louise. "I thought you'd already told her about all of this," he said incredulously.

Shirou and Louise shared a look and grimaced together.

"Your High — H-Henrietta," Louise corrected herself. "Some of this will be sound very strange and unbelievable, but I've seen it for my own eyes, and the parts of it that I haven't, I trust my Servant to have told me truthfully. Please keep an open mind."

"O-okay," Henrietta answered uncertainly.

So, they told her.

Louise led the story, talking about what Heroic Spirits were and how they had met the three who had all attacked them at various points on their trip. She talked about Fouquet and Drake, and how the latter had appeared in the company of Perseus and Not-Lancelot (which was what Shirou had taken to calling the mysterious figure in blue), and she talked about how they'd met Wales on their way to Albion.

Shirou and Wales added to it when necessary, such as the situation in Albion, the *Royal Sovereign*, and Reconquista's plans to attack Newcastle (Wales), or the identity of the Heroic Spirits that were known, how the Kaleidoscope, the Second True Magic, worked, and the mechanics behind

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Noble Phantasms (Shirou), but for the most part, Louise did the talking.

When they finished, Henrietta was silent for a long moment. The expression on her face was unreadable, and it was impossible to tell whether or not she believed them.

At last, she said, "This is a lot to take in."

"If it helps, I can vouch for 'em," Derf spoke up.

Henrietta looked puzzled. "The talking sword?"

"Derflinger, Yer Highness," Derf corrected her. "An' I had the pleasure of knowin' Brimir, seein' as I'm about six thousand years old. This Heroic Spirit stuff is stuff he learned way back when, but never really taught ta any of his disciples."

And the question that bothered Shirou about that: why not?

If he knew about them, why hadn't Brimir taught his disciples about Heroic Spirits and True Magic and all of those other things?

"...As you say," Henrietta allowed. She turned back to Shirou, who had reached down to where Derf rested against his chair and shoved him back into his sheath. "Nonetheless, because I trust Louise Francoise and because of Louise Francoise's trust in you, Sir Shirou, I am willing to put aside my doubts and believe you without question."

"Oh!" Louise shot up in her seat and seemed suddenly to remember something. She rummaged about in her pockets and after a moment of searching, produced both the letter

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and the ring she had been entrusted with. "Forgive me, Princess, I nearly forgot to return this to you."

Henrietta smiled.

"Thank you, Louise Francoise." She took back the letter, crumpled from Louise's pocket, but pressed the ring, the Water Ruby, back into Louise's palm and gently closed Louise's fingers around it. "And as a reward for your loyalty and your success, I would like you to hold onto this ring for now, as a token of my gratitude and esteem."

"B-but this is...!" Louise protested, flushing brilliantly. "I-I mean, I-I couldn't!"

"For such dedication, not only to me as your friend, but also to the well-being of your country, this is the least of the rewards I could give you," Henrietta said, smiling. "Please, I insist, Louise Francoise. Put it on."

"B-but!" Louise tried to protest again.

"I, as well," Wales said suddenly. He reached up to one hand and pulled from his finger the ring he had shown the guards earlier — a stunning silver ring with a large, glittering gemstone that looked like yellow topaz.

"I-I couldn't!"

"Please accept this," Wales asked. He set the ring on the table in front of Louise. "Not simply as a token of my esteem, but I would ask you to hold onto it and take care of it until such time as I have reclaimed my rightful throne. I fear I won't be worthy to wear it again until then."

"Oh, Wales," Henrietta sighed sympathetically.

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"I-I...I..." Louise tried to say something, still determined and adamant that she couldn't possibly accept such a gift, but Shirou saw when she gave in by the way her shoulders dropped a little and the fight left her eyes. "Th-thank you, Your Highness."

She slipped the Water Ruby on one finger, but the Wind Ruby proved much too large for her, until Henrietta reached over with her wand, muttered an incantation, and tapped the ring. Like that, it shrunk to fit Louise's finger easily.

Shirou couldn't help but chuckle.

Louise sent him a dirty look. "What?"

Shirou pointed to the Wind and Water Rubies, one of which sat on her index finger and the other of which sat on her ring finger, both on her right hand.

"On your fingers, now," he explained, "you're wearing the rings traditionally worn by the ruling monarchs of Tristain and Albion — something no one else in history has ever done, right?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Well," Shirou began slyly, "just how do you think your classmates are going to react when they realize that you have so much pull with both the Princess of Tristain and the rightful King of Albion that you've actually been allowed to wear the royal rings of both countries?"

Surprise flitted across her face first, but as she pieced together all of the implications, her expression slowly

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changed into a smile that Shirou found rather strikingly familiar.

"Oh," Louise said, sounding almost sadistically pleased, "that's right, isn't it?"

And as he sat there, watching her silently plot out how she would instill respect — by force, if necessary — in all of the naysayers who had bullied and mocked her before, Shirou found himself marveling at the strangeness of just how similar she was to Rin.

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CONTINUE?

[YES/NO]

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #6

"Welcome," Ilya said brightly, "to the special edition of Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner! Today, we'll be answering questions people have had about the mechanics that lie behind it all!"

"I don't know how you can get so excited about this," Rin grunted. "I've had to do these shows three times in a week. Two of them on the same day. Can't I catch a break?"

"Ah, but Tohsaka-sensei, if you didn't do it, who would?"

"You're right," Rin grunted again. "If I wasn't doing this thing, then that crazy Tiger would be. And knowing her, she'd screw something up."

Ilya hummed. "Are you sure it's not just because the author isn't really good at comedy, so it's better for him to write a more serious character than a joke like Taiga?"

Rin grabbed her rolled up newspaper and wacked Ilya over the head with it. "Stop breaking the fourth wall!"

"Tohsaka-sensei is so cruel," Ilya lamented tearfully.

"But, Tohsaka-sensei!" someone in the audience called. "Doesn't the basic premise of this entire section break the fourth wall? In point of fact, if you're punishing Ilya-san for it, shouldn't you be punishing everyone for breaking the fourth wall just by being here?"

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In a flash, Rin whipped up her hand, shaped into a gun, and fired a ball of black energy at the culprit. Immediately, he fell over and didn't get back up.

"Anyone else?" she asked threateningly.

No one answered.

"Good." Rin nodded. "Then let's get to the first question."

"Right!" Ilya popped up brightly. "Our first question: is there still a system in place that would attempt to crush the irregularities in nature? If so, does a Counter Force still exist for it?"

"That's a good question," Rin said. "So basically, the question is, "Does Gaia exist in Halkeginia?" The answer to that question is yes. However, the Gaia of the Familiar of Zero world is much, much weaker than the Nasuverse Gaia. It can still do such things as crushing Reality Marbles, but because it's weaker, a Reality Marble user can activate and maintain his or her Reality Marble much more easily than in the Nasuverse."

"Shirou's advantage points just got a *huge* boost," Ilya said smugly.

"Naturally," Rin agreed. "A powerhouse like him could probably maintain his Reality Marble for an hour or two like that, so it gives him a really distinct advantage. Anyway, Gaia isn't especially fond of humans, just like in Nasuverse, but a lack of power makes it much more difficult to act on. That's actually part of the reason why the elves hate humans so much: humans do their own thing while the elves listen to

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Gaia. Of course, because humans are humans and elves are elves, they don't get along very well. If mankind was more in line with Gaia, then hey, everyone would be rather happy with one another."

"So why is Gaia weaker?" Ilya asked.

"I knew you were gonna ask that," Rin said with a smirk. "It has to do partly with a lack of lunar lifeforms. There's two moons, remember?"

"Oh yeah," Ilya said. "That was kinda strange, to be honest. Where'd the second one come from?"

"Who knows?" Rin shrugged. "But the gravity well of each moon makes it impossible for life to form on either, so without any life on either of the moons, there was no Crimson Moon for Gaia to base True Ancestors on, so Gaia never created anything powerful enough to classify as its Will given form — no Archetype Earth. Without True Ancestors and with humans killing off Nature Spirits as they settled Halkeginia, Gaia eventually became too weak to do much of anything except speak to the elves."

"No Princess Arc, huh?" Ilya grinned. "Halkeginia's Tohno Shiki must be so depressed."

"If he even exists."

"Point."

"Next question."

"Yes, Tohsaka-sensei!" Ilya saluted. "The next question: is it possible to summon Phantasmal Species of Phantasmal Rank or higher?"

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"Oh, this is a good one." Rin grinned.

She grabbed her marker and wrote **Monstrous**, **Phantasmal**, and **Divine** on the board.

"I'm sure everyone is already familiar with this," Rin started, "but these are the ranks for the Phantasmal Species, in order of weakest to strongest. The question, then: is it possible to summon Phantasmal Species of Phantasmal Rank or higher? The answer is yes. Actually, every dragon, fire salamander, manticore, or griffin summoned as a familiar technically classifies somewhere among the Phantasmal Species. However, as we covered before, because they've become so commonplace, their Mystery is almost gone, which means that their mystical weight is almost nonexistent. Those of the Phantasmal and Divine rank that still retain most of their Mystery, especially Millennial rank creatures, are certainly possible to be summoned...but the kind of mage required to pull something like that and bind it as familiar would be truly frightening."

She paused.

"However," she added, "the question was more along the lines of, "Can a Phantasmal Creature for Shirou's universe be summoned," right? In that case, the answer is still yes, but depending upon which creature it is, the Mental Interference skill would be drastically greater than normal in order to compensate for the fact that it's a much more powerful creature than Halkeginian natives."

"It would still be really frightening, though," Ilya added. "Summoning Heroic Spirits is one thing, and there's precedence for it when it comes to Void mages, but calling a

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Phantasmal or Divine ranked beast at the age of sixteen?
You'd have to be a mage of Karin the Heavy Wind's level
before you finish puberty!"

"Naturally, which is why it wasn't uncommon in Brimir's
time," Rin said. "Alright, then. We have time for two more
questions, then we have to wrap this session up. Next?"

"Next," Ilya looked down at the sheet in her hands. "Oh!
Here's another good one: so Magi in Familiar of Zero don't
have Circuits. Does that mean that they're more vulnerable to
things that Magic Circuits would be able to cleanse via innate
resistance?"

"That *is* a good one," Rin agreed. "And the answer? Oh
yeah, definitely. Mental Interference magecraft would
be *devastating* to a Halkeginian mage. Someone like Medea
could make just about anyone in Halkeginia into an obedient
slave if she wanted to, including heavy hitters like Karin the
Heavy Wind. Even Shirou, who knows virtually nothing
about hypnotism, could probably do it, too, but that's
debatable."

"Debatable?"

"As in, it's debatable whether or not Shirou knows any
magecraft that could hypnotize someone to be his slave. If he
knew how, then even he could do it."

"That kinda sad," Ilya said.

"When even a third rate magus like Shirou could do it
effortlessly, yeah, it kinda is," Rin agreed. "Next?"

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"Um..." Ilya looked down at the sheet. "Here: do Reality Marbles made by humans exist in the Familiar of Zero universe?"

"Definitely," Rin answered immediately. "It's definitely possible for a mage of the Familiar of Zero universe to develop and utilize a Reality Marble. But it's just as rare, if not rarer, than it is in the Nasuverse, and that mainly has to do with a lack of a powerful, centralized research facility and a lack of mages with the drive to do such research. The average Halkeginian mage just doesn't care about researching magic."

"They really *are* backwards," Ilya mused.

"What do you expect?" Rin asked. "These were guys who didn't have enough forethought to realize that the power of magecraft would inevitably decline as Mystery started to vanish. You can't hold them to our standards."

"I guess not." Ilya smiled brightly. "Well, anyway, that's all for this time! Remember, we're on break next chapter!"

"So don't be upset when we don't show up."

"And after that," Ilya went on as if Rin hadn't spoken, "we'll start on a topic that everyone's been looking forward to! Until then!"

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #6: End

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Chapter VIII: Ash Like Snow

“I'm glad," Shirou said as he and Louise climbed out of the carriage, "that the Princess let us take a carriage back. I *really* don't like horseback."

"My Servant," Louise smiled, holding out a hand for Shirou to help her down. He grasped it as she stepped out of the door, "fearless, capable of taking on Pseudo Gods without flinching, able to casually destroy castles and ignore grievous wounds, afraid of a horse. Ah, *now*, I've heard it all."

Shirou felt his lips quirk up. "It's not that I'm afraid of them, Master, it's simply that I don't like being numb from the waist down afterwards."

"Hmph," she grumbled playfully. "It's not my fault people in your world don't bother to learn horseback riding! What a bunch of plebeians — can't even ride a horse!"

Shirou chuckled. "As you say, Master."

She glanced at him and smothered what he thought was probably a grin.

The carriage door clicked shut behind them, then the driver snapped the reins sharply and the horses jerked into motion. Shirou and Louise turned around and looked back at the castle, the six-spired fortress that they had left what seemed now like a lifetime ago. It stood, reaching towards the sky, its cool gray stones glowing.

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Together, they strode through the Academy's gates and started the trek back towards Louise's room. High in the sky, the midday sun blazed, bright, brilliant, and golden.

"It's strange," Louise said as they walked. "It's only been a few days since we left, but it feels like we've been gone for months."

She lifted her right hand up to gaze at the two rings — the Wind and Water Rubies — that fit snugly on her fingers.

"A lot's happened," Shirou reminded her. "The bandits on the way to La Rochelle, the ambush by those mercenaries and Perseus at the inn, the attack on the ship — first by fake pirates and then by Drake — and the fight in Newcastle on top of it all... All things considered, it's not surprising that it feels like it's been a lot longer than a few days."

"I guess you're right." Her hand fell back to her side. "Still. It feels strange, coming back. Like...like visiting a secret hiding place you used to go to when you were a child."

His mind leapt instantly to the lake he'd seen in that strange dream.

"It's not the same, you mean," Shirou finished for her. "Even if the place is the same, you've changed, right?"

Like returning to Fuyuki after ten years away. Homurabara, the shopping district, Miyama, Shinto — so little had changed. The people had grown older, wiser, and more experienced, but the town hadn't changed at all. That town that had once been the sum of his universe had seemed so small once he stepped out of the train station, ten years older and ten years more mature.

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"Yeah."

Louise had changed, too. True, she was still burdened by the same problems and insecurities she'd had before they left, but they appeared not to bother her quite as much as they had before. It was like she had grown up a little in the span of those few days, like she had learned not to take everything quite so seriously.

Or maybe it was all a side effect of the even more apparent change: her relationship with him.

Since the beginning when she'd summoned him, even after she'd learned to put her trust in him, there had been a wall between them — a distance, so to speak, a gulf that separated them socially even when they were three feet from each other. She'd kept him at a distance because he'd become something larger than life to her — he knew the deference, the sort of adoration that came with looking up to someone, because he had experienced that feeling first hand that night when Saber had appeared before him in that little shed he called a workshop ("You call that pitiful, unprotected little thing a workshop?" Rin asked sarcastically).

He was her teacher, her mentor, instilling in her all of his knowledge about magic (meager though it actually was). He was a distant, unreachable figure that she looked up to, that she couldn't reach.

And then, during the mission to Albion, she had taken those first few steps and confided in him about her concerns, and though he hadn't realized at the time, that distance, that gulf, had shrunk just the slightest.

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And it had shrunk again that night on the ship when he held her as she cried in his arms.

There was still something of a distance between them, but it was much, much smaller than it had been just a few days before.

"How is your wound?" Louise asked suddenly.

Shirou grunted and reached for his side, feeling the bandages wrapped around his torso just above his hips. He probed the wound gently and got a white-hot flare of agony in response.

"Still tender," he answered. "By my guess, it'll need another week or so to heal up enough that I won't risk tearing it open on accident during a fight."

"Are you sure the Princess's idea wouldn't have worked?"

Shirou shook his head.

"Cutting away the flesh so you can heal the wound wouldn't have worked. If it was just the flesh itself that was cursed, that solution might've been a good one, but Harpe's curse is too potent. It's better to let it heal naturally."

"Letting it heal naturally," of course, had meant calling in a "peasant" doctor and getting stitches. The only thing any Water Mage had been able to do was make sure the wound was clean so that it wouldn't get infected.

"How troublesome," Louise huffed. "Attacking you from behind with a Noble Phantasm that inflicts wounds that can't be healed with magic... How can he call himself a Heroic

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Spirit when all he's done is sneak around and ambush us?
How shameful!"

Shirou allowed himself a small smile. "Not all Heroic Spirits were courageous warriors who valiantly strode into battle, Louise. In fact, a good number of them were also just people who did whatever they had to in order to defeat a greater evil, even if it meant sneaking around and ambushing the enemy."

Louise huffed again. "He would have made an excellent Assassin class Servant," she admitted grudgingly.

"Actually," he corrected her, "we should be thankful that he hasn't gone for a direct attack yet, because he's an even better Rider."

"Rider?"

"Pegasus," Shirou told her. "In the legend of Perseus, he slew the monster gorgon, Medusa, and from the blood that came from her severed neck was born the Pegasus, a winged horse that he later rode to rescue the princess, Andromeda, from a monster sent by the Sea God, Poseidon —"

Shirou stopped and blinked. In his head, the pieces fit together and the realization sputtered to life in his brain.

"Medusa," he said the name again. The image of Rider, the tall, sultry, long-haired woman who had been under Shinji's command during the Fifth Holy Grail War, appeared in his mind's eye. "It was Medusa."

The blindfold — no doubt to keep her powerful Mystic Eyes of Petrification from attacking everyone indiscriminately

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— the way she had smelled of snakes and blood, the way she had summoned her Pegasus by stabbing her own neck; it was all starting to make sense.

"Shirou?"

"The name of the first Rider Servant I met," he clarified. "Ha. I guess Rin was right, because I can't believe I didn't notice it before."

After the Grail War, he'd spent some of his free time looking up different heroes and legends — with a focus, of course, on Greek and Arthurian mythology, since Hercules, Medea, and King Arthur had all been in the War — to supplement the history recorded in some of the weapons in the Blade Works. The legend of Perseus and his slaying of Medusa had been among them.

But he'd never made the connection before, between the Rider from the Fifth Grail War and the monstrous gorgon from the story. Why would he? Rider, though she could be bloodthirsty in battle, was stoic and calm, almost gentle, not a raging monster.

"Sorry," Shirou apologized. "I got a bit distracted. Don't worry about it. Anyway," he added, "in his legend, Perseus rode a magical winged horse called a Pegasus. I've seen one before, and it's powerful enough that even *I* would have difficulty fighting it without resorting to something incredibly destructive."

That same Pegasus, without any sort of augmentation from Bellerophon, had managed to back Saber into a corner and forced her to use Excalibur. That same Pegasus had the

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strength and power to defeat a Servant with nothing more than the *wind* that followed in the wake of its wings.

Shirou was not fool enough to think he could overpower something like that without resorting to something from the Blade Works.

"I've never heard of a magical beast like that before," Louise admitted.

"And that's without accounting for a Noble Phantasm," Shirou said a bit grimly. "Harpe may be dangerous, but only if you get caught by surprise or don't realize how dangerous it is. In direct combat, he can ride that Pegasus and augment it with a Noble Phantasm. In a crowded area like a city street, that would mean *massive* civilian casualties."

After all, if Medusa, who had never actually ridden the Pegasus that had been born from her blood (you can't ride something if you're dead), had a Noble Phantasm like Bellerophon, then it stood to reason that Perseus, who actually *had* ridden it, would have, if not the same, then a similar Noble Phantasm.

"I guess we're lucky," Louise mused. "If he'd used something like that in Newcastle, we'd all probably be dead."

Lucky was one way to put it. If Perseus had actually decided to utilize the full extent of his abilities, barreling through Rho Aias wouldn't have been a problem for him, especially with an A+ Anti-Army Noble Phantasm. The sort of damage that would have done to Shirou, reflected upon his body by the curse of Rho Aias, would have made it

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much, *much* harder to fight that blue-cloaked figure, that Not-Lancelot.

On top of that, in the crowded throne room of the Newcastle fortress, the wind from Pegasus' wings, augmented by Bellerophon, would have turned everyone, soldier and civilian alike, into mincemeat. He wouldn't even need to land a hit with a direct charge; just making a pass or two over the crowd's heads would have sowed enough chaos and discord that anyone who wasn't shredded by the wind would have been running around like a headless chicken.

They would've been easy pickings. Between Wardes, Not-Lancelot, and Perseus, everyone else in Newcastle would've been killed.

Including Shirou and Louise.

It was only because Perseus had not chosen to use Pegasus and Bellerophon, only because Perseus had not deemed them enough of a threat to utilize his full power against, that more than three people had left Newcastle alive.

So, yes, "lucky" was certainly a word for it.

"Lucky," Shirou agreed, "that Perseus still isn't taking me quite that seriously."

— o.O.O.O.o —

The first thing Louise did when they got back to her room was throw herself onto her bed.

"I never thought I'd say this," she sighed, "but I'm glad to be back here."

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"Miss your old bed that much, did you?" Shirou quipped.

"Don't get me wrong," she started, "that bed at the inn was nice, but we only stayed there for one night. Since then, it's been a hard, lumpy bed on that ship every night. It's a relief to be able to sleep on an actual *bed* again."

"It was only two nights," Shirou reminded her.

"And before that, it was the hard ground," she added. "Or have you forgotten the six nights we spent camping out in the wilderness? If I remember right, it was your idea, too."

"Hey, even *you* can't stay awake for eight days straight." Shirou slipped Derf off his shoulder and sat down in one of the chairs with a grunt. "I was simply looking out for your wellbeing, Master."

She huffed. "Doesn't mean I have to like it."

The doorknob clicked, and then the door that they had just closed a moment ago opened. An unfamiliar young woman dressed in a maid's uniform stepped in and jumped several inches in the air when she saw the two of them. Her hand flew to her chest.

"Oh!" she exclaimed faintly. "Forgive me, Miss Vallière. The Headmaster instructed me to expect you back, but I'm afraid I didn't realize it would be so soon."

She gave a short bow. "My apologies."

Shirou turned to look at her, took in her long red hair, tied up into a neat bun, her heart-shaped face, and her bright blue eyes. On her bed, Louise sat up.

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"Who are you?" she asked the maid flatly.

"My name is Annabelle, milady." The maid, Annabelle, bowed again. "Pleased to meet you." She turned to Shirou. "And you as well, Sir Shirou."

"The pleasure is mine," Shirou responded automatically.

"What happened to Siesta?" Louise demanded. "She's been taking care of me personally for the past month."

"Siesta's contract has been terminated, milady," Annabelle said politely.

"Terminated?" Louise sat up straighter and her brow was furrowing as her lips thinned. "What do you mean, terminated? When?! I wasn't aware any complaints had been made against her!"

"Someone made a better offer, milady," Annabelle explained. "Two days ago. She left around lunchtime."

"Better offer?" Louise parroted. Her eyes narrowed. "You mean someone bought out her contract?"

Annabelle squirmed.

"U-um... Yes, milady..."

"Who?"

"U-um... I'm not...supposed to say... I-I mean, it's only a rumor —"

"*Who?*" Louise demanded forcefully.

The maid fidgeted for a little bit, chewed on her bottom lip, and wrung her skirt with her hands nervously before

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looking up at Louise with an expression not unlike a housecat cowering underneath a lion's gaze.

"C-Count Mott, milady. He asked for her by name."

"Mott?" Louise repeated the name, trying it out on her tongue, and sat back down on her bed. "What does this Count Mott want with Siesta?"

"Ain't all that uncommon," Derf piped up grimly. The maid let out a little shriek.

"D-did that sword —"

"Yes, he's a talking sword," Louise answered flatly. Shirou imagined she was probably getting tired of answering that question every time Derf spoke up in front of a stranger.

"Anyway," Derf continued, "it ain't all that uncommon. When one o' these uppity Noble types decides he wants someone new ta warm his bed, he goes out and finds himself a new, young, pretty-lookin' maid ta join his staff."

"A concubine?!" Louise shot up, flushing furiously. "This Mott guy came to the academy and bought out Siesta's contract just so he could find himself a new *concubine*?"

"It's not like she could say no," Derf gave his equivalent of a shrug. "He's a Noble, girly. She's only a commoner. That Siesta girl couldn'ta refused him."

"I-I hear he's done this several times before," Annabelle spoke up bravely. She flinched when Louise turned her glare on her. "Th-that is, the rumors say that he picks up a new girl every few months by buying out her contract — w-whenever he gets bored of the old ones."

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"And what happens to the old ones?" Louise asked dangerously.

Annabelle shrugged miserably. "Dead," she said gravely, "pregnant, fired, sold... No one really knows. But every girl dreads hearing he's decided to buy out their contract."

Something in Shirou went cold.

A frigid sort of anger, righteous and determined, rose up in his belly and spread through his veins like ice.

Siesta was in trouble.

Siesta, who had shown him kindness in a moment of depressing frustration, who had generously fed him that day before the duel with Guiche, who, though he was not especially close to her, was someone worth protecting, worth saving...

And if this maid was to be believed, she was in the hands of a depraved pervert who would just as soon use her up and discard her like she was some kind of *toy* to be played with until she broke. A *toy*, like she wasn't even *aperson*, like she existed only for and at Mott's own pleasure, to be thrown away when she lost her luster or Mott lost his interest.

Shirou could imagine the sort of person this Count Mott must be; he had seen others of the like, other mages, only the reasoning and the motivations were different, even if the results were the same. Like Mott, those other mages, some Sealing Designates who Shirou himself had been forced to kill, sought out people to be test subjects — lab rats who were reduced to nothing more than slabs of meat on which to experiment.

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He had seen what became of those people; some were simply killed when they were no longer useful, but others were locked up in cells or squeezed into beakers and test tubes, suspended in a torturous existence until the mage decided to revisit them and try something new.

If Mott was anything like that, then the more damage would be done the longer Siesta was in his care.

Shirou could not accept that.

He would save her. He would not be Emiya Shirou if he didn't.

However, it was Louise, not Shirou, who got to her feet first, and she was already striding for the door when he stood up from the chair he'd been sitting in.

"M-milady," Annabelle stuttered nervously, "where are you going?"

Louise didn't answer her.

"Let's go, Shirou," she commanded instead. Her voice was strong and confident and contained a note of authority that Shirou recognized from Saber.

"Louise?" he asked, as though he didn't already know what she wanted.

"We're going to rescue Siesta."

Shirou's lips curled into a grim smile. "Of course, Master."

— o.o.O.O.o —

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"Halt!" the guards said as Shirou and Louise approached the gate protecting Mott's mansion. "State your business!"

"I am Louise Francoise Le Blanc de La Vallière," Louise said imperiously, "third daughter of the Duke and Duchess de La Vallière. I have business with Lord Mott concerning a maid."

The guards glanced at each other and leaned their heads together, whispering to one another. Shirou frowned at them and found himself feeling a little impatient.

Count Mott's mansion was an hour's walk from the Magic Academy, which equated to about forty-five minutes on horseback at a sedate pace. Naturally, Shirou and Louise had gotten there in less than half an hour.

Surprisingly, it had been *Louise* who had set their hard and fast pace, not Shirou, on the Academy-owned horse that Shirou was fairly sure she had ridden to La Rochelle as well.

But now that they were there, Shirou didn't want to be waiting around, held up by a pair of hapless guards, while Siesta could be inside at the mercy of Mott's "tender graces." He wanted to be moving, already, heading inside before something bad could happen, before Siesta could be forced to "service" Mott in whatever way he came up with, or worse, paraded about for party guests in a skimpy French maid outfit, or even completely in the nude, to be passed around as they pleased, or —

He breathed in deeply through his nose.

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Your imagination is getting away from you, Shirou, he told himself. *Calm down. You've seen plenty of horrible things before, so why is this getting to you?*

Perhaps because it was someone he actually knew, this time, rather than a stranger off the street. Things were always much more difficult when it was personal.

At last, the two guards pulled away from each other.

"Our apologies, Milady de La Vallière," one spoke up. "I'm afraid we weren't expecting a visit from you, so we couldn't prepare the proper hospitalities."

"It's no trouble," Louise said with surprising calm. "I've come on personal business, so I was in a hurry and I didn't notify Count Mott that I would be arriving. Nonetheless, I must speak with him immediately."

'Personal business?' the other guard mouthed to himself. Shirou had to stop himself from scowling at what he thought that guard was probably imagining.

"Of course, milady," the first guard said. He turned to his partner. "Escort them to the front door, then find a servant to inform Lord Mott of their arrival and escort them to meet him."

"Yes, sir," the other guard said politely. He turned to Shirou and Louise. "Please dismount from your horses and follow me, milady."

"Of course," Louise replied. Shirou took one glance at her, but since she didn't seem at all worried or nervous, he decided to follow her lead.

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He and Louise climbed down off the academy-loaned horses and let the second guard lead them up the neatly-built brick pathway that cut through the front lawn as the first took their steeds' bridles and led both to the stables off to the left. Shirou glanced to either side as they walked, mentally building a strategic map of the grounds in case negotiations with this Mott character became...*aggressive*.

It was a practice he tried to keep up whenever he went somewhere unfamiliar, because it was good practice when going into an unknown situation, but after the first few years, it had turned into something he only did when he was expecting trouble or when he was nervous or on edge. The trick was to turn it from a natural response — the rush of adrenaline that triggered fight-or-flight responses and made you feel so very aware of everything around you — into a calm, almost meditative exercise in determining exit strategies, fallback points, and protective cover, just in case things went south.

But you couldn't do it all the time. Shirou had nearly burned himself out learning that lesson. You couldn't constantly be on guard, preparing every hour of every day for someone to attack or ambush you. That sort of paranoia was destructive in the extreme, and it led either to exhaustion, which meant you might tire yourself out and not be prepared when you actually needed to be, or psychosis, in which case you would suffer a mental breakdown of one of the worst kinds.

That was why Shirou hadn't been doing it very often since he'd gotten here — Louise spent most of her time in school, after all, ignoring the special circumstances that had arisen

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since he'd been summoned, so there wasn't usually much in the way of threatening presences. There was no point in scoping out all of the crawlspaces where assassins might hide or searching for the closest feasible exit when the odds of being attacked were astronomically low on most days.

That was also why he was doing it now — there was a sort of nervous energy bubbling around inside his chest, because he was used to simply barging in head first whenever someone was in danger, not going the subtle route.

So, he scanned the surprisingly flat grounds on either side of the stone walkway as his feet carried him forward. To the left, there was a stable conjoined to what looked like a small blacksmith's station and a barn to keep the animals whenever a storm rolled in. The mansion, which was wider than it was tall and had, Shirou imagined, been added onto several times, stretched out too far for him to see much of what else was in that direction.

To the right, there was basically just the servants' quarters, along with a rather extensive-looking garden and a glass table set and brick patio right in the center of it.

When the guard led them in through the large, double front doors and into the expansive, lavishly decorated entrance hall, a servant, a young man who looked to be maybe a year or two older than Louise, was waiting for them.

"My Lord Mott is not expecting any guests," the servant said, glancing at Shirou and Louise.

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"My Lady Louise de La Vallière has come to meet with My Lord Mott," the guard replied. "Though she admits it is unannounced and unexpected, she has business to conclude."

"Business? What sort of business does My Lady de La Vallière have with My Lord Mott?"

"She has not said, merely that it is personal business."

"This is most unexpected."

"I am aware. However..."

The guard went on to explain the situation to the servant, who seemed to be getting more and more nervous by the second.

"Shirou," Louise muttered lowly so that only he could hear. "If we can, we need to avoid a confrontation, especially a physical one. If it comes to it, however..."

Shirou shifted a little. Louise sounded nervous. "I understand, Master."

"No, you don't," she corrected him. Her little fists clenched and unclenched and her shoulders were tense. "I didn't say anything back at the academy, but I thought I recognized Mott's name. Now, I remember. As a Count, Mott may not be as high up in the peerage as some of the others, but he's friends with a lot of very powerful people, including Duke Richmond, the Minister of Finances, and Duke Stanton, the Lord Chief Justice. Most of his friends aren't very fond of the Princess, though they respect her station."

"Oh," was all Shirou could think to say.

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Louise gave a very small, very tight nod, and the look she gave him out of the corner of her eyes said it all.

"It means that we can't throw our weight around, physically or otherwise," she explained tersely. "My name might have gotten us an audience, and it *might* be enough for him to consider releasing Siesta, but it's not enough that I can just order him to let her go. If there's a fight, *he* has to be the one to start it."

"I understand," he repeated.

The guard came back, but the servant was already gone, having disappeared up the stairway in a hurry.

"Please follow me, Sir, My Lady," the guard said.

"Of course."

The guard led them up the staircase and further into the mansion, and as they passed by paintings, sculptures, and intricate vases, Shirou thought, with a pang, that it reminded him of the Einzbern castle back in Fuyuki. That, naturally, brought back memories of the Grail War, of Saber, and of the aftermath, when he'd taken care of a white-haired little girl who had been nothing but a tool for her family since the moment her father had left to fight in the Fourth Grail War.

But Louise in front of him was not Ilya, nor was the mansion hers to do with as she pleased. Fortunately, there was no Bounded Field around the mansion, nor really anything that would establish the encompassed ground as territory, so Mott wouldn't have such an overwhelming advantage if it did come down to a fight. It was one of the rare moments where Shirou was intensely grateful that the

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magi of this world were so strange and so much tamer than the ones in his world.

Nevertheless, Shirou didn't intend to start a fight. Though he was a little on edge and somewhat nervous, he would do as Louise had bidden and refrain from starting a fight. If all went well, then there wouldn't be a need for physical violence in the first place, and really, it wasn't like there was anything motivating him to kill Mott — Mott wasn't like Kirei or Gilgamesh, nor the few Dead Apostle Ancestors that Shirou had found on the other side of his blade, nor even like some of the depraved magi that he'd put down over the years.

Really, Shirou thought as they came to another door, there was no reason for him to want Mott dead, mangled, or otherwise maimed. There were some concerning points, to be sure, and the talk of what he had done and what he was notorious for was a little disconcerting, certainly, but there was nothing to be overly upset about.

And if he were honest, the feelings of unease and anxiety in his belly were probably a result of the personal connection he had to Siesta rather than anything he really had to worry about.

Right. He could control himself. There was no reason to want Mott dead.

That thought left his head the moment the door opened.

The room inside was just as lavishly decorated as the rest of the mansion had so far been. The floor was a rich, golden mahogany hardwood, glimmering in the firelight from the dusky, red-brick fireplace and the gas lamps, which were

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finely crafted from gold and frosted glass and etched with elegant details that seemed to be depicting a scene from one legend or another. The window at the back took up half of the back wall and gave an excellent view of the grounds behind the mansion, the gently rising slopes and the mountains in the distance, and was framed by rich red velvet curtains.

The walls were painted a soft, creamy color and had lines of gold filigree that crisscrossed tastefully over the surface. Half of the right wall was also taken up by a pair of bookcases that appeared to have been built into it, separated from one another by a decorative structure that was also lined with gold filigree. The left wall was home to yet more paintings, one of which depicted a scene that Shirou thought would count as explicit if not for the fact that it was clearly a high quality work of art.

Three chairs and a couch, all made of what looked to be purple velvet, sat in the center of the room atop a finely woven carpet that appeared more like a collector's item than something you'd actually use. Situated between them all was a small table with a white silk table cloth.

"Welcome, Miss de La Vallière," said a figure sitting in one of the chairs; Mott, obviously. "I'm sorry for the unfriendly welcome, but I wasn't expecting you."

But the thing that caught Shirou's attention was not the decorative room, it was not any of the high-priced items that must have cost a fortune, and it was not Mott's frilly and vaguely handsome countenance.

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What caught Shirou's attention was the girl lying on the floor.

She was off the carpet and completely naked - no doubt so as not to leave a stain that couldn't be cleaned. She had been stripped completely of anything resembling clothing, including her socks, and was covered in sweat and saliva. Her lower half was pockmarked with bruises, crescent-shaped fingernail markings, and red handprints, all mottled together around her hips and thighs.

From a single look, it was obvious what Mott had been doing to her just moments before.

Beneath the shock that was numbing everything else, Shirou felt his stomach roil and protest the scene, and Louise next to him seemed to have been stunned into silence.

"Do forgive the mess," Mott said pleasantly. "I'm afraid I didn't have time to clean up before your arrival."

"M-mess?" Louise echoed faintly.

"Yes, the mess," Mott repeated as though she were being purposefully ignorant. He gestured to the naked girl. "I was just breaking in one of my new toys when my servant announced your arrival, so I had to finish quickly and didn't have time to clean."

"T-toys?" Louise parroted. There was an undertone of outrage and something else in her voice, and through his own surprise and the nausea that was rolling about in his belly, he noted that she seemed to be desperately reining herself in.

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"Yes, toys," Mott said. His expression suddenly lightened into something Shirou recognized as pride. "This one was a rather recent purchase, and I got a little bit excited, so I couldn't wait to play with it."

Shirou's world turned sideways as something hot and stuffy filled his head and his vision went white. A shrill ringing filled his ears so that he was deaf to everything else, and his chest *burned*.

For an instant, Shirou drowned in blank oblivion.

When everything faded back to normal a moment later, he could tell by the small, feminine hand on his forearm that he'd nearly thrown himself at Mott in blind rage.

"...interrupted me," Mott was saying. "Now, I'm quite busy, Miss de La Vallière, so if you could tell me what exactly it was you came to see me about?"

"...Siesta," Louise said after a moment. "I...came for my maid — my handmaiden," she corrected herself, "Siesta."

"Siesta?" Mott frowned and leaned backwards in his chair. "That name does sound familiar."

It was obvious that he was just playing with them — Shirou could see it in Mott's face that he knew perfectly well who Siesta was, but feigning ignorance would allow Mott to gauge her value to Louise, and so give him the upper hand. Shirou had seen enough of that sort of thing during the time he'd spent with Rin up at the Clock Tower, where he'd had a front row seat to all of the maneuvering and games that the so-called nobles in London played every day.

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Politics. Shirou *hated* politics.

"You... You bought out her contract... at Tristain's Academy of Magic," Louise clarified. "Two days ago," she added.

"Ah, yes. I remember that one. Exotic looking, black hair — a real collectible. But you say she was your handmaiden? I was not informed of that."

"Well...no, not yet," Louise hedged. "But I'd planned on making her my handmaiden."

"Then she's not yet your handmaiden?"

"No."

"Then you can't have her."

"What?"

Mott frowned at her. "Miss de La Vallière, if Siesta was truly not your handmaiden, then I committed no insults upon your honor or your family's. Siesta is mine, I bought her with my own money, and I have no obligations to return her to you if she wasn't your handmaiden."

He shifted in his seat. Shirou could practically feel the anger radiating off of Louise, and Mott must have noticed, too, but he didn't seem at all perturbed by it.

"Quite simply, you have no claim," Mott said. "That you would come here now, trying to bully me into returning something that didn't belong to you in the first place by claiming it was stolen from you, is the height of childishness. I would have expected better from a de La Vallière."

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Louise seethed. "You...!"

"What do you want for her?" Shirou cut in.

Mott looked at him and Louise gave him a glare at his interruption, but Shirou didn't let it bother him.

"Excuse me?" Mott asked.

"I said, what do you want for her?"

"I'm sorry, I'm afraid we haven't been introduced," Mott began. "I don't recognize the symbol on your clothing —"

"It doesn't matter," Shirou cut across stonily. "How much do you want for Siesta?"

There were a few artifacts in his possession that would make money problems obsolete — Draupnir, Andvarinaut, to name a few — that Shirou wouldn't mind parting with, especially if it meant saving Siesta from this...this...

Shirou wasn't exactly sure what to call him.

But there were definitely a few things in his vault he could sacrifice to save Siesta. If they happened to be cursed to bring the owner misfortune and he happened to forget to mention that, then, well, there was nothing he could do about that, was there?

"Shirou, what are you doing?" Louise hissed.

"Bargaining, Louise," Shirou muttered back.

"She's not for sale," Mott replied flatly. "As I said, Siesta is exotic, a collectible. I paid good money for her, and there's nothing you can offer me that is of equal value. Besides,"

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Mott grinned a lascivious grin, "I haven't gotten to play with her, yet."

Louise's hackles raised and Shirou's eyes narrowed.

"Play with her?!" Louise sputtered.

"Of course," Mott said as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. "She's my property, isn't she? What good is she if she doesn't serve the purpose I bought her for?"

"Property?!" Louise repeated furiously.

"Of course," Mott said again. "After all, commoners exist only for the pleasure of the Nobles, don't they? The Princess may have this silly notion that they are our equals, but you can't be equals with a piece of furniture, Miss de La Vallière. The idea itself is absurd."

Louise's face had gone red, and then a pale, ghostly white. Shirou himself had to muster all of his self-control to stay rooted to his spot and not turn Mott into smear on the ground.

"That's all Siesta is to you?" Louse demanded shakily. "A...A piece of *property*, no different from a chair or a table, to be used *as* you please *when* you please?!"

"Siesta is no chair or table!" Mott objected indignantly. "She is exotic, a collectible, like a piece of fine jewelry!"

"She's a human being!" Louise roared.

"She is my *property*!" Mott shouted back, standing up. "I bought her from the academy and I spent good money to do

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it! You forget your place, girl, to think that you can tell me what to do with my property in my own home!"

Louise looked very much like she wanted rip Mott to pieces with her bare hands, and Shirou was tempted to let her, or else to do the deed himself, but it was Louise who had told him at the beginning of this whole thing that there couldn't be a physical confrontation unless Mott started it.

"Where is she, by the way?" Shirou forced his voice to be calm, nonchalant, using everything he'd learned from observing Rin and Saber to control himself. "I don't think we saw her on the way in."

Mott frowned again as he sat back down. "She didn't understand her station," he explained. Absently, his fingers came up and brushed a cut on his lower lip — Shirou was surprised he hadn't noticed it sooner. "I needed to rid her of that ridiculous notion the Princess is putting in everyone's heads, so I sent her down to my jeweler for some...polishing."

"Take me to see her," Louise demanded immediately.

Mott frowned at her again and looked as though he was about to say no. At the last second, however, he seemed to reconsider it, and after a moment visibly in thought, he spoke.

"If I take you down to see her and give you the chance to say a goodbye," he began, "will you leave here peacefully so I can get back to my busy work?"

"Yes," Louise answered without pause.

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Mott snorted and stood up. "You are a terrible liar, Miss de La Vallière," he said as he strode over to the bookcase. "But I shall hold you to that promise, regardless of whether you meant it or not."

He pressed his hand against a panel on the decorative structure that separated the two bookcases from one another and pushed until it sank into the rest of the wood like a button. With a rumble, that decorative structure pulled back away from the wall and swung inwards like a door to reveal a stone staircase that stretched down an empty black passageway.

In spite of it all, in spite of the situation that they were in, Shirou almost wanted to call him out on being so cliché.

"Come." Mott lifted a lone torch away from the wall and lit it with a short spell. "I'll let you see Siesta, if you want to so badly, and after that, you will leave, or else I will have my guards *make* you leave."

Louise stood and fell into step behind him as he led the way down into the dungeons. Shirou made to follow behind her, but stopped at that instant as something in the back of his head prickled.

"Not like this, Shirou," Rin's voice told him sadly. "Please, not like this."

But Shirou couldn't stop. As long as there were people in need of saving, there was no stopping or retreating. There were no regrets. There was only going forward.

So, Shirou stepped into the passage way behind Louise and refused to look back.

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— o.O.O.O.o —

The staircase went straight down without curving or twisting. Though it was hard to tell exactly because the walls were uniform the whole way down, Shirou estimated that by the time they reached the bottom, they had descended a grand total of four stories — about fifty feet, in other words.

At the bottom of the staircase was a dungeon, as Shirou had first thought. The floors and walls were all made of dark stone rather than more solid bricks and mortar. It looked like one long hallway, bordered on either side by a series of what looked like prison cells, each with barred doors and the barest of necessities: a pan for when nature called and a heap of straw that he supposed was an approximation of a bed.

It looked completely medieval, like something out of the Middle Ages, back when society was less advanced and peasants lived in huts and lean-tos rather than actually buildings and houses, and there was absolutely no privacy. Because the front walls were basically nothing but long metal frames evenly spaced with thick bars, there was no hiding and no place to escape from the eyes of whoever decided to look in.

It was something that didn't fit with the rest of the mansion, which was much more modern and more like something out of the industrial age — more eighteenth or nineteenth century than the old fashioned dungeon that was laid out before him. Surely, Shirou found himself thinking as they started down the hall, Mot must have had the money and the resources to update everything, didn't he?

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Unless he didn't want to, the grave thought came. Unless Mott wanted this place to be primitive and uncomfortable, so that it was more of a deterrent to behavior that he didn't like.

If it wasn't intended to be a prison for enemies, but rather a place of discipline for those who defied him, well, then there wasn't any point in making it comfortable, was there?

Shirou's thoughts were derailed as they passed by the first cell when he glanced in and saw a girl, beaten and dead and decomposing, who, with a jolt, he thought he recognized.

His feet stopped for just a moment as his heart skipped a beat, but when he looked back into the cell, it was empty. There was no girl, there, no rotting and decomposing corpse. Shirou had just been seeing things.

"Please, Shirou," Rin's voice said again. "Not like this. It *can't* be like this."

Shirou shook his head and fell back into step behind Louise.

Just now, he thought, what was that?

When he'd passed that cell, why had he thought he'd seen a girl in there when it was empty? Had it just been a trick of the light, a mixture of a memory and an illusion his brain had conjured because he had expected someone to be there?

Why had he thought that girl was familiar, like he'd seen her somewhere before or like he'd known her somehow? He hadn't recognized her at all; he didn't know her name or her age or anything. She simply evoked a feeling a familiarity in him. But why?

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Why was he hallucinating badly enough that he had mistaken empty air for a corpse whose face seemed to him now as the remnants of a bad dream?

And why was Rin telling him not to go any further?

Their group continued down the hallway, with a few dim, flickering lanterns and Mott's single torch for light. Shadows danced about the walls, and their shoes clack-clack-clacked with every step so that the sound echoed eerily into the distance. Throughout the entire time, in the otherwise silent hallway, Shirou could not shake the feeling of *déjà vu*.

But why? The question bothered him. The sensation of *déjà vu*, the feeling that this was all familiar and that he had done this before, bothered him, but the memory, the reason *why* that was behind it all was as elusive as the moon reflected on the surface of a lake. No matter how desperately he grasped for it, it always escaped him, and all he was left with was that same feeling of *déjà vu* and a frustration that burned in his chest.

"This dungeon was built during the Fifth Crusade nearly thirty-two-hundred years ago," Mott was explaining as he led them. "Back then, this was just a military training camp. After the Fifth Crusade, it was abandoned and left in disrepair to rot. It wasn't until about a thousand years ago that my family claimed this land and renovated the old camp into a mansion."

But Shirou wasn't paying much attention, because as they passed another cell, he looked inside and his belly did a funny little flip-flop as another jolt rocketed through him.

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The boy in the cell was strapped down and naked, shackled to a cold metal table by thick, broad leather belts that even a fully grown bear would have trouble breaking. His flesh was emaciated — he was so thin that his ribs stood out in harsh relief against his skin and it seemed that he was literally nothing but skin and bones. Shirou could even see a faint outline of his teeth through his hollowed cheeks and gaunt face.

And as Shirou looked at the face, he recoiled, because the place where the eyes should have been was just two empty sockets, pits of darkness that sucked in light; the eyes had been surgically removed.

To be experimented on, a sinister voice whispered in Shirou's ear.

The black hair was slightly longer than Shirou's, and the complexion was pale, and the boy couldn't have been more than a year older than Louise. What could he possibly have done to deserve such torture?

Nothing, the voice said again, *he just had rare eyes. It was a pain to capture him, but it was well worth the loss to get our hands on **those**.*

But Shirou blinked, and the boy disappeared, replaced with yet another empty cell.

Shirou breathed in deep and tried to calm his thudding heart.

It was another hallucination.

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"You can still go back, Shirou," Rin's voice told him.
"Please. You *can't* do it this way. You'll break."

Something ironic twisted Shirou's mouth up into a parody of a grin. "You of all people know better than to underestimate me, Rin."

But there was no witty banter, no scathing comeback or condescending remark about what a hopeless idiot he was. There was no response from Rin at all, whose voice he had gotten used to hearing. As he turned back to Louise and fell into step behind her, there was only the silence and solitude of his own thoughts.

In that moment, Shirou had never felt more alone.

But it didn't stop there.

Two more such incidents occurred as they were walking down the hallway, and both times, Shirou saw the horrific visage of a prisoner who had been treated as badly as any Jew during the Holocaust, sometimes worse. Severed limbs and fingers, body parts twisted and distorted unnaturally, expressions of horror, frozen in death, every single time — it was like looking in and seeing visions of every horrible thing that one human being could do to another.

The starting penalty is five.

The ghost of that time, a memory of All the World's Evils, sent a shiver down Shirou's spine.

Rape.

Sodomy.

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Murder.

Castration.

Genocide.

Patricide.

Fratricide.

Matricide.

Tyranny.

Ethnic cleansing.

Arson.

Exile.

Execution.

Torture.

Sadism.

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But Shirou simply took another steadying breath, ignored the hallucinations, ignored Rin, whose voice had gone from simple warnings and requests to desperate pleading, and soldiered on.

That was only natural. Even if he took Rin's warnings as fact, even if he allowed himself to believe that her warnings and these hallucinations were connected, which they very well may be, and that they were leading up to something much,

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much darker and much, much more devastating, Emiya Shirou could not back down and retreat out of a concern for his own well-being, not when Louise needed his protection and Siesta was in need of saving.

It would be a denial of Emiya Shirou to place himself above others.

To go back, to retreat and leave because it would be more advantageous to him than marching forward would be to betray the ideals he had sworn to uphold, the ideals that he had told Archer, once upon a time, that he would shoulder, no matter what. To forsake those ideals was to forsake the person, Emiya Shirou, and to forsake Emiya Shirou was to forsake the woman who had become the center of his universe.

Because, even more than his ideals, what Shirou treasured most was that woman. Upon that throne in his soul, that place where concern for his own health and well-being, that place where, for a normal person, sat the selfish instinct to protect and preserve one's own life, that woman sat. Everything in him was dedicated to her, and there was nothing, no treasure or Noble Phantasm or cherished person, that could replace her value to him.

And to betray his ideals was to betray her.

So Shirou soldiered on.

At last, after walking through an intersection and down a shorter hallway, they finally came to the end, where a much larger door to a much larger cell took up most of the space from one wall to the other.

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"As I said," Mott began, fiddling with his wand, "Siesta is a collectible. Naturally, I could only give her the absolute best, even when teaching her the proper place for a commoner in this world. Ah. Here we go."

He pressed a key into the door's lock and it unlocked with a loud, metallic click. He waved his wand and the door slid open on its own as though an invisible hand had pushed it. Mott stepped into the dark room, which had no fires or lanterns to light it, and Louise and Shirou made to follow him in as he set about lighting a few torches.

"Shirou," Rin's voice stopped him. She wasn't begging or pleading — in fact, she sounded very calm — but the tone of her voice was resigned and sad, like she was talking to someone who was about to walk to the hangman's noose. "Shirou, there's no going back from this. Once you do it, you can't take it back. This box...it isn't one you can close back up."

It was enough to give Shirou a moment of pause — just a moment — where he hesitated and felt somewhat worried about the ominous and concerning solemnity with which Rin told him this final warning. For that single moment, there was doubt, because after the Grail War and after the dust had settled, Rin had never driven him wrong. She had never concealed something unless it was for his own good, even though he sometimes wished she hadn't.

If there was one thing Shirou could count on, without a doubt, it was that Rin was his very best friend.

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But the decision had already been made. There was no other choice but to move forward, no other choice that would not go against everything that made him who he was.

So, with all his sincerity, he told her, "Sorry, Rin."

And he stepped forward just as the lights all flared to life.

And he stopped.

His blood froze in his veins.

His heart shuddered to a halt.

His lungs became paralyzed.

His brain sputtered and came to a standstill.

Every muscle in his body seized up.

Lying on the floor, chained to it by heavy iron manacles and unconscious, was Siesta.

She was completely and entirely nude. There wasn't a stitch of clothing on her, not even underwear, to give her some semblance of modesty. She was as bare to the world as she was the day she was born, bare for anyone to see as much as they liked.

The backs of her thighs, her upper arms, and her hips were bruised where someone had handled her roughly, though she hadn't been raped like the maid up in Mott's parlor, and there were several cuts and scrapes, all minor and superficial, from the ill treatment she'd received. There was even some redness where she'd been smacked and whipped with what was probably a riding crop and the manacles were chafing on her wrists.

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None of it was serious or life-threatening. In fact, the damage had probably been inflicted more for pain and humiliation than anything else, and was probably easily healed by a Water Mage without the risk of scarring or permanent damage. In all likelihood, the damage was more mental than it was physical.

"You sick bastard!" Louise was saying.

"Come now, Miss de La Vallière, is that any way for a Noble to speak to another Noble?" Mott was saying.

But Shirou wasn't hearing any of it.

He was smelling the coppery tang of the blood and the moldy mildew and dankness of the dungeon. He was hearing a faint buzzing in his ears. He was seeing stone floors and a naked girl lying exposed on the floor.

But he was not seeing Mott's dungeon. He was not smelling Siesta's blood. He was not seeing a teenaged girl with short black hair nude on the stone floor.

Shirou was seeing Rin.

She was lying on the ground much as Siesta was, only there was no point in chaining Rin to the floor. The magical protections on the door to her cell would have kept her from escaping, and if it had not been for his own superhuman abilities, even Shirou would've been unable to open it.

But more than that, Rin couldn't have escaped even if she wanted to.

She'd been stripped of anything that could possibly a Mystic Code, including all of her clothing and her underwear,

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so that she was completely nude. Her hair was matted with dirt and grime and her own blood, and maybe even other things that Shirou didn't even want to think about.

The entire right side of her face was such a mottle of purple and yellow bruises that her eye had swollen completely shut. Her left arm had very obviously been broken within the last day or two, and three fingers on her right hand were cruelly bent in odd angles where the interrogator (if it was even an interrogation at all and not just some sick form of torture) had started with breaking her fingers, only to move on once he got bored.

Her sides were pockmarked with even more bruises, but care had been taken not to break anything that might do damage to her internal organs, like her ribs. They were intended only to hurt and to ache, to make every breath a labor of agony. And they were all at least a week old, which meant that they had to have been much, much worse when they were first inflicted. Much worse, and much more painful.

Dried blood was crusted around cuts and scrapes that had been carved into her flesh with what looked to have been a razor, all of which had been deep enough to bleed and bleed and *bleed*, but not enough that she would die. The most concerning one was the gash on the side of her head that looked severe enough she might need stitches for it, or at least a very good healer.

But it all came down to one thing. This hadn't been an interrogation at all. From the beginning, it had never been about finding out information on a Sealing Designate. No, this had been needlessly cruel and violent.

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This was about a grudge.

And because of that grudge, because he was the subject of someone's hatred, Rin had been hurt so badly.

Shirou wanted to throw up. A heady feeling rushed to his brain and left him with a dizzying sense of nausea, so much so that he swayed and his legs felt weak. He had to pull all of his self-control, muster every ounce of willpower he could manage, just to force himself into a semblance of calm.

Because he didn't even want to think about what it could mean.

But the start of everything was not in that cell, Shirou knew. There was more to it than just finding Rin in some dank and dingy dungeon. The story didn't start there.

No, everything had started when one of Shirou's associates ("acquaintance" was too weak, but "friend" was too strong) within the Mage's Association had contacted him while he was dealing with a minor skirmish in Eastern Europe.

"The new Vice Director has put out a Sealing Designation on you," the message had said. *"Tobsaka Rin has been detained for questioning."*

In the mundane world, it wouldn't have been overly concerning. But the mundane world was governed by laws and moral boundaries; the Mage's Association only acknowledged the Lords and its own internal hierarchy.

In the Mage's Association, being detained for questioning meant you had no rights and they would do whatever it took

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to find out what they wanted to know. It was especially brutal in the cases of Sealing Designates, who were a danger either to the secret of magecraft or were conducting forbidden research.

As a Department Head, however, Rin had a lot of political clout, which meant her detainment was more the bait for a trap than anything serious, so Shirou wouldn't normally have been concerned.

But it was the last part of the message that had gotten Shirou to drop everything and head for London: *"They've locked her at the Bottom of the Bridge."*

The Bottom of the Bridge: the place where the Clock Tower locked up the worst disasters of the Association.

Shirou's plane had barely landed before he'd rushed off to the British Museum in London; he hadn't bothered with waiting or with pleasantries, he'd simply run as fast as his legs could carry him without catching undue attention and made it to the museum as quickly as possible while limiting himself to human ability.

Naturally, they'd been waiting for him.

In the past, Shirou had been responsible for the capture of a number of Sealing Designates who were as much a danger to the Association as they were to the rest of the world, so he knew where the Bottom of the Bridge was located. It'd been easy — too easy, in retrospect — to break into the Association's headquarters and make his way down to the cells where the worst Sealing Designates were held.

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It should have said something to him that there were only a few Enforcers standing in his way. It should have set off all sorts of alarms in the back of his head that he met only token resistance on his way down to rescue Rin.

But Shirou hadn't been able to think about it, nor had he a moment to really care, as he barreled through every protection in his way to the Bottom of the Bridge. He hadn't been able to give much thought to the meager compliment of Enforcers guarding the prison or the gruesome victims, the Sealing Designates that had been captured and put behind bars, all in various states of nearly-dead, locked up in the cells.

And then, he found Rin, and any thoughts he could have had about the ease of finding her were wiped from his head as he laid eyes upon her broken and beaten body.

How could Shirou worry about anything else when his best friend was lying completely nude in a dank and dirty dungeon?

So he didn't. He focused entirely on her. With tenderness and care, he gently lifted her onto her back and checked gingerly for a pulse, and there was never a moment in his life where he was more thankful for that tiny thump-thump-thump underneath his fingertips.

But she had been tortured. She had been tortured and it was a miracle that she was still alive.

"Rin," he managed to choke out. Something inside of him was very, very cold, and sitting there, hunched over Rin's unconscious body, Shirou felt hollow and empty, like

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someone had come along, reached inside of him, and torn away everything that mattered.

A hand grasped his shoulder.

Shirou reacted before thinking.

With all of his speed, with a torrent of pain-anger-fear-anguish spiraling through him, he spun around and stood, and his fist lashed out without holding back. With enough strength and power to rival the greatest hero of Greece, Shirou struck.

The Enforcer who had attempted to pull him away from Rin never had a chance.

The head was obliterated with a single blow, sending blood and bits of gray matter all over the place, and the body fell limply to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. So simply, a life was ended.

Shirou felt no remorse.

He couldn't. At that moment, in that place at that time, he didn't have the emotional range to feel something like remorse for Rin's captors — *especially* for Rin's captors.

Voices came from down the hall, and a moment later, another pair of Enforcers entered the cell, already in motion to cut Shirou down.

But there were few mages who could fight Shirou and win. A pair of Enforcers was child's play.

The first one received a fist to the chest, and a series of rapid fire cracks followed as every rib in the Enforcer's torso

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snapped like a twig and crushed the heart and lungs, then the body went flying backward. The second one received a backhand that shattered his jaw and turned the rest of his skull into pulp.

Two more were dead.

With the two of them taken care of, Shirou turned back around and picked up Rin, careful not to jostle her and worsen her wounds.

He needed to leave.

"Shirou!" a distant voice called, but Shirou wasn't listening. "Shirou, you have to stop!"

But the voice was too far away and too unimportant. No matter how much it called and how desperately it shouted, Shirou simply couldn't hear it.

"Don't worry, Rin," he mumbled to the girl in his arms. "I've got you."

He strode out of the cell with her held in his arms like a newlywed bride, making sure not to bump into anything as he stepped through the hole where the door had once been, and then started back up the way he came.

"Over here!" a voice called in the distance. "He's this way!"

Shirou scowled and looked at the hallway he'd come through to reach Rin, where the voice of another Enforcer and a series of clack-clack-clacks that could only be the footsteps of a large group echoed. If he tried to go back that way, then he'd run into the group, and he'd have to fight

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them while carrying Rin and trying not to worsen the damage that had already been inflicted.

There was no way to do that, not without risking Rin's life and safety. If he wanted to escape without putting her in danger, then he'd have to find another way out, where there weren't Enforcers trying to kill him.

His scowl deepened.

"Trace, on."

An ordinary, mundane sword appeared in the air near Shirou, and he flooded it with Prana as he would a Broken Phantasm, then sent it shooting down the hallway and into the ceiling, where it exploded with the force of a tank shell. With an ominous rumble, the stones crumbled and fell and the ceiling caved in, blocking the way he came so that the Enforcers couldn't follow him.

He turned in the other direction.

Only one way to go.

He started forward down the empty hallway, trying to keep a lid on the anxiety and fear and the remnants of horror that were mingling and compressing into a rage that he was sure would see the entire place leveled. He pushed it all down and away — *rescue Rin now, get upset later*, he told himself — as he had trained himself to do during his travels.

Anger could be useful, but usually it meant tunnel vision and blinding yourself to things that would be obvious with a clear head.

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So he pushed everything else down and away and focused the entirety of his attention on finding his way out. He could be angry and vengeful after he'd saved her, after he'd made sure she was fine, because he would never forgive himself otherwise. Of all the people he couldn't save, he *refused* to let Rin be one of them.

It took Shirou longer than he would have liked to reach the upper levels again, so much so that the frustration in his belly was reaching the boiling point by the time he did, and he blamed it on the fact that he'd been forced to take an alternate route. He'd only ever gone through the Bottom of the Bridge the one way, so it'd been an adventure in trial and error to find his way up using the other pathway after he'd collapsed the main one. It wasn't an adventure he was keen on repeating.

It was dark when he made it back up to the main floor of the museum proper. He had to enhance his vision with Reinforcement to see the clock in the dim light, and he discovered, to his surprise, that he'd somehow spent a total of almost three hours navigating his way through the passageways currently beneath his feet when it had only been about forty-five minutes, according to his internal clock.

"What the —?" he muttered to himself. "But that means... A Bounded Field to distort my perception?"

The sound of hands clapping tore Shirou's attention towards the exit as the museum lights slowly flickered back to life. It came from a man, a vaguely young man who looked to be somewhere in his twenties, which, for magi, meant that he could be sixty or seventy years old. His black hair was parted in an aristocratic style, his brown eyes gleamed sharply in the

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brightening light like shards of glass, and his skin was the sort of pale you got when you spent longer inside than you did outside. He was dressed in an expensive suit and looked every bit the modern business man, but for the sword strapped to his waist.

A jolt of shock rippled through Shirou's belly: Durendal, the Peerless Sword.

"Congratulations, *Sir* Emiya," the man said silkily, still clapping. "You figured it out. A bit too late, I'm afraid, but I'm prepared to give you points for effort, anyway."

The man's hands dropped down and folded behind his back, and the smug smirk on his face told Shirou everything that hadn't been said.

"This was your idea," he realized. The boiling anger surged suddenly to the surface and Shirou snarled. "Arresting Rin, torturing her, luring me here — all of it!"

"Oh, so you *do* have a brain," the insult rolled off the man's tongue casually. "I was afraid I might have to explain everything — I wasn't expecting much from a backwards oriental like you — but it seems you've got a fairly solid grasp on the basics, at least, so that does save me some time."

The insult barely registered — it wasn't important anyway — through the beginnings of a cold fury Shirou had not felt since Kotomine Kirei and Gilgamesh.

"But I suppose you want to know why," the man continued smugly. "In that case, I suppose I should begin with my name. I am Varys Lancaster Baelmeloi," he gave a mockingly formal bow, "Vice Director of the Mage's

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Association, and I am the hand which arranged this whole dance."

Varys stood straight, and it took all of Shirou's self-control to keep himself from simply killing the smug bastard and leaving with Rin.

He knew better than that. If he wanted to take care of the whole problem, then he needed to find out who was behind it and how extensive it was, or else it could come back to bite him in the future. If he didn't find out how deep everything went, then they'd just try again, only next time, they'd do something that would ensure Shirou didn't have any reason to run away.

Next time, they might simply assassinate Rin and be done with it.

"So, you put all of this together simply to get my attention?" Shirou asked dangerously. It was not hard to fake the anger when it was actually real anger held on the tightest leash he could manage. "Is this some sort of twisted game for you!?"

"It's nothing so crass, I assure you. The reason behind all of this is simple, Shirou Emiya." Varys' smile dropped into an expression of disdain. "I want you *gone*. Every breath you take is an affront to the things my family has worked for over the past thousand years, and everything you do threatens the secrecy and safety of our world — of magecraft. Every day, you flaunt your craft amongst the mundanes and endanger the work we have spent *lifetimes* building up."

He sneered.

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"The previous Vice Director didn't pursue you because she didn't want to waste the resources on what she felt would inevitably be a case of mutually assured destruction, and she didn't use Tohsaka against you because she felt you might simply destroy the Clock Tower if she did. She was too weak to do what was necessary to remove the Association's greatest threat. *I*, on the other hand, am *not*."

Varys lifted his hand and snapped his fingers. Suddenly, magical energy erupted all around them, and dozens of Enforcers poured out of the shadows one after another like cockroaches to surround Shirou and Rin. It was a veritable army, at least seventy high class combatants, each one capable of defeating a normal magus and each specially equipped to deal with magecraft. If Shirou had been a normal mage, it would have been so far past overkill that it wasn't funny.

"This is why I've called you here, Shirou Emiya," Varys said smugly. "Today, you die, and I am rid of two thorns in my side. But I am not without kindness: at least I arranged for you to see your friend one last time."

But Shirou was not a normal mage.

He tamped down on his anger and let out a breath. "I am the bone of my sword."

"Kill him."

As one gigantic mass, the Enforcers all rushed forward to attack and overwhelm him.

But Shirou was prepared for that.

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From above his head, a dozen swords, each four times as tall and four times as broad as a normal sword, slammed down to form a circle around Shirou and Rin — a crude sort of barrier that probably wouldn't last very long against seasoned Enforcers. If he'd been pinning his hopes on using those swords to keep the Enforcers at bay and protect him, then he'd be disappointed when they were destroyed.

Except Shirou hadn't planned for them to last more than maybe a minute.

Carefully, gingerly, he set Rin down onto the floor and covered her up with his coat, leaving him in nothing more than his shirt, pants, boots, and gloves. He stood up again and turned in one direction and lifted his left hand.

To begin with, if he did anything too destructive, then he could hurt innocents or bring the roof down on his head, so he had to take care, or else move the battleground to someplace where he could do as much damage as he liked.

"Trace, on."

A sleek longbow appeared in his hands, and resting atop his finger, the Azoth Dagger, elongated into a thin, arrow-like shape, faded into existence with a flash of light.

This was why Shirou had just barely avoided a Sealing Designation. This power, this ability, this Reality Marble that allowed Shirou to recreate everything about any melee weapon he saw was the reason he had nearly been given a Sealing Designation, and half the reason why he hadn't gotten one was lying unconscious at his feet.

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Shirou pulled back on the bowstring and took aim. In front of him, four of the oversized swords vanished as Shirou dismissed them, leaving nothing between him and the crowd of Enforcers.

"Retribution for magistricide," he whispered, and let go.

The Azoth Dagger leapt from the bow like a bullet, letting out a keening whistle as it flew. At a speed several times that of sound, it crashed into the leading Enforcer, cut through his chest and out the other side, and then it exploded and rained shards of light that killed another four. In a single instant, so fast that he might have missed it if he'd blinked, five were dead.

But more Enforcers simply filled the hole he had created and rushed through the opening in his cage of swords. Shirou took a step back so that he was standing in front of Rin and let his bow fade. Before the motes of golden light had fully vanished, his hand had leapt to the sword sheathed at his hip and pulled it free and into a swing; the sheer power behind it, the overwhelming strength of his swing, swept outwards like a gust of wind and cleaved the first three Enforcers in half.

"Steel is my body and fire is my blood."

Blood splattered over the ground and the faces of the other Enforcers, but they ignored their dead and dying comrades and clamored to fill the spots left behind by the fallen. Shirou took a step forward to give himself some room and swung his sword again. Again, the first row of Enforcers fell, cleaved in half by nothing more than the wind swept aside by his sword, and again, more Enforcers poured in, taking their comrades' places.

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Again, Shirou swung his sword.

Again, Enforcers died.

"I have created over a thousand blades."

It seemed like there were always more, no matter how many he killed, so that they just kept coming and coming and coming. With every swing of his sword, more Enforcers died. With every swing of his sword, the ones left behind came closer than the ones before

"Unaware of loss, nor aware of gain."

One leapt from the group and overtop the corpses of the Enforcers Shirou had just killed, too close for a sword and obviously hoping to force Shirou into a disadvantage. The solid stance and confident, self-assured bearing were the hallmarks of a skilled martial artist, the sort that could take down ordinary humans and normal mages swiftly and effortlessly.

Shirou's fist leapt out, faster than humanly possible, and shattered his ribcage into a thousand slivers of white bone.

"Never alone, striving for Utopia!"

He took another step forward, swinging his arm back and then forward as a spear appeared in his empty hand.

"Gae Bolg!"

The spear in his hand contorted at impossible angles and lanced into another Enforcer, piercing straight through the heart and killing instantly. Shirou tossed both the spear and

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the body out of the way, even as Gae Bolg started to fade away.

"There are no regrets. This is the only path!"

"Stop him!" someone shouted.

Shirou lifted his free hand up into the air as more and more Enforcers poured into the hole in their crowd that he had made and *pulled*. With a flash of white light like lightning, a large hammer, triple the size of a normal warhammer, appeared in his palm. It was decorated with beautiful symbols and etching, and it looked like something that belonged as much in an art gallery as it did on the battlefield.

Mjolnir II, a modification of the original Mjolnir, the warhammer of the Norse Thunder God, Thor, reduced down to a quarter its original size in order to be more manageable as a weapon.

Shirou swung his arm down and let go. Mjolnir II leapt from his hand and gave off a low whooping sound as it flew through the air, bowling over everyone in its way and giving Shirou a moment of reprieve, just long enough to finish his incantation.

"My whole life was...Unlimited Blade Works."

"Now!"

The ring of fire spread outwards from Shirou's feet, opening up and overlaying Shirou's alien perspective overtop of the real world. The Unlimited Blade Works, the Infinite Creation of Swords, the barren hill that was his inner world,

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was forced into existence through the usage of a magecraft that was infinitely close to True Magic.

But a group of Enforcers split off from the rest as he finished his incantation and pulled something from their clothing, a set of ten identical daggers which had been hidden up until that moment, then thrust them all into the floor.

Beneath Shirou's feet, that ring of fire spreading outwards finally reached the daggers, which had been arrayed in a circle around Shirou and Rin, consumed them, forced his distorted perception into reality, and then...vanished. The alien terra which had started to appear all of the sudden disappeared, leaving the world exactly as it had been a moment before.

The activation of Shirou's Reality Marble, the Unlimited Blade Works, had just been canceled out.

A thrill of shock jolted through his chest and Shirou's brain stuttered to a halt.

No one had ever canceled out the Blade Works before. Never, in the handful of times he'd resorted to it, either to give himself room to safely use his sword or simply as one of his trump cards, had someone actually managed to stop it.

But now someone had.

In the sudden oppressive silence that followed, his eyes sought out the daggers and read their history, their composition, the concept of their making, the manufacturing process, their accumulated age — and everything made sense.

Artifacts designed and made for the singular purpose of disrupting Bounded Fields.

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And what was a Reality Marble but an Innate Bounded Field?

They'd planned for it, Shirou realized with a strange sort of mental numbness. From the beginning, they'd planned for him to utilize his Reality Marble. They knew he wouldn't risk his sword in a heavily populated city like London, so they'd taken advantage of it and prepared for him to use his Reality Marble by bringing in artifacts that could disrupt Bounded Fields.

Every step of the way, Varys had been one step ahead of him. Every time Shirou thought he had the advantage, that he was going to win, Varys revealed another trap or trick to counter him. It was like Varys could read his mind or predict the future and knew everything Shirou was going to do before he even thought of doing it.

The crash of shattering steel, which was a unique sound but somewhat similar to breaking glass, echoed out from behind him. Shirou spun around almost too late to see that his wall of swords had been broken, letting the Enforcers behind him move in, and he pulled out the first thing that came to mind from the hill.

"Rho Aias!"

The seven-layered barrier, the sublimated Noble Phantasm born from the legend of Ajax the Greater blocking Hector of Troy's unblockable spear, appeared in front of him to stop the coming horde. The seven petals of the hyacinth in the center of the barrier seemed to glow.

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But the Enforcers didn't try to press their advantage. As soon as Rho Aias appeared between them and Shirou, they all stepped back and simply waited. They didn't try at all to make it through the barrier, nor did they even try to test its strength so they could figure out what they needed to bring it down.

Instead, they all took a step back and put some space between themselves and Rho Aias, then stood silently, watching him as if they were waiting for something —

Everything seemed to slow down to a crawl. Shirou's head spun back around, but his body seemed to take infinitely longer to make the same journey.

Behind him, utilizing the opening provided by Shirou's distraction with Rho Aias, Varys was rushing forwards, Durendal brandished for a fatal stab and a triumphant expression on his face. He was crossing the distance at a speed more appropriate to a Dead Apostle than a magus, and the space that separated the tip of his sword from Shirou's chest was closing rapidly — too fast.

One meter.

Shirou's heel pivoted on the floor as his torso slowly jerked around, providing his body the momentum to turn.

Three quarters of a meter.

Shirou's left arm swung around to give himself even more momentum, carrying his torso with it.

Half a meter.

His right arm trailed behind, beginning the slash that would deflect Durendal to the side and away.

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A quarter of a meter.

But it wouldn't be fast enough. Varys had caught him off guard, had timed everything perfectly so that he would be able to attack Shirou's blind spot too swiftly and from too close a range for Shirou to react to it. Everything had been planned to perfection so that Shirou wouldn't be able to stop it, wouldn't be able to defend himself against the blow that would pierce his heart.

And without Avalon, that would mean death.

And Shirou regretted, in the fraction of a second he had before Durendal cut through his armor and bit into his flesh, only that he hadn't been able to rescue Rin.

Durendal stabbed forward. Varys completed his thrust and cut through flesh like butter. Red blood, red as the clothing Shirou wore, blossomed on Shirou's chest.

And Rin fell into Shirou's arms.

Shirou's sword completed its own swing, and Varys let go of Durendal to avoid the sharp blade, the crystallization of Salvation, that had been used to kill Angra Mainyu and many Dead Apostles, that saved countless innocent lives.

But had, now, been unable to save Rin.

"Rho Aias!" Shirou spat out as quickly as he could.

Another barrier, another Rho Aias, appeared to fill the hole that Varys had just come through, but it was flawed and had only four petals — a rush job he had cobbled together just to give himself some space.

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And then he sank to the floor, holding Rin in his arms as Durendal fall away with a clatter.

"Rin!" he said her name, ignoring her nudity and pressing his hand to the wound as he tried to think of a spell, any spell, that could save her. "Come on, stay with me!"

But he couldn't think of anything. To begin with, his knowledge of healing spells was vastly limited, and he only knew one or two that were designed mainly for flesh wounds, not organ damage. Damn it all. Why hadn't he learned something better?

"Damn it!" Something pricked at the corners of his eyes as he pressed his hands desperately over the wound. "Damn it, damn it, damn it!"

With every curse, he prayed that the blood flowing over his fingers would magically stop, that the wound would somehow close, that he wouldn't — that his *best friend* wouldn't die in his arms.

But blood still poured from her wound, soaking into his clothing, and then disappearing as the protective charms cleaned the cloth and leather almost before they could actually become dirty. The flesh beneath his fingers did not miraculously knit itself back together. No matter how desperately he wished for it, her wound would not close.

"DAMN IT!"

A hand came up, slender and feminine with three broken fingers, and rested over his. Shirou's heart stopped, and, coughing up blood, one brilliant blue eye opened as Rin's lips curled into a smile.

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"Idiot," she chastised him with a wheeze.

"R-Rin."

"I can't...leave you alone...for one minute...without you almost...getting killed." She coughed up more blood.

"You're...so hopeless, Shirou."

She offered him a pained grin, marred by the swelling and bruises on the right side of her face and the red, red blood staining her teeth.

"Guess...this time...I saved you."

Rin gave a weak chuckle.

"Geez...It looks like...you've...rubbed off on me, Shirou."

She gave a sigh and relaxed in his arms. The blood pouring out from her wound began to slow, and the time between breaths was getting longer and longer.

"No! No, Rin!"

"When it...comes to...ways to go," she whispered, "I guess...saving someone...isn't so bad, huh?"

She gave another sigh, and then her eyes closed and her entire body went limp.

"No!" Shirou cried out. He pushed on every Circuit he had and flooded them with Prana. Every single healing spell he knew was applied one after another. "Don't you dare die on me, Rin!"

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But nothing happened. The girl in his arms did not magically revive. The wound had stopped bleeding, but only because her heart was no longer beating. His spells had absolutely no effect.

There was no magic in the world which could bring back the dead.

The first of the tears came, then. A torrent of emotion swelled up inside of Shirou's chest, raging and expanding like a balloon until all he could feel was a bone-deep, mind-numbing despair.

His heart felt like it had been torn from his chest. The nausea in his stomach returned full force, but he had already emptied it earlier, so there was nothing left to heave up. All he had was that feeling...like the bottom of his world had dropped out.

Rin was dead.

Rin, his best friend, was dead.

All because of greed and arrogant belief in superiority. All because one man had felt threatened, because one man had decided he knew best, and had thus decided that Shirou needed to die. All because that man had decided that he could make the rules, and that others had to play by them, no matter what.

She was dead because...it was Shirou's fault.

He set her gently down on the floor, taking care not to mess up her hair or bruise her skin any more than it already had been.

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It was his fault. Rin was dead because of him.

What good was all of this power if he couldn't even save Rin?

He stood up. The bubble that had surrounded him and Rin popped, and there was suddenly a vortex of noise as Varys shouted at everyone to break down the barriers, to kill Shirou while he was distracted.

Varys.

Varys, who was at the center of this whole thing. Varys, who had used Rin to get Shirou's attention, who had had her beaten and tortured simply for being associated with Shirou.

Shirou would...

Shirou would make sure he could never do that to someone else ever again.

"Trace, on."

A sword appeared in the air.

"Roll out. Bullet, clear."

More swords appeared in the air, multiplying with every second.

"Freeze out. Sword Barrel Full Open."

Rho Aias came down, but the moment it did, the collection of swords hovering in the air by Shirou's head lashed out, targeting the Enforcers and raining down upon them. Demonic swords, holy swords, weak knockoff swords

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— every type of weapon imaginable leapt forward and attacked without mercy.

Underneath a rain of Noble Phantasms, even the best of the Enforcers could do nothing but die.

But Shirou didn't take aim for Varys. No, not with the rain of swords. That would have been too easy and too quick, or perhaps not quick enough.

Shirou didn't want Varys to be a part of the dying crowd. Shirou wanted him to know that he had targeted Varys specifically.

"Trace, on."

A black spear appeared in Shirou's hand — black as pitch with intricate vine patterns carved into the shaft. It looked like a black Gáe Bolg, a beautiful streamlined weapon with perfect balance that allowed even a rank amateur to hit his target with every throw. This was the Gungnir, the Declaration of the Elder God, the spear of the Norse God Odin.

Shirou's eyes met Varys'. Shirou watched as Varys realized what was about to happen, as first surprise, then realization, then horror played across his handsome features. He watched that moment when Varys knew he was doomed, the despair and the terror as he tried desperately to get away, to leave, to escape, even though it was impossible.

Shirou watched, and for the first and only time in his life, enjoyed that expression.

"Gungnir."

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The black spear left his hand. The predecessor to Gáe Bolg, endowed with the concept of always hitting its target, no matter how many times it's dodged, Gungnir flew true, curving and winding around everything in its way with a magical, impossible efficiency. It kept going, refusing to be stopped by anything and everything that tried to stop it, pursuing Varys as he tried to run away, until, with a final, satisfying, fleshy thump, it struck true and pierced his heart.

But Shirou had no time to enjoy it. He had no time to watch the life bleed from Varys' face. He had no time to take Rin's body and see her get a proper burial, at home in Fuyuki, next to her father and mother. He had no time to come to terms with everything that had just happened.

Because, at the same moment that Gungnir slammed home into Varys' heart, something grabbed onto Shirou, and *pulled*, and the world around him disappeared into blackness. Shirou screamed as loud as he could, screamed until his lungs were emptied and his throat was sore, and reached back, back towards the place where Rin was, where she'd been left, alone on that floor, for anyone to steal her body and experiment on it.

So Shirou screamed, even though there was no air to carry the sound, even though he couldn't hear his own voice, even though there was nothing but empty blackness around him, he screamed.

"RIN!"

— o.O.O.O.o —

"Shirou!"

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Something smacked against his face.

"Shirou! Snap out of it!"

"Darling!"

Again, something smacked against his face.

"Shirou!"

Shirou blinked. The world swam into view, blurry and unfocused.

He blinked again. And he found himself staring into a pair of burgundy eyes.

"Louise?"

The burgundy eyes blinked, too, and then backed away. Louise gave a sigh of relief.

"Finally," she said. "I thought maybe you'd gone catatonic for a while, there."

"Catatonic?" he asked slowly.

"Darling!"

A pair of hands latched around his neck and pulled his face down into something soft and squishy and *brown*.

Darling — brown — *Kirche*.

Shirou found her shoulders with his hands and pulled his face up and out of her cleavage.

Up and out of her cleavage — *that* was something that'd never happened to him before.

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Kirche stumbled backwards and pouted at him. He felt a little guilty, because he must've been a little more forceful than he'd intended to, but he couldn't worry about it, not when he had to...when he had to...

He'd been...rescuing Siesta?

Shirou blinked and looked around.

Kirche, Tabitha, and Guiche, along with Tabitha's dragon, had all appeared at some point, although he didn't know how or why. And there was Louise, of course, and Siesta was still unconscious, though she'd been wrapped in a sheet or something, and...and...

...how had they all gotten outside?

"What...happened...?"

Louise frowned and fidgeted a little, but refused to meet his eyes. Guiche looked faintly disturbed, Tabitha was unperturbed, and Kirche was looking at him with...something...on her face, but not her usual false cheer.

"We were...rescuing Siesta from Mott," Louise said finally. "He...took us down to his dungeon, and...and I knew something was wrong, because there were these moments when you would space out, like you were remembering something."

Right. Right. They'd gone to see Mott, and had come upon him and a maid he had recently raped, and after that, while doing their best to control their tempers, they'd followed Mott down into his dungeon to see Siesta. And...and Shirou had had those hallucinations, where he'd

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seen prisoners who weren't really there, all beaten up and dying or dead.

Memories from the Bottom of the Bridge, he realized now. Memories of Sealing Designates who had either outlived their usefulness or who had been deemed too dangerous to live.

"But when we got to where he was keeping Siesta," Louise went on, "you just...snapped. You stopped paying attention to me or Mott, and you tried to pick Siesta up, and when Mott tried to stop you, you...you..."

She looked ill just talking about it.

"You punched him," she said at last. In those three words, so much more meaning had been packed.

He'd punched Mott, like he'd punched that Enforcer when he'd gone to rescue Rin.

When he'd...gone to...

Shirou looked down at his hands. There was no trace now, of course, because the protective enchantments on his clothing had cleaned it all off, but just as surely as if it had all been there physically, Mott's blood and remnants of his brain were surely all over Shirou's hands.

"After that," Louise said a little shakily, "you...went on a rampage. You destroyed everything that got near you, including several of Mott's guards...Zerbst and the others showed up then, and we had to evacuate the mansion before you destroyed it with us inside."

"The mansion..."

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Shirou looked back out at the open ground, at the massive crater where once there had been an expensive and beautiful mansion.

"I...did that..."

"You kept screaming. 'Rin! Rin!' Over and over."

Louise hugged herself and shivered. "It was...terrible."

"That's...that's right, I..." he whispered. "I was...reliving a memory, and..."

And he'd seen Rin killed. Watched her die, right in front of him, sacrificing herself to save his life, to save him from the sword, Durendal, in the hands of the Association's new Vice Director, and...

And then, he'd been summoned into this world, and his mind had locked it all away, unable to deal with everything all at once.

"Rin..."

Shirou swallowed thickly. The torrent of emotions rose up inside of him again, and suddenly, he couldn't hold it back anymore — *didn't want to* hold it back anymore.

There was no one to mourn Rin in this world, no one except him. There was no one with the sort of bond he'd had with her. There was no one else who was her best friend. There was no one else to be sad about her death, no one else to cry for her, to say goodbye to her.

So he didn't try to stop the tears.

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And when the skies opened up and drenched them all, when rain poured down and washed away the blood that had soaked the ground — dead, so many dead, and all by his hands — he welcomed it and let it wash away his tears.

And he wondered, in that moment, with Rin and Ilya now both gone, with Sakura probably killed simply for being his friend...

What was there left for him to go back to?

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CONTINUE?

[YES/NO]

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner

IMPORTANT MESSAGE: Just a reminder, Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner is on break, this chapter. We'll see you next time for a lesson about a very important subject that has been on everyone's mind since the very beginning!

Please make sure to attend! We might even bring in a guest character!

Tohsaka-sensei is feeling a little under the weather, you see...

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner: End

Chapter IX: Final Overture

It took their group, now escorting nearly two dozen maids and house staff, more than four hours to get back to the Academy.

After nearly two whole hours of organizing those still alive and setting up transportation, they left the demolished mansion, reduced to a crater, scatterings of bricks and planks of wood, and dust, and made the trek back to the Academy. With the additional people, however, what should have been an hour long trip wound up taking nearly two and a half hours.

By the time they finally crossed through the Academy gates, all of them tired and spent, the sun was already sinking below the horizon, casting the sky in a rainbow of oranges and purples as the first of the night's stars twinkled into view. In the dying light, the normally gray bricks and stone that made up the castle and spires glowed like gold, like a slab of hot steel just pulled from the fire, blazing and radiant.

"Finally," Kirche murmured behind them. "That took *forever*."

"We'll need to get the others settled in," Shirou said to Louise quietly. "We should probably get some medical assistance —"

"That can wait," she interjected. She had a look of concentration on her face. "The worst of it is some cuts and bruises; what everyone needs now is some food and rest."

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Neither of them mentioned the maid who had been subjected to Mott's tender mercies; she was still catatonic, wrapped up in some spare clothing for warmth and to cover her nudity and carried in the makeshift wagon they'd managed to pull together to transport the wounded. And since most of the damage she'd sustained was either superficial, psychological, or needed a specialist (what Shirou wouldn't have given for a gynecologist), there was nothing else they could do for her until she snapped out of her stupor.

A water mage might be able to heal the physical damage, but the mental wounds would be much harder to deal with.

"As you say, Louise," Shirou agreed with her. "We'll have to contact the Headmaster to get some rooms set up, then."

"And one of the servant staff to have some food prepared," Louise continued for him. He nodded. "Maybe we should have — Annabelle!"

And standing in the pathway leading up to the school was Annabelle, fidgeting nervously and wringing her hands in her uniform, and standing next to her was —

"Headmaster!" Guiche gasped from behind Shirou.

"What's that old coot doing out here?" Kirche hissed a little too loudly.

"Show some respect!" Guiche hissed back.

"Sir Shirou, Miss de La Vallière," Osmond greeted, looking every bit his age and leaning on a staff for support, "and Mister Gramont, Miss Tabitha, and Miss Zerbst, as

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well." He looked at them sadly. "I apologize, but it was out of my hands. I had no other choice."

A feeling of unease coiled up in Shirou's belly.

"No other choice?" Louise parroted. "What do you —"

"I'm sorry, Miss de La Vallière!" Annabelle burst out. She refused to look Louise in the eye. "I — I had to...I mean, I couldn't...!"

"What —"

Magical energy blazed to life suddenly and violently all around them, and every instinct in Shirou's body screamed to fight as an oily smell like burning plastic or melted rubber assaulted his nostrils. His hand leapt to Derflinger instantly.

"An attack? Here?" Shirou muttered. In the Academy courtyard?

But it was not Drake or Perseus or Not-Lancelot who appeared suddenly in formation around their group, wands raised and charged with Prana. No, it was a squad or maybe a full platoon of knightly figures, all dressed in richly adorned but functional clothing, blue cloaks wrapped around their shoulders, and bearing a familiar crest.

"The Palace Guard!" came Louise's stunned whisper.

"Chameleon spell," Tabitha murmured from behind them.

"Put your wands on the ground and your hands in the air!" one of the guards shouted.

For a long, tense moment, no one did anything and everyone seemed frozen in place, but it wasn't hard to tell

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that the guards were getting more anxious with every passing second. Shirou's grip on Derflinger's hilt tightened — there were only a handful of ways things could pan out from here, and none of them were very appealing.

It really boiled down to two major choices: first, they could surrender and be arrested, whereby they would be taken into custody and probably taken to the capital city to face...whatever counted for a justice system in Tristain. Depending on how everything went from there, they could still escape if they really needed to, and if things went really well, then they would just walk out as free men, cleared of whatever charges were being brought against them. That was the option Shirou would like to take, if he were honest, because it would be easier for Louise if she wasn't a wanted fugitive, always on the run and always looking over her shoulder and wondering if the nice old lady selling her food was going to turn around and report her to the nearest guard.

Of course, it was entirely possible that they would wind up convicted anyway, because the only thing this could possibly be about was Mott, and if it was about Mott, then the timing was incredibly suspect — too fast and too convenient for there to not be any sort of politics behind it all.

On the other hand, they could just disarm the guards, defeat them, and leave, skipping the whole problem of the courts or whatever awaited them and get a head start on their pursuers, but that guaranteed that Louise would spend the rest of her life as a wanted fugitive, never able to rest, never able to settle down, and waiting for the authorities to swoop down on her.

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Neither option was ideal. Both carried a certain amount of risks and uncertainty, and Shirou already knew which one he'd take if it was up to him.

But it wasn't up to him. In the end, Shirou did not belong as part of this world; he was an outsider, an intruder, and he would inevitably return to his home, he hoped, because there were still things he needed to do there, but until then, he was Louise's Servant, her sword and shield. His only purpose was to protect her, to save her. He could not make a decision like this for her.

Because, in the end, it was *her* decision. It was *her* future on the line. He didn't have the right to choose for her.

"Well, ain't this a fine kettle of fish yeh've gotten yerself into, partner," Derf muttered in his ear.

Shirou didn't reply. "Louise," he mumbled instead from the corner of his mouth, "whatever decision you make, I will always support you."

Louise didn't respond, but from the ever-deepening frown on her lips and the way her eyes flitted back and forth, she was considering what to do, what her options were.

"Put your wands on the ground and your hands in the air!" the guard repeated.

"What's the Palace Guard doing here?"

"I won't say it a third time!"

"Are you daft, Kirche?! They're arresting us!"

"This is your final warning!"

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"Arresting us? For what! It's not like we committed a crime or something!"

"Does it matter why? They're arresting us! Isn't that enough?"

"It's not if we haven't done anything! I refuse to be —"

"Do what he says!" Louise barked suddenly.

Shirou didn't let go of Derf for a moment.

"Are you daft, Vallière?" Kirche demanded. "This is one of the most transparent political moves I've ever heard of!"

"That doesn't matter!" Louise snapped back. "If you fight back, it'll just make you look guilty!"

Kirche didn't say anything, but as Shirou's fingers unfurled from Derflinger, he imagined the sour look that must have been on her face. With a clatter, three wands and a staff fell to the cobblestone pathway — Kirche, Tabitha, Louise, and Guiche had surrendered.

Louise had decided to take her chances on the justice system.

With Louise's decision made, there was only one thing to do: Shirou lifted his hands up and into the air.

"Louise Francoise Le Blanc de La Vallière," the guard said as his comrades descended upon them, "you're under arrest for the murder of Count Augustus Mott."

— o.O.O.O.o —

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From the space between the bars on the window, moonlight shone down and glittered off the surface of the red gemstone.

Shirou turned it over in his hand, watching the way the light reflected and refracted, bouncing through and off of the crystalline structure that lay inside it and glinted crimson. The silver chain connected to it gave a soft clinking sound.

It was a garnet, not a ruby, Shirou knew. He'd spent enough time around Rin to distinguish between the two just by looking. Not surprising, really, since the Tohsaka family magic was Jewelcraft and Shirou had known Rin, had been her best friend, for the better part of half a century.

He turned the gem over in his hand again.

This was the gem that had saved his life, once upon a time.

Back when he'd been ignorant, back when he hadn't known a thing about the Grail War, that first night, Cúchulainn's spear had pierced his heart, and with this very same gem, Rin had saved his life. He'd tried to return it, of course, much later on, but Rin had refused to accept it back.

"I already used it up saving you, so it's useless to me, now," she'd told him when she'd handed it back. "You keep it. I think you'll find more use for it than I would."

So he'd kept it. For nearly fifty years, he'd kept it, as a memento of that time and a reminder that he wasn't alone, that he had a friend who knew his dreams and supported him.

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And now, it was all he had left of Rin, and the thought brought him an odd mixture of comfort and dismay, a strange halfway feeling that twisted around in his belly and brought a...something to his face. It wasn't a smile, but it wasn't a frown.

"Geez!" he could imagine her saying. "Quit moping already, Shirou!"

And he found himself wishing that he really, truly was hearing her voice again. But it was only his imagination, a mental image constructed of his memories of her and his knowledge of her character. The real Rin, and the facsimile that had been with him the past few weeks, would never speak to him again.

In the end, he hadn't been able to save Saber, and he hadn't been able to save Rin.

His fingers curled around the gemstone, gently, so as not to crush it, and for a single moment, he regretted it and wondered — if he had not chosen this path, would Rin have died for him the way she had? If he had not selfishly chased his dream of selflessness, if he had not run after that beautiful image, would Rin have sacrificed her own life for him like that?

Unable to save Saber, unable to save Rin — if he had not so zealously pursued his ideals, would things have been different?

But then he remembered Saber's smile as she vanished from the hill, and he remembered Rin's smile as the life bled from her in rivers of red. Even knowing what was to happen

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to them, even knowing that they were going to die, that they were dying, they had looked at him and smiled. They had left him happy, in their own way, content, so that even if he hadn't saved their lives, he had saved them all the same.

And that...that washed away the regret. That washed away the doubt.

Emiya Shirou had never wished for a world without conflict and war, without death, he just didn't want anyone within his view to cry.

He let out a breath through his nose. Something...It was indescribable. He couldn't name it, couldn't really describe it, only to say that it was bittersweet and it filled his belly with an empty weight, not unlike the thrill of adrenaline, but not nearly so sharp. It brought that something back to his lips — not a smile, but not a frown, either.

To die with a smile... Yes, he decided, that was its own form of saving. He would still pursue that dream, still strive to save everyone in sight, but if they had to die, if it weren't possible for him to save them, then he could live with it all so long as they smiled at the end.

So long as they smiled the way Saber and Rin had.

"Shirou?"

A familiar voice pulled him out of his thoughts, and he looked up and away from the large garnet in his hand to Louise, who sat opposite him and was staring blankly at the wall.

"Yes, Louise?"

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"You could get us out of here, right?" she asked. "Punch down the wall or bend the bars out or something?"

"Of course, Master."

He didn't move. She didn't move. For a long moment, there was only silence between them.

"...But you shouldn't."

"No. No, I shouldn't."

Louise sighed. "Yeah, I'd hate to live my life as a fugitive from the law. Mother would hunt me down and kill me." She grumbled. "Stupid maid."

"You can't blame the maid for doing her job, Louise."

Louise sighed again. "No, I can't," she admitted. "But I really, really want to."

It would have been all too easy for Shirou to take out that platoon — knocking them all out or trapping them behind a cage of swords wouldn't have taken much effort, and killing them, if necessary, would have been just as effortless — and make an escape with Louise. If Colbert or Osmond, the only two mages in the Academy who were even close to a threat to him, had tried to stop him, then he could have defeated them, too, with marginally more difficulty, though he was more inclined to believe that they would have let him and Louise flee.

But running would've made the problem all the worse. Resisting arrest and assaulting the palace guards, on top of whatever else they charged her with? It would have made her look guilty, and she would have been a fugitive for the rest of

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her life. She would have lived out the rest of her days fleeing from the law, trying to settle down here and there but always on the lookout for her pursuers. It would have been a hard, dangerous life of constant paranoia, of always looking over her shoulder and wondering if the fruit vendor smiling at her was going to turn around and report her to the guards.

The only real option had been to surrender. Sure, it meant handing over their weapons and equipment, and sure, Louise could wind up convicted of whatever they were going to charge her with, but in that case, it would also be too easy to escape — there wasn't a mage he had yet met in this world who could bind him if he didn't permit it.

"Forget about the maid," a familiar voice said, "*you're* the reason we're in here, Vallière."

Of course, the thing Shirou hadn't been counting on in the process was Guiche, Tabitha, and Kirche getting arrested, too.

"I don't understand why *we're* here," Kirche huffed from the cell next to theirs. "We weren't even involved."

"Personally, I blame you, Zerst," Guiche said sourly from the cell across from Kirche's. "*You* were the one who insisted on following them."

"Oh?" Shirou allowed himself a small, sardonic smile. "Do you mean to say that it meant nothing to you, Guiche? Saving all those maids?"

Shirou could imagine the expression that would be twisting Guiche's face. "That's not..." he began, then gave up and sighed. "Monmon is going to kill me."

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"No one forced you guys to follow us," Louise told them flatly.

"Well, I couldn't very well let you go off with Darling all by yourself, could I?" Kirche asked rhetorically. "Who knows what you might have done while you were all alone!"

"Help," Tabitha added. It was the first she'd spoken since Mott's mansion.

"I don't even know how *I* got dragged into this," Guiche said. He sighed again. "What will my father say when he hears I've been arrested?"

"He'll praise you for trying to do the right thing," Shirou answered. Probably, anyway. He didn't know Guiche's father, but considering Guiche's personality, it was a good bet.

"Maybe," Guiche hedged.

"Stop encouraging him!" Louise hissed.

"Sorry, Master."

"Oh, I bet daddy will be so proud!" Kirche teased. "Little Guiche has gone off and done a few manly things! He's so grown up, now!"

"Hey!"

"But you're still not as manly as Darling," Kirche crowed. "Oh, Darling! If only we weren't separated by these walls!"

"Denied," Shirou declared flatly. He could imagine Kirche slumping into a pout in her cell. "I —"

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A burst of magical energy stole the words from his mouth — it came from nearby, from the door leading out of the holding area they were in, and Shirou was instantly on his feet as a barrier of wind suddenly wrapped around his and Louise's cell. Louise was on her feet a moment later.

"What the —?"

"Shirou, what's —"

Another burst of magical energy came from the same place, and Shirou's hand immediately went to Derf's hilt as a dense fog suddenly rushed down the corridor — but Derf wasn't there, that was right, they'd taken his weapons when they'd arrested him and Louise, so neither Derf nor Gavilain were nearby. He had nothing to defend himself with.

But Shirou was never without something to defend himself with.

The others gave out startled cries, then, one by one, fell in their cells with meaty thumps.

"Shirou," Louise asked from her spot hiding behind him, "what's going on?"

"I don't know," he muttered.

For a moment, there was only silence, a long, uncomfortable few seconds that stretched for eternity where the slightest sound seemed like a crack of thunder, and Shirou could hear his heart thumping rapidly in his chest, pulse pounding in his ears, as adrenaline flooded his body. The trigger in the back of his head, the hammer of a pistol, pulled back and fired, turning on his Magic Circuits, preparing to

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fight. Every fiber of his being was vibrating and readying for combat.

Then, a third burst of magical energy came, and a gust of wind raced down the corridor and swept away the mist that had knocked Guiche, Kirche, and Tabitha unconscious. Immediately afterwards, the barrier that had protected Shirou and Louise sputtered out and died.

It had been done on purpose, he concluded, specifically to remove Guiche, Tabitha, and Kirche from the equation. That meant...

"An assassin?" he muttered to himself. "But...then why...?"

Why not knock Shirou and Louise out, too?

It didn't make sense. If this was an assassination, then why would the assassin not knock out Louise and Shirou as well, especially since they were probably the targets?

Clothing rustled quietly in the silence, and Shirou held out his hand as though he were grasping a sword as he prepared the blueprint for a weapon. He was rushing and he wasn't using an incantation, so it might be a bit shoddy, but a shoddy Noble Phantasm was still leagues beyond an ordinary weapon.

"Stay behind me, Louise," he muttered.

Black cloth fluttered in the moonlight, and suddenly, appearing as if from thin air, a figure stood outside their cell door, pulling down the hood of a cloak and staring at them with blue, blue eyes and smiling a small smile.

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Louise gasped. "P-Princess!"

"Hello, Louise Francoise," Princess Henrietta greeted kindly.

The pieces began to fit together. If the Princess was the one who was visiting them, that meant...

"Then..." Shirou began, "that was your mist?"

"Oh yes," Henrietta answered readily. "There are certain secrets that I'm afraid I'm not quite prepared for Sir Guiche or Miss Kirche to hear, just yet, so I asked Wales to set up a barrier for you while I put the others to sleep. I'm afraid I needed to speak with you most urgently, so it couldn't wait until morning."

"That explains the mist," Shirou said.

"Yes," Henrietta nodded. She gestured to the black cloak she was wearing. "But I couldn't be seen having come to visit Louise Francoise, so I had to come when the guards were most lax and under the cover of this invisibility cloak. It really is quite useful." She fingered the black cloth. "To be quite honest, I was surprised when I found it among the royal heirlooms. Most likely, one of my ancestors used it to sneak out and visit his mistress."

Shirou imagined a middle-aged king with Henrietta's blue eyes sneaking out of his own castle with the same invisibility cloak and felt a grin tug at his lips. "Indeed."

"Why are you here?" Louise burst out suddenly. Both Shirou and Henrietta turned to look at her and blinked.

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Louise flushed. "I-I mean," she corrected herself, "Princess, why have you come to see me?"

Henrietta's head tilted to the side.

"Louise Francoise?"

"I'm a criminal," Louise said a little bitterly. "Charged with murder. Surely Your Highness shouldn't be visiting someone like that."

Henrietta's expression smoothed over and a slight frown tugged at her lips. "If you think I would suddenly renounce you for your hand in Count Mott's untimely demise, intentional or otherwise, you'd be wrong," she said. "Moreover, I might actually thank you for it."

It was Louise's turn to blink bewilderedly.

"Louise," Henrietta began, "were you aware that Count Mott was suspected of having been involved with Reconquista?"

Louise, eyes wide, shook her head slowly. Shirou was rather surprised, too.

"It's nothing we could prove, of course," Henrietta allowed, "and only five people, including Wales and now you yourself, know of my suspicions. But we did suspect Mott of at least being a sympathizer, if not a member of the movement."

"B-but," Louise stuttered, "that would mean...!"

"That Mott was a traitor to the Crown, yes," Henrietta answered calmly. "Without evidence, however, and with my

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position being as it is, there was nothing we could legally do to him — especially since he was good friends with Duke Stanton and Duke Richmond, who are powerful members of the Conservatives."

"Which would mean that any unlawful expenses could be covered up and any issues brought to court would be dismissed," Louise concluded, frowning.

"Exactly," Henrietta nodded. "With both the Lord Chief Justice and the Minister of Finances counted among his friends, there was no way of legally charging Mott with anything and no evidence to make anything stick. Even now, we can't be sure whether Mott was actually involved with Reconquista, or if he simply found their campaign palatable."

That was all fine and dandy, Shirou thought, but it hadn't meant a thing to him. They might as well have been speaking in a different language.

"Once more," he raised his hand slightly, "for those of us who *weren't* born and raised in Tristain?"

Both the Princess and Louise glanced over at him and frowned, then looked back at each other and seemed to carry out a silent conversation using only hand gestures and facial expressions before the Princess backed away and Louise turned to regard him.

"When it comes to the nobility, there are two main political parties in Tristain," she began. "The first is the Royalist party, more informally referred to as the Tories. They support the Crown and the rule of the Crown as it has traditionally been since the time of the founding of Tristain.

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In regards to policy, the Royalists usually follow the Queen's lead. My family has been Tories since...well, since as long as I can remember."

"The de La Vallière family has always been close to the Crown," Henrietta added. "More so since my mother's coronation almost twenty years ago."

"The other party is the Conservative party, called the Whigs," Louise continued. "They would prefer if the ruling power was turned over to the nobility and the Crown was more a figurehead. They've enjoyed a lot more power in recent years than they used to, and because some of their views align with Reconquista's policies, at least of few of them are probably sympathizers."

"And they've been gaining members," Henrietta said. "I'm afraid some of my proposals and reforms aren't too popular with the staunch traditionalists."

"I see," Shirou replied neutrally. Some of this sounded kind of familiar. "And this gave Mott an advantage?"

Henrietta shook her head. "Mott was a Whig," she explained. "And so are Duke Stanton, who is the Lord Chief Justice, and Duke Richmond, who is the Minister of Finances, both of whom are also friends with each other and with Mott."

Ah. Now it made sense. "So any money Mott and his friends might have used to support Reconquista's efforts in Albion would be covered up by his friend, the Minister of Finances, and if any charges were brought against Mott legally,

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they would be dropped by his other friend, the Lord Chief Justice."

"Precisely," Henrietta nodded. "That is why we aren't sure whether or not Mott was actually involved with Reconquista, or whether he just agreed with some of their views."

"And how does that help us?"

"It doesn't," Louise answered, sounding somewhat frustrated. "Either way, we're still charged with Murder and Destruction of a Noble Lineage."

"Ah, but that is where you are wrong, Louise Francoise," Henrietta said with a smile. "Did you not think it odd that you were being charged and tried by the Lord Chief Justice?"

"No," Louise said a little petulantly. "I'm being charged with a capital crime, and I'm the daughter of a Duke. Shouldn't I be tried by the highest court in the Realm?"

"Perhaps," Henrietta said, "but Duke Stanton was also a friend of Mott's, was he not? That makes this a conflict of interest, which Duke Stanton well knows, and so he should recuse himself and allow this case to be tried by another judge if he were at all concerned with seeing justice done. However..."

"He's not," Louise concluded. There was something in her voice. Not hope, precisely, but something more than simple understanding. "Which means...Which means..."

"This is political," Henrietta nodded. "The Lord Chief Justice wants this case to go his way. He *wants* to find you guilty, because finding you guilty will turn some of the

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Nobles who are on the fence his way. The trial will likely be nothing more than a show for him to put on and the jury will undoubtedly be composed of people willing to follow his lead. He will do whatever it takes, even if it's not strictly legal, in order to find you guilty of killing Mott, because it would give him exactly what he wants. Can you imagine the scandal? A daughter of the de La Vallière house, convicted of murdering a Peer and ending a Noble line? It would be a heavy blow to your family's power, Louise."

Louise winced. "Mother's going to kill me," she muttered.

"And *that* is where I come in," Henrietta smiled. "Congratulations, Louise Francoise. You are now officially an agent of the Crown."

Louise gasped. "Wh-what?"

"I filled out the papers when I heard you'd been arrested," Henrietta explained, "and I had them post-dated a week ago — the day you started out for Albion, in fact."

Shirou shifted a little nervously. "You can do that?"

Because that sounded *really* illegal.

"Not technically, no," Henrietta admitted. "But this way, I can say that Louise Francoise was investigating a rumor for me — the maid, Annabelle, I believe her name was, will have to be sworn to secrecy, of course — on the issue of Mott laundering money for Reconquista. When Mott discovered her purpose, there was naturally a confrontation, and, well, one thing led to another..."

A chill swept down Shirou's spine.

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This was Princess Henrietta? This was the same girl who'd barged into Louise's room in the Academy, all cloaked and disguised, and had proceeded to almost beg her best friend to retrieve a letter from Albion? This was the same girl who had turned to her best friend because she had felt there was no one else she could trust?

This plan she was contriving, now, that she was presenting to them, sounded like something that Shirou might have expected out of *Rin's* mouth. It was cold, it was calculated, it was magus-like.

"Lord Stanton won't be able to convict you," Henrietta went on. "If he does, he'll drive away a lot of the fence-sitters, who will feel that he's attempting a power grab. They'll feel that it could happen to anyone if it could happen to a child of the most powerful Duke in Tristain. That would drive them straight into our arms.

"Furthermore," she continued, "being an agent of the Crown gives you a lot of leeway. With the papers I filed, you act with the authority of the Crown, which means Duke Stanton will be making a statement against the Crown's authority if he convicts you. That, too, will alienate a lot of those who might have chosen to ally themselves with him, and it would win the Royalists a lot of support from the neutral factions. Essentially, no matter what, if Duke Stanton convicts you, he'll be shooting himself in the foot politically. And Duke Stanton will know this, so he won't convict you."

The scope of her plan was beginning to unfold before Shirou's eyes. Though it was risky and illegal, Henrietta's course of action had ensured that Duke Stanton would lose no matter what he chose to do, and she'd made it so that the

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least devastating choice for him to make was to cut his losses and let Louise go.

Essentially, Duke Stanton could make one of two choices, as long as it was to drop the charges against Louise.

With this, she had just declared Check.

But it wasn't that easy, Shirou knew. There were still flaws, problems with this plan. There were a number of people who would see through it, who would know that Henrietta had engineered the whole thing to get her friend out of a murder charge. They would see it, they would know, and it would be viewed for what it was: favoritism.

And that would drive some of those fence-sitters over to these Whigs, over to the Reconquista sympathizers.

But Henrietta, who would surely know that, had gone through with it anyway.

"And you would do all of this," Shirou began, "for...what? A friend?"

"For my friend, Louise Francoise, who was the closest thing I had to a sister when I was a child, yes," Henrietta answered. "Of course, that my friend is also a Void Mage and has a familiar who I believe could singlehandedly destroy this country if he put his mind to it only offer me ready excuses."

Somehow, Shirou wasn't surprised that she knew about Louise being a Void Mage. "Even so," he said, "there's no way you don't realize the trouble this will bring."

Henrietta only smiled, a small, indulgent little smile that mothers gave their children when they were trying to explain

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something complex. "Sir Shirou, I know that my actions in this instance will undoubtedly set some of the more conservative Nobles against me, but I was never under any illusions that I could reform this country without stepping on a few toes. I will drag Tristain into the future, kicking and screaming if need be."

She took a few steps back and lifted her hands to her hood, but didn't quite pull it back up, yet.

"Louise Francoise," she said, looking to Louise, "the hearing will be tomorrow. Duke Stanton is doubtlessly hoping to rush the proceedings to prevent anyone from mounting a defense for you. I will be there to speak for you, and you will be able to return to the Academy in time for dinner. The Crown will repay you for your friendship and your bravery. It is the least I can do to show my appreciation for bringing Wales back to me."

"But," Louise began, throwing herself against the bars, "what about Tabitha and Guiche and...Zerbst?"

"They arrived only in time for the aftermath, yes? Simply say so, and I will vouch for your word. Duke Stanton will not be able to convict them if they weren't there in time for the crime he intends to charge them with."

Louise sagged in relief. "Thank you, Your Highness."

Henrietta offered her a small smile. "It's Henrietta, Louise, or else Ann, as you used to call me when we were children. For you, it always will be."

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She lifted the hood over her head and suddenly vanished. A minute later, the door to the holding area opened and closed with a quiet creak.

For a long moment, there was only silence in her wake.

"I don't deserve her friendship," Louise said at length.

"It seems the Princess would disagree," Shirou remarked.

"But I bring her nothing but trouble!" Louise hissed. "She's been nothing but kind to me, and all I do is cause more problems for her! First, with Wardes! *He* went off to join Reconquista!"

"That wasn't your fault," Shirou tried to cut in.

"Now, with Mott!" she went on as though he hadn't spoken. "And Duke Stanton! And Duke Richmond! And —"

"And that's *my* fault," Shirou interrupted. "Even if I wasn't exactly in my right mind, I'm still the one who dealt the fatal blow to Mott."

"But it's *my* responsibility!" she turned to him. "You're my familiar, Shirou! Sure, people might not realize when they look at you, but once I introduce you as my familiar, everything you do reflects upon me! Mott's just as much my responsibility as it is yours —"

"And there was nothing you could have done about it," Shirou said sternly. "Louise, I was reliving a repressed memory. I've seen what happens to people who relive them in bits and pieces over a period of weeks or months, how they thrash in their sleep and wake up disoriented, believing they're still living that moment. I relived the *entire* thing all at

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once. I was in no shape to be pulling my punches. Getting everyone out of my way was the best possible decision you could have made in that situation."

"Still!" Louise said. "You're *my* familiar, Shirou! *My* responsibility!"

"And it takes binding magic nearly on the level of True Magic to force a regular Servant, a mere *fraction* of a full Heroic Spirit, to obey your will," he stopped her. "When you summon a human as your familiar, whether it's an ordinary man or a Pseudo God, you can't consider them the same as a regular familiar. Humans have *sapience*, Louise, *free will*. They are not mindless, obedient slaves."

He shifted.

"The point I'm making, Master," he went on, "is that you can't blame yourself for these things. You are responsible for your own choices, not anyone else's. You did not make Wardes choose to betray his country. You did not make me kill Mott. And you did not make the Princess choose to be your friend. Whether or not you are worthy of being her friend is her choice, not yours. Even if you feel like you don't deserve it, don't punish yourself. Instead, work towards becoming worthy of her regard. If you don't feel like the you of today is worthy of her friendship, then work hard and become a better person so that the you of tomorrow is."

Louise opened her mouth as if to respond, paused for a moment, then closed it, sighed, and offered him a small, sincere smile.

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"Thank you," she said. "You always seem to know exactly what I need to hear."

Shirou gave her a sardonic grin. "Isn't that my job? Protecting you, even from yourself?"

"...Done now?"

A soft voice echoed through the holding area, and both Louise and Shirou suddenly froze and spun around. In the cell across from theirs, Tabitha was watching them unblinkingly with her blue eyes.

"What?"

"How long," Shirou asked shrewdly, "have you been listening in?"

"...Since beginning," Tabitha admitted. She twirled her finger the way one would twirl a wand. "Wind mage...remember?"

"Th-then you heard...the Princess!" Louise squeaked. The expression on her face was somewhere between rage and horror and realization.

"...Yes," Tabitha admitted frankly. "Different barrier. Smaller, less noticeable."

"Wha — but, how did you cast magic without your staff?!"

"Practice," was the only answer Tabitha gave.

Louise gaped and looked like she was having trouble deciding what to do or how to react to the news that Tabitha

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had eavesdropped on the Princess's plan. Shirou took the moment to ask another question.

"Will tell anyone what you heard?"

Tabitha shook her head. Beside him, Louise went from furious and incoherent to surprised. "Why not?"

"...Wanted to thank you," Tabitha said simply. "For worrying...about us."

Louise flushed. "Well," she said with a little bluster, "it's only natural, isn't it? You guys weren't involved, so there's no reason you should be blamed for everything."

"Still..." Tabitha insisted. "Wanted to thank you. So...thanks, Louise."

"You're welcome...Tabitha."

— o.O.O.O.o —

The next morning at what Shirou guessed to be about two hours before noon, a troop of guards marched into the holding area and escorted their group, all five of them, up to a large, empty room, where they were provided breakfast and drink and given half an hour to eat. Afterwards, another troop of guards came to help the first, and Shirou followed Louise as they were shackled and led out into the city.

It seemed that Lord Stanton wanted this display to be public.

Shirou was tempted to comment nonchalantly about how easily he could break free of the chains and manacles that were supposed to be binding his wrists and ankles, but the

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comment died on his tongue before he could seriously consider voicing it when he realized that the road they were being led down was entirely devoid of people.

The vendors peddling their goods on the sidewalks, shouting and yelling their prices and what they were selling, the people walking to and from whatever jobs they might have, and the casual walkers wandering about aimlessly — they were all absent. The road was completely empty; there wasn't anyone walking it but for Shirou's group and the two troops of soldiers leading them.

That was odd, Shirou thought. It was only an hour or so before noon, so why weren't there any people bustling about and going on with their daily business?

Perhaps the streets had been cleared so that the onlookers and bystanders couldn't interfere or unintentionally cause enough chaos for one of Shirou's group to escape. Since they obviously didn't have motorcades in this world, clearing the streets beforehand so that prisoners or criminals could be transferred without fuss would certainly make sense.

Or perhaps, a more morbid side of Shirou mused, it was simply so that there wouldn't be any witnesses.

The soldiers led them further down the road and eventually to a large building made entirely from shining white marble — the courthouse.

They were marched up the steps, slowly, one stair at a time, and when they reached the gigantic double doors, two of the soldiers split off from the group and pushed them open. The doors were so big and so heavy that it took them

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nearly five minutes to push them all the way in, grunting and straining all the while.

From there, they were led through the empty entrance hall, their shoes clicking and echoing on the polished marble floor with every footstep and the manacles that bound their hands and feet clinking loudly.

Strangely, at least in Shirou's opinion, no one else in the group spoke the entire way. He had expected perhaps some grumbling from Louise, something about how uncouth and disrespectful it was to bind a duke's daughter, or else whining from Kirche or Guiche, but they were silent, too.

And the strangest part of all, of course, was Tabitha, who didn't have her nose shoved in a book. It was probably rather hard to read with her hands bound in heavy iron, though.

From the entrance hall, they were taken through another set of double doors, made of heavy, solid oak, this time, and led into a large, spacious courtroom with golden wood floors and rows of benches arrayed across the room. At the back, there was an imposing raised structure — the judge's bench — with a somewhat smaller structure attached to it — the witness stand.

On the side walls, there were a collection of raised benches, which were currently occupied by about a dozen people in very fancy looking clothing and robes, and on the other end from the judge's bench, there were yet more benches, the gallery, only these were empty except for the maids that had been rescued from Mott's manor, all of whom seemed rather shabby when compared to the Nobles sitting in the jury benches.

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Shirou and the others were led to one of the two tables in front of the gallery, where the guards chained their shackles to a trio of metal rings bolted into the wood. Two of their guards took a place at either end of the group while the rest marched off and positioned themselves around the room.

There was no sign of a prosecutor or defense attorney in sight.

"All rise!" someone bellowed out.

Immediately, everyone jumped to their feet with a great, low rumble like thunder, including Kirche and Guiche, who had both sat down in the chairs that had been provided. From an area behind the judge's bench, a thin man in long, plum colored judicial robes strode out and climbed up into the chair that sat out of view. He was scrawny looking with short brown hair and a pencil-thin mustache that sat primly on his upper lip. His beady eyes were blue and narrowed, and his mouth seemed as though it were set in an eternal frown.

"The Right Honorable the Lord Chief Justice, His Grace, Duke Stanton of Anjou, presiding."

"Be seated," Duke Stanton barked in a loud, booming voice that seemed ill-suited to his frame, and with another rumble, the entire room sank back into their seats. Louise and Shirou sat down, too, and Shirou noticed that she was fidgeting and shaking a little, so he reached under the table and laid his hand over her much smaller one. She glanced at his direction, but didn't offer him a smile or any sign that it had helped at all. She did, however, stop shaking.

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The judge, Duke Stanton, cleared his throat. "Beginning now on this day, Mannsday the twenty-eighth of Ansuz, this disciplinary hearing into the events of the preceding day regarding the death of one Augustus Mott, Count of Blois. The accused, one Louise Francoise Le Blanc de La Valliere, third daughter of the Duke de La Vallière, Duke of Aquitaine, and her compatriots, Kirche Augusta Frederica von Anhalt-Zerbst of Germania, Guiche de Gramont, fourth son of General de Gramont, the Count of Nevers, Tabitha, no surname provided, and one Shy-row Eh-my-ah —"

"Shirou Emiya," Shirou corrected automatically.

But it was evidently the wrong thing to do, because scandalized whispers broke out among the Nobility seated in the jury boxes. Duke Stanton stopped and gave Shirou what he probably thought was a severe look, but without the raw, murderous intent that filled your lungs and choked the breath from your throat, it wasn't even the slightest bit intimidating.

"Young man," Duke Stanton boomed in that loud voice of his, "the next time you interrupt me, I'll have you held in contempt of court! Now!" He gave a flick of his wrist and snapped the paper he'd been reading from. "The accused, Louise de La Vallière, Kirche von Zerbst, Guiche de Gramont, Tabitha, and *Shirou Emiya*, Louise de La Vallière's..."

Duke Stanton trailed off.

"There must have been some sort of clerical error," he determined in his thunderous voice. "These records state that this young man is de La Vallière's *familiar*, of all things!"

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Whispers broke out among the attending Nobles. Louise sunk down in her chair miserably.

"No, that sounds about right," Kirche spoke up. "Louise cast the summoning spell, and, well, Darling here is what came through."

More whispers.

"You have a *relationship* with a *familiar*?" Stanton asked in a tone that seemed to mirror the thoughts of the other Nobles.

Words of disgust echoed from the jury box. "Harlot," someone said, and "whore," and a whole bunch of other derogatory terms and slurs.

"Well, no," Kirche admitted and gave a slightly subdued smile, "but not for lack of trying. Darling is quite manly, after all."

"What nonsense!" Duke Stanton said. "Do you truly expect this court to believe this tripe? What sort of mage summons a *person*? It's unheard of!"

The Nobles in the jury box started whispering again, pointing every now and then in Shirou's direction. Next to him, Louise's frustration and anger and every other emotion swirling inside of her was palpable, and he could feel it radiating off of her that she desperately wanted to snap off a witty and condescending retort.

Shirou was suddenly overcome by a sort of mischievous feeling, and before he could stop himself, he adjusted his posture a little and very snidely said, "If you want, I could explain it for you."

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But it would probably go over your head, went unsaid.

And it felt like something so completely out of character for him and something just so *Rin* that he thought for a moment that maybe he hadn't even said it aloud, like maybe it had just been a fantasy he'd concocted from his memories of her. Except the minute he saw Stanton's face, how it colored a bright shade of red for a moment, and the jury box started to murmur, and the incredulous looks Guiche and Kirche were sending him as well as the laughter that Louise was very obviously trying to hide, he knew that he'd actually said those words, and had done so in a fairly Rin-like manner.

Duke Stanton's face cycled through a number of expressions that he managed to hide well enough that Shirou couldn't quite make out all of them; in the jury box, the whispers rose to a murmur, a hum that buzzed like a hive of angry bees.

Stanton lifted his gavel and slammed it down one, two, three times, and by the third thunderous crack, his expression had settled back into the look of severity he'd worn upon stepping up to the bench.

"Order!" he cried with each whack of his gavel. "Order!"

After another four whacks, the jury finally calmed down, and the judge, in his too-big robes, leveled his severe look Shirou's way again.

"Very well, then!" Stanton thundered. "Since you are determined to pass this pile of nonsense off as fact, you must accept the consequences thereof! All charges leveled against one Shirou Emiya are hereby dropped and leveled instead

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against his master, Louise Francois Le Blanc de La Vallière, who is henceforth to be considered responsible for every single one of his actions!" A glimmer of cruelty entered Stanton's eyes. "And as it would be inhumane to separate a familiar from its master, he shall also share her fate, whatever it may be."

Shirou said nothing, and beside him, all humor had been sapped out of Louise.

"Now," Stanton continued, settling back into his chair as his face returned to the stern, impassive look he'd worn when he walked in, "if we might *finally* begin this hearing, the accused stands charged with Murder in the First Degree, Murder in the Second Degree, Unlawful Termination of a Noble Line of Tristain, and Destruction of Property of the Crown of Tristain. They stand here before a jury of the Peers to account for their actions on the preceding day, Eolhsday the twenty-seventh of Ansuz."

Shirou nudged Louise a little and whispered: "Eolhsday? Ansuz?"

"Eight day weeks," she muttered back, "four week months, twelve month years; three-hundred-eighty-four days total."

"Ah." So either the calendar was just set up differently because they wanted to, or, more likely, the presence of a second moon had resulted in a shift of this world's orbit around the sun.

Stanton shuffled some of his papers. "The above charges are levied in the following capacity: that the accused did

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knowingly and intentionally, in full awareness of the illegality of doing so, confront Count Augustus Mott in his home on the twenty-seventh of Ansuz with the intent of committing homicide; that the accused did commit such a homicide and unlawfully terminate a Noble lineage of Tristain; that the accused did commit several more incidental homicides following the first when Count Mott's personal security attempted to apprehend them; that the accused did, following these events, also destroy the Lord Mott's mansion and grounds, which were remanded into the Crown's custody following the Lord Mott's death."

In other words, Stanton was going to charge them all with everything he could get away with. It seemed that Henrietta was right; if Stanton could get just one of those charges to stick, then it would definitely be a heavy blow to Louise and her family.

"In the interests of expediency," Stanton boomed, "I, the Lord Chief Justice, Duke William Stanton, shall be performing the interrogation personally. As such, and since Miss de La Vallière has neglected to contact legal counsel herself, these proceedings shall be carried out without a prosecutor or a defense attorney."

Shirou blinked, and then realized the play Stanton had made as Louise seethed with surprise and anger next to him.

Not once since being arrested had they been given either a chance or the option of contacting legal counsel. They'd been taken from the Academy directly to the capital, and from there, they'd been locked up without talking to anyone else until morning, and then they'd been dragged to the courthouse.

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Nowhere in there had they been given either the option or the opportunity to obtain a defense attorney of any kind.

Without a prosecutor, that put the rights of questioning and interrogation directly in the judge's hands, and without a defense attorney, there was nothing and no one to present an argument in Louise's favor. She could try to defend herself, of course, but something told Shirou that she would just get slapped with contempt of court if she tried.

That meant she couldn't object to a line of questioning, she couldn't ask any witnesses questions (cross-examination, he thought it was called), and she probably couldn't even call on a witness of her own to testify. In other words, she had no way of telling her side of the story.

And since the judge was the one who would be questioning Louise and the others and any witnesses, he could ask whatever questions he liked and lead the trial in whatever direction he wanted. And Louise, without a defense attorney to call foul, couldn't do anything about it.

To put it simply, the entire thing had been arranged so that "guilty" was the only possible verdict.

"But we weren't given a chance to contact legal counsel!" Louise cried indignantly.

"That is not the fault of this court," Duke Stanton said coldly.

Kirche was on her feet in an instant. "Now wait just a minute!" she said furiously. "What sort of nonsensical legal system is this? No defense attorney? No prosecutor? This sounds more like a circus than the court system touted

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throughout the continent as the most enlightened and fair of the modern era!"

"You can't do this!" Guiche agreed. "This is a violation of our civil rights! You don't have the authority —"

"This is *my* courtroom!" Stanton thundered. The loud, overwhelming voice instantly cowed Kirche and Guiche, who flinched back, and seemed to shake the floorboards beneath Shirou's feet. "I am Tristain's *Lord Chief Justice*, the highest legal authority in the Realm! In this room, there *is* no higher authority! You would do well to remember that, else you find contempt of court added to the list of charges leveled against you!"

Kirche sank back into her chair.

Shirou's lips pulled into a frown. Henrietta had been right, then.

"Now then!" Stanton went on. "We will firstly establish the order of events. Louise de La Vallière," Stanton turned to regard her, "at approximately noon yesterday, you and your *familiar* left Tristain's Academy of Magic, correct?"

"Yes," Louise answered after a moment.

"And after borrowing two horses from the Academy's stables, you traveled to Lord Mott's estate, Chateau de Blois?"

"Yes."

"With the intent of confronting him?"

"Yes," Louise began, "but —"

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"And upon reaching Chateau de Blois," Stanton steamrolled on, "you requested a private audience with Lord Mott?"

"Yes, but —"

"And during this private meeting, you confronted Lord Mott and proceeded to have a heated argument?"

"Well, yes, but that's not —"

"And when this argument escalated," Stanton pressed intently, "you ordered your *familiar* to kill the Lord Mott, did you not?"

"No!" Louise denied vehemently. "That's not what happened!"

"Then you're saying that your *familiar* didn't kill Lord Mott, or the security forces who attempted to apprehend you afterwards?"

Louise flinched. "No, but —"

"Then you admit that this familiar of yours, this Shirou Emiya, killed Lord Mott and his personal security?"

"Well...yes, but it wasn't his fault —"

"But he is your familiar, is he not?" Stanton asked pointedly. "Or are you going to admit to perjury and fraud by saying he isn't?"

"No, he's my familiar!" Louise said a little indignantly. "But that's not —"

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"Then it isn't his fault, no," Stanton said. "Rather, as your familiar, the blame would then fall on you. A mage is responsible for his familiar. As your familiar, every deed he commits is *your* responsibility. That you did not *order* him to kill Lord Mott does not make you any less culpable —"

"Isn't that a little heavy-handed?" Shirou interrupted. He couldn't sit idly while Stanton railroaded Louise. "I'm her familiar, sure, but I'm also a human being. You can't consider it the same as you might a traditional familiar, not when free will enters the equation."

Stanton turned to regard Shirou coolly. "Then it's a good thing," he began, "that this court does not consider the testimonies of familiars as bearing any weight, nor do I intend to set such a precedent."

Murmurs of agreement rose in the jury box, though some of them didn't look quite so sure.

"Kirche Augusta Frederica von Anhalt-Zerbst," Stanton boomed suddenly. "Can you corroborate Louise de La Vallière's testimony?"

Kirche grimaced. "No."

"And why not?"

"Tabitha, Guiche, and I left after Louise and Shirou did," Kirche admitted, somewhat grudgingly. "We were about half an hour behind them."

"Which means that you did not arrive in time to witness Lord Mott's death?"

"No, we didn't."

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"So Louise de La Vallière *could* have ordered her familiar to kill Lord Mott, could she not?"

"No," Kirche denied immediately, "Louise wouldn't —"

"But you just admitted that you were not there to witness Lord Mott's death," Stanton pressed, "isn't that right?"

"Well, yes, but —"

"So you cannot say for sure that Louise de La Vallière didn't order her familiar to kill Lord Mott, can you?"

"Well, no, but Louise isn't —"

"But you were in time to witness the aftermath, correct?" Stanton asked.

For a moment, Kirche didn't answer, and Shirou glanced over at her to see the look of frustration on her face; it must have galled her, having Stanton railroad all over her testimony and twist it in his own favor.

"You *were* in time to witness the aftermath, weren't you?" Stanton repeated.

"Yes," Kirche answered sourly.

"Could you describe it for the court?"

Again, Kirche remained silent, and when Shirou glanced over at her again, the frown had turned into a scowl.

"Could you?" Stanton asked again.

Kirche sighed through her nostrils.

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"...Like a Fire Stone," she said finally. "Like someone had set off a Fire Stone in the basement. The entire mansion was just destroyed."

Gasps and murmurs broke out among the jury box, and not a small number of them was looking at Shirou and Louise with fear, like they were inhuman monsters.

"Something that Louise de La Vallière, as a member of the Vallière house, no doubt had the resources to purchase," Stanton concluded.

But there was no way Louise was going to let Stanton get away with that implication — the implication that she had gone and purchased a bomb, of all things, and taken it to Mott's mansion with the intention of using it. She started to rise out of her chair, mouth halfway open and taking in a deep breath to begin her tirade.

Before she could stand, however, Shirou's hand clamped down on her thigh and pressed her back into her chair.

"Remember what the Princess said," Shirou murmured out of the corner of his mouth.

Louise's eyes flashed and she shot him a quick glare, but she settled back down into her chair, simmering.

"You can't prove that!" Kirche protested on Louise's behalf.

"No one can," Stanton replied stonily. "After all, Fire Stones don't leave any traces behind, do they? That's a very convenient way of removing the evidence, isn't it?"

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Kirche looked like she wanted to say something else, but with her scowl growing ever deeper, she clamped her mouth shut and glared at Stanton for all she was worth.

"However," Stanton moved on, "did you not arrive prior to the destruction of the manor?"

"We did," Kirche answered.

"And yet, upon arriving on the scene of Lord Mott's death, you did not attempt to apprehend Louise de La Vallière and her familiar?"

"Apprehend?" Kirche repeated incredulously. "What?"

"Nor, for that matter," Stanton continued, "did you attempt at any point to contact proper authorities to report the crime?"

"Contact the — ?"

"Instead," Stanton pressed, "you aided and abetted Louise de La Vallière in escaping from the scene of the crime."

"Aided...?" Kirche parroted. "You mean helping get the maids back to the Academy?"

"So you admit to aiding and abetting Louise de La Vallière?"

"Aiding and...? We helped a bunch of injured people get someplace safe!" Kirche protested indignantly.

"And yet," there was a barely-there undercurrent of triumph in Stanton's voice, "your first thought was to go to the Academy an hour's ride away rather than the nearby city

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of Blois? A journey, I might add, which would undoubtedly take longer while escorting the injured?"

Kirche flinched. "We didn't," she started. "I mean, we just followed Darling's lead..."

"And as Shirou Emiya is Louise de La Vallière's familiar, following him was tantamount to following Louise de La Vallière, who, having been involved and responsible for the Lord Mott's death, was a criminal on the run from the law!"

Stanton banged his gavel three more times as the Nobles in the jury box whispered amongst themselves.

"I have heard enough!" Stanton declared. "Having examined the testimonies given henceforth, and having deliberated upon the evidence given therein, I have no doubt that I speak for the members of the jury when I declare the accused to be —"

The doors at the back of the courtroom banged open loudly, cutting Stanton off, and Shirou turned with Louise and the others to see the familiar blond-haired Agnés, dressed in a far more formal uniform than he had ever seen her in before and bearing the same badge that the men who had arrested them had worn.

Stanton rose from the judge's bench, his expression thunderous. "This is a closed hearing! What is the meaning of —"

"Presenting," Agnés talked over Stanton, "Her Royal Highness, Crown Princess Henrietta!"

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She stepped to the side and bowed stiffly from the waist, and from behind her, Princess Henrietta, with her back straight, her shoulders squared, her face set in an impassive mask, and oozing power and authority from every pore, strode into the courtroom. Unlike the somewhat naïve and mild mannered young girl who had visited Louise that night that seemed like a lifetime ago, the young woman who walked through the heavy oak double doors looked every inch a princess, that unshakable, untouchable figure she had been when Shirou had first laid eyes on her during her visit to the Academy, only much colder and much firmer.

In the short time Shirou had known her, she had never bore a greater resemblance to Saber than she did at that moment, if in presence only.

The relief that flooded Louise right then was so intense that it was nearly palpable.

Up on the judge's bench, Duke Stanton gave only the slightest of flinches, so subtle and so quick that even Shirou just barely noticed it.

"Lord Stanton," Henrietta acknowledged formally.

"What's the Princess doing here?" Kirche hissed.

"She's come to rescue us," Guiche replied faintly. "The Princess...the Princess has come to rescue us!"

"Your Highness," Duke Stanton returned with forced politeness. "I'm afraid I must ask you to leave, Your Highness. These are closed proceedings, a responsibility of the court, not the Crown."

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Henrietta raised one eyebrow. "It is always the interest of the Crown when Her Lord Chief Justice acts with political expediency rather than in pursuit of justice."

Duke Stanton flinched just the slightest again, but now that he knew what to look for, Shirou saw it easily. "I'm afraid I have no idea what you mean, Your Highness," he said.

"You do not?" Henrietta tilted her head back a little, and in her casual voice was a rigidity like steel. "Then it would seem it might be time for you to step down, Lord Stanton, if you think it the norm to try a suspect before the investigation has concluded, and even more so if you believe it only natural to forgo a prosecutor and defense attorney."

This time, Stanton did not flinch, and it looked to Shirou as though he had prepared a response specifically for that accusation.

"The de La Vallière's are a very powerful, very wealthy, and very influential family," Stanton said reasonably. "It was only prudent to conduct the trial in all haste, before testimonies changed, witnesses were bribed, or evidence vanished. I was interested only in seeing justice done before that wealth, influence, and power allowed Mott's killer to cheat the system."

"I'm sure," Henrietta acknowledged coolly. "And yet, in your haste to see justice done, you ignored the rights of the accused —"

"Murderers and traitors have no rights!" Stanton objected thunderously.

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"— and presided over a trial wherein you yourself have a conflict of interest," Henrietta continued as though he hadn't spoken.

Once again, Stanton gave a small, almost nonexistent flinch. "My acquaintance with Lord Mott is no reason to recuse myself —"

"In accordance with Tristain's laws," Henrietta interrupted, "your acquaintance with Lord Mott was *every* reason why you should recuse yourself. As our law states, justice must be blind and impartial, and so must a judge be as such in order to try a case. Because Lord Mott was your friend, you cannot —"

"I am not some freshly graduated Academy student bound by my emotions!" Stanton spat. "I am the Lord Chief Justice! The highest judicial authority in the Realm! I should think I am experienced enough to put aside my own feelings in order to try a simple murder case!"

"But it is not a simple murder case."

Henrietta waved her arm at Louise.

"You are trying a minor from a House whose political leanings oppose yours for the crime of murdering someone with whom you were friends. Whether or not you have the capability to remain impartial is moot; law dictates that you should recuse yourself all the same, merely on the possibility that you cannot."

Stanton looked like he wanted to say something, but Henrietta cut across him.

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"Furthermore," she continued, "you have no right to bring charges against Louise de La Vallière."

"*What?!*" Stanton boomed.

"You have no right to bring charges against Louise de La Vallière," Henrietta repeated.

"Your authority does not stretch that far!" Stanton told her savagely. "You overstep your bounds, Princess! As Lord Chief Justice, it is perfectly within my rights —"

"Unless I am mistaken, you do not have the right to charge and try an agent of the Crown without first seeking the Crown's approval."

The long moment of silence that followed that declaration so intense that you could have heard a pin drop. By the look on his face, Stanton didn't quite know what to make of it, and by the look of surprise on Guiche and Kirche's faces, they didn't, either.

"What?"

It came out barely above a whisper, and it was so different from his ordinary voice that Shirou almost didn't recognize it as Stanton's.

"Louise Francoise Le Blanc de La Vallière is an agent of the Crown," Henrietta said. "While the Lord Mott's death was a tragic accident and I cannot dispute that Louise de La Vallière and her familiar may have been responsible, you cannot charge her with a crime that was committed in the course of pursuing special interests of the Crown."

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Stanton's eyebrows furrowed, and when he spoke again, his voice had mostly returned to normal.

"Special interests?"

"In regards to Reconquista," Henrietta clarified. "The recent events in Albion have made the Crown concerned for Her own internal security. We received information that the Lord Mott might be a conspirator, and so We requested that Louise Francoise, as an agent of the Crown, investigate it."

"I heard of no such investigation!" Stanton thundered.

But Henrietta merely looked at him stonily.

"Of course not. You were well-acquainted with Lord Mott. We did not think it wise to test to whom your loyalty was stronger, so you simply weren't informed."

Stanton looked almost as though he'd been slapped, and something vindictive in Shirou was immensely satisfied.

"Are you questioning my loyalty to the Crown?" Stanton demanded.

"Of course not," Henrietta replied simply without giving anything away. "However, with the Reconquista movement in Albion gaining ever more power as its leaders solidify their hold, it was deemed necessary to move without alerting any spies or sympathizers, and so the Crown has taken the precaution of investigating its suspicions without informing anyone who has any substantial relationship with those whose loyalty is in question."

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Splotches of red grew on Stanton's cheeks, and he looked as though there was something he wanted to say, but knew better than to say it.

"That does not absolve her of guilt!" he said instead, pointing to Louise. "As she has admitted, she was responsible for Lord Mott's murder! Even if your suspicions panned out, Lord Mott was still a Peer and a citizen of Tristain! Even a traitor has rights to a fair trial to determine his guilt —"

"The Crown is the absolute authority in Tristain," Henrietta interrupted coldly. "The ancestral grounds that you own are yours only because the Crown granted them to your ancestors. The rights you enjoy as a Noble are yours only because the Crown deemed it fair to grant them to you for your service to our country. It is well within the Crown's power to strip a traitor of his rights and execute him summarily."

The furrowing of Henrietta's brow sent a shiver down Shirou's spine, because the look on her face and the frigidity of her voice was *wrong*, was *too incongruent* with the girl who had asked Louise to go to Albion.

"The moment Lord Mott conspired with rebels and mutineers to overthrow the Crown," she said in a tone that seemed to freeze the very air around her, "was the moment he forfeited his rights and properties as a Peer and a citizen of Tristain."

"The laws — !" Stanton thundered.

"The laws exist to serve the Crown," Henrietta's calm, quiet voice echoed through the courtroom. "They exist to

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protect the Crown's loyal subjects. If a subject is not loyal, then the laws do not protect him."

She said it so simply, as if that really was all there was to it. But to Shirou, it felt wrong, like an excuse rather than a legitimate reason, like a bold lie that went unchecked only because of the supreme confidence Henrietta was exuding.

"But Lord Mott is not the one you have put on trial today, Lord Stanton," Henrietta said. "Rather, you have put on trial an agent of the Crown, who acts with the backing and authority of the Crown, and therefore cannot be tried for the crime for which you are trying her. As such, the Crown requests that you release her and drop the charges."

From her expression and the way she said it, it wasn't a request at all, and with each word, Stanton's face darkened and his scowl deepened, emphasizing the age lines around his mouth and eyes until he seemed to have aged ten years in the span of a few moments.

"If your loyalty is truly beyond question," Henrietta added dangerously, "then there should be no reason why you wouldn't obey, Lord Stanton."

Stanton's hand shook, and for a moment, Shirou thought that he might refuse, despite the implication of damnation, but at last, he banged his gavel one, two, three times.

"Court is adjourned," he said solemnly. His mouth twisted, like the words left a bad taste in his mouth, and his narrowed blue eyes glared out as though he wished Henrietta would burst into flames. "Louise Francoise Le Blanc de La Vallière, you and your companions are free to go."

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Stanton stood suddenly from the judge's bench, his entire body vibrating with suppressed rage, and he turned jerkily towards the door from whence he'd come.

"Release them," he added to the guards, and then he strode back the way he came and slammed the door behind him.

"By the Founder," Guiche breathed shakily. "By the Founder."

"Well," Kirche said, "I guess your Princess is a lot better than I thought she was."

"Was that," Louise whispered, "*really* Henrietta?"

As the guards came up and unlocked their shackles, Shirou glanced back at the Princess, whose face was still set in that calm, cold expression she'd worn since she'd first stepped into the courtroom, and found there was really only one answer he could give.

"I don't know."

— o.O.O.O.O —

Henrietta was waiting for them when Agnés led them to a small meeting room down the hall from the main courtroom.

"Partner!" a familiar voice cried as they walked into the room. "You're back!"

Arrayed across the small conference table were their personal affects, the stuff that had been confiscated when they'd been arrested, including Shirou's swords and the others' wands.

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"There goes my peace and quiet," Louise mumbled.

"Do me a favor, Partner?" Derf said.

"What's that?" Shirou asked as he picked up the broad leather belt that held Derf's sheath.

"Never get arrested again. I'm startin' to rust again just thinkin' about that room they stuck me in last night! Weren't even another sword to chat it up with!"

Shirou chuckled. "I'll try."

The door clicked shut behind them, then clicked again as it locked.

"The coast is clear, Your Highness," Agnés reported.

Immediately, Henrietta's cold expression melted away and she sagged limply into the closest chair with a long sigh.

"Princess!" Louise cried.

Henrietta waved away her concerns with a hand — it was shaking, Shirou noticed.

"I'm fine, Louise Francoise," Henrietta promised faintly.

"Princess, you're ill!" Louise said. She rushed to Henrietta's side and felt up the Princess's forehead, then grasped one of Henrietta's shaking hands and let out a hiss. "Freezing!"

"No, I'm fine, really," Henrietta protested weakly.

Louise didn't listen; she stood up and spun for the door. "Wait here! I'll get a doctor!"

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But Agnés stepped in front of her and blocked her way out.

"What are you doing?" Louise demanded. "I need to get a doctor for the Princess!"

"Stay," Agnés ordered coldly. "It's because of you she's like this, so you don't have the right to leave, yet."

"Agnés," Henrietta warned, trying to sound scolding, but the faintness of her voice ruined it.

"It's true," Agnés said unrepentantly. "You overexerted yourself for her sake."

Henrietta sighed.

"No," she said, "it's my fault. I didn't take enough. It was all I could do to last as long as I did."

"Take enough?" Shirou asked.

"I don't understand," Louise said slowly.

Henrietta glanced at them, then pulled a bottle filled with some kind of amber liquid from what Shirou could only imagine was a secret pocket hidden in the folds of her dress.

Louise gasped.

"Liquid Courage!"

Guiche and Kirche gasped, too.

"Princess, you didn't!"

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Henrietta shook her head regretfully. "I'm afraid I'm not quite strong enough or brave enough to do what I did today on my own, so I had to resort to something like this."

She thumbed the bottle, and the substance inside sloshed around, glittering like gold.

Shirou cleared his throat. "Liquid Courage?" he asked.

"It's a potion," Louise explained somewhat distractedly. "It's supposed to remove the drinker's fears and inhibitions, and it used to be really common for generals to use it so that they could lead battles more easily and make the tough decisions without worrying about indecision, but it's been illegal ever since the Massacre at Orleans."

Shirou made a mental note to check that out the next time he was at the library.

"Princess," Louise said, "please tell me you didn't actually use this!"

Henrietta shook her head again.

"I needed to," she said by way of explanation. "I couldn't have confronted Duke Stanton like that on my own — and it was only half a dose!" she added hastily.

The look on Louise's face was a mixture of despair and disappointment.

"I don't understand," Shirou spoke up. "What's so wrong about this potion?"

Derf snorted. "What *isn't* wrong about it?"

It was Guiche who answered.

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"It suppresses your fears and inhibitions," he said quietly. "That'd be fine if it was just something to keep you from being afraid, but it suppresses *all* of your inhibitions. Things that would normally hold you back, like morality or logic or concern for the wellbeing of others, those are suppressed, too. You can make the monstrously inhumane decisions that no decent person could make, like killing the enemy even after they surrender because it would negatively affect the morale of the enemy's army or supporters."

Henrietta winced with each word.

"And afterwards," Guiche added, "everything that was suppressed comes back all at once. The Massacre at Orleans was just the last straw; before that, it wasn't uncommon for the generals who used it to resign or commit suicide once the effects wore off."

Shirou looked to Henrietta, who grimaced.

"It's true," she admitted. She sighed again. "But it was necessary."

He glanced again at her shaking hands and remembered what she'd said the night before and what he'd done to try to save Rin.

"I'm not that much of a hypocrite," he decided on, "that I would chastise someone for the lengths they'd go in order to save someone else."

Henrietta offered him a wan smile, and Shirou forced himself to return it.

Because a part of him *did* want to chastise her.

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"At any rate," he went on, "it seems that your plan went off without a hitch, Your Highness."

"Plan?" Kirche asked.

Louise stirred. "Shirou," she began indignantly, "you can't tell me you approve of this!"

"I don't," he replied. "But I have no right to criticize her, and in the first place, scolding the Princess won't change the fact that it's already happened."

Louise scowled, but her mouth snapped shut. She didn't like it, Shirou knew, but she knew he was right.

Henrietta sighed again.

"Well," she said, "things did go mostly according to plan, but I'm afraid I made an enemy of Duke Stanton today."

"You shouldn't worry, Princess," Louise said sourly. "After all, he's a Reconquista sympathizer, isn't he? Which means he's a traitor either way."

"Wait, what?" Kirche asked. "The judge is allied with those rebels from Albion?"

"The Princess said as much during the trial," Guiche answered. "Mott was under suspicion, yes? Then being Mott's friend would mean Duke Stanton should be equally involved."

Henrietta shook her head again. "There is a large difference between being a sympathizer and joining the movement outright. I fear my actions today have only pushed him into their arms. And as he is Lord Chief Justice..."

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It went unsaid just how much damage someone with that kind of influence could do.

"Fire him," Shirou suggested simply.

Guiche gaped at him. "It's not that simple!" he squeaked.

Louise shook her head. "Wouldn't work."

Henrietta nodded.

"As Louise says," she agreed. "I cannot simply fire the Lord Chief Justice. I can have him suspended pending an investigation into today's events and Mott's finances, but I cannot remove him outright."

"But you said —" Kirche began.

Shirou grunted. "I thought so," he said shrewdly. "So then, all of that bravado during the trial...you were bluffing."

Henrietta's cheeks flushed. "Ah...Well," she smiled sheepishly, "it was much easier to do when I wasn't afraid of being caught."

"You mean all of that was a bluff?" Kirche demanded incredulously.

"Bluff," Tabitha added.

Louise frowned. "Not all of it," she said. "Actually, most of it was true, but if she'd tried to do any of those things she implied, she'd catch a lot of trouble from the Nobility. The Crown *is* the absolute power, but with the political climate the way it is, exercising that power so decisively would be suicide."

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"It would cause a civil war, at least," Guiche agreed.

"Which still makes it a bluff," Shirou corrected Louise.
"Stanton probably knew it, too, but if he tried to call it, things could easily have turned even farther in the Princess's favor."

Kirche let out a sound somewhere between a sigh and a groan. "I hate politics," she whined. "So much deception and subterfuge."

"Like things are any different in Germania!" Louise said.

Guiche sighed. "Here we go again."

"They are!" Kirche shot back. "If the Emperor tells you to do something, you do it! None of this backstabbing and roleplaying! When we say the Emperor is the highest authority, we *mean* he's the highest authority! Unlike here, where the Princess can't even control her own Chief Justice!"

"Why you —!"

"Enough."

Both girls glanced at Shirou, then at each other, then they scowled and turned away so that they didn't have to look at one another.

Teenage girls at their very best. It seemed like that didn't change no matter where you were.

Agnés chuckled. "They like this all the time?"

"Like cats and dogs," Shirou answered. Agnés grinned. He turned to Henrietta. "Anyway. Princess?"

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Henrietta blinked. "Oh. Right." She smiled. "Well, I only brought you back here to retrieve your personal affects and tell you that there's a pair of carriages arranged to take you all back to the Academy. Incidentally, those maids you brought back from Mott's mansion will remain here at the Palace, and those in need of medical care will be attended to by my personal physician."

Louise and Guiche gasped.

"Miss Kirche, Miss Tabitha, Sir Guiche," she continued, "your familiars have all been well taken care of and will be waiting for you with your carriages. I understand that Miss Tabitha often rides her dragon to and from the places she needs to go, so if you decide to forgo the carriages, please inform the drivers of the change in arrangements."

Henrietta turned to Agnés. "Agnés, could you escort them out? I need to speak with Louise Francoise and Sir Shirou alone."

Agnés stepped forward. "Alright, you three," she said roughly, "this is official Crown business, which means it's time for you to leave."

She unlocked the door and pulled it open, then gestured out into the hall. Without a word, Guiche and Tabitha walked out.

"But, Darling," Kirche began to protest.

"Go, Kirche," Shirou ordered firmly.

Kirche frowned and quirked her mouth to one side, then gave a frustrated huff and left the room after Guiche and

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Tabitha. With one final "Your Highness," Agnés followed them out and shut the door again, which locked itself with a click.

For a moment, there was silence.

"What is it you needed, Your High — Henrietta," Louise corrected herself when the Princess started to frown at her.

For another long moment, Henrietta didn't answer. Then, without preamble, she said, "Within the month, we will be at war with Albion."

"A month?" Louise asked numbly.

"If that," Henrietta answered.

"That's —"

"A generous estimate," Shirou said. Louise looked at him incredulously. "With Wales here, the last legitimate member of the Albion royal family, it was less a matter of if and more a matter of when. As long as he's still alive, Reconquista lacks any true legitimacy."

"Exactly so," Henrietta nodded. "The Pope has not yet declared one way or another, but Reconquista cannot claim even the illusion of legitimacy as long as Wales is still alive."

"And they'll want to kill him as quickly as possible," Shirou added. "The solidity of their government and political power depends on it."

"Hmph," Louise huffed. "What legitimacy? They're a bunch of traitorous rebels!"

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"Louise," Henrietta said, "I'm telling you this because I may call on you."

Shirou's lips thinned into a line, even as Louise flinched. "What?"

"Louise —"

"It's because of me."

Henrietta grimaced, but didn't deny it.

"You, Shirou?" Louise asked.

"He is right," Henrietta admitted, "but also wrong."

Louise turned to Henrietta. "Princess?"

"Since the moment I heard about his abilities," Henrietta explained. She shook her head. "No, that's not right. Since the moment I was informed that he was Gandalf, I've known that he might be needed in this upcoming war."

Surprise flickered across Louise's face, followed by something like betrayal. "Henrietta —"

"Please do not think less of me, Louise Françoise." Henrietta looked down at her hands and fidgeted with her fingers. "It was not that I meant to take advantage of your friendship, nor, indeed, that I intended to use you from the beginning. If it was at all possible, I would like to —"

She stopped and fell silent for a moment.

"With the alliance with Germania," she started again, "and the assistance of their vast armies, there would have been no need to ask you and your familiar to go into battle for our

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country. To ensure that it would not be necessary, I decided to sacrifice my happiness and secure an alliance with Germania, and to ensure that the alliance would succeed, I asked you, my oldest and best friend, to retrieve the letter that might have prevented it."

Her hands curled into fists in her lap.

"But that may no longer be an option," she said sadly. "Even with Wales brought back alive, it shouldn't have been a problem; Germania might have hesitated somewhat, but their interest in securing territory in Albion, or failing that, securing the favor of Albion's rightful king, would have made them eager to ally with us. The problem is not Wales. The problem is the allies you said Albion has at its call."

She lifted her head and looked Shirou in the eye. "Tell me, Sir Shirou," she demanded strongly, "if we did not have your assistance and our only enemies were these Heroic Spirits, how well would we do with an army thirty-thousand strong?"

Shirou grimaced, closed his eyes, and let out a breath through his nose.

He didn't even have to think about it. To compare a mage, even an army of mages, to a squad of Heroic Spirits, two of whom had Noble Phantasms that specialized in killing armies, was ludicrous. There really wasn't any contest at all.

"Utter defeat," he admitted.

Henrietta nodded; she had likely suspected as much.

Louise's mouth closed and her lips thinned into a determined line; she squared her shoulders and planted her

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feet, and as strongly as she could manage, she said, "If Your Highness requests it of me, then I can only obey."

"Louise —"

"You're my best friend," Louise continued, undaunted. "It's the least I could do."

Henrietta heaved another sigh. "I was afraid you might say that."

She pulled out something else out from her hidden pocket and set it down on the table.

"A book?" Louise asked curiously.

"Yes," Henrietta answered. She splayed her fingers across the old, faded leather cover. "Even with the odds as they are, I refuse to send you into battle without the ability to defend yourself."

"I'm...supposed to defend myself," Louise began slowly, "with a book?"

"This is not just any book, Louise," Henrietta said. She flipped it open — the pages were blank.

"It's a...blank book?"

"No," Henrietta leaned over the table and looked Louise in the eyes. "This is the Founder's Prayer Book. I meant to give it to you last time, but with everything that happened, I forgot."

Louise gaped. "This old thing?!"

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Henrietta nodded. "It is said that the Founder Brimir offered up a prayer unto God, and then wrote the spells down upon these pages in magical lettering, enchanted so that only he could read it."

"Ho?" Derf spoke up. "So that old thing is still around, is it?"

Shirou turned his head — he couldn't quite see Derf's 'mouth,' but he could see the hilt. "You recognize it?"

"Oh yeah," Derf answered. "I don't know about that prayin' ta God bit, but old Brimir wrote just about every spell he knew in that book. I was sure it would'a been in Romalia's vault."

Louise looked from the book back to Derf. "But it's blank!"

"No, no," if Derf had a head to shake, Shirou imagined he would be shaking it, "see, that magical lettering stuff was true, too. Ya need a special artifact ta read those pages. Them rings ya got — when they're close ta the pages, spells should start showin' up. Give it a try."

Derf wiggled one quillon suggestively.

Louise looked unsurely back to Henrietta, who gave her a reassuring smile and a nod, then back to Derf, who wiggled again and said, "Go on!"

She brought up her hand, the Wind and Water Rubies glistening on her fingers, and laid it over the blank pages, then gasped as words started appearing underneath her fingertips, filling up the blank pages.

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Shirou's lips curled upwards. "Well, now, Master. It seems we've found you a book on Void magic."

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CONTINUE?

[YES/NO]

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #7

"Go, Henrietta!" Ilya screamed. "Royals for the win!"

Waver Velvet, Lord El Melloi II, puffed on his cigar. "Are you always this...spirited, Lady Einzbern?"

Ilya's face puffed up. "No, no, no!" she cried. "Rin always calls me Ilya! I'm supposed to be your student!"

Waver puffed on his cigar again. "But how can you be my student? You already know all this material, don't you?"

"Yes! But I pretend not to for the sake of the audience! It's acting, it's acting!"

Puff.

"Then why am I here? I'm a teacher, not an actor."

"And I'm dead!" Ilya pointed out. "Listen, Mister, you're just supposed to lecture like you would at the Clock Tower. You read all of the primer material, right?"

Puff. "Yeah."

"Then you just lecture about the material that was highlighted for you, okay?"

Puff.

"Fine," Waver said. "I'm just supposed to explain that stuff, right? Look into the camera and talk like I would in the lecture hall?"

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"Yes, Waver-sensei!"

One slim eyebrow rose. Puff. "Seriously? I'm an Englishman, you know. I'm speaking in English. What the hell is with that *sensei* crap?"

"Rin doesn't mind," Ilya murmured.

"*Tobsaka?*" The other eyebrow rose. "*She's* the one who normally does this gig?"

"She is," Ilya said. "She's feeling a little under the weather, right now. She's pouting because she got killed off."

"But she's —" Waver's mouth suddenly disappeared, and he had to juggle around to catch his lit cigar before it fell to the floor.

"We're not supposed to talk about that," Ilya chided. "We're not supposed to spoil parts of the story, especially when the author is still considering whether or not things will work out that way. Just let Rin die, okay?"

Waver's mouth came back and he stuck his cigar between his teeth again. "Fine. Let's just get this over with."

"Alright, then!" Ilya said cheerfully. "Today's topic is...!"

She spun around and pointed to the board, where the words **Halkeginia Grail** were written in bold.

"...the Halkeginia Holy Grail!"

"Guess that's why you're here," Waver puffed on his cigar. "Being an Einzbern and all."

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"I wish," Ilya said. "The Halkeginia Grail is so far beyond the Fuyuki Grail System that we only even call it a Grail for convenience's sake. And anyway, aren't you supposed to start?"

"Right, right," Waver said. "Alright, then. Today's topic is the Holy Grail system used in Halkeginia. Sit down, shut up, and pay attention." Puff. "So you guys know about this Brimir bloke, right?"

"We've mentioned him, but we're not really supposed to go into too much detail about him," Ilya told him.

"Right, right." Puff. "So this Brimir bloke built the Grail system used in Halkeginia. He picked the best ley line on the continent, then used some trickery and dickery and attached his Grail system directly to the Magical Foundation of Halkeginia, so that he could revolutionize the familiar process and Summon Ritual as well as the inheritance of Void magic after he died. That way, he systemized the summoning of familiars and removed the necessity of carving the Familiar Runes by hand. Saved a whole lot of people some pain — can you imagine having to manually carve the Familiar Runes into a wild animal that would probably rather eat you?"

"Makes you wonder how anyone had any familiars back then," Ilya commented. "And how many mages got eaten before they could inscribe the Runes."

"Quite." Puff. "Anyway, his new system did the heavy lifting and summoned the familiars, and then applied the Runes automatically once the contract was completed. Naturally, since the ritual is supposed to limit one familiar per mage, the Grail usually won't answer a summoning attempt if

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a mage already has a familiar, so as long as the contract exists, the Halkeginia mages can't summon another familiar without killing the one they already have."

"Part of the reason why it's considered sacred, right?" Ilya asked.

"Naturally," Waver answered. Puff. "Of course, a mage with the proper skill and know-how could probably find a way around the safeguards and summon whatever they want from wherever they want and as many familiars as they want, but the pieces of knowledge required for something like that are scattered throughout the continent, so they'd have to either collect all of that knowledge, which in itself would be the work of a lifetime, or else they'd have to be at a level far beyond modern mages. A sufficiently skilled Mjodvitnir would do the trick."

"It's a good thing we don't have one of those in *Miracle of Zero*," Ilya remarked. "They'd be really scary."

"I wouldn't know," Waver said. "I'm just here for the lecture, so I haven't been paying attention to the storyline. At any rate, to put it simply, the kind of mage with the know-how and power to study, connect to, and manipulate the Halkeginia Grail doesn't exist in the modern era."

"So exactly how much more powerful than the Fuyuki Grail *is* the Halkeginia Grail?" Ilya asked.

"There's a *huge* difference," Waver explained. Puff. "The Fuyuki Grail only spanned a city and only drew power from that city, so it took sixty years to build up enough power to summon seven Servants. The Halkeginia Grail, though, is

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connected through the entire continent and draws power from all across the continent. Furthermore, it's not summoning Heroic Spirit-class entities all the time, so it's got tons of power sitting around, even after the yearly familiar summoning. To boil it all down, comparing the Fuyuki Grail and the Halkeginia Grail is like comparing a AA battery and a nuclear power plant."

Ilya giggled. "Don't tell Old Man Acht. He'll feel pretty inadequate." She hummed. "So, we've covered how it's built and how it works. What does it *do*?"

"Good question." Waver puffed on his cigar. "The Grail was conceived to handle every possible situation, though I'm not sure Brimir could really handle making something like that. Anyway, it's designed to find the familiar most appropriate to the mage doing the summoning, accounting for dozens of factors, but focusing primarily on what a mage's needs and Affinity are, and in the case where the appropriate familiar doesn't or didn't ever exist in that universe, it'll use the Second Magic reach into parallel worlds until it finds one."

"That sounds pretty amazing," Ilya said. "So the Halkeginia Grail has enough power that it can brute force a True Magic?"

"Hey, that's part of the reason we call it a Grail," Waver answered. "It might not be part of a ritual to achieve Akasha or a True Magic, but it's still an omnipotent wish-granting device. If the Fuyuki Grail can use brute force to perform a True Magic, then the Halkeginia Grail *definitely* can."

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"So what if the most appropriate familiar for a mage is something non-living," Ilya asked, "like a Wraith or a Heroic Spirit? For that matter, how does it summon Heroic Spirits in the first place?"

"That's another good question," Waver said. "As long as it's non-living, the process is generally the same across the board — it just makes a body — but for Heroic Spirits, the Grail obviously doesn't have the power or authority to summon something like the real deal. For Heroic Spirits, the Grail just makes a perfect copy of the Spirit on the Throne and makes a flesh and blood body for it. In that case, they'll have an un-listed skill called *Incarnation*, which gives them a human body that is incredibly robust, virtually ageless, and immune to things like disease. The higher the level of the Incarnation skill, the more faithfully reproduced physical traits are, like inhuman ancestry."

"But wait," Ilya interrupted, "if Heroic Spirits are given flesh and blood bodies through this skill, *Incarnation*, doesn't that mean that you wouldn't need to attack with Mystery in order to damage them, then? Anyone could kill them like that!"

"Yup." Puff. "Anyway, aren't we out of time?"

"Oh crap!" Ilya cried. "Ah, but we still have some stuff to cover! Crap! Um!"

She turned to face the camera. "Next time, okay? We'll finish up the Grail lecture and answer some more questions from the fans if we have the time! See you then! Tohsaka-sensei might even be back!"

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"You do realize you're talking about Rin, right? She'll probably be pouting for another three chapters."

"Point taken."

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #7: End

Chapter X: A Momentary Rest

BANG!
Shirou jerked awake in a flash, disoriented, and the remnants of his dream (blonde hair, green eyes — it had been a while since he'd dreamed of Saber) had barely faded from his eyes before he had thrown himself from his bed and to his feet and reached for Derf.

But his hand had only just curled around the white-wrapped hilt ("Whazzat? What's going on, Partner?") when his brain registered the scene in front of him and the white-hot surge of adrenaline pumping through his veins began to die down.

Louise was sitting on her bed in her nightgown. In one hand, she held a long, thin stick made of wood from a willow tree — her wand. The other hand was splayed over the pages of the Founder's Prayer Book, which lay open across her thighs, with the Wind and Water Rubies sitting atop the faded paper. Across the room, she'd set up her vanity with little bits and pieces of old furniture that she'd salvaged from unused rooms and storage closets that had been long forgotten by the rest of the Academy.

Shirou sighed and dropped unceremoniously back down onto his mattress.

"Again?"

Louise flushed, but didn't say anything.

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A little over a week had passed since the farce that Stanton had tried to pass off as a trial. Since arriving back at the Academy, Shirou and Louise had spent most of that time holed up in her room with not much to do except for practicing the spells in the book from Henrietta (Louise) and sitting helplessly and watching her fail miserably (Shirou).

The only time they ever left was for things like attending classes and taking care of physical needs. They didn't even go to the Alvis Dining Hall to eat — Annabelle, who was filling in for Siesta, brought their meals to them, instead, and they had breakfast, lunch, and dinner in Louise's room on her woefully undersized tea table.

If he were honest, Shirou would actually have liked to get out and stretch his legs, but Louise refused to go out more than necessary, and Shirou was not ignorant enough not to understand why. Most people in her kind of position wouldn't want to go out, either.

Within a day of them returning to the Academy, word of what had happened had spread like wildfire, and Shirou thought it was rather depressing just how unsurprised he was over her classmates' reactions. Pointed fingers, strange looks, stares, too-loud whispers whenever they walked the halls or sat in on her classes — it was the negative attention that came with all the wrong kinds of fame, as Shirou knew all too well.

To begin with, you couldn't charge into a battlefield, save the lives of the combatants, and then walk off without a word and not attract all sorts of theories about your personality and motivations.

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Not even once retreating, not even once being understood.

In the end, even though Shirou's destination was different, his path was not that dissimilar from the one Archer, the hero Emiya, had taken — in the first place, they were the same person, and there were only so many twists and turns they could each take on that path without betraying who they were at their cores. Though Shirou had the power to do things Archer had never been capable of, it only meant that he was able to save some of the lives Archer could not.

But Louise was not used to all of that attention. She wasn't used to the sorts of rumors being swapped about when they thought she wasn't looking or couldn't hear them — that she hadn't actually been arrested, but rather suspended for failing to cast magic properly (one that was, for Louise, distressingly popular; it seemed like she wouldn't be escaping "Zero" quite so easily), or that someone had tried to make a political move and had it backfire (which was somewhat true).

The ones that got the closest were those who remembered just how easily Shirou had tossed Guiche around in that duel almost a month back, and they thought that Louise had commanded him to blast apart Mott's mansion brick by brick with his bare hands — more accurate than the others, but still not quite true.

The rumor that bothered Louise the most, however, was the one that Shirou was almost positive had been started by Duke Stanton somehow: that Louise had bought a Fire Stone, which Louise had later explained to Shirou was a very powerful bomb (this world's nuclear warhead, as it were), and

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set it off in Mott's mansion, and she'd been called in to answer for it, but her family's influence had gotten her off the hook.

They'd nearly had to replace her vanity after she'd heard that rumor.

As far as Shirou knew, Kirche and Guiche had also taken to hiding out from their classmates since arriving back at the Academy; apparently, as the only witnesses to what had actually happened, everyone wanted to hear from them. They might have enjoyed the attention for all of about ten minutes, but since then, they seemed to be locking themselves in their rooms to escape the gossipmongers who wanted to know every little detail.

That, and (Guiche had admitted to Shirou one morning) Agnés had threatened them with dismemberment if they told anyone what had actually happened. Apparently, when she was serious, she was scary enough to get even an unruly girl like Kirche to obey.

Regardless, the majority of the last week had been spent in Louise's room with the door locked and the windows closed so that they wouldn't be bothered by nagging gossipers who wanted to hear all about the sordid affair (especially after that one girl had tried to wheedle it out of Louise while levitating outside of her window). And, with nothing else to do, Louise had been practicing her magic by trying to cast spells out of the Founder's Prayer Book.

And failing.

Miserably.

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"I'll restate my opinion," Shirou began, "that it'd probably be a better idea to do this outside, where you're less likely to do some serious damage —"

Her vanity wobbled, then collapsed to the floor with a great, loud crash when the legs snapped from the abuse that'd been heaped on them by all of the explosions.

"— or destroy something you'd rather not."

Louise flushed an even brighter shade of red and looked away, refusing to meet his eyes, but still didn't say anything. Shirou sighed again.

"I'll fix it," he promised for the third time in as many days.

"Thank you," she mumbled miserably.

He set Derf down, propped up against the wall as he'd been before, then walked over to the battered vanity and started to carefully pick apart the pieces — by now, he could probably repair the thing in his sleep, that was how well he'd gotten to know its structure, but it was better to be cautious with things like this rather than just bulldozing through. That was the way magic was, too; put too much Prana in when you're reinforcing something, and it'll just break, so you have to be careful and find out the limitations before you can start taking shortcuts.

"Ya know, girly —" Derf gave a huge yawn; Shirou wasn't sure whether or not it was fake — "ya need ta figure out what's too much and what's not enough, first. Aimin' yer spells and all o' that stuff comes later. If ya don't know how much energy ya should be puttin' into yer spells, then they'll just keep blowin' up in yer face."

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"I'd like to see *you* try and rediscover a magic that hasn't been taught in over a thousand years," Louise muttered rebelliously.

Shirou shook his head, but didn't turn to look at her. "No, Derf's right."

Derf chuckled.

"Shirou!" Louise sounded betrayed.

"Some magic," Shirou explained, "only gets more powerful the more energy you feed into it. The more energy you use to cast it, the more dramatic its effects get, so having a lot of energy is a huge boon for that sort of thing, even more so if you're doing magic that requires a lot of magical energy to begin with."

Like Rin's Gandr, ordinarily a simple curse, which she could overcharge and turn into the more powerful Fin Shot that was even capable of physical interference, or on the other end, a Grand Ritual, something that normally required a whole team of magi in order to complete. There were all sorts of magic where simply having a lot of magical energy meant you could do things the ordinary mages would either be incapable of or require assistance to complete.

"On the other hand," Shirou went on, "there are some types of magic that require precise control rather than just shoving as much magical energy as you can into it. If you use too much, then the spell will just fail and explode in your face — if you're lucky. If you're not, then it'll kill you outright."

Like reinforcement, where the slightest bit too much magical energy would cause whatever you were reinforcing to

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simply break, and if you put too little, you got substandard results. The principle was virtually identical with Broken Phantasms, but those, at least, managed to hold themselves together until they hit something and exploded. That was part of what made them so useful — there wasn't a point to a Broken Phantasm if it just blew up in your hand and took a few of your fingers with it.

Either way, there was a reason why the first thing Rin had tried to teach him was to never do magic that was above his level.

"I...guess that makes sense," Louise mumbled.

"Course it does," Derf added in. "It's like with anythin' ya go about doin'. If ya want ta make a fire, ya gotta have enough to burn, dontcha? But if yeh've got too much wood on the fire, it might get outta control. It's the same principle with magic. Too much o' your Willpower, and it might blow up, but not enough, and ya might not get anythin' at all."

"What the mages of my world call Prana," Shirou said, "or magical energy. From what I can tell, it's the same thing as your Willpower."

He shook his head and stood, then rapped the top of the vanity as gently as he could with his knuckles. It held strong — which meant it would probably survive another day of Louise casting spells at it before it needed repairing again.

"Anyway. Before you start worrying about applying this magic of yours, the first thing you should do is figure out how to measure what's too much and what's not enough."

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He turned around to look at her, and she looked back — the Founder's Prayer Book in her lap lay forgotten.

"There are probably a dozen or so different exercises magi teach their kids to help them learn how to measure the use Prana," Shirou said. He saw something like hope lift inside of Louise and stretch across her face, like a balloon was swelling inside of her chest. "Unfortunately, I don't know any of them — my old man wasn't exactly conventional, and by the time I had a proper teacher, those sorts of lessons were unnecessary..."

He ignored the sharp, fleeting pang that accompanied the memory of Rin teaching him and focused instead on Louise, whose shoulders began to droop again. And it was true enough — there was no doubt that magi families had practices and exercises to help teach their heirs how to regulate the flow of Prana, it was just that Shirou had never been privy to any of them. His education had been pretty haphazard before Rin.

That didn't mean that he hadn't learned it on his own. Obviously, or else he would have never gotten anywhere with magecraft in the first place.

"But I guess there *is* a way for you to learn," Shirou added. He watched the hope rise in her face again. "I could teach you Reinforcement."

"Reinforcement?" Louise asked eagerly.

"Finding, assessing, and filling in the imperfections in an object by injecting Prana." He offered her a bit of a smirk. "You could call it one of the things I'm good at, actually."

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She leaned forward and shoved the Founder's Prayer Book off to the side.

"Could you...show me?"

Instead of answering, Shirou picked up a sliver of wood about as thick as the average arrow — a remnant from one of the old table legs Louise had spent the last week trying to blow up — and held it up for her to see.

"Trace, on."

The hammer in the back of his head cocked and fired. The magic circuits flipped on.

BEGIN SYNCHRONIZATION.

ANALYZING COMPOSITE MATERIALS.

REINFORCING COMPOSITE MATERIALS.

ALL PROCESSES COMPLETE.

"Trace, off."

In just a few moments, the entire process was completed. Absently, Shirou thought that his younger self would have been amazed at just how quick and efficient he'd become at something that had once taken him much, much longer to do, but then, even just by the end of the Grail War, he'd gone so much farther than he'd ever imagined possible.

With the Reinforcement complete, Shirou handed the shard of maple wood over to Louise, who took it curiously and turned it over in her hand several times. The corners of her lips turned down and her brow furrowed.

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"It doesn't look any different," she told him.

"Try to break it."

She glanced at him and frowned, but took the piece of wood and grasped it with both hands and tried to snap it with one quick jerk.

It didn't even bend.

"What —?"

She scowled and tried again, twisting the sliver of wood around in her palms over and over and applying pressure from just about every imaginable angle, and when it still didn't break, she gave a growl and brought it down over her knee.

Or she would have, if Shirou hadn't reached out and grabbed her wrist before she could.

"Shirou —"

"Trust me," Shirou cut her off, "if you want to be walking out of this room tomorrow morning, then you shouldn't do that."

Louise huffed. "Fine."

She offered up the sliver of maple, and he let go of her wrist and quickly took it back.

"When you do it right," he explained, holding up the shard, "you can give an ordinary piece of wood a strength resembling that of steel, or you can turn yourself into a professional athlete, or any number of other things like that."

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On the other hand, when you do it *wrong* and put too much into it..."

Shirou moved his hand safely away from Louise's face and flooded the piece of wood with Prana, shoving way, way more magical energy into it than was necessary. The maple turned hot in his fingers, so hot that he could feel it through his gloves, then glowed for a brief moment, a fraction of a second, and then...

It exploded.

Louise gave a shriek and flung her hands up to protect her face — but she needn't have bothered, because the moment the shard started to splinter and burst, he clapped his other hand over it. A flash of light and heat erupted between his fingers, then a thin, wispy curl of smoke wafted up and vanished into the air.

"...then it'll just explode in your face."

Derf barked out a rusty laugh over in the corner.

Louise dropped her arms back down to her sides, and, face flushed, she gave him a glare and a scowl. "That wasn't funny, Shirou!"

"I'm not laughing," Shirou said seriously.

"Well, I am," Derf's quillions wiggled. "I thought it was hilarious!"

Shirou directed a quick scowl over at Derf ("Ooh, scary!"), then turned back to Louise.

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"In my world," he explained, "the first thing a mage learns from his teacher is this: to be a magus is to walk with death."

He remembered the grim look on Kiritsugu's face, the grave expression as he explained to Shirou what it meant to perform magecraft, to reenact mysteries and inject one's own logic into the world. In some ways, he thought, magi were forced to grow up earlier than other children. But then again, Shirou had already understood the terror and finality of death before Kiritsugu had started to teach him magecraft.

One could not walk through hell and come out the other side unstained.

"At any moment," Shirou continued, "your magecraft might backfire and kill you. At any moment, you might make a mistake and pay with your life. At any moment, you might overreach your own limitations and suffer the rebound. At any moment, any number of things might go wrong, and the resultant backlash means death."

He opened up his hands and showed her the remnants of the maple shard. "The first thing a mage needs to learn is how to use his Prana and how to use it properly. For me, at least, I learned by practicing Reinforcement."

Louise leaned over his palm, looking down at the ashy residue that was even then being purged from his glove, sliding off the sides and to the floor. She reached out with one hand and carefully, hesitantly, she touched it with her fingers, then pulled them back and rolled it experimentally between her index and thumb.

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The look on her face as she examined the remnants of the maple shard was strikingly familiar, and Shirou tried not to think too deeply on the fact that he could imagine another girl, only with long, wavy brown hair and bright blue eyes, sitting in front of him instead. Maybe it was just that the memory had resurfaced only a week ago, and maybe he was drawing too many parallels, but either way, he could almost see Rin in Louise's place, hand curled over her mouth and brow furrowed as she puzzled out whatever mystery had attracted her attention.

And maybe, just maybe, it made him miss her just a little bit less.

"Shirou," Louise said quietly at length.

"Yes?"

"Could you...teach me?"

He offered her a little smile. "Of course, Louise."

"Just...one thing, first."

"What is it?"

"What's a professional athlete?"

— o.O.O.O.o —

"...assess the structure...find the openings...fill them...with prana..."

"Don't rush it. The better your foundations are, the faster you can master it, and the faster you master it, the quicker you can go through the steps."

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Louise said nothing, simply scowled down at the shard of wood in her hand — it was another piece of some furniture that Louise had been practicing her Void magic on, and she had been trying, after failing quite spectacularly on a few other pieces, to perform Reinforcement magecraft on it.

"But I can't even get a good grasp on where the openings are!"

"Nor will you, just yet," Shirou answered her. "I practiced every morning for more than five years, and I still made plenty of mistakes when using it."

Louise hefted out a frustrated grunt. "But I don't have five years!" she said.

"And it shouldn't take you that long," Shirou told her. "I didn't have a proper teacher, remember? Anyway, it shouldn't take you five years, but you're not going to master it in an afternoon, either."

She let out another frustrated grunt.

"I know," she admitted grudgingly. "I just don't want to wait!"

She glanced back down at the wooden shard in her hand, considered it for a moment with a furrowed brow, then tossed it away and flopped down onto her bed. She was so small, Shirou observed, that her dangling feet just barely brushed the floor.

And he was struck, suddenly, by the absurdity of the idea that she was going to fight a war, that she was preparing so that she could go into battle when the time came, and the

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same steely part of him that had protested leaving the Albionese Royalists to their fate raged against the very idea of letting her anywhere near that kind of fighting —

But Louise was too determined to stop, the fluid and empty logical side reasoned. To keep her safe, he could either lock her in a padded room, surrounded by thick, concrete walls — which would only serve to make her angry — or he could be there to protect her himself when she inevitably charged off.

In the meantime, if he could help her get strong enough to actually fight, then he was certainly going to do so.

"Well," Shirou said, "you've already been practicing for about three hours. Maybe you should take a break."

Her stomach let out gurgle of agreement.

"...and eat breakfast."

"...maybe you're right."

He stood and pushed the chair he'd been sitting on back under Louise's tea table with a twirl and a gentle nudge, then slung Derflinger over his shoulder and made for the door.

"I'll go down to the kitchens and see if I can't get something for you to eat."

He grabbed the doorknob and undid the lock with a click— Louise couldn't perform a locking spell, so they'd had to lock the door manually.

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One dainty arm rose up off the bed, index finger extended into the air. "Make sure to get me a strawberry éclair!" she ordered.

Shirou allowed himself a little smile. "Of course, Louise."

His hand twisted and the doorknob turned, then he pulled and the door swung open —

"Eep!"

— and Siesta, hand poised to knock, squeaked and blinked up at Shirou with big, wide eyes.

"What? Who's at the door, Shirou? Is that Annabelle?"

"No, it's Siesta."

"Siesta?!"

"E-excuse me!" Siesta sketched a hasty bow. "U-um, Mister Shirou, M-Miss Louise...but, I just...th-that is, um, I mean...what I'm trying to say is..."

Her mouth screwed up and she hefted a frustrated sigh, head drooping and shoulders sagging.

"I'm sorry," she muttered to the floor, "it's just...with everything that's happened, I don't..."

"It's fine," Shirou reassured her. From the noncommittal grunt Louise gave, she didn't seem to agree.

"I thought you weren't going to be back for another few weeks," Louise said from her bed. For Louise, it was the same as asking if Siesta was okay.

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"The healers suggested I should," was Siesta's answer, "but I...I mean, all of the bruises and stuff are gone, right? So there wasn't any reason why I shouldn't return to work, and my family is relying on me to help support them and..."

She faded out again, but Shirou understood what she was saying. He was the same way — as long as all his limbs were attached and he was well enough to fight, nothing could convince him against it, and even sometimes when he wasn't well enough (*pain, Gilgamesh, he couldn't move his left arm — ah, that was only natural, because his left arm wasn't attached anymore*), he'd fight anyway.

"But that's not why I'm here," she continued. Siesta shook her head. "Um, no, I-I mean, I'm going to get back to work, yes, and, um, I've asked to attend to you specifically, Miss Louise, but what I'm saying is, um —"

"Spit it out!" Louise snapped. Her stomach gave another hungry growl, almost as though it agreed.

Siesta blinked. "O-oh! Um, well, yes. That is, I...I'd like to thank you, Miss Louise and Mister Shirou, for coming to rescue me."

She gave a short but deep bow, but it only served to make Shirou uncomfortable.

"There's no need to thank me," he said a little gruffly.

He could handle appreciation for his food and for small tasks, the sort of small things where people just said "thanks" and moved on, but he'd always had trouble with such sincere and heartfelt gratitude. That kind of gratefulness was...awkward, because why should they be thanking him?

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He'd only done what had come naturally to him and saved those within his reach.

Since it *was* something that came naturally to him and since he himself was rewarded simply by saving someone, receiving thanks for it left him feeling like he didn't deserve it.

Rin had called him distorted, once.

"Well, *I* won't turn her down," Louise piped up. "We went through a lot of trouble because of that whole fiasco!"

"I-I'm sorry to have troubled you."

"Ah, no, that's not..." Shirou couldn't see it from his spot at the door, but he could imagine the bright red that must have been painting Louise's cheeks. "Don't worry about it."

"B-but still!" Siesta persisted. "I want to thank you! So, um, there's an old family artifact passed down from my great-grandfather. I-I want you to have it."

Louise sputtered and shot up from the bed.

"Are you insane?! What kind of idiot gives away a historic family heirloom?!"

"It's not like it's that old!" Siesta insisted. "A-and it's the most valuable thing I can give away! I don't have anything else that I can give you to show my gratitude!"

She flushed suddenly and looked away towards the far wall, fidgeting nervously. "E-except, um, m-my hand."

Shirou grimaced. That sounded rather morbid. "Your hand?"

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"She means in marriage, you dolt!" Louise snapped again. "And he refuses, anyway! You're not even a Noble!"

Siesta flinched, but also relaxed a little, and an expression of relief — and disappointment? — crossed her face.

"I'll have to agree with her," Shirou said wryly. "I'm not planning on getting married anytime soon."

Or ever.

"Still!" Siesta insisted again. "You saved me! So please, accept my gratitude and take it!"

She bowed again, her entire body stiff and determined, and though it made him uncomfortable, Shirou had also learned that it was best to just accept when someone tried to reward him. Some people just felt that there was a debt to be filled and couldn't be persuaded otherwise.

Usually, he just left before it became a problem. But at times like this, where that wasn't an option...

Shirou sighed. "What is it?"

"Shirou! You can't just take a family's artifact!"

Shirou neglected to mention that he already had, several times, but that had simply been disarming enemy combatants. A good portion of the artifacts he had collected — minus the stuff he had made himself — had gotten into his vault that way. Spoils of victory, as it were.

But he also remembered the little old woman in India who had handed him an elaborate necklace made of gold and glittering green emeralds and refused to accept it back when

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he'd tried to return it. He'd later sold it to a museum to help fund his airplane tickets so that he wouldn't be limited just to missions and interventions that the Association "allowed" him to take part in.

"I don't really want to," Shirou agreed. "But Siesta is determined to repay us, and if she wants to do so by giving away her family's artifact, then I will accept it gratefully."

"Shirou!"

He ignored her and turned his attention back to Siesta.

"How long will it take you to retrieve this artifact of yours?"

"O-oh!" Siesta blinked. "Oh, um, I can't. I'm sorry — I mean, it's not something I can move by myself, so..."

She left it hanging. From the bed, Shirou heard a great, big sigh.

"How far away is it?"

"Three days from here, in the village of Tarbes. U-um, there's a temple built around it and everything."

"A temple?!" Louise sputtered. "I thought you said this thing wasn't that valuable!"

"It's not!" Siesta insisted. "Um, I mean, it's pretty famous, yes! But my great-grandfather couldn't get it to work again, so he asked the local mages to put a preservation spell on it. He said it could fly, but most people just think it's a hoax. If we tried to sell it, I don't think anyone would actually buy it."

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She fidgeted again. "But, um, it's the only thing I have that I can repay you with. So, I know it might not be much, but I'd like you to have it anyway."

She trailed off again, and a long moment of silence hung in the air. Then, Louise let out another great, big sigh.

"At this rate," she said, "I might as well just buy a pair of horses, so we don't have to keep renting them from the Academy."

Siesta's face lit up like a lightbulb. "You'll come?" she asked eagerly. "Oh, you won't regret it, Miss Louise, I promise! I'm sure my family will be happy to welcome you into Tarbes!"

"Yes, yes, I know. But before we make any plans for leaving," Louise's stomach gave another loud growl, "do you think you could get us some breakfast, first?"

"Oh." Siesta sketched another hasty bow. "Oh, forgive me, Miss Louise! Of course! I'll get on it, right away!"

She spun around and rushed out of the room so quickly, the door almost blew closed in her wake.

On the bed, Louise let out another sigh.

"If something strange happens again, Shirou," she warned, "I'm blaming *you*."

Shirou chuckled.

"Duly noted."

— o.o.O.O.o —

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It was about midday when Shirou and Louise had finished packing everything they would need to take on their trip and started to load up their horses (and by the look the one was giving him, they were probably the same horses they had ridden to La Rochelle a few weeks before). Waiting outside the stable with her own horse, Siesta was already packed and watching with a patient sort of anticipation.

"We go to Tarbes, we get this artifact, and then we come right back here," Louise was saying as Shirou secured her pack to her horse's saddle. "No traitors, no Reconquista, no Heroic Spirits."

"Hopefully, it'll be that simple," Shirou mumbled back.

But when had it ever been?

"You'll have to stay for dinner," Siesta chattered excitedly, more to herself than them. "Oh, and meet my family, of course! My parents will want to thank you, and, oh, my brothers and sisters, too! I'm sure they'll all want to meet you!"

Louise groaned, low and under her breath.

"One night," she murmured to Shirou. "We'll stay with her family for one night."

"You don't just want to get in, accept the artifact, and leave?"

Louise huffed and squared her shoulders.

"There's this thing called courtesy," she told him. "I'm a Noble, and even if Siesta's family isn't, it would be rude and unbecoming of me to refuse her hospitality."

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"You can't just say, 'thanks, but no thanks?'"

"Of course not!" Louise hissed. "If they open up their home to us, it's only polite to accept! Common courtesy dictates that I must spend at least one night with her family if they offer!"

"— and my mother makes this delicious stew. Oh, and my great-grandfather's favorite noodle dish —"

"Well, if you're sure about it, then I guess I won't object."

"I don't really want to do it, no," Louise admitted. "But I don't want to be rude, either, so...so we're just going to have to stay the night."

"As you say, Louise."

"— and you'll just love it there, I know it!"

Shirou tied the last bag on and gave it a gentle yank — it stayed secured.

"We're ready to go," he announced.

Siesta stopped talking and blinked.

"Oh!" she gave a broad smile. "Then let's go! It's three days to Tarbes, heading in the direction of La Rochelle, so there's not a moment to waste!"

With expert ease, Siesta flung herself up and onto her horse, and next to Shirou, Louise did the same, looking faintly grumpy. Shirou looked at his own horse, which stared back with its beady black eyes and gave him a disgruntled nicker.

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"Don't give me that. I'm not any happier about this than you are."

One hoof pawed at the ground, kicking up a few reeds of straw.

"Well, it's not like I could *fly* to Tarbes. Although it would probably be much more comfortable."

The horse snorted and pulled its lips back into a passable imitation of a sneer, black eyes narrowed at him. Its look said, "If you don't appreciate my help, then get there some other way."

"Sure, I could *run* to Tarbes, but that'd leave Louise without protection. What happens if one of those Heroic Spirits decides she's too good a target to pass up while I'm gone?"

The horse nickered at him again and tossed its great head to one side, as though to say, "Just get on, already!"

"Love you, too."

He put one foot in the stirrups and swung himself up onto the horse's back, then took hold of the reins and steered it (a little more roughly than was probably necessary) around in the other direction. Both Louise and Siesta were staring — one with a look of faint annoyance, and the other on the verge of giggling.

"What?"

"It's a horse, Shirou," Louise said flatly.

"I think he likes you!" Siesta grinned.

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Shirou grunted sardonically. "He'd probably toss me off first chance he got if he thought he'd get away with it."

The beast beneath him gave a snort of agreement, flicking its ears back.

"Well, if you're done talking to him, let's get going," Louise said.

"Right —"

"Leaving without us?"

A gust of wind blasted the ground in front of them, and Sylphid, carrying Kirche, Tabitha, and, as was becoming all too common, Guiche, landed neatly in the courtyard, crooning a hello.

"Zerbst!"

From atop Sylphid's back, Kirche waved. "You didn't think we'd let you go on another adventure without us, did you?"

"I don't know how you managed to convince me to come along," Guiche murmured.

"Treasure, treasure!" said Kirche. "The Dragon's Raiment, remember?"

"Oh. Yeah."

"Zerbst!" Louise sputtered. "How did you...?!"

"Your door was open," Kirche said flippantly. "Actually, I'm sure the whole school probably knows by now. I can't have been the only one who overheard you."

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Siesta flushed bright red. Shirou very much wanted to pinch the bridge of his nose — wanted to, but didn't.

After the whole incident with the Princess and Guiche eavesdropping, they really should have learned: every wall in the Academy had ears.

"So naturally, you decided you were going to follow us again."

"Of course!" Kirche chirped. "Anywhere Darling goes, I have to follow! I can't let anyone else win your heart! Plus, well..."

Her smile fell and she glanced back at the school with a grimace, then shrugged. Shirou imagined she was probably thinking of all of the rumors flying around and the nosy classmates who seemed to have nothing better to do than pry.

"It'll be nice to get away from all that attention for a little while."

Louise sighed. The moment her shoulders dropped, Shirou knew she'd caved in.

"Fine," she said wearily. "Fine, you can come with us. Just...try to act more like a Noble, okay? And button up your shirt! I don't want the people of Tarbes to see you and think that all Nobles are as...as...*lascivious* as you!"

Red, red lips pulled into a broad grin, and Kirche gave a throaty chuckle. "Oh, Vallière, don't you know? You *can't* tame fire. You'll just get burned."

— o.o.O.O.o —

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The next two days went mostly as Shirou might have expected — in other words, the only way they could have gone with Kirche and Louise spending that much time in close proximity. Much of those two days, spent on a horse with nothing to do but talk and think, Kirche and Louise got into one argument or another, usually having to do with Kirche's personality and penchant for abrupt, amorous relationships. They even continued on into the night after they set camp, snipping back and forth at one another until they finally wore themselves out and got to sleep.

The second day wasn't any better, only slower and a bit less energetic, because no one had slept too well the previous night.

When they stopped for the night on the second day of their trip, everyone was tired and sore and so lethargic that Shirou wound up taking care of most of the labor — tying the horses down to the nearest thing resembling a post, gathering firewood, setting up the simple canvas tents that would serve as shelter for the night, and, to his delight, the cooking (Siesta tried to insist on doing it herself, but with the way she yawned and blinked at him blearily halfway through the argument, it didn't take much effort to convince her).

Since everyone was so tired, they all ate their supper in silence, offering only mumbled thanks and murmurs of appreciation for his cooking skills. Shirou silently promised himself that he would get back to a proper kitchen as soon as he was feasibly able and polish up on them — since it had been so long since he'd gotten the chance to make a proper meal, he had gotten incredibly rusty, which had been made clear as he was preparing tonight's dinner.

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By the time the sun had set and the two moons had risen into the sky, everyone else had gone to bed, muttering "good night" to each other along the way, leaving Shirou alone with Kirche, who was the only other person still up.

But Kirche, who still seemed wide awake to Shirou and in no danger of nodding off anytime soon, did not suddenly pounce on the opportunity presented to her to try and seduce him. Quite the contrary, she was unusually quiet and didn't so much as glance in his direction; she simply stared straight ahead into the campfire, eyes locked on the flames and face expressionless.

It was somewhat unnerving, if Shirou was honest.

But it was also somewhat relieving. Shirou had gotten quite used to her advances and had just grown tired of rebuffing her when she didn't seem to listen, so it was a nice change of pace not to have her throwing herself at him whenever he was within earshot.

"It's not just about the sex, you know," she said suddenly.

Shirou blinked at the non-sequitur.

"What?"

"Don't tell Louise," Kirche added quickly. "It's really too much fun, winding her up like that. Everything's always so *serious* with her, so *someone* needs to let out all that tension every now and again, and you're nearly as bad, and Guiche is afraid he'll be pulverized if he goes against anything you say, so it might as well be me. So don't tell Louise I said that."

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"I...make no promises," was Shirou's response. He still wasn't quite sure where the conversation was actually headed.

Kirche waved it off with an unbothered gesture of her hand.

"Anyway, it's not just about the sex," she repeated. "Or, well...not entirely. Don't get me wrong, it's really nice when a guy knows just what to do and where to touch, when to speed up, when to slow down, when to slap —"

"I get it," he said, a little more gruffly than he intended.

"Right," she said, unperturbed. "Anyway, it's nice when a guy knows what he's doing and knows how to please me, but it's not just about the sex."

"Then what is it about?"

"*Passion*," she told him, putting a sultry emphasis on the word. "Finding someone who can...light the fire in me. Someone who makes my skin burn and my blood boil with just a simple word or a feather-light touch. Someone whose voice sets me ablaze at just the right moment, but makes me smolder the rest of the time. Someone who just...*ignites* me simply by existing."

She gave a shudder and her entire body quivered as her head tilted back, and Shirou was struck by the unbelievable possibility that she might have gotten herself off just by *fantasizing* about it.

"My whole life is about finding that passion," Kirche said wispily, "finding the person who can make me feel that way. Sex is the closest I've ever gotten to that sort of feeling, but in

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the end, it's always disappointing, because it doesn't last." She shrugged. "But it's amazing while it does."

At last, she turned to look at him, eyes somewhat glassy from the haze of what he was sure had been a sexual climax, and gave him a smile — a simple upturn of the lips, without any sultry or lascivious undertones.

"I don't know if I'll ever find that person," she admitted, but she didn't sound at all bothered by the thought that she might not. "Until I do, I'll keep chasing after that feeling, pursuing casual relationships with whoever lights a strong enough spark. And Darling..."

Her pupils dilated broadly and a flush crept across her cheeks.

"...the spark *you* lit is the strongest one I've *ever* felt."

Shirou, uncomfortable, turned away. "I've already told you that my heart belongs to another."

"I don't steal men who already belong to someone," Kirche denied. "Any woman who can't keep her husband in the first place can't lay any claim. If his heart really belongs to someone else, then he wouldn't look twice at me anyway."

He glanced back over at her; she was hunched over, her elbows wresting on her knees, her hands dangling between her legs, and her bronze skin made almost golden in the flickering firelight.

"You said you already have someone," she went on shrewdly, "but she's not here, is she?"

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The memory of Saber as she was just before she vanished, standing atop that hill and haloed in the golden light of the dawn, appeared in his head, her features somewhat blurred from the many years it had been since he'd seen her last. Shirou kept his expression the same and tried not to give anything away, but the way Kirche's lips quirked upwards on the one side told him that he hadn't succeeded.

"I thought so." She leaned backwards, her chest thrust out and her spine bent forwards like a tense bow, and gave him a smile that was part triumphant, part grim, and part something else, though he wasn't sure what. "So, that talking sword of yours must've been telling the truth, then. You're from another world. And so is your lover."

Very deliberately, Shirou did not turn his eyes to glare at Derf, who was huddled silently in his sheath. It wouldn't have changed anything — she already knew, and Shirou didn't have the skill to do something like hypnotize her to forget a memory that was more than a week old.

Besides, Saber had been gone for nearly fifty years, now. If he continued on, if he held that image of her in his heart and in his memories until the day he died, if that wonderful miracle occurred a third time, then he would see her again, wouldn't he? Hadn't he already come to terms with that?

And then, Kirche delivered the final blow.

"She's dead, isn't she?"

This time, Shirou did flinch — not much, just a wince around the eyes and a tightening of his lips, but if the earlier tell was subtle enough that Shirou wasn't sure what had

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tipped her off, this one might as well have been shouted with a megaphone.

"I thought so," Kirche said a bit smugly. "The passion between two lovers who cherish one another with all their hearts is the sort of thing they write stories and sing songs about — something as measly as a few magic runes and an obligation to Louise wouldn't be enough to keep you here if there was someone for you to go back to."

Shirou flinched again as the image of Rin, broken and bleeding and dead, popped up in his mind's eye. It took a minute to drive that memory back where it belonged.

Saber was gone — had been gone for so long that he could barely remember the shape of her face or the sound of her voice. Ilya had died not long after. Rin, his best friend, who had supported him even in his stupidest moments, had been killed. And Sakura...who even knew if she was still alive, if Zouken's twisted magecraft hadn't done something irreversible or if she hadn't been hunted down in the aftermath of that fight with the Association merely for knowing him?

There was nothing for Shirou to go back to except for his ideals, no one left alive who really understood him — and, in the first place, wasn't this world in need of saving just as much as his own?

"That changes nothing," Shirou responded.

"On the contrary — fire is life is passion. Passion is for the living, Darling; the dead can no longer love."

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*Not even once retreating,
Not even once being understood.
He was always alone.*

Thus, his life has no meaning.

"There will come a time when you find yourself in my place."

His fingers curled into a fist.

"There is no longer any person alive with a claim on your heart," Kirche told him simply. "So I will pursue it, as I pursue the spark that exists between you and I. Age is simply a measure of experience, Darling, so I don't care about yours. The only thing that truly separates us is an old flame — and no flame is meant to burn forever."

But Shirou couldn't listen anymore. He stood suddenly and silently, and without a word, he snatched up Derflinger and slung the sword over his shoulder, then he turned his back on the fire, stepped over the log he'd been sitting on, and made his way towards the tent where he'd be sleeping. There was a shrill ringing in his ears, and he didn't dare to look back, lest he say something out of anger.

"Darling," she called after him.

Shirou stopped. He stopped, and for a moment, he just stood there, his fingers shaking, his chest painfully tight, and hating himself for wondering if maybe she was right. It had been so very long since that time, those two weeks (lived twice) that had been so wonderful and terrible at once. It had been so very long since he'd seen her face, heard her voice, felt the warmth of her skin beneath his fingers.

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How much longer would he continue on? How much longer until he saw her again? Pursuing his ideals had carried him this far, but...

But the miracle of meeting her, the miracle of living with her, the miracle that had graced his life an impossible two times. After all these years, could it happen a third time? Could he see her again, one day?

Or was he simply chasing an ever-distant dream?

He'd never let it reach him before, this sort of indecisiveness. He'd always clung to that beautiful vision because it was too beautiful to lose.

"The dead can no longer love," Kirche had said. "No flame is meant to burn forever."

She had struck something, something so deeply buried that it had caught him by surprise when she had unearthed it. A doubt, perhaps, a shadow of a doubt, a shadow of a shadow, something too weak on its own to bother him...

But...

But was it all meaningless? Was it all worthless? Was he hanging onto this belief so desperately, even though it wasn't true? Was it nothing more than a fantasy, crafted around the words from a half-remembered dream?

When the time came, would he even...would Saber still...

"Shirou...I love you."

No. His heart slowed and calmed and his hands steadied. No, that was right. What Kirche spoke of, those were the

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words of someone young and inexperienced, someone who had never truly loved. She didn't really understand what it meant to be one half of a whole, to be so completely joined with another person that you were empty without her.

Love was not about knowing. The heart did not listen to the brain so easily, was not swayed by logic and reasoning and materialism. To be in love was not to recognize, "I'm the most compatible with this person, therefore we must be in love." It wasn't something you could prove in the thinking or with empirical evidence. That wasn't how it worked.

Love was faith and trust. It was believing in another person, knowing in the heart that you were deeply connected to another person. It was knowing, not through logic and evidence, but through intuition and intimacy, that there was someone who understood you and accepted you as you were, and it was understanding and accepting that person in the same way.

Shirou had faith that at the end of the road, when it was finally time for him to set down his sword and rest, Saber would be there waiting for him.

"You've never been in love, so you don't understand," Shirou said finally, without turning around. "When she left, she took everything of myself with her, and she left everything of herself with me. What you're trying to compete against, Kirche, is not a withering bonfire or an old candle that might be snuffed out at any moment, but the light of the sun itself."

And when he closed his eyes for a moment, he could see her gentle smile, could see her lips curve around her

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declaration of love as dawn broke on the horizon behind her and illuminated her in golden light. That beautiful dream, that utopia where she had gone to rest, if he searched for it tirelessly, then he could make it there.

"I carry that light within me, every day," he went on. "It can never disappear."

Inside of him, the Image of Victory gleamed, impossibly bright and impossibly flawed, the one sword he could not make. The sheath was gone — had disappeared from him when the Grail was dismantled — but that shining visage of that sword, *her* sword, could never be taken from him.

"If you chase after me, you'll waste your whole life chasing me. But I suppose it makes me a bit of a hypocrite to tell you not to pursue an impossible dream."

"Darling..."

"Don't chase after me, Kirche. My path is one you can't follow. Fall in love with someone else and achieve happiness."

He left her without another word.

Knowing her, she probably wouldn't listen, and he wouldn't be surprised when she didn't.

After all, he hadn't listened either, back when Archer had told him what fate awaited him at the end of the road.

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CONTINUE?

[YES/NO]

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #8

"We're back again!" Ilya crowed. "Time for the next Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner! Welcome!"

She thrust her hands into the air towards the banner that had been set up above her. It said, "Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner" in bright, bold lettering.

Ilya let her arms drop and leaned towards the camera. "Tohsaka-sensei is still feeling under the weather," she whispered conspiratorially, "so Professor Velvet will be joining us again."

"Professor Velvet, huh?" Waver puffed on his cigar. "I think I like that."

"Don't get used to it," Ilya said flatly.

"Ha." Waver blew out some smoke. "I know, I know, this is Tohsaka's gig, I'm just standing in for her."

"That's right," Ilya smiled. "At the end of the day, even when you're a total badass, you're still just second best!"

"Heh!" Waver grunted. "I remember when punks like you used to give me respect! Kids these days..."

"Says the middle-aged man who hangs around in his underwear playing video games on his off days," was Ilya's reply.

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"And I ain't ashamed," Waver said, taking another puff of his cigar. "You gotta live life by your own rules. Don't let anyone else tell you what kind of person you should be."

"Which is just a justification old men like you use to rationalize behaving like children," Ilya said succinctly. Waver grunted again. "Anyway, today, in celebration of our 10th chapter, we have a special guest!"

"Wait, special guest? I didn't hear anything about a special guest!"

"It was in the department memo sent out a week ago. Didn't you read it? It said that we were inviting a special guest onto the show this chapter."

"Memo? What memo? I didn't get any memo! And for that matter, what kind of idiot would actually accept an invite to guest star on this stupid segment —"

BOOM!

With a crack like thunder, a gigantic bear landed on stage.

"UUUUUUU – LA – LA – LAAH!"

Arms raised, the red fur rippled. White teeth gleamed from between rugged crimson hair, pulled into a broad grin. It was —

"Ack! Wait, that's not a bear! That's —!"

"Iskandar-san!" Ilya waved cheerfully. "Welcome!"

"Ho-ho!" Iskandar grinned. "It's good to be here, Miss Ilya! Say, I thought I heard my vassal's voice, just now."

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"Idiot!" Waver punched Iskandar in the arm. "Rider, you idiot!"

But Iskandar just blinked and looked down at him. "Is that you, boy?"

He leaned over, inspecting Waver for a moment, then leaned back and grinned again. "You've gotten taller!" He slapped Waver on the back. "Good on you, boy!"

"Ack!" Waver jerked forwards and nearly swallowed his cigar. "Pah! Watch it, you stupid oaf! And what's with that greeting? All the stuff that's happened since you went and got yourself killed, and *that's* the first thing you say to me?!"

"Well, sure," Iskandar blinked, scratching at his cheek. "Unless you aren't happy to be taller. Aren't you happy to be taller?"

"Ugh. Just... You know what? Nevermind."

"*Anyway*," Ilya interjected, "we need to get back on topic! Remember, Professor Velvet? The Grail! The Grail!"

"Right, right." Waver puffed on his cigar. "The Grail."

"Grail, eh?" Iskandar rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Say, boy, this wouldn't happen to be anything like that trinket we fought for in that War, would it?"

"In the broadest sense, it's similar, yeah."

"So it's a wish-granting device!" Iskandar dropped his fist into his open hand. "Ha! Then it could —"

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"Idiot!" Waver grunted. "I said, 'in the broadest sense!' If you'd been here last time, you'd already know — *the Halkeginia Grail isn't something you fight over!*"

Iskandar scratched his head. "It isn't?"

"No!"

"Iskandar-san," Ilya piped up, "the Halkeginia Grail is only meant to summon the mages' familiars. If a Heroic Spirit is summoned, then he gets a flesh-and-blood body and the skill, Incarnation, but it's not a ritual to achieve True Magic or grant a wish."

"I see, I see." Iskandar nodded, then grinned. "So if I'd been summoned by this Grail, then I could have had my wish granted anyway! Ha! Boy, I've decided! I'm going to appear in this story!"

Waver let out an indignant squawk. "That's not up to you!"

"It isn't?"

"No! It's not!"

"But why not?"

"Because you're not writing this story! Idiot!"

"So I've just got to talk to this author guy, then. Ha! Maybe he'd like to join me!"

"Idiot! You idiot!"

"Anyway," Ilya turned the camera in her direction, "since those two are having a lovers' spat, I guess it's up to me to

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finish up with the Grail lecture. Right. Last time, we talked about limitations, so this time, we're going to talk about history."

She stuck her finger up in the air and rest one hand on her hip, and she grinned. "I learned this pose from Rin!"

She cleared her throat.

"So the Halkeginia Grail wasn't actually Old Man Brimir's idea. As I'm sure most of you have already figured out, it was originally conceived by that infamous troll, Kis —"

"WAIT A MINUTE!"

Waver grabbed the camera and turned it back in his direction. "If I'm gonna be roped into doing this stupid show, then I'm gonna do it, damn it!"

In the background, Iskandar laughed.

Waver coughed into his hand and took another puff on his cigar. "Anyway, the idea for the Halkeginia Grail goes to the Old Man of the Jewels, Zelretch. Old Brimir was his apprentice back in the day — c'mon, who saw that one coming? — which means that all Void Mages are inheritors of the Second True Magic and can use a fraction of its power."

"Which explains the World Door and World Gate spells," Ilya added. "I mean, opening up a pathway between parallel worlds? Anyone who gave it any thought should've realized that!"

"But what does that have to do with this Grail?" Iskandar asked, puzzled.

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"I'm getting there!" Waver grunted. Puff. "As I was saying, the Grail was built as a collaboration between Brimir and Zelretch. Though it's designed to handle all kinds of familiars for all kinds of mages, its primary function is actually balancing the inheritance of the Void."

"Like Louise, Joseph, Vittorio, and Tiffania, right?" Ilya asked.

"Exactly," Waver answered. "Everything was set up so that each of the four Brimiric nations would only have access to a specific spell set and was hardwired with a specific Void Familiar. Usually, Void Mages summon regular humans as their familiars, but in the case where something upsets the balance — like, for example, the first Void Mage of the four to summon summons a Heroic Spirit — the Halkeginia Grail will compensate by summoning an appropriate being to each of the other three."

"But if there's one Heroic Spirit in Gallia, one yet unrevealed in Albion, one unrevealed in Romalia, this Shirou guy in Tristain, and that three man team bouncing around, doesn't that make six Heroic Spirits outside of the main character?" Iskandar wondered. He dropped his fist into his hand. "Haha! Someone's summoning Heroic Spirits! That means I could still show up!"

"Wha — I thought you weren't paying attention to the story!"

Iskandar blinked. "I never said that."

"Wha — but you — !"

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"Anyway," Iskandar interrupted, "what do I have to do to wind up on this roster, eh? I want to get in on the action! It's a whole new world to conquer!"

"Donate \$500 to the author so that he can afford to buy a new laptop," Ilya said simply.

"I can do that!" Iskandar grinned.

"*Monthly*," Ilya added flatly.

Iskandar didn't falter. "Even then!"

"Do you have it on you?" Ilya asked innocently.

Iskandar looked down at himself, at the breastplate which covered his chest, at the two-layered skirt which covered his thighs with fabric and leather, down to his sandals. He had no pockets, whatsoever.

"Uh..."

"Cash, up front," Ilya declared. "No checks or credit cards."

"I'm good for it!" Iskandar insisted. "I just need to get into the story and start conquering, and I could get it —"

"No IOUs," came the final nail.

Off to the side, Waver grunted. "I'm getting too old for this crazy —BLEEP—."

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #8: End

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Chapter XI: Shining Sword of Salvation

They arrived just outside Tarbes without fanfare around midday of the third day of travel, almost exactly seventy-two hours after leaving the Academy. They were all sweaty and dirty, and the only reason they didn't offend everyone within ten feet with their odor was because of the liberal use of "Freshening Charms," which was apparently a spell every Noble learned from the moment they could walk.

In a world without cars that could turn a three day ride into a three hour one, Shirou could certainly understand why they would need them.

Down the gentle slope in front of them stretched out the village of Tarbes, a sleepy little town with a population, Shirou estimated, of about three thousand or so. The roads were comprised entirely of well-worn dirt pathways, and the houses, consisting mostly of collections of buildings spread out in tight little clusters, were a creamy white with slanted tan roofs, resembling, more than anything, the 18th century structures Shirou had seen in London while he'd been staying at the Clock Tower with Rin. Leafy green trees, in full summer bloom, sprouted up between houses and out towards the edges of the town, and a small white fence, about waist height, circled the village in its entirety.

To the left of the village, there were large swathes of land that had been smoothed down and plowed so that food could be grown, and in the center of town, three narrow towers jutted upwards from what Shirou imagined was probably the

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local church. Way back, in the distance, a forest sprawled out towards the horizon, and three large mountains loomed like fortress walls over the little town.

Compared to the Academy, which was incredibly remote and sat by itself, Mott's mansion, which had been situated as far from the nearby city as humanly possible, and the overly crowded capital that hosted the Princess and the royal palace, Shirou found Tarbes to be surprisingly homely and welcoming.

"Welcome to Tarbes," Siesta said brightly. "It might not be very large or terribly important, but it's home."

"...It's a farming village," Louise was the first to say, brow furrowed.

"O-oh, yes, it is. Um, i-is there something wrong with that?"

Louise, who didn't seem to have heard her, lifted a finger and pointed at the mountains in the distance.

"And those would be the Pyrenees Mountains," she said, almost to herself. "Which means..."

Her arm swung around to point vaguely northward. "...Aquitaine would be in that direction."

"And Germania's that way," Kirche jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "What's with the geography lesson, Vallière?"

Louise shook her head. "Nothing," she said, again, mostly to herself, "I guess I just didn't realize how close to home we were."

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"Home?" Shirou asked.

"The de La Vallières rule the Duchy of Aquitaine," Guiche answered. He pointed towards a mountain to the far left, which, though much farther away, seemed the same size, meaning it must've have been the tallest peak. "That's Aneto...So Aquitaine would be about forty miles north of here. And then La Rochelle..."

He pointed to another spot, which, Shirou realized as he scrutinized it more closely, was actually familiar. In fact, he could swear he recognized it, but where exactly...

...Hang on a minute, now.

"Not you, too, Guiche!" Kirche huffed. "I thought we were here for an artifact, not a geography lesson!"

Guiche shook his head.

"It's not that," he said. "It's just...that's the path we took to La Rochelle about two weeks ago. Sir Wardes insisted on going through the mountain pass because it was more expedient, so how..."

"How did we miss an entire village on our way there?" Shirou finished.

Siesta gasped. "Oh my! You went *through* the forest?"

"Sir Wardes insisted," Guiche confirmed. "He, um, wanted to make up time for stopping to set up camp at night."

Siesta let out a squeak, and a look of amazed horror stretched across her face.

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"You *slept* in the forest?"

"Well, yes —"

"And you *survived*?!"

Guiche looked at her bewilderedly, Kirche had an eyebrow raised, and across from Shirou, as his own lips pulled into a frown, he could see a similar look begin to tug Louise's mouth down, too.

"Is there something wrong with the forest?" he asked.

"Something wrong?!" Siesta turned to him, hysterical. "Mister Shirou, *no one* who enters the forest *ever* comes back again! That's where the Fair Folk are!"

A wave of surprise washed over the rest of the group, and various reactions from shock to outright panic instantly followed.

"You mean *Fairies*?" Kirche asked incredulously. "I thought those were just stories!"

"Oh my god." Guiche, pale as milk, leaned backwards against his horse, shaking. He looked like a man who had just barely escaped death. "Oh my god."

"By the Founder," Louise muttered, wide-eyed. "You — you're sure?"

Siesta nodded her head.

"The treeline marks the edge of their territory," she explained. "But they can come out, if they want. That's why we requested a priest put up the fence —" she gestured

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towards the white fence that encircled the town — "so that they couldn't come in at night and steal away the children."

"Steal away the children?" Shirou wondered aloud. That didn't sound much like what he knew of the Fae.

"And replace them with changelings!" Siesta confirmed.

"Changelings?" Shirou repeated skeptically.

Siesta looked at him incredulously. "You've never heard of *Fairies*, Mister Shirou?"

"I've met a few —" a certain snobbish Queen of Avalon came to mind — "but they're nothing like what you're describing."

The others gaped open-mouthed at him, doing passable imitations of goldfish — even Tabitha was staring at him with widened eyes and raised eyebrows. All except for Louise, who didn't seem the least bit surprised by the news.

"M-met a *Fairy*?" Guiche squeaked.

"And came back *alive*?" Kirche finished for him.

"M-Mister Shirou..."

It was Louise who interjected with logic.

"Different world, remember?"

Realization dawned on Kirche and Guiche's faces, and Tabitha's eyebrows settled back down into place as she turned her eyes back to her book. It was only Siesta who still looked bewildered.

"Different world?"

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Louise and Guiche grimaced and glanced at one another, and Shirou opened his mouth to explain, but before he could get the first word out, Kirche reached over and gave Siesta a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

"I'll explain later."

"O-oh. Thank you, Miss Kirche."

Shirou cleared his throat. "So what are fairies like here, then?"

If he had to face one, the better idea would be being prepared.

Siesta opened her mouth to start telling him, but it was Louise this time who reached over (and up) and grasped Siesta's shoulder.

"I'll tell him," she said simply. "You lead us where we're going."

"Oh, yes! Um, we'll need to head to my house, first, so I can let my parents know I'm in town and to make dinner for more people."

"It's fine," said Louise.

"Right!" Siesta said. "Follow me, please, everyone."

She turned back down the road and started towards the sleepy town of Tarbes. After glancing once at one another, the others fell into step behind her, with Shirou and Louise at the back, Kirche, Tabitha, and Guiche in the middle, and Sylphid lumbering with surprising grace at the tail end.

"So," Shirou said as they walked, "fairies?"

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"Right," Louise nodded. She adopted a painfully familiar lecture pose that had Shirou's heart skipping a beat. "Well, the first thing to understand is that fairies are generally regarded as nothing more than myth. Some parents tell bedtime stories about the dangers of wandering into the forest at night, but since no one has ever actually laid eyes on a fairy — at least, not in over three hundred years — most people think they're nothing more than folklore."

"Maybe they were killed off," Shirou muttered to himself. After all, that was what had happened to the Elementals back home — those that hadn't retreated to the untouchable places inside the World had been overrun as mankind grew and expanded uncontrollably.

"Who's to say?" Louise answered. "Anyway, most of what we know about fairies comes from folk stories. Supposedly, they look a lot like people, but have pointed ears and can sprout wings and fly at any moment, and their magic is said to be completely different than that of humans. According to the myths, they're burned by wrought iron and incapable of entering a place marked by holy symbols, which is why —"

As they passed through the gate, she gestured to the fence, which was marked with strange ovular symbols with one pointed end and a line jutting out on either side. They looked to have been painted on there with blood.

"— the fence here is set up this way. As long as the fence remains closed, it's like a protective barrier that keeps them away."

Shirou's eyes narrowed on the symbol. "Sacraments..." he muttered.

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"Exactly," Louise nodded. "They're also known to kidnap children in the middle of the night and leave behind shapeshifters called "changelings" that will pretend to be human for a while, and then go back to the Fairies later. In some stories, they don't even leave a changeling behind; they just kidnap the baby and disappear."

Shirou hummed.

He'd never heard anything like that before, except in the legend of Sir Lancelot, who, only an infant at the time, had been taken in by the Lady of the Lake as his human father lay dying. Of course, that wasn't saying much, because everything else he knew about Fairies came from personal experience, and he hadn't ever bothered to sit down and read up on English folklore or go through the Clock Tower records.

In either case...

"Siesta." Siesta looked back at him over her shoulder.

"Yes, Mister Shirou?"

"Are you still having problems with these Fairies?"

She blinked at him.

"Oh, no!" she said. "Well, I mean, sometimes some livestock or crop goes missing, and anyone who doesn't believe in the stories and enters the forest anyway isn't heard from again, but things have been fine ever since the fence got put up."

"How long ago was that?"

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"It must've been..." She put a finger to her lips thoughtfully. "Shortly after my great-grandfather settled down here. That was almost eighty years ago."

"Your great-grandfather?" Louise asked.

Siesta nodded.

"Yes," she said. "He came to Tarbes about eighty years ago, claiming to be from a distant country in the East and that he had no way home, because his flying machine had crashed. People were wary of him — he was quite strange looking, and his story was too unbelievable — but eventually, because he was polite and worked hard, they welcomed him here and he settled down with a local farm girl. My family has been here ever since."

She smiled a fond little smile. "Or that's how the stories go."

Something in the back of Shirou's head niggled at him. "Flying machine?"

Siesta nodded again. "Oh yes! He called it something different, though. What was it again? A fighting get? A flying pet? A —"

"Fighter jet?" Shirou finished incredulously.

If something like that was here in Halkeginia, then that meant this wasn't the first time someone like him had been pulled into this world, and if Siesta's great-grandfather hadn't been Gandalfr, hadn't been *summoned* as a familiar, then that meant that there *was* a method of traveling back and forth.

There might yet be a way for him to get home.

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"That was it! What a strange name for a flying machine."

Guiche looked back at him. "You've heard of this flying machine before, Sir Shirou?"

"Something like that. But I never would have expected to find one *here* of all places. Siesta, what happened to it?"

"It crashed, the story says," was her answer. "It'd be at the bottom of Arrêt Darré Lake."

And probably rusted beyond repair after 80 years in the water. Well, there went that idea.

"Was this 'fighter jet' another thing from your world, Darling?" Kirche asked.

"It probably was," Shirou confirmed. "Depending upon when it got here, it might've been anything from a Mitsubishi F-2 to something like an old World War Two-era Zero Fighter."

"I don't understand. What's the difference?"

Well, aside from age and speed, Shirou wasn't exactly sure.

"Armaments, probably. A Mitsubishi F-2 would be much faster and have more powerful, more accurate weapons. Against any modern aircraft, a Zero Fighter would lose — *horribly*."

"Like the difference between a human and a Heroic Spirit," Louise mumbled thoughtfully.

"Maybe not to that extreme, but basically, yeah."

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"U-um, Mister Shirou, I don't understand. What's a heroic spirit?"

Shirou blinked and looked back to Siesta, and he realized that no, he hadn't ever explained any of those things to her. Kirche, Guiche, and Tabitha had been there when he'd had to explain it all to Wales, and Louise had heard it all much earlier than that, but there'd never been any need to tell Siesta.

Luckily, Kirche saved him from having to launch into it again by promising, "I'll explain that later, too."

"Oh. Thank you, Miss Kirche."

"So what happened next, then? With your great-grandfather, that is."

"He walked here, to the nearest village, and eventually settled down. He had to get help, though, to go and bring his other artifact back to the village. They even had to hire a few mages to bring it all the way back here, because great-grandfather didn't know how to make it work."

"Was it really that big?" Louise asked.

"Oh yes," Siesta nodded. "It was so big, the temple that houses it now had to be built around it, because it wouldn't fit anywhere else. One of the mages put a protective spell on it to keep it from rusting or anything, but other than that, it's just been sitting there ever since they brought it back."

"So it's sort of like a landmark or a...monument?" Shirou guessed.

And she wanted to hand this over to him?
Something *that* valuable with *that* much history?

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She shrugged. "Not really. There're always some tourists who want to get a look at it, but it's not really special and no one will miss it. I think most of the townsfolk have gotten tired of being asked about it, actually, and — oh, we're here."

Siesta stopped and looked up at the house to the left, which was large and wide and appeared to have been expanded outwards several times. Like the other houses in town, it was built in a strangely familiar style similar to the Renaissance-era architecture Shirou had seen in Italy during one of his co-ops with the Church.

But even though the warm beige brickwork and slanted orange-red roof were basically identical to all of the other buildings in town, there was something about this house, about Siesta's house, that seemed friendlier, more inviting. Something, Shirou wasn't sure what, made it feel more like coming home, like he was being welcomed back after a long time away.

It even had that terribly cliché white picket fence, the kind you only really saw on postcards.

"It's not much," Siesta said fondly as she opened the gate, "but it's home."

They followed her in, Shirou brushing his fingertips along the chipped white paint, and up the lawn to the front door.

"It's bigger than I expected," Guiche mumbled.

Siesta gave a little shake of her head. "My family has always been a large one. When Great-grandfather settled down here, this house was much smaller, but as my family grew bigger and bigger, we needed more room, so..."

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She left it hanging, but no more needed to be said — the sheer number of expansions and additions, so large that the fence had to be moved at least twice (based upon noticeable differences in the white paint), said everything she didn't.

"How many siblings do you have?" Louise asked in a strange sort of voice.

"Seven," was Siesta's answer, "and I'm the oldest."

It was said with the tinge of exasperated fondness that only an eldest sibling, having to deal with all of the troubles and problems associated with being the oldest and most responsible, could understand.

Naturally, after years of having put up with Fuji-nee and later Ilya, Shirou was intimately familiar with it.

"That's why I got a job at the Academy," she explained, "to help pay the bills so my parents had enough money to feed my brothers and sisters."

"Oh," was Louise's awkward reply.

When they reached the front door, Siesta twisted the knob and opened it — with a faint creak — then turned back around to face the rest of them.

"Please wait here," she said. "I have to go and tell my parents I've brought all of you back with me."

Then, she turned back around and disappeared into the house, leaving the rest of the group to stand all huddled together on the front porch.

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For a long, awkward moment, they just stood there in silence. Even the usually vibrant Kirche didn't have anything to say, and Guiche, who was shifting from foot to foot every second or two, looked somewhat uncomfortable. Tabitha continued to read as though nothing was the matter. Next to Shirou, Louise's foot began to tap, tap, tap rhythmically against the cobblestone steps, and he thought he could make out something resembling the famous Frere Jacques lullaby from his world's France.

Then, from within the house, an exuberant cry of "Siesta!" reached them at the front door.

— o.O.O.O.o —

"I'm sorry about that," Siesta apologized for the third time.

"It's fine," Louise ground out.

"I really am."

"It's fine."

"Maybe if I'd been more specific —"

"*It's fine.*"

"Don't be too hard on the poor woman, Vallière," Kirche said smugly. "Obviously, she can recognize quality when she sees it. It's only natural —" she thrust out her chest to illustrate her point — "we Germanians are simply built better."

Siesta flushed and turned nervously to Louise again. "I'm *really, really* sor —"

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"It's. *Fine.*"

Shirou let out a sigh through his nose.

After they'd been let into the house and Siesta had started to introduce them to her parents, Siesta's mother had been absolutely ecstatic to meet the "beautiful, wonderful, red-haired Louise Vallière" that had "saved her darling daughter, Siesta." Siesta had "told her so much" about "how kind" and "how generous" she was, and how she had rescued her from "that dirty old Count Mott." For all that her mother talked about it, Siesta had sung Louise's praises to the high heavens during the week or so she'd been recovering from the whole ordeal.

It would have been a perfect moment to help build Louise's self-esteem and make her feel she had accomplished something with value and meaning...if only Siesta's mother hadn't mistaken Kirche for Louise.

It wasn't a terribly impossible mistake to make — if one had only the hair color as a descriptor, then simply saying that "Louise de La Vallière is a redhead" would only narrow it down to about one-hundred-million people (on Shirou's Earth, anyway), and if two redheaded girls were presented to you, your natural reaction after hearing about a kind, generous, well-adjusted person would be to pick the older, more mature-looking girl.

In this case, Kirche.

It had happened to Shirou, too; whenever he met someone who had heard of "Shirou Emiya," who had saved so many lives and toughed out numerous battlefields, the first

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thing he often heard after introducing himself was something like, "I thought you'd look a lot tougher," or "I expected you to be taller." With his patchwork hair and his smooth, youthful features, Shirou didn't really look like a hardened veteran, and his height — 178 centimeters, or about seventy inches — was only slightly above average.

But the fact that it wasn't a difficult mistake to make didn't improve Louise's mood in the slightest. On the contrary — it only made her mood *worse*.

Shirou cleared his throat a little.

"Siesta," he began, "where is this temple you were talking about?"

Louise shot him something of a glare for the obviousness of his tactic, but Siesta seemed relieved to finally talk about something else.

"It's on the outskirts of the village, past the church. Since there was no room on our property, it was agreed that it would be best to put it out of the way, where it wouldn't interfere with our daily lives."

She pointed out in the direction to the left of the church's bell tower. "Just over there. It'll only take about five minutes."

"I can see why, if it attracted tourists and treasure hunters," Guiche mumbled thoughtfully.

"Something like that, yes."

Right, because it'd get really disruptive if something that attracted so many people was situated in the middle of the village square.

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"So," Kirche began, "this artifact we're here for —"

"What's with this 'we' you're talking about?" Louise grumbled.

"— what is it, exactly, anyway?"

"Oh," Siesta said. "Yes, um... No one is really sure what it is, actually. My great-grandfather told everyone that it could fly, though."

"Fly?" Guiche parroted incredulously. "You mean, without a Windstone?"

"No one knows for sure how it works," Siesta replied. "Um, it's sort of like a boat, but it has wings and all sorts of strange structures on the inside — no Windstones, though. None of the mages who've come to Tarbes to look at it were able to get it to fly, either."

Shirou glanced over at Siesta, who was still describing this artifact of her family's, and a creeping suspicion was beginning to take form in his head.

Shaped vaguely like a boat, but also having wings; strange structures on the inside — wires and pipes, perhaps, though he'd have to get a look first — this was starting to sound less and less like a magical artifact and more and more like some kind of jet or plane.

But her great-grandfather had himself been a fighter pilot, she'd said. If this artifact was another type of jet or plane, it shouldn't have been difficult to get it flying, too. In that case, if it wasn't a jet or a plane from his world...

What could it be, then?

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"None of them?" Kirche repeated. "I mean, Tristain is stuck up and prudish and a bit backwards, but when it comes to magical studies, this is the best country on the continent! There's a reason why every Noble who can sends their heirs to the Magic Academy here, after all!"

Siesta shook her head. "Mages from all over have come to check it out at one point or another; there was one from Germania, a rather nice nobleman from Albion, a couple of Gallian scholars, an inquisitor from Romalia — most of them before I was born — oh! Now that I think of it, there was this rather pushy blonde woman from the Oriz Academy who came here a year ago to examine it, but she didn't get anywhere, either."

At the mention of the last one, Louise let out a low groan and mumbled something that sounded like "Belly snore."

"I mean no offense, Miss Siesta," Guiche said politely, "but are you sure it can actually fly and your great-grandfather wasn't just looking for attention?"

Siesta shook her head.

"No one has actually seen it fly, and my great-grandfather admitted that he had no idea how it worked, either, so most of the people around here think it was just a hoax. But my great-grandfather insisted it could fly, until the day he died, so everyone in the village has heard of his great flying machine, his "Dragon's Raiment," by now."

Kirche stumbled.

"Dragon's Raiment?" she parroted. "Wait, *that's* the artifact you're going to give to Darling and Louise?"

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Siesta blinked at her. "Um...yes?"

Kirche sagged and let out a groan, and Guiche sighed.

"There goes our treasure," he muttered.

"But we had a map and everything!" Kirche lamented, pulling a piece of parchment from out of her cleavage and waving it around.

"I'm...sorry?" Siesta said uncertainly.

Without looking up from her book, Tabitha shook her head. "Not your fault."

Kirche, too, waved it off. "It's fine, it's fine. We just got our hopes up, is all." She smiled, crumpled up the map, and threw it away. "Well, it's not a total loss. Even if we don't get to have it, at least we'll get to see what the fuss is about."

— o.O.O.O.o —

The temple containing the Dragon's Raiment was situated a little bit farther than Siesta's original description had implied, but was still close enough that Shirou would describe it as being on the outskirts of the village. Past the last building, what was probably the local priest's house, there was a small field about fifty meters across, cut in half by a beaten pathway and dotted at the far end with a handful of maple trees. Framed by the trees was the temple, looking somewhat rundown and covered with vines and ivy.

In other words, it was just out of the way enough and just camouflaged enough that the eye would automatically pass over it under a casual scrutiny.

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Siesta led them up the beaten pathway, walking at the head of the group, and as they made for the temple, she started explaining the history of it again.

"After they brought it here, the mages set a protective spell on the Dragon's Raiment to keep it from rusting or falling apart, and then they constructed the temple around it to fit Great-grandfather's specifications. They were really generous — all they asked for was a month to study it."

"And they still couldn't discover anything about it?" Guiche asked politely.

Siesta shook her head.

"Even after having spent the month here to study it, they left empty-handed," she explained. "The way I heard the story, they told Great-grandfather that the enchantments and spells placed upon the Dragon's Raiment were so complex and so powerful, no modern mage could ever hope to unravel them and learn their secrets. They were almost convinced it was a divine instrument sent down by God."

As they came closer to the temple, she pointed up at a golden plaque, which was, much unlike the rest of the wood surrounding it, completely free of vines, moss, or ivy. It didn't even have so much as a scuff mark.

"The inquisitor who visited shortly after Great-grandfather's death almost took it to Romalia as a holy artifact, but when he heard about this plaque and Great-grandfather's last wishes, combined with the fact that no one could make it work, he eventually decided to leave it here."

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Written in strange letters on the plaque above the doors was the solemn will, "To those who read this inscription, only you may take this treasure from its resting place. Navy Ensign Sasaki Takeo."

"What does the plaque say?"

"No one knows. Grandfather says that Great-grandfather instructed that only someone who could read it was allowed to take the Dragon's Raiment, but no one has ever deciphered it. It's written in a strange language that no one in Halkeginia seems to speak."

But Shirou could read it. As clear as day, he knew what those letters said, what those symbols were.

The writing on the plaque was Japanese.

"Siesta," Shirou began, "your Great-grandfather, did he have a name that sounded really strange and foreign?"

She blinked bewilderedly at him. "How did you know?"

Shirou didn't answer. He had suspected it before, when she'd talked about how her great-grandfather had come from a country far to the east, that maybe Siesta's black hair and dark eyes hinted at an Asian ancestry, but now, he was almost certain of it. If this plaque was right — and it was written in Japanese, so it must be — then her great-grandfather could've been transported here around the time of the Fourth Grail War, or perhaps even sooner.

"And when he married, did he take his wife's name instead of her taking his?"

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Siesta's mouth made a surprised little 'o.' "U-um, yes, actually..."

"And have you been told that your hair and eyes are really similar to his?"

"Y...Yes..." Siesta said slowly. "But how did you..."

Even Guiche and Kirche were giving him strange, slightly disturbed looks.

"Sir Shirou," Guiche asked, "exactly how is it that you know all of this?"

Shirou gestured to the plaque.

"That language there is Japanese, native to a land far to the east called Japan." He hummed. "In Japanese, that's *Nibongo*, native to *Nibon* and spoken by *Nipponjin*."

"Like you," Louise added.

Shirou nodded without giving it any thought. "Like me."

Siesta blinked owlishly at him — she seemed to do that a lot, when she was surprised.

"So...you and Great-grandfather...are from the same place?"

Shirou looked back up at the plaque.

"*Kono mei wo yomu hitobito ni totte, anata dake wa kono ji'in kara kono takara wo totemo yoi. Kaigun Shōi Sasaki Takeo yori,*" he recited. "Or, "To those who read this inscription, only you may take this treasure from this temple. Navy Ensign Sasaki Takeo.""

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Everyone turned at once to look at Siesta.

"Is that what the plaque says?" Kirche asked.

But Siesta only shook her head. "I don't know. The only one who could ever speak or read that language was Great-grandfather, and he's..."

She didn't need to say anything more. In this world, considering the level of medical advances, Shirou very much doubted that anyone except really skilled Water Mages lived, on average, to be older than eighty or so. Even the Noble mages didn't seem very interested in extending their lifespans.

"But," she added, "it *does* match with Great-grandfather's final wishes, so maybe..."

Shirou was a little surprised, but mostly thankful, that no one accused him of making it up.

"Alright, then," Kirche said. "So, is there some sort of key or something we need to open the door, or can we just go right in?"

Siesta shook her head. "No key, no, but, um," she smiled sheepishly, "the door hinges...*might* be a little rusted."

"Might be, as in...?"

"They haven't been oiled in over twenty years."

Immediately, Guiche offered to help out. "I could use my Valkyries —"

"No need," Shirou interrupted.

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He stepped up to the double doors, grasped the rings that passed for handles, braced his legs and feet against the wooden porch, and *pulled*.

With a great, low groan, the doors began to open, inching outwards at a torturously slow pace. The hinges ground together and cried out with every millimeter, wailing in protest as Shirou grunted and used all his strength, as well as all his restraint, to open the doors without tearing them out of the frame or the knobs off the doors.

Briefly, he wondered how that mage had managed to get inside and study this Dragon's Raiment without the help of someone like him to open the doors, but he chocked it up to magic. The mages here seemed to use that for everything, even menial labor, when they could get away with it.

Shirou took a step back, and then another step back, as the doors slowly but steadily came outwards, dropping a layer of dust to the floor and his boots along the way. The hinges continued their chorus even louder, screeching shrilly with every movement, no matter how microscopic, until —

SNAP!

Something finally gave, and with the sudden lack of resistance, Shirou stumbled backwards, tripped on his heel, and landed ass-first on the ground.

"Mister Shirou!"

"Sir Shirou!"

"Darling, are you alright?"

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For a moment, Shirou only blinked up at the vast blue sky — the thing which stung most was his pride — and then, slowly, he sat back up and looked at the group; all of them were staring at him worriedly. Louise, the only one who seemed unconcerned, gave him a small smirk that reminded painfully of Rin.

"Thought you'd take a break?" she asked.

Shirou gave her a smirk back.

"Well," he drawled, then held up the pair of rings that had once been attached to the doors, "*something* decided to break, at least."

The concern melted away into various expressions of surprise and bemusement, except for Louise, who was biting a lip to keep from laughing, and Siesta, who was (once again) blinking bewilderedly at him.

"Sometimes," Guiche mumbled lowly, "I forget exactly how strong Sir Shirou is."

Shirou rolled forward and back up to his feet.

"Ready to try again?" Louise asked.

"Sure."

"*Without* breaking anything, this time."

He offered her a grin. "No promises."

Shirou stepped up past the rest of the group and back to the doors, which were opened just barely wide enough for someone like Louise to slip through, and absently tossed the metal rings to the side. They crashed to the wooden porch

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with a thunderous clang and a resounding thud that vibrated through the boards.

"By the Founder!" someone whispered. "Those must weigh sixty kilos each!"

Shirou didn't remark upon it; he just took one more step forward, braced his legs again, reached out with both of his hands, and grasped both doors. The heavy, old wood groaned beneath his fingers.

Then, he pulled. He could feel the muscles in his shoulders tense and bunch up and his biceps compress, and then, slowly and steadily, the crack between the two doors began to widen again.

He pulled, and pulled, and pulled, and beneath his fingertips, the wooden boards moaned and shrieked under the stress. Inch by inch, millimeter by millimeter, the doors came apart and opened up. More dust swept down from the tops and disappeared from Shirou's clothes as quickly as it settled.

With a grunt and a final push, Shirou extended his arms all the way and threw the doors wide. The hinges gave a shriek, the wood groaned and creaked, and their sheer weight and mass swept the wind aside on the way, but at last, the doors opened all the way to admit their little group.

"Oh my," Siesta said from behind him. "I'd heard the rumors and everything, but...Mister Shirou certainly is strong."

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"Just be thankful you weren't awake to see what happened to Mott," Louise muttered under her breath. Even Shirou just barely heard her.

"Alright, then!" Kirche chirped. "Let's get a look at this Dragon's Raiment!"

She stepped up on the porch and then passed Shirou, who moved aside, and Louise, sighing, fell into step behind her. Then came Tabitha, whose nose was still buried in her book, and Guiche, and Siesta brought up the rear. Once they'd all gotten through the doors, Shirou followed them inside and squinted into the darkness.

The temple had no windows, which Shirou might have been able to see earlier if the walls outside weren't covered in vines and ivy, so the only light was the single broad shaft that came through the doors and speared across the floor. In the gloom, if he squinted a little, he could make out a strange shape cloaked in the shadows.

"Where is it?"

"I can't see anything."

"Um, there should be some candles around here somewhere."

"Hang on, I've got it."

There was a flash of light, and then Kirche was holding a ball of flames in the palm of her hand. In her other hand, she held a long, wooden stick — her wand — which she twirled around in circles while she muttered another incantation. The ball of flames split into four, each a quarter the size of the

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original, and then danced off and into the air like the will-o'-the-wisps from folklore. Kirche conducted them across the temple with long, sweeping motions of her wand until each one reached a corner, landed perfectly on the wick of a candle, and started to burn.

Immediately, likely set up in response to the lighting of the candles, four paper lanterns (and wasn't that nostalgic?) hanging from the ceiling ignited, banishing the shadows and illuminating the room, from the dusty boards beneath their feet to the dull planks that formed the walls...

And, at the same time, revealing the treasure seated at its center.

Whatever Shirou had been expecting to find secreted away inside the temple, what he actually saw was something that had never crossed his mind. The moment his eyes landed upon the object that had apparently attracted so many tourists and curious mages alike, the legendary artifact that had drawn scholars from all across the continent here in pilgrimage, Shirou felt his breath leave him like he'd been kicked in the stomach.

"This is it? The Dragon's Raiment?"

"Yes. This is, um... This is Great-grandfather's treasure."

"It doesn't look like much."

The others didn't seem quite so impressed.

"There's no way this thing could fly," Kirche said, sounding somewhere between disappointed and frustrated.

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"It's like some kind of boat, isn't it?" Guiche asked skeptically. It seemed like he agreed with her. "Look — the wings can't even move up and down, and the material isn't sturdy enough to support something of that size. And there — there's a hole in the side. It certainly *looks* impressive, but there's no way this thing could actually fly. Dragon's Raiment, indeed."

Kirche sighed and shrugged helplessly. "And here I was getting my hopes up. What was the point in coming here if it was all just a hoax? Right, Darling?"

But Shirou didn't agree.

Certainly, if it were anything else sitting before them, Kirche and Guiche might have a point about it. Shaped almost like a boat, wings that weren't fit properly for flight, damage to the structure... But it wasn't anything else.

Shirou had been expecting something fairly impressive from all the hype that had surrounded the Dragon's Raiment, but he'd never expected something like *that*.

"...Darling?"

"Shirou, are you alright?" Louise asked.

"Mister Shirou," Siesta said nervously, "if...if it's not good enough..."

But as the surprise faded, Shirou simply grinned.

"Master," he said to Louise, "I've thought before that your world and mine must have had something in common in order for me to appear before you...but now I'm certain."

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"Shirou?"

"I'll need a few days," Shirou changed the subject abruptly. "Maybe a week. But by then, I'll have this thing ready to fly."

"A week?"

Kirche made an annoyed sound. "What are we supposed to do for a week, then, while you fix this thing?"

"I hate to agree with Zerst," Louise added, "but she does have a point. We were only supposed to be out here for a day or two."

Shirou shrugged. "Vacation? Back when I was your age, most of my classmates would've given their left arm for a vacation from school."

"Vacation? Wha — but, that's...!"

"We'll be scolded by the headmaster for sure," Guiche mumbled miserably.

"I could do with a vacation," Kirche said, smiling like a cat who'd cornered a canary.

"Siesta, would it be too much for your family to host us for a while?"

"Not at all!" Siesta said brightly. "In fact, I'm sure my parents would be delighted!"

Louise gave Shirou an imploring look. "Can't we just take it back with us? You could fix it at the Academy, right?"

"I could, but..." Well, there were several reasons not to. Aside from a lack of space and privacy, both of which would

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make it hard to work get any work done during the day, there was something very simple to account for. "It'd be easier to do it here."

As long as she was here, she didn't have to put up with the rumors and the classmates who just wouldn't leave her alone. She could relax away from the pressures and constant annoyances that had been plaguing her since they'd returned after the incident with Mott. And who knew? If she was gone for a week, maybe they'd start to lose interest, so by the time she got back, everything would have returned to normal.

"Besides, this could give you the chance to practice without having to worry about the stress of classes."

Louise's eyebrow twitched, and even though she scowled, Shirou knew he'd won her over.

"Fine," she grumbled. "We'll stay for a week."

"Thank you, Master."

Then, Shirou ushered them out of the temple so he could get to fixing the Dragon's Raiment and asked Siesta to take the others back to her house so they could settle in. It would be boring to watch him work, he'd told them, so they might as well go and relax instead of sitting there on the old, dusty floor.

Indirectly, he'd also told Louise that she should practice her Reinforcement instead of just enjoying their impromptu vacation, but made sure that she understood not to push herself too hard. She seemed to catch on, so he wasn't too worried about that.

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When the others had left and Shirou wasn't able to see their backs anymore, he turned around and inspected his prize — and it was a prize, there was no mistake about that. Siesta, the townsfolk, all of those scholars who had come to examine it, and even Kirche and Guiche, they might not have thought much of it, but just looking at it, Shirou could already tell its value exceeded his original expectations.

This wasn't just a treasure, this was an artifact befitting something like a king or a god.

Thinking about it then, he really shouldn't have been as surprised as he'd been when he first laid eyes on it. After all, hadn't Fouquet stolen the Compliant Rod from the Academy's vault? If something like that was lying around here, then would couldn't something like this have been here, too?

Yes, this was definitely a prize, and as much as he appreciated it, Shirou couldn't help feeling a little bit bad, as well. All he'd done was save her life — what had come as naturally to him as breathing — and she was going to hand over something like this in exchange?

This was worth *may* more than some jewel-encrusted necklace.

But...he wasn't going to let this pass him up. Against an enemy like Francis Drake, Shirou was at an overwhelming disadvantage — even if he could hit Drake from afar with a Broken Phantasm, it required time to Trace the bow and the sword he intended to use, and then more time to take aim. During those critical moments, Drake had proven capable of bombarding him with cannon fire and preventing him from doing anything except dodging.

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And now, with this, the playing field was level again.

Shirou stepped forward and inspected the damage, his eyes roving over the hole in the hull, then turned his gaze at the places where the armaments had originally been. His original estimate of a week might have been too generous — fixing the damage wouldn't take too long, perhaps, but replacing the weapons that had once been affixed to the craft based solely upon his reading of its history might be much harder.

Briefly, he wondered how a fighter pilot from modern Japan had managed to find something like this, whether or not Sasaki Takeo had already had it when he came through whatever had brought him to this world, and what exactly had dragged a Navy Ensign from his native Earth to this strange, backwards world ruled by mages. But Shirou would also be the first to admit that he didn't know thing one about True Magic, with the exception of a fraction of what the Second and Third could accomplish.

"Hey, Partner," Derf spoke up for the first time, "can this thing really fly?"

"If I can get it working again, then yeah. The tricky part will be recreating the weapons that used to be on here."

And he wasn't even going to *touch* that one thing. If that was what he suspected it was, there was no way he would risk fiddling with it.

"Really? No offense, Partner, but that's a mighty big hole, there. I think remakin' da weapons'll be the least o' yer worries."

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Shirou nodded.

"You're right," he acknowledged. "It's not something that can be done by a mage using only the materials on hand. Any fix I could do would be temporary. For that matter, I'm not sure I could successfully replicate the component materials that make up the hull."

Even the Blade Works had limits on what it could recreate, and anything Projected was, in the end, a transient object. Recreating the material that way was doomed to failure, a band-aid for a gaping wound, and as for using any of his other skills, well...

To begin with, completely restoring damage like that wasn't within the abilities of Emiya Shirou. Of course not — Shirou wasn't anywhere near skilled enough to perform restoration magecraft of that level. He understood the corresponding principle, and he could apply it to swords and other melee weapons, but fixing an advanced vehicle like this, which bore only a passing resemblance to a modern fighter jet, was beyond him.

"Derf, I want you to promise me that you'll keep what you're about to see to yourself."

"Eh? Well, sure, Partner, but why...?"

"You'll understand in a moment," Shirou said cryptically. "Just keep your mouth shut."

"Alrighty, then. If you say so."

Yes, fixing such an advanced vehicle was beyond the abilities of Emiya Shirou.

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That was why...

"Hey, you lazy freeloader, wake up."

...the one who would repair this thing *wasn't* Emiya Shirou.

"I've got a job for you."

In the back of his head, sharing his body and his soul, something large and overwhelming roused. Like a primordial god, stirred from sleep, it rumbled and unfolded, and its presence, a light radiating out like a second sun, filled up all the empty spaces inside of him.

Shirou pressed a hand against the hull of the ship. "Just this once, I'll give it to you. Fix this thing."

The giant light shook and answered, not with words, but with a vague sense of eagerness. The overwhelming radiance swelled and pushed, then ebbed back and pushed again.

"Guess that's as close to a deal as I'm gonna get."

He let out a breath and closed his eyes, and when the light pushed again, he pulled, up and out, and relaxed the walls he'd built around it.

Apeiron breathed.

"How disrespectful."

He regressed. **His** Magic Circuits, beyond the nature of a human's Magic Circuits, churned and circulated. Immense magical energy, enough to match even a Servant like Saber, ran through and was gathered.

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"But I'll forgive it, this once. This chance is one even I wouldn't pass up."

Shirou's lips curled into an arrogant smirk, and his eyes, now **Apeiron's** eyes, the color of gold, seemed to glow.

"After all, this makes *two* Noble Phantasms you've gathered since arriving here."

Vimana's hull, perfectly preserved for nearly eighty years, gleamed and shone.

— o.O.O.O.o —

"Are you gonna lay there and laze about all day?"

Shirou blinked his eyes open blearily and looked up at Louise, who stood over him with her hands on her hips. He blinked again and was overcome by a sudden, powerful nostalgia that coiled loosely in his belly.

"You almost had me worried, you know," Louise said. "But then I remembered, 'ah, right, Shirou's a bit of an idiot, so he probably fell asleep in the shed again.'"

For a moment, Shirou wondered if maybe he was dreaming, because that sounded remarkably like something Rin would've said when they were younger and she'd caught him sleeping in his shed after a night of working on his magecraft. But the warmth of the sun and the uncomfortable ache in his back that came from sleeping on the hard floor dispelled that idea immediately.

Still...

"Are you alright, Louise? You're acting a bit strange."

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She flushed and turned away, huffing. "I-I'm fine! A-And anyway, aren't you done fixing that thing, yet? It's been almost a week!"

Shirou gave a grunt as he sat up and looked over at Vimana, which hadn't been moved since he'd started working on it.

"Not yet," he said, pushing himself to his feet. "I haven't finished reconstructing and calibrating the weapons systems. It can fly now, yeah, but that's all it can do. If I tried to take this thing into a fight, I'd have to rely on my magecraft to attack or counterattack."

Whatever Louise had been about to say was lost, and her mouth closed before she got so much as a word out. Instead, a curious expression crossed her features, and she walked up to stand beside him, one hand holding her left elbow and the other curled thoughtfully around her mouth.

"It has weapons systems?" she murmured. "I figured a fighter jet would have those musket-like things, but I didn't think something like this..."

Shirou nodded. "Yeah. It might not look it, but this thing is an advanced piece of hardware that could outfly even the most modern of fighter jets, and the weapons it had before were some of the most powerful I've even heard of."

Shirou had dabbled in guns, in his younger years. On some of the assignments he'd taken with the Church and the Association's Enforcers, it'd been easier, more efficient, and simply drew less attention to use firearms to defeat the target. Even though Shirou had gotten very comfortable as a

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frontline, close quarters fighter, his natural skills had still been more inclined towards archery and long distance.

But even the best guns he'd ever come across paled in comparison to the weapons that had once been attached to Vimana. It was a pity Gilgamesh had taken them all off before it had passed from his hands and into the Indians', because even recreating them from the history he'd been able to read had resulted in something that couldn't compare. Even as something that was more like a shade of the originals, they still outperformed modern firearms by an order of magnitude.

All things considered, Vimana was a Noble Phantasm that had been equipped with other Noble Phantasms. As far as utility went, there was no other mount or vehicle that could match it, and only something like a Divine-class dragon or Excalibur had the sort of firepower to put it to shame.

"That amazing, huh? I guess I should've expected as much from a Noble Phantasm treasured by Gilgamesh, of all heroes."

"Yeah. I —"

"Hey!" Kirche's voice called from outside. "Louise, is he done, yet?"

Next to Shirou, Louise groaned. "She followed me out here."

Shirou made a sympathetic noise in the back of his throat.

"Next time we go somewhere, we should tie her down to her bed."

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A grin cracked Louise's face. "N-no," she said, holding back a giggle, "we'd get in trouble with the headmaster."

"Ah, right. Yeah, that'd be bad," Shirou nodded. He hummed and playfully adopted a thoughtful look. "A sleeping potion, then? We could spike her food at dinner one night. By the time she wakes up, we'll be long gone."

This time, Louise did laugh. "B-but, w-where would we get the ingredients? I — ha! — I only get s-so much for my allowance, you know!"

"Well, I *do* know how to juggle ..."

Louise snorted and slapped a hand over her mouth to suppress her giggling, and even Shirou couldn't help but smile at his joke.

"Louise, Darling!" Kirche appeared in the doorway. "You're missing the party!"

"Party?" Louise and Shirou parroted.

Kirche jerked her thumb behind her. "The Tristainian fleet is about to fire off the ceremonial salute to greet the Albion delegation."

"Albion delegation?"

Shirou hadn't heard anything about that, and neither, it seemed, had Louise.

Kirche blinked at the two of them and sighed.

"Ah, man!" she said. "Don't tell me the two of you haven't heard about that, yet? It's been all over the Academy grapevine since we got back from that Mott fiasco!"

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"Spit it out, already!" Louise grumbled.

"Alright, hold your horses!" Kirche sighed again. "Albion sued for peace shortly after we got back from rescuing Prince — er, *King* Wales. They sent a delegation over to write up the treaty, probably to prevent Tristain from declaring war."

BOOM!

The sound of cannon fire rocked the temple and sent the floorboards beneath their feet aquiver.

"And that would be the traditional seventeen-gun salute," Kirche added. "Next is —"

But a second, much louder bang cut her off, and a series of thunder-like cracks rent the air — definitely *not* cannon fire. In fact, that sounded more like —

Kirche spun around. "That's not part of the salute!" she said unnecessarily.

A loud rumble, like an avalanche roaring down the mountainside, shook the floor beneath their feet and vibrated through their eardrums. Something large and heavy had just crashed to the ground.

Shirou was the first of them to make it out the door and into the field, but Louise and Kirche were hot on his heels, skidding to a halt behind him.

In the distance, a great ship bearing what had to be Reconquista's colors had fallen and smashed into the forest. Its vast white sails were ablaze, and red-orange flames crackled and ate at the polished wood frame. In its side, the portion that hadn't buckled under the force of crashing into

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the Earth, were several large holes that looked, at first glance, to have been caused by cannonballs.

"Ambush?!" Kirche gasped. "But why would Tristain —"

"They wouldn't!" Louise snapped. "Ignoring that we don't have the manpower for a sustained conflict, it's beyond dishonorable to engage an enemy who entreats peace!"

"Then how —"

"Hey!" Guiche and Tabitha came running towards them — Tabitha, for once, didn't have her omnipresent book. "Did you see what happened? That ship just blew up for no reason!"

"It wasn't Tristain?"

Guiche shook his head.

"Our fleet was too far away to even hit that ship! It just exploded out of the blue!"

"Then —"

The crack of more cannon fire rent the air, sharp like fireworks, and flames erupted now on the other side, on the Tristain ships. Cannonballs, black specks that Shirou couldn't even see, rained down from above, and the rapidfire boom-boom-boom of the cannons rolled across the sky. The Tristain ships, sensing the disadvantage, started to pull away and out of range, even as one, two, three of them collapsed and started to fall.

And then, descending from the clouds above, three-hundred more ships joined the Albion side, cannons flashing.

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With their reinforcements behind them, the Albion ships gave chase, pelting the remnants of the Tristain fleet and whittling their numbers down with each shot.

It was over in less than a minute. Outgunned, outnumbered, overwhelmed, and caught off guard, the last Tristain ship broke apart and sank down, out of the sky.

"N-no way!" Kirche gasped. "That's the Albion Grand Fleet!"

"A-a five-hundred ship armada," Guiche whimpered, "most powerful aerial navy in Halkeginia. Oh, we're doomed. We are *so* completely doomed."

"What are they *doing* here?" Louise demanded. "This is well within Tristain territory!"

"Isn't it obvious?" Shirou asked. "Henrietta already told us this would happen."

He'd hoped she was wrong, that if it did come, the wait would be longer while Reconquista consolidated their power.

But even though he'd hoped for it, he'd known that it would come sooner than later anyway.

"Wha-war?" Louise stammered. "But it's too soon! I thought we'd have another couple of weeks! A month! More time, at the very least! *I'm not ready, yet!*"

"War never waits until you're ready." Shirou took a few steps forward and frowned. There was something...strange, here.

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Ignoring the mystery of the ship that blew up without being fired upon, there was something that didn't sit right with the entire situation.

"Still!"

"W-we have to get out of here!" Guiche cried. "We have to run!"

Shirou ignored him and scrutinized the gigantic fleet. Something seemed...*off*, but he wasn't quite sure what. He needed a closer look.

"Trace, on."

In a single instant, he reinforced his eyes, and his vision increased to the point where he could track a supersonic missile at four kilometers. With his enhanced sight, he examined each of the large, imposing ships, cataloguing as much as he could about their weapons and designs, and based upon his meagre knowledge, the original grouping of ships that had fired upon the Tristain ships were all uniformly shaped and built, and it was only the reinforcements that...

Ah. That was it.

"What?! Shirou, you don't actually intend to try and fight them all, do you?"

"Darling, that's insane!"

"Forgive me for saying so, Sir Shirou, but destroying a single ship is one thing, destroying an entire fleet is another!"

"It's not the Albion Grand Fleet," Shirou announced.

"It...isn't?"

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"Take a look, Louise." Shirou pointed up at them. "You might not be able to see it too well, but only about half of those ships is built according to Halkeginian ship designs — see? They're the only ones with sails on the sides."

"Huh?" Louise squinted up at the massive fleet, which had bombarded the remains of the Tristain fleet, likely to kill the survivors, and was starting to head towards Tarbes itself. "You're...you're right! But how...!"

"I...don't understand, Sir Shirou," Guiche said. "What does that mean?"

"Can you think of no one, Guiche, who flew upon a ship in the sky, but did not need sails to drive it?"

Shirou didn't need to look to know the expressions of comprehension dawning on their faces.

"But she said you destroyed it!" Louise protested. "Didn't she? When we met Prince Wales, you blew her ship out of the sky with that Broken Phantasm thing! I remember, because she was really upset about it!"

"That's right," Kirche agreed. "Darling, I thought you'd already beaten her special weapon with one of your own?"

"Apparently not," Shirou answered sardonically. "In hindsight, I probably should have expected something more impressive than a single ship from a pirate who managed to become a Heroic Spirit."

It didn't take long for what that meant to sink in.

"What?!" Louise screeched. "That whole *fleet* is her Noble Phantasm?!"

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"So it seems."

"Doesn't that just make them more dangerous?!" Guiche asked, somewhat hysterically. "A whole fleet that can function without a crew, with enough power to turn an entire army into ash — that doesn't sound like something we want to be in the way of!"

"Guiche...Guiche is right," Kirche said. "Darling, I know you're strong, but we really can't stay! If we get on Sylphid and leave now, we might be able to make it!"

"Tactical retreat," Tabitha added.

"And abandon all of Tarbes to be destroyed!" Louise argued hotly.

"Look, Louise, it's a tragedy, but that fleet just destroyed your Tristainian fleet without even flinching! There's no time to evacuate the town, so the best idea is to cut our losses and go tell someone who can actually *do* something about it!"

"Albion's always had the best fleet," Guiche murmured in the background.

"That doesn't make it right! And...and there must be something we could do, right?! Can't we?!"

"Vallièrè, if you've been holding back on us and can cast a spell that can destroy an entire fleet, then I'm all for it!"

"That's not...!" Louise turned in Shirou's direction. "Shirou, you can do something! Can't you?"

For a moment, Shirou said nothing. He just scrutinized the ever-advancing fleet, eyes sharp.

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There were a number of Noble Phantasms he could use, a number of weapons in his arsenal that might be strong enough to defeat that fleet. Caladbolg, perhaps, used as it had been in the legend, or Excalibur Galatine, if he could get it close enough to its full power, or maybe Brionac, Lugh's spear, or Siegfried's Balmung. Any Noble Phantasm would do, as long as it had the range and power to take down at least enough ships to force Drake to retreat. For that matter, if he could just pinpoint Drake's location (and if the angle had been better, he probably could have), he could take her out with Hrunding in an instant.

But defeating the fleet wasn't what Louise was asking for, was it?

"Can't you?!"

What she wanted was for him to save these people. What she was begging him to do was save Tarbes from Drake's fleet.

And there was only one Noble Phantasm that was suited for that task.

Perhaps, Shirou thought, that was why he had been summoned in the first place.

"Louise," he began, "when you summoned me, what did you call out for?"

She flushed. "I don't —!"

"No, you don't need to answer," Shirou cut her off, "I can guess."

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Shirou took a few steps forward and unsheathed his sword.

He'd thought, before, that maybe it was because no other hero could compete with the other Heroic Spirits they'd met so far, that no other hero could conjure whatever weapon was necessary to face down Perseus, Drake, Not-Lancelot, and whatever else might still be waiting in the wings. Because all of these other Heroic Spirits were stacked against her, the spell had called him, someone who could strike at their weaknesses with whatever Noble Phantasm was needed.

But that was just conceit. No, to begin with, there were other heroes who could have fulfilled his role, maybe even better than he could — the hero Emiya that had been summoned in his Grail War, Gilgamesh with his endless array of Noble Phantasms, or even Lancelot himself. What chance did the enemy have against the King of Heroes, who could strike all their weaknesses, or the Knight of the Lake, who could turn their own Noble Phantasms against them?

It had to be simpler than that.

"The words you said, the prayer you uttered when you cried out for me..."

The Magic Circuits burned. The magical energy churned and circulated, nearly too much for his only-human Circuits to handle. In his hand, his sword, the Last Phantasm that had been passed to him by the Lady of the Lake, began to glow.

But it wasn't as simple as the fact that he was alive. What separated him from other heroes, like Sir Gawain and Sir Lancelot, like Alexander the Great, like Gilgamesh or Perseus

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or Heracles, what made him different from all of them was not simply the fact that he was alive. It *couldn't* be that simple, because he'd already come face to face with Heroic Spirits in this world who seemed as alive as he was.

"It called to me because I hold that prayer in my hands."

What had brought him here, then, what had selected him to be Louise's familiar, it wasn't just luck or chance. Louise *had* used a catalyst, of sorts, even if she hadn't realized it at the time. He was almost certain of it, now.

Shirou thrust his left foot forward and his right foot back, turning his body as he grasped his sword with both hands and brought it up towards his shoulder, tilted behind him. It was a stance reminiscent of a baseball player, a batting stance that optimized the length of the swing and allowed for the arc sword to cover the maximum range.

The light of his blade blazed like the sun, blindingly intense and hot against his cheek. The crystallized prayer, Salvation, shone, bright and luminous.

"Th-that light, it's..."

"...Beautiful."

"In your heart, you cried out for salvation. You wished with everything you were for a miracle to deliver you from despair."

This was what Louise had called out for when she summoned him. She'd asked not for a familiar, but for a savior, and whatever power existed behind the summoning ritual had chosen not a King of Knights or a King of

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Conquerors, but a King of the Forsaken, of all those who had been left to their fates and cried out to be saved.

And so he had come.

"And the name of that miracle is..."

Shirou swung, twisting his torso around, stepping forward with his right foot, and cutting through the air.

Shining Sword of Salvation —

"— **GAVILAIN!**"

The wind was blown back. A beam of light like a ray, a golden radiance compressed into an arc — with a blunt roar, a resounding boom from the sound barrier being broken, a heavy *whoosh* as the air sizzled and was carved away, it soared from the edge of his blade like a rainbow and expanded rapidly, until its magnificent glow lit up the sky and eclipsed the sun in brilliance.

In an instant, moving so swiftly that it resembled lightning, the arc crossed the distance, and before the grand fleet, Reconquista's stolen ships and the Noble Phantasm of the Heroic Spirit Francis Drake, could turn away, it consumed all five hundred ships and passed on, cleaving through the clouds in the distance and disappearing into the sky.

What remained in its wake was nothing. Everything that had been touched by the golden light had simply been incinerated and erased from existence — not even ashes were left of that grand fleet.

James D. Fawkes

The sword wielded by Emiya Shirou was Gavilain, the Shining Sword of Salvation, sister to Excalibur, the Sword of Promised Victory, and Arondight, the Unfading Light of the Lake. Similar to Excalibur, it took the input prana and multiplied it, condensing it into a golden light, a radiance to destroy the enemy.

Different from Excalibur, however, and resembling more closely Sir Gawain's Galatine and the Irish Noble Phantasm, Caladbolg, Gavilain's attack was a broad beam, a wave-like blade of light that extended from the swing of the sword. On the other hand, whereas the solar Noble Phantasm, Galatine, incinerated the enemy by scorching and burning them away with flame, Gavilain's attack was more condensed, more focused, and it seared the enemy away so that everything touched by the light was simply annihilated.

Galatine cleansed with flame. Gavilain destroyed with light.

In that case, it was only natural that what remained of the annihilated fleet was nothing.

"N-no way..." Guiche whispered from behind Shirou.
"The entire fleet...gone..."

"D-Darling, that was...!"

"S-Shirou..."

"Louise," Shirou said without turning around, "when you summoned me, the wish you prayed for, it was to be saved, wasn't it?"

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He let his arms fall, and the blade of his sword, still glowing, cast a pale golden light on the grass around him. Starting five feet in front of him, the great clearing that had stood outside of Tarbes just beyond Vimana's temple had been scorched black and turned into a rippling field of glass. Behind him, the village of Tarbes remained untouched.

In the distance, a great swathe of trees had withered from the heat and been reduced to skeletal husks.

"Then, look closely. This is your prayer made real. This is your salvation."

James D. Fawkes

CONTINUE?

[YES/NO]

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #9

"Hooo-me RUN!" Ilya cried. Dressed in her usual sweatshirt-bloomer combo and a ball cap, she mimed swinging a baseball bat. "And Emiya knocks it right out of the park! The crowd goes *wild!*"

Silence.

Ilya pouted. "I *said*, the crowd goes *wild!*"

More silence.

"*The crowd goes wild, damn it!*"

More silence. A sigh. Waver Velvet, Lord El Melloi II, Lord and respected lecturer of the Clock Tower, pressed the button on the remote control in his hand, and the sound of a roaring crowd cheering in a baseball stadium played over the speakers.

"And the opposing team is annihilated!" Ilya called over the cheering. "Emiya wins the game! Emiya wins the game!"

"I'm not getting paid enough for this," Waver mumbled under his breath.

Ilya spun around towards him and jabbed a finger in his direction. "You're not getting paid anything! This is a dictatorship, not a democracy, so shut up and let me cheer on Onii-chan!"

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Waver just sighed again, but Ilya ignored him and turned back to the camera.

"Ahem!" she cleared her throat. "Today's Lecture Corner is a bit of a special, because Onii-chan used his Noble Phantasm for the first time — wasn't that exciting!"

"Overkill is more like it," Waver murmured.

"In case you missed it last time, it's been retconned," Ilya went on. "The author finally decided that he was just plain tired of that Anti-World monstrosity he cooked up ages ago, so this new one was invented and took its place. Please note the difference!"

She pointed to the blackboard, which had "**Gavilain IS NOT Escalvatine with a new name!**"

"For those of you who can see where the inspiration for Gavilain's description came from, good for you! Don't tell anyone. Let everyone else figure it out on their own."

She cleared her throat again. "Anyway, in celebration of this momentous occasion, we brought our guest back from last chapter! Please welcome back Iskandar-san!"

The camera panned over to the tall, hulking, red-haired behemoth, Iskandar, who was cupping his chin and...did not react at all.

"Iskandar-san?"

"...How indescribably sad."

Ilya blinked. "Eh?"

James D. Fawkes

"Having seen that sword, all I can think is how indescribably sad it is."

He gestured to the TV screen, normally hidden from the main camera, where the recording of Shirou unleashing his sword was paused mid-swing.

"He took upon his shoulders the curse of this world," Iskandar said, "and he defied fate to pursue an impossible dream, forsaking everything else in the pursuit of a lonely ideal. Throwing away things like love, companionship, and ambition, discarding his sense of self, casting off everything in order to chase a dream that can never come true...it's such an agonizing tragedy. What kind of world must it have been to place such a terrible burden on the shoulders of a young boy?"

"Um..."

"That is why...in the face of that light which shines so brightly, I can only look away."

He offered a sad chuckle. "Truly, those two were made for each other."

A notification popped up onscreen: "Iskandar is now an Avalon Shipper!"

"O...kay..." Ilya hedged. "That was weird and somewhat off-topic."

Waver grunted and lit up a cigar. "Didn't you watch *Fate/Zero*, Einzbern?"

"Of course!" Ilya huffed. "I was in it, too! So were you, although you were much cuter and shorter back then."

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Waver's fingers twitched and he almost dropped his cigar. "Don't you remember what he said after Caster's monster was obliterated?"

"Of course I — oh. Yeah, I remember, now. I guess the author must've really liked that scene."

"Who didn't? It was one of the best scenes in *Fate/Zero*."

"And then Gilgamesh decided to ruin it by being a creepy old man."

Waver grunted. "I never understood those kinds of shippers. I mean, in the first place, Saber and Gilgamesh are simply incompatible, and the minute Saber gave in and became his bride, he'd just lose interest in her. The only reason Gilgamesh was so fascinated with her was because she told him to sod off when he said, 'Be my wife, woman.'"

"I know, right? A healthy relationship would've been impossible! The only way they could get together is if you radically changed their personalities, and when you do that, what's the point of writing about them anymore?"

"Wish fulfilment. That, and maybe some super vicarious autoeroticism having to do with supreme male domination of a strong female figure."

"...Huh?"

Waver took a puff on his cigar. "It's a primal sexual thing having to do with power and domination. I'd explain it, but I'm pretty sure you're too young."

"Hey!" Ilya squawked. "I'm over eighteen, you know, even though I don't look like it!"

James D. Fawkes

"And yet, somehow, I think I'd get arrested if I tried to walk down the street with you."

Ilya huffed. "Well, anyway, most of his behavior in *Fate/Zero* and *Fate/Stay Night* is just Gilgamesh tsundering really hard. Maybe that's the attraction — tsundere are very popular, for some reason."

Waver almost choked on his cigar. "What?!"

"You didn't know? Gilgamesh is Tsundere for humanity. Haven't you been keeping up with *Fate/EXTRA CCC*, Professor Velvet?"

"Yes, but where the hell did you get that Gilgamesh was a tsundere out of that?"

"It's called subtext, or reading between the lines. It's not really that hard —"

Iskandar cleared his throat pointedly.

"I might just be a guest on this little show," he began, "but isn't it a bit counterproductive to turn the whole segment into a gossip corner?"

Ilya gasped.

"Oh no!" she cried. "We got distracted! We're supposed to be talking about Onii-chan's *sword*!"

Waver snorted.

Ilya's cheeks puffed up in a scowl and she pointed at Waver. "Pervert! That's not what I meant!"

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Waver just coughed into his hand. "Anyway, this awesome sword?"

Ilya shot him a dirty look, but turned back to the camera. "Right. Well, we're running out of our allotted space, so I'll have to hurry up! Since it's a retcon, it's especially important to talk about Gavilain, so pay attention, everyone!"

She snapped her fingers, and a large, scaled-up poster of Gavilain appeared, pasted to the blackboard.

"A revised picture will be posted later, so don't worry about that now. The important thing is the change to attack power and type — it's now an A++ Anti-Army Noble Phantasm. Check back on Shirou's profile on the bottom of **Chapter Three: Forebodings** for a more precise list of its stats, as well as Shirou's revised parameters!"

She slapped a thin wooden pointer — which had appeared from nowhere — on the poster. "It's no longer Anti-World, and it no longer has Chaos to fight Ea's Truth! That's important! Also, in a competition between Excalibur and Gavilain, reference Heaven's Feel Route, Day 16: Burst Out/Oath, Saber's Black Excalibur versus Shirou's half-baked Rho Aias and Rider's Bellerophon! It's more like a double-knockout than that fight, but the sentiment is there!"

She cleared her throat. "And that's...it, I think? Did we cover everything important, Professor Velvet?"

"Yeah, that was everything. Can we go, now? Tohsaka will be back next time, so let's finish up, already."

James D. Fawkes

"Now, wait a minute!" Iskandar interrupted. "We still haven't covered the issue of my appearance in the story! I really think —"

In unison, Waver and Ilya turned to him and shouted, "FOR THE LAST TIME, NO MEANS NO!"

Tohsaka-sensei's Lecture Corner #9: End

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I: Before Dusk

Part One: The Holy

"Albion's always had the best fleet," Guiche murmured.

It felt unreal, standing there, witnessing the invasion of his home Tristain by Albion's Reconquista. It was like he was standing outside of his body, watching from the outside in, or like he was dreaming, and what he was seeing was nothing more than a nightmare, a figment of his imagination. Maybe if he pinched himself or slapped himself, he'd wake up back in his bed at the Academy.

But this was no dream. This was very real, not an illusion, and it was happening, and all he could do was stand there, frozen to his spot, too afraid and too surprised to even run. It was as though someone had glued the bottoms of his shoes to the ground with a Square-class sticking spell.

Guiche wondered, was this what his ancestors had felt like as soldiers in the Crusades? Had they known, as he knew now, that what was happening before his eyes was history in the making? Had they felt, as he felt at that moment, that scholars and students hundreds of years in the future would call this the start of a war, the first battle of Tristain's struggle to retain sovereignty?

Had they been so overcome by fear that they nearly forgot to breath?

"That doesn't make it right! And...and there must be something we could do, right?! Can't we?!"

James D. Fawkes

"Vallière, if you've been holding back on us and can cast a spell that can destroy an entire fleet, then I'm all for it!"

"That's not...! Shirou, you can do something! Can't you?"

Or maybe the reason Guiche hadn't run screaming, trying to escape from Reconquista's ships — he turned to regard Sir Shirou, who was scrutinizing the fleet with a frown — was because Sir Shirou hadn't run, hadn't retreated. Ever since that day, that duel, Guiche had looked up to him as the epitome of honor and strength.

Yes, Guiche wasn't too proud to admit that he had been very reasonably frightened for quite some time after that close scrape with death, but even though he had been very afraid, he had also been very enraptured with the image of strength and dedication that seemed to cast a shadow over Guiche and the entire school.

Afraid, but also awed and humbled.

That was why, in Albion, when he had seen Wardes' (the traitor!) wand-sword turn towards Louise and the others, when he had realized — from the way the sparks had started to build along its length — exactly what was going to happen and that none of his Valkyries could move in time, he had thrown himself in the path of the lightning bolt. Because he admired that heroic visage, because that strong back, those square shoulders, had stood between him and death before, for no other reason than because it was the right thing to do, Guiche had thrown himself in the path of an attack that would have — should have — meant his death.

To save Louise.

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Why? Because it had been the right thing to do. Because in some small way, he could live up to the shadow cast by that strong back.

Some of Guiche's fear sapped away, and his hands — which he had only just noticed were shaking — calmed and stopped trembling.

Sir Shirou wasn't afraid, so what did Guiche have to be afraid of?

Nothing. Because that strong back promised, *I will save you.*

"Can't you?!"

Yes, even that fleet was nothing to fear. Guiche was sure of it. He didn't know how or what amazing magic Sir Shirou would use, but he was certain that there existed some method or some means which Sir Shirou could use to defeat that fleet.

It was simple, really. If you asked Guiche who the most powerful person he knew was, the name that would leave his mouth wasn't his father's, or Old Osmond's, or Princess Henrietta's or Prince Wales', nor even the mysterious and legendary Heavy Wind whose prowess was still whispered about among the nobility. If you asked Guiche to name the most powerful person he knew, he would immediately say, "Shirou Emiya."

After all, what could a simple fleet do against a man who had casually destroyed an entire castle?

"Louise," Sir Shirou finally said; Guiche found himself holding his breath. "When you summoned me, what did you call out for?"

James D. Fawkes

Out of the corner of his eye, Guiche saw Louise flush red. "I don't —!"

"No," Sir Shirou interjected, "you don't need to answer. I can guess."

He took a few steps forward and slowly unsheathed the sword at his hip; Guiche had only ever seen him draw it once before, during that fight in Albion, and like then, his eyes were immediately drawn to the intricate characters scrawled onto the blade, to the gemstone in the hilt and the red enamel splashed across the guard.

Up close, now, seeing it in so much better detail, Guiche wanted to call it the most magnificent sword he had ever seen, but the moment the thought entered his head, he knew it was wrong. Simply calling it magnificent could never do that sword justice. To call it majestic or beautiful would only stain it. There were no words, no poetry or flowery rhetoric in Guiche's vocabulary, which could properly encapsulate the true splendor before his eyes.

"The words you said, the prayer you uttered when you cried out for me..."

The blade suddenly began to glow, and Guiche heard himself gasp.

This sword — no, could something so beautiful and wondrous even be called a sword in the first place —

"It called to me because I hold that prayer in my hands."

Sir Shirou slid into a stance, placed his left side forward, and, holding it aloft with both hands, wound his sword back.

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It reminded Guiche somewhat of the fencing lessons (which he regretted, now, not paying enough attention to) his father had given him when he was younger.

But it was all wrong. This was no guard, no proper fighting stance — even to Guiche's amateur eyes, it was full of openings and holes — nor even a good attacking stance. It would only be good for the first swing.

Even so, the sword blazed ever brighter, and despite the fact that it was so bright it should have hurt, like staring into the sun, Guiche found he could not look away.

"Th-that light," Louise whispered, "it's..."

"...Beautiful," Guiche breathed.

"In your heart, you cried out for salvation. You wished with everything you were for a miracle to deliver you from despair."

Unbidden, every memory of salvation flashed before Guiche's eyes.

Sir Shirou's talking sword, spinning through the air, absorbing the lightning that should have ended Guiche's life —

Sir Shirou, standing between the pirates and Guiche —

Those broad shoulders, that strong back, standing between Guiche and those archers and bandits —

Sir Shirou, kneeling over Guiche with that black sword —

Louise, attempting the summoning spell for the fifth time and calling Sir Shirou —

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Guiche's father, the great General de Gramont, wand flashing as he drove away a wild griffin that had nearly snatched Guiche straight out of the family garden.

Something in Guiche trembled, and his knees wobbled and threatened to give out beneath him. On his face, he was faintly aware of the tears that silently fell down his cheeks.

"And the name of that miracle is..."

"I am saved," Guiche whispered the answer.

Stepping forward with his right foot, Sir Shirou twisted his torso around and swung.

"— **GAVILAIN!**"

A heavy, resounding boom rent the air. A beam of light like a ray, that golden radiance that lit the sword from within, leapt forward from the path of the blade. The arc of light, so beautiful and so wonderful that Guiche could not but be awed, cleaved through the air, blowing the wind back as it carved through everything in its way. Even though it was not aimed at him and moved with lightning speed towards the grand fleet, a wave of heat still washed over Guiche like the ocean tide.

In an instant, moving so fast that the fleet did not have time to dodge, the arc consumed all five hundred ships and passed on, cutting through the clouds in the far distance and vanishing into the sky.

And in its wake remained nothing. Of that grand fleet that could have singlehandedly conquered all of Tristain, not even ashes were left withal.

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And yet, despite the confidence he had held within Sir Shirou's ability, Guiche felt as though something in his world, some faucet or fact that had gone unchallenged his entire life, had been irrevocably changed.

"N-no way... The entire fleet...gone..."

"D-Darling, that was...!"

"S-Shirou..."

"Louise," Shirou said without turning around, "when you summoned me, the wish you prayed for, it was to be saved, wasn't it?"

Only then did Guiche look out over the field that had once stood beyond the Dragon's Raiment's temple, and he found that he was not surprised by what he saw. The grass had been seared away, and the ground had been warped into a rippling field of black glass. The trees in the distance had withered under the insane heat, reduced to dark, skeletal husks.

It wasn't the sort of damage a Fire Stone could do, no, but that was misleading. If a Fire Stone had gone off in the center of the clearing, it would have taken the entire village of Tarbes and a good portion of the forest out, to say nothing of the fallout that would hit La Rochelle and likely coat the next several square miles in ash. Everything and everyone within range would be utterly annihilated by the heat and explosive force.

But again, that was misleading.

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Because this was not a direct attack or a detonated bomb. The damage in front of Guiche's eyes was nothing more than a side effect, the unavoidable damage done when that light passed too close to the ground...

And it had not been until the light was at least a hundred and fifty meters off the ground that it had stopped incinerating everything beneath it.

Compared to everything else he'd seen before, Guiche thought, nothing could compare to this.

"Then, look closely. This is your prayer made real. This is your salvation."

— o.O.O.O.o —

Part Two: Antebellum

When the request for a treaty came from Albion — no, Henrietta corrected herself scornfully, from Reconquista. When the request for a treaty came from Reconquista, a part of Crown Princess Henrietta had been relieved and very much glad, hoping that it would mean that she wouldn't be sending her best friend and the Gandalfr into battle against the rebels. Louise should worry about school and growing up, about boys and grades and what dress to wear to the next ball, not the chaotic mess that was Halkeginian politics. Henrietta had already asked too much of Louise; she was sure that asking her dearest childhood friend to fight and die for Tristain's sake would break something inside of her.

The larger part of her, however, was outraged. They would sue for peace and ask Henrietta to implicitly legitimize them when Wales, the rightful ruler of Albion, sat next to her

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and ate every meal by her side? They would ask her for peace and legitimacy, knowing, as they must, that Tristain harbored the last true threat to their sovereignty?

They would dare, *dare*, to smile at her with the same mouths that had ordered the death of the only man she had ever loved? With the same mouths that had ordered the deaths of hundreds of innocents and civilians whose only true crimes had been loyalty to the rightful ruler of their kingdom?

Nevermind that they had broken the Versailles Accords and committed war crimes, nor that they had pulled a coup d'état or committed regicide, it was their audacity to come to Tristain with the claim that they desired peace after all of that which really upset Henrietta. And what infuriated her even more was that she couldn't do anything about it.

Oh yes, Henrietta was furious at the audacity of Cromwell and his cohorts.

Tristain had no real standing military, after all, only a very small army and a handful of chivalric orders. Sure, in a pinch, they might drum up a sizable group, but they would all be untrained civilians led by untried nobles and a few young mages who had grown up to their fathers' war stories.

That was why, even though it rankled her, Henrietta understood the simple fact that she must take the offer to treat with Al — with Reconquista seriously.

As her first serious act in regards to Tristain's future — a sort of test, as it were, and a kind of twisted preparation for the coming months when she would be crowned — she must

James D. Fawkes

act in the interest of Tristain as a whole, rather than do what suited her and what she desired in her heart to do.

It was for that reason that Henrietta sat amongst a gathering of her most trusted advisors, Wales quietly and privately fuming next to her, on the appointed day of the treaty signing. They were, all of them, arrayed around a U-shaped table, huddled forward and gazing at the mirror that stood in the front, visible to the entire group.

The Magic Mirror — there was actually another name for it, but Henrietta had been calling it the Magic Mirror since her youth and could not recall the proper one — was one of the few purely Tristainian magics. It was an invention straight out of the Oriz Magic Academy and one of the most closely guarded secrets in the entire country, one of the handful of advantages Tristain had that no other country could boast. In fact, outside of Oriz Academy's notoriously secretive scholars, the number of people in the whole of the country who knew of its existence was less than fifty.

The reason why — the Magic Mirror was a revolution in long distance communications, a unique device that allowed people miles away from each other to communicate in real time. The way it had been explained to Henrietta, the mirrors, usually in pairs, were enchanted simultaneously, and the Fundamental Resonance Effect (whatever that was) ensured a secure connection between them, allowing two people to talk to each other from miles apart.

By the best estimation, the connection was sustainable without a drop in voice or image quality to the point that it was theoretically possible to communicate almost across the

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entire continent — from the Tristainian capital, the example had been given, to the center of papal supremacy in Romalia.

So, Henrietta and her retinue, all generals and judges and policy makers staunchly loyal to the Crown, sat in front of it at midmorning on the day of the signing, waiting for its twin to spark to life and connect them with the diplomatic party.

(Naturally, it would be kept out of sight of the visiting dignitaries and destroyed if battle broke out and it was in danger of being discovered.)

At the back of the room was Agnès, and standing guard over the entrances and exits (two each) were several members of the Musketeers and other chivalric orders, with the obvious exception of the Griffin Knights — they were still under investigation after Sir Wardes's betrayal.

Finally, just as everyone was beginning to become truly impatient, the surface of the mirror shimmered and sparkled, then changed to show the face of a grizzled-looking older man who must've been about ten years from mandatory retirement. Behind him was the inside of a ship cabin, the captain's cabin most likely, and the entire group had a clear view as if looking inside through an open window.

"Admiral Villeneuve," Henrietta greeted.

The grizzled old admiral gave Henrietta and Wales a respectful nod each. "Your Highness, Your Majesty." Villeneuve's mouth twisted into a lopsided smile. "Antoine. You're getting on in years, aren't you, old friend?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Henrietta saw General Gramont, who was sitting to her right, smile back. "No more

James D. Fawkes

so than you, Charles. My hair is still blonde, after all, whereas yours is more gray than brown."

Villeneuve lifted his hand and ran it through his hair, which was short and streaked through with large patches of gray, then chuckled and dropped it back down to his side.

"True. But then, I don't see the need to disguise my age with hair coloring charms."

"There is such a thing as aging gracefully, you know."

"Admiral," Henrietta interrupted, "has the...*Albion* diplomatic fleet arrived?"

Next to her, Wales scowled and clenched his fist. Without changing her expression, Henrietta reached over and gently placed her hand atop his, giving him a reassuring squeeze.

"Aye," Admiral Villeneuve replied. He, like the others sitting in the room, could not have missed the way she'd said 'Albion,' or her comforting of Wales, but didn't make any comment or in any way show that he'd noticed. "They hailed us a short while ago. I left La Ramée in charge of the ceremonially salute. In fact..."

There was a succession of great, earth-quaking booms from Villeneuve's end, and he looked back over his shoulder, even though he couldn't have seen anything.

"That would be Albion's salute. And next would be..."

Seven more booms, much closer than before, resounded throughout, and the image in the mirror quaked as Villeneuve's entire cabin shuddered and shook.

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"Ours." Villeneuve frowned. "Only seven? That's petty of you, La Ramée."

But another distant boom echoed across, and startled, Villeneuve turned to the door.

"What?"

"Admiral Villeneuve, what's happening?"

Villeneuve's head swiveled back towards the mirror.
"Forgive me, Your Highness, I'm not sure. I'll go —"

CRACK, CRACK — BANG. The sizzling boom of exploding black powder sounded loudly, like a firework only much closer, and the entire cabin shuddered again, though not as violently as before. Villeneuve stumbled and steadied himself on his desk.

"What the —"

Villeneuve turned to leave and check on the disturbance, but he'd barely gone a few steps before someone was knocking at the cabin door.

"Admiral Villeneuve!" a voice called through the wood.
"There's been a development, sir!"

"What is it?"

"Following our ceremonial salute, one of the enemy's ships was sunk, sir! We think...it might have been intentional!"

Villeneuve recoiled.

"Was it us?"

James D. Fawkes

"No, sir! We didn't use live ammunition for the salute!"

"Wha — then they blew up their own ship!"

"Yes, sir!"

"What madness," one of Henrietta's advisors muttered.
"They destroyed their own ship? What for?"

"It's not madness," Wales said. His fist clenched tightly again. "Reconquista was never going to settle for peace. As dishonorable as it is, as obvious as it will be to the rest of the continent, this was their plan from the beginning. Subterfuge."

"With all due respect, Your Majesty," someone said,
"might not your own feelings be coloring your opinions?"

Someone else hissed, "Watch your —"

Cannon fire began going off in the background. The image in the mirror started quaking again.

"Sir, the Albion flagship claims retaliation for our sinking of their ship!"

Villeneuve grunted. "So, this was their plan, was it? An excuse to declare war!"

More cannon fire echoed; the mirror shook so violently that Henrietta was sure their own mirror would begin to shudder as well, and then, another crackling explosion, much louder and much closer this time, rang out again.

"The *Mervator* went down!" a distant voice shouted. "All hands lost! Admiral La Ramée is dead!"

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"Sir!" the crewman outside the cabin began.

"I heard!" Villeneuve roared, standing. "Relay orders to the rest of the fleet! I'm taking command! Turn us about, starboard! Full speed ahead! Get us out of line of those cannons!"

General Gramont was on his feet in an instant. "Charles!"

Villeneuve paused a moment and looked back at the mirror.

"Charles, you don't intend to fight back, do you?! That's suicide!"

"Antoine..."

"Albion has the best fleet on the continent!" General Gramont's fist slammed into the table. "Damn it, man, you're outnumbered and outgunned! Taken by surprise, to boot! For Founder's sake, retreat! We'll —"

"Do nothing of the sort," Villeneuve replied. "Tarbes is right behind us. Innocent civilians are in the line of fire. And most importantly, even if we can't win, we can at least whittle down their numbers a little."

"But —"

Dozens of surprised exclamations carried into the cabin, and once more, there was a pounding on the door.

"Enemy reinforcements, sir! Estimates place their number at three-hundred ships, for a total of five-hundred-twenty-three! We need you!"

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"Aye, you do!" Villeneuve answered. "Relay orders, retreat out of range of their cannons, then swerve around for their flanks and prepare to broadside!"

He spun back around to the mirror and offered a grim smile. "Goodbye, Antoine. I have always cherished our friendship."

"Charles!" General Gramont cried, but Villeneuve was already gone, and the cabin door slammed shut behind him. Cannon fire continued to erupt in the background.

"Charles!"

For several long moments, the only thing anyone could hear was the terrible, menacing sound of the cannons and the voice of Admiral Villeneuve as he shouted out his orders, too indistinct to entirely make out. Henrietta's pulse was quickening, and blood pounded in her ears. She knew, she *knew*, what was going to happen, that Admiral Villeneuve wouldn't be coming back, but she couldn't help hoping...

Then —

Flash. A bright light consumed the mirror, followed shortly by a deafening bang, so quickly that they seemed to have occurred simultaneously. For a single instant, the entire mirror was aglow, so brilliant that it hurt to look at, and then, with a shudder and a wink, the surface faded back to its natural state, and Henrietta was staring at her own ashen face rather than the inside of a ship cabin.

The silence that followed felt as though it stretched on forever, and it seemed that no one knew what to say about what they had just witnessed. Wales' grip on Henrietta's hand

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was like steel, solid and tight, and awash in the events that had just happened before her eyes, he felt like her only solid anchor to the real world.

"What just happened?" someone asked quietly.

That shattered the reverie.

"What happened?!" someone else asked. "Are you daft? *Reconquista* just destroyed our welcoming fleet! They just *obliterated* our diplomatic party! How hard is that to understand?!"

Murmurs of agreement arose among the rest of the group.

"Perhaps it was an accident — a misunderstanding?"

But one among them offered an alternative explanation to the thought no one seriously wanted to consider.

"An accident?!" General Gramont thundered, turning on the speaker. "An *accident*?! How *naïve* are you?! My oldest friend just gave his *life* in defense against Reconquista, and you think it was an accident?!"

"Yes, but if he had just attempted to *parlay* —"

"*Parlay*?!" General Gramont sputtered. He reached for his wand, already halfway through the motions for a spell. "You ignorant little — !"

Mazarin, however, who was sitting between Henrietta and General Gramont, was like lightning, suddenly on his feet and his hand wrapped around General Gramont's wrist. "Enough. This is not the time to be fighting amongst ourselves."

General Gramont seethed. "Mazarin — !"

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But Mazarin allowed him no time to protest.

"Admiral Villeneuve's sacrifice was tragic, yes, but we should not allow our tempers to control our tongues, or our wands. Neither should we allow our passions to dictate our policy, especially our foreign policy, and most certainly not in these troubling times."

For a long moment, General Gramont only snarled furiously, but after what must have been a full minute of glaring a hole in Mazarin's head, the snarl dropped into a frown and his arm drooped. Mazarin, who must have sensed his surrender, let go of his arm.

"Forgive me," General Gramont said. "I allowed my grief and my temper to get the better of me."

Mazarin only shook his head. "Your feelings and reactions are understandable, so no one here blames you."

"*You* weren't about to be on the business end of his wand," someone else muttered rebelliously. Mazarin ignored it.

"Now," he said instead, "what are our options? Have we closed all diplomatic possibilities at this time?"

Henrietta could hardly believe her ears, even as one of the others shook his head and answered, "No. We could have a messenger bird sent out with a request for a peace summit immediately."

"Right. Dispatch a special envoy, then. We should take care of this matter before a simple misunderstanding erupts into a total war."

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Reconquista had just attacked them, was even now conquering Tarbes, and had blown their diplomatic fleet — understaffed, underequipped, and not expecting combat, at that — clear out of the sky, and Mazarin still wanted *tonegotiate?* As though it was all some big misunderstanding and the lives that had just been lost were only fodder?

"Are you *serious?*"

Everyone stopped talking and turned to face Henrietta, and it was only then that she realized she'd been the one to say it.

"S-so," she started a bit shakily, "Reconquista falsely entreats peace, takes advantage of our generosity and good will and uses a diplomatic meeting to stage an ambush, hundreds of men — good men, honest soldiers who had no time or means by which to defend themselves — are killed, and we are going to simply sweep it under the rug, tell them it was all a misunderstanding, and hope they don't come to the capital and do the same thing?"

For a moment, no one said anything. Then, Mazarin began, "Your Highness..."

But Henrietta cut across him. "No, Mazarin! Even though the marriage fell through, I will become queen shortly enough! What sort of queen would I be if I allowed good men to die, if I allowed our citizens to suffer, simply because it was easier and less troublesome than doing the right thing and fighting back?"

She stood abruptly, half in a daze, head clouded with something light and freeing, and she wondered, was this what

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true courage felt like? Was this what it felt like to be truly brave, rather than relying on a potion to falsely boost her confidence?

It felt good. It felt incredible.

"Your Highness," Mazarin tried again, but at that same moment, the door burst open and a messenger handed an envelope — which carried the royal seal of Albion, the royal seal that must now be in the hands of Reconquista — to Agnès, who opened it, scanned its contents, and scowled deeper and deeper with every passing second.

When she was done, her face set into a severe look and her mouth pulled into a grim line, she strode with purpose up to Henrietta, handed over the letter, and mumbled into Henrietta's ear, "Declaration of war from Albion. It's got Cromwell's signature."

Henrietta fumbled for a moment getting the letter back out and unfolding it, eyes darting back and forth as she read it — written in papal Romalian, as though that somehow lent religious legitimacy to its contents.

It was a very official and longwinded letter describing in detail the grievances Tristain had supposedly committed, among them harboring "a dangerous fugitive from the righteous justice of Lord Cromwell and the courts of the Holy Republic of Albion," and "falsely entreating peace with intent to perform acts of war."

After a long and tedious explanation that went on for two pages more than strictly necessary, it finally ended with a

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declaration of war and Cromwell's neatly scrawled signature, complete with his family's personal seal.

But as she sat there, taking it all in, a suspicion began percolating in Henrietta's brain, and she turned to her loyal friend and asked, "Agnès, how long would it take to dictate a letter of this length?"

"By magic? Maybe fifteen minutes or half an hour. By hand? At least twice that."

"And how long would it take the average messenger owl to make it from Tarbes to Albion to here, stopping only long enough to pick up and drop off a letter?"

"At minimum, about twenty minutes."

Messenger owls were a special species of owl, bred for their innate wind magic, which let them travel at speeds nearly twenty times that of regular birds. They could cover a distance of almost two hundred miles in only a quarter of an hour, moving so quickly that they'd already be at their destination by the time you spotted them and waved to flag them down.

But the minimum amount of time needed to draft and send the letter in her hands meant that it would've taken an hour to get to her.

It couldn't have been more than fifteen or twenty minutes since Villeneuve's ship had been shot down.

Henrietta saw the realization cross the faces of the other members, several of whom were beginning to look outraged.

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For the sake of those who still looked a bit stumped, she summed it all up.

"Reconquista," she didn't bother pretending they had any legitimacy by calling them 'Albion,' "never intended to broker or honor any peace between us. This letter —" she threw it onto the table — "was likely penned several days ago in preparation for their subterfuge. Cromwell has played us for fools."

The long silence that followed was deafening, and it was obvious by the betrayal that marred every expression that no one still harbored any delusions about the Tarbes situation being an accident or mistake. Satisfied, Henrietta concluded that they were, to a one, unanimous in their feelings about Reconquista.

Maybe now they would stop dithering about and actually *do* something.

"We should send an envoy to Romalia, ask His Holiness to rule on Reconquista," someone suggested into the void.

"Yes, of course," Mazarin said immediately. "Perhaps they will send an Inquisitor to inspect this letter and involve His Holiness's Templars. Reconquista cannot claim legitimacy if the pope himself denounces them. In the meantime, we should send an envoy to Germania and request assistance. Even with the wedding cancelled, they might feel generous enough to lend aid."

Henrietta floundered for a few seconds. Something uncomfortable coiled in her belly. "You intend to sit back and

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wait for help?! People are dying out there! Admiral Villeneuve sacrificed his *life* to protect them!"

"And that is very tragic indeed," Mazarin said solemnly. "But Albion has air superiority and a standing army. Even if we amassed as many troops as we can as quickly as possible, we wouldn't manage more than one or two thousand, and it would do no one any good for us to throw away our lives trying to retake Tarbes from a superior enemy."

Murmurs of agreement echoed, though General Gramont had a very sour look on his face.

"Fine!" Henrietta said, fed up. "Fine! Cower here and wait for help from Germania, if you like. Wait for the pope to get off the fence and finally take a stance on Reconquista! *I* shall be heading to Tarbes! If you have any shame at all, you'll join me!"

"Your Highness!" Several voices cried out to try and stop her, but Henrietta was already storming out the door, mind racing as she considered what, exactly, she was about to do. She was about to go to war. She was about to charge onto a battlefield.

A part of her was terrified out of her wits.

But the rest of her felt righteous and just, like she was doing the right thing and God and the Founder were on her side.

"Your Highness!" Mazarin came racing after her, Wales hot on his heels. "Please wait, Princess!"

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For an elderly man who could have been Queen Marianne's father, or at least her older brother, Mazarin was surprisingly quick on his feet, and when he caught up to Henrietta, he reached out and took hold of her arm with an almost shockingly strong grip.

"Your Highness, you mustn't do this. Your courage is admirable, but it will not protect your life."

Henrietta wrenched her arm out of Mazarin's hands and continued on.

"You have too little faith in me, Mazarin," she said, undaunted. "We have something far better than armies to place our faith in."

"What?" Mazarin gaped.

"Agnès." Agnès appeared next to Henrietta as though she had been there all along — likely, she actually had. "Send a letter to the Academy. Tell Headmaster Osmond that I have need of Louise Françoise's familiar."

"Of course, Your Highness."

Wales, who had looked quite lost during the latter part of the meeting (and Henrietta wondered if Albion's politics had been more decisive and straightforward), seemed to grasp immediately at what she meant to do.

"So," he said, "that is your intention, then. You had me scared for a moment there, Ann."

But Mazarin protested still. "Your Highness, even Gandalf cannot turn the tides of a battle like this. It's

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madness to think even such a legendary familiar could defeat a fleet of Albion's best ships."

Henrietta only smiled grimly. "It's not Gandalfr I place my faith in, Mazarin."

There were legends, of course, about the special abilities of the Gandalfr, about the powers possessed by a fully realized Left Hand of God. Church doctrine said that the Founder's great familiar, His great Shield, was an army unto himself, a peerless warrior that could take on squadrons of knights and mages and come away unscathed, and that the holy power vested in him was Brimir's blessing to make an ordinary man into a divine messenger, an instrument of the Founder's will.

But the times had changed. Airships had been invented and turned into weapons of war. Dragons and griffins and manticores could fly far beyond the reach of a sword. Even the great Gandalfr couldn't hope to destroy a fleet, and even Brimir's blessings could not enable a simple warrior to fight modern war machines. The nature of combat had simply changed too much.

That was why it was not the holy familiar, Gandalfr, that Henrietta put her faith in.

"It's Sir Shirou Emiya."

— o.O.O.O.O —

Part Three: The Master

"SAY WHAT?!"

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Cromwell's voice echoed across his office and sent many of the trinkets and devices quivering.

"I-It's just as I said, sir!" the frightened messenger cried. "A-according to our agents in La Rochelle, our fleet was destroyed by a beam of light! The entire fleet, reinforcements and all!"

"I heard you the first time!" Cromwell snapped impatiently. The messenger, a young boy barely old enough to have joined the military, squeaked.

Likely, he had never seen any side of Cromwell but the calm, collected, charismatic leader who had gathered the downtrodden and discontent to rebel against King James. He could not be blamed for how badly he was shaking, nor for the way his knees were wobbling and the nervous terror on his face.

He could also not be blamed for such a wrench being thrown into Cromwell's carefully crafted plans — the letter, in Cromwell's opinion, had been a very neat touch to tie it all together — nor for the strange and unexplained phenomenon that had unraveled the plot to take their first foothold into Tristain. He could not even be blamed for the contents of the message he had just delivered, because he was just the messenger, not the culprit behind it all or the source of Cromwell's thunderous ire.

Even so, that didn't excuse him. None of it could possibly be that messenger's fault, but he had the unpleasant honor of facing the brunt of Cromwell's anger.

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"It's not the what that concerns me!" Cromwell roared. "It's the how! The how! How did those backwards, inbred Tristainians manage something like this! How, without us knowing! How! How!"

"U-uh, I-I don't —"

"Of course you don't know!" Cromwell roared again. "In fact, nobody seems to know! Doesn't anybody know!? *Why* doesn't anybody know!? This is the sort of thing we needed to know! Don't you think so!?"

"Calm down."

A cool voice cut through the office like a dagger clad in silk. Immediately, Cromwell spun around, even as the messenger squeaked again, to behold a figure who seemed to melt right out of the shadows. Cloaked entirely in black, hidden so completely by her dark cowl that all Cromwell could see was her pretty purple lips pulled up into a smile, she appeared so suddenly that she might have teleported, or maybe she had been there all along, invisible, watching Cromwell fly into a rage and silently laughing at his foolishness.

"You."

The smile grew broader, and her white, white teeth glinted in the sunlight. "Me."

"U-um..."

Cromwell spun around to face the messenger again. "Out!" he shouted. "Out! Out! Out!"

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The messenger squeaked one more time, then turned as so quickly he might have gotten whiplash and fled from the room as fast as his legs could carry him. After he had gone, Cromwell closed the doors with a flick of his wand and established their privacy with another flick. Only then did he turn back to his guest and regard her solemnly.

"Sheffield," he said.

"Cromwell," Sheffield purred. "Are you done tormenting that poor boy, then? It was actually quite fun to watch."

Cromwell waved it off with an aggravated twirl of his wrist. "Are you actually here in person this time," he asked instead, "or am I talking to another puppet?"

Sheffield had a thing against meeting in person. Cromwell didn't claim to understand her reasoning — she hadn't even shared with him her given name! — but with all of the resources she'd lent to him and his movement, there hadn't been any reason to question it too much.

But there were limits to what Cromwell was willing to accept, especially when it was entirely possible, now, that she had been playing him for a fool the entire time.

Why else wouldn't she have told him about that superweapon Tristain had used against his fleet?

"How little faith," Sheffield cooed. "What have I done to earn such distrust from you?"

"I haven't the patience for games today!" Cromwell snapped. "Besides, why didn't you tell me that Tristain had a weapon like that at their disposal!?"

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Sheffield's smile flickered and fell.

"I am not all-knowing," she said a little sourly. "There are limits to my knowledge, as well."

"You're going to claim you didn't know?!"

"I didn't," was her bland answer. "But I'm afraid our underestimating him was partly my fault. One of my agents, you see, misidentified him as King Arthur, who would certainly possess a Noble Phantasm of the sort that could have wiped out an entire fleet so easily."

Cromwell sputtered. "Then why didn't you —"

"But one of my others," she cut across, "said that it *wasn't* King Arthur, only a pretender. In that case, I allowed myself to underestimate the power of his Noble Phantasm."

She admitted it with reluctance and distaste, like she was telling some dark secret that she would rather not give voice to, but it cooled Cromwell's blood somewhat.

"I'm afraid that's my fault, Master."

Another voice added in. Cromwell jumped and spun around again, and there, leaning casually against the wall, was a figure in ancient-looking armor with scraggly red hair and a ragged black cloak wrapped around his shoulders. Gleaming golden eyes turned, half-lidded, to regard Cromwell, and as Cromwell looked back to Sheffield, there was something of a snarl curling her lips.

"You always did like sneaking around, *Perseus*," said Sheffield, spitting the warrior's name like a curse.

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Perseus, arms folded across his chest, only offered a shrug.

"My apologies, Master," said Perseus, sounding not very sorry at all. "However, my first duty is to your protection, and I would be remiss if I allowed you to travel unescorted."

The eyes slid back over to Cromwell. "Regardless, the misidentification of Gandalf's Noble Phantasm is my fault. I assumed the cosmetic similarities to Excalibur were a sign of its impotence, not that we were dealing with a wielder of another Last Phantasm."

For a long moment, Sheffield chewed on her bottom lip and seemed very much to want Perseus to burst spontaneously into flames. Cromwell, feeling very much out of place at that moment, cleared his throat.

"Yes, well," he said awkwardly, "I suppose you'll not be making that mistake again."

Sheffield huffed, but reluctantly admitted, "This is good, though."

Cromwell choked on his own spit. "Good!? Our entire fleet was —"

"Yes, yes, destroyed," Sheffield cut in impatiently. "And while it's a setback to have lost such a useful Noble Phantasm as that, we now also know the limitations of the enemy's Noble Phantasm."

"For all the good it does us," Perseus said dismally. "A++, Anti-Army. A divine mystery on the level of a god's magic..."

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Even Cromwell, who didn't know much about what they were discussing, had to admit that it sounded quite powerful. And something like that was in the hands of the enemy?

How did you beat something like that, exactly?

But Sheffield only chuckled.

"Ho? You underestimate me, Perseus."

From under her cowl, Cromwell just barely caught the glimmer of what must be her runes — that was right, she so often acted on her own and by what seemed to be her own whims that Cromwell had long forgotten that he was not dealing with another mage of Halkeginia, but the legendary familiar, Mjodvitnir, the Mind of God.

And Cromwell, who had studied extensively the old Brimirc texts in Romalia, understood her power perhaps better than anyone else did: to use any magical artifact she touched with complete mastery and to recreate any magic in Halkeginia. That was why he'd been so confident of his success, wasn't it? With such a powerful familiar by his side, assisting him in his campaign, he couldn't lose.

"For a mage of my caliber, building something to defeat even something like that should be well within my power."

She turned to face Cromwell, and her smile had reappeared. "Continue as you have. Even if Tristain invades Albion, don't surrender. Once the board is set up properly, *then* we'll wipe them out all at once. Even their Gandalfr won't be able to save them."

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Cromwell offered her a matching grin, excitement coiling in his belly, and swept into a bow. "Of course, my lady."

When he stood straight again, both Sheffield and Perseus were gone.

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Reference

Servant: Emiya Shirou/Shirou Emiya (King Apeiron)

Class: Gandalf

Strength: B+ (A+)

Mana: A

Endurance: A

Agility: B+ (A+)

Luck: A

Class Skills:

Magic Resistance: Grants protection against magical effects. Differently from the Resistance effect that merely rejects prana, this ability cancels the spells altogether.

- C: Cancel spells with a chant below two verses ("Line level"). Cannot defend against Magecraft on the level of High-Thaumaturgy and Greater Rituals.

Mental Interference: A potent compulsion that ensures the cooperation of the familiar with the Master; it compels him to defer to her and to place her safety and wellbeing as paramount to his own success. The rank denotes the potency of the compulsion needed to achieve the intended effect upon the familiar.

- C: This is the average level of compulsion, necessary for creatures that would not normally obey their Masters. Equivalent to the compulsion needed to "tame" a Rhyme Dragon.

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Master of Arms: The ability to instinctively wield weapons with incredible skill.

- EX: Can wield any weapon he grasps as though he had practiced with it his whole life, including Noble Phantasms. As long as it is recognizable as a weapon, he will be provided with what he needs to wield it, including knowledge of its use and "permission" to use it. At this level, instead of appearing foreign, any knowledge gained on a weapon's function will seem instinctual. Bonus effect of ranking up Agility and Strength and dramatically increasing speed whenever he holds a weapon. (As Shirou's compatibility with the Gandalf class is unrivaled, this skill is naturally of the highest ranking.)

Personal Skills:

Magecraft: C

Protection of the Fairies: A

Clairvoyance: C

Eye of the Mind (True): B

Noble Phantasms:

Name: Gavilain

Title: Shining Sword of Salvation

Rank: A++

Type: Anti-Army

Range: 1-50

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Number of Targets: 500

Name: Sarras

Title: The Sacred Reliquary

Rank: E — A++

Type: Anti-Unit

Range: N/A

Number of Targets: N/A

Name: Anaide

Title: Blessings of Avalon

Rank: B

Type: Anti-Unit

Range: 0-1

Number of Targets: 1

Name: Unlimited Blade Works

Title: Infinite Creation of Swords

Rank: E — A++

Type: ?

Range: ?

Number of Targets: ?

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Servant: Sir Francis Drake

Class: ?

Strength: C

Mana: B

Endurance: B

Agility: A

Luck: EX

Class Skills:

Magic Resistance: Grants protection against magical effects. Differently from the Resistance effect that merely rejects prana, this ability cancels the spells altogether.

- D: Cancel Single-Action spells ("Dot level"). Magic Resistance of the same degree of an amulet that rejects magical energy. Since she doesn't have Magic Resistance of her own, her Magic Resistance is low.)

Mental Interference: A potent compulsion that ensures the cooperation of the familiar with the Master; it compels her to defer to her and to place her safety and wellbeing as paramount to her own success. The rank denotes the potency of the compulsion needed to achieve the intended effect upon the familiar.

- B: The level of compulsion necessary for unruly and dangerous beasts that would normally kill their Masters. It can twist even the likes of a mantichore or a griffin into an obedient follower. At this level, distortion of the personality is inevitable.

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Personal Skills:

Voyager of the Storm: A+

Pioneer of the Stars: EX

Military Tactics: B

Noble Phantasms:

Name: Golden Wild Hunt

Title: The Night of the Golden Hind and the Storm

Rank: A+

Type: Anti-Army

Range: 20-40

Number of Targets: 20 Ship Forward Deployment

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Servant: Perseus

Class: Sylph

Strength: B

Mana: B+

Endurance: C

Agility: B+

Luck: A+

Class Skills:

O'r Anyr: A skill granted to powerful wind-element familiars. Wind-based attacks receive a boost and cost decreases at higher levels.

- A: The power of wind-based attacks increases dramatically, and the cost of all wind-based magic is decreased by half.)

Mental Interference: A potent compulsion that ensures the cooperation of the familiar with the Master; it compels her to defer to her and to place her safety and wellbeing as paramount to her own success. The rank denotes the potency of the compulsion needed to achieve the intended effect upon the familiar.

- C: The average level of compulsion, necessary for creatures that would not normally obey their Masters. Equivalent to the compulsion needed to "tame" a Rhyme Dragon.

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Personal Skills:

Magic Resistance: Grants protection against magical effects. Differently from the Resistance effect that merely rejects prana, this ability cancels the spells altogether.

- B: Cancel spells with a chant below three verses ("Triangle Level"). Even if targeted by High-Thaumaturgy and Greater Rituals, it is difficult for him to be affected.

Independent Action: the ability to remain independent even when rejecting the prana supply from the Master.

- A: Capable of working without any support or orders from the Master whatsoever. Because of his constitution, he can fight entirely on his own and prefers the solitude. At this level, his fortitude and morale will increase as long as he is fighting without assistance from allies.

Charisma: B

Divinity: B

Eye of the Mind (False): B

Noble Phantasms:

Name: Harpe

Title: All Life Is Equal

Rank: B

Type: Anti-Unit

Range: 2-4

Number of Targets: 1

Name: Talaria

Title: Divine Winged Sandals

Rank: E+

Type: Anti-Unit

Range: 1

Number of Targets: 1

Name: Bellerophon

Title: Bridle of Chivalry

Rank: A+

Type: Anti-Army

Range: 2-50

Number of Targets: 300

Name: Kibisis

Title: Reversal of Reality

Rank: C

Type: Barrier

Range: 1-4

Number of Targets: 1

Name: Aegis

Title: Almighty Mirror Shield

Rank: A++

Type: Barrier

Range: 1-3

Number of Targets: 3

Name: Mantle of Darkness

Title: Cloak of Invisibilty

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Rank: C

Type: Anti-Unit

Range: 1

Number of Targets: 1

The background of the entire page is a bright, sunny landscape. The top half shows a clear blue sky with a bright sun in the upper center and scattered white clouds. The bottom half shows a lush green field of tall grass, with a soft glow emanating from the horizon line.

Like all things, it begins with a wish.

One wish, for a powerful, strong familiar.

One wish, to be a hero that saves everyone.

One wish, to finally live free.

One wish, to meet again after so long apart.

One wish, to be forgiven for the sin of betrayal.

One wish, with the power to change the world.

“This is your prayer made real.

This is your salvation.”