

## Fate/Bonds Beyond Humanity

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### 71- What Lurks in the Shadows

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Both of them rushed to change clothes, or to put proper ones in Shirou's case as he put on a short navy blue sleeved shirt and jeans before changing his hair to white and grabbing his fake ID. Fuyuki was the type of city where a police officer would stop students and ask why they weren't in school so the Mage needed to look like an adult.

Maybe a drop out college student would be a more apt description but an adult nonetheless and the sort of person someone wouldn't find strange if they were on a date in the middle of the week.

They would also take a car to help with the disguise and transportation so it would be great if he had a driver license. "Xenovia, no." The woman had showed up dressed in her full combat uniform, cloak and everything.

"But Master-"

"We are going to be going around town so please dress less conspicuously."

"... It worked just fine the first time we arrived in Fuyuki." She complained under her breath and he let that slide as the bluehead obeyed the order.

Shaking his head the Mage made a mental note to explain why it really didn't work on that occasion either and certainly wouldn't with the heat of the summer reaching its peak. People would ask questions for the heavy hood alone. If anyone saw the clothes she used underneath the best hope they could get was if they thought she was a cosplayer of some sort.

'In this heat her long gloves and boots would be as suspicious as they were attractive even if the leotard would-' The redhead slapping himself when he began to spring in his mind. "No time for that. She is a trained Exorcist, you are the one raised as a 'spy'..."

Blending in wasn't really on Xenovia's manual even if she knew enough to be discreet but that conversation could wait until later as Shirou moved to prepare a car. Fortunately he was spoiled by choice thanks to his lover.

Another part of the Emiya estate which was expanded thanks to Rias was the garage. Not that it was small before but the fact was that Emiya Kiritsugu had hidden many cars around Fuyuki and his son's home had little space for them. The city had dozens of safehouses with different utilities and the Magus Killer had cars in six.

And every single one of them was taken inside the garage, the subterranean one that was connected to the main building. The car elevator in it accessed every single car and when Shirou opened the panel on a wall he saw six buttons, all labeled.

Including the magically enhanced Murcielago and Humvee who were previously taken care of by the man's contacts. Now in his home Shirou was the one who would have to take care of them but once again worry had gotten in his way. Still the cars were preserved with magic so when he arrived in the garage they were ready to roll.

So he pressed the Murcielago labeled button, as it was the car which he was most familiar with, and watched as the floor opened up and the black sports car raised from the underground as the spells woven around it retreated.

Then he frowned with the realization there would be four people in that car and none of them could transform into a cat for space. That frown made him study the buttons and found himself not knowing which car would be best, certainly not the Humvee, too big for the city.

His answer came when he noticed the name Mitsubishi and he remembered reading an article about how they didn't sell sports cars anymore. Trusting that his father would have bought something simple for a change he pressed the button and was a little disappointed.

Sure the car was big and had four doors but also didn't look like the sort of car which would belong to the average man. 'The old man certainly doesn't hold back with cars. Is that my mom's influence? Do I want to know?' Studying the new black car, his nose twitched and he chuckled. "At least this one is also ready for some beatings."

Placing a hand on it Shirou used Structural Analysis, quickly learning every bit about the car as he could, both mechanically and enhancement wise, and its model's name.

"'Lancer', huh? Definitely mom's influence."

"We are taking that one?" Xenovia arrived dressed in jean shorts and a light red top with a chibi Rias plastered in the front. Both had laughed a lot when they first bought it back in the Underworld. "So, conspicuous enough for you?"

"Proper for summer without a doubt." He studied the car a little more before pointing to the several keys close to the wall. "Can you-" Xenovia had already thrown the right one.

Both were already inside the Lancer when the bluehead said, "The Magus Killer is really paranoid, isn't he? To have this many cars?"

"Pft, you have no idea." The engine roared and they departed towards their meeting point. It was pretty far and in the middle of the town but that was for safety since everything could still be a trap.

Not that Shirou believed it was since something inside him was saying the girl with the last Caliburn Fragment wouldn't lie. Also he was pretty sure it wasn't Avalon affecting him but if it

was then the implications would be staggering. During a red sign he checked the Noble Phantasm in his soul just to be sure.

It was as inert as always, or as inert as an Artifact made by Fairies could be which meant it was active enough to protect him without offering its real power. He wasn't its owner and never going to be so he knew it wasn't just as active as it could be.

So he took some measures. 'Bellerophon, keep an eye on it. Any changes you give me a call.' The pegasus replied happily, flying higher in the skies of his soul. "About that second Mage, any idea who they are?"

Caressing the shrunk Durandal in her neck like a real cross the bluehead shook her head. "Sorry, Master, but I wasn't exactly interested in details about potential targets when I was at the Church." Xenovia confessed with a frown. "But if they give a name then that will help."

The green light turned on and they continued traveling Fuyuki at a calm speed even as both paid attention to the roads for any sign of danger. There was just the usual amount of cars and people on the streets and no magic whatsoever so Shirou drove casually until they arrived at their destination.

A small ice cream parlor with tables both inside and outside the place in one of the most busy streets of the whole Fuyuki. Unfortunately it was so busy that finding a parking spot close to it turned out to be a challenge and they had to go around a few rounds before finding any space.

While it was a few blocks away it was enough. "Glad to not have your cape?" Shirou asked as the blazing sun bashed on their heads as he locked the car.

His knight approached without a care and without batting a sweat. "Are you kidding? Remember where I worked before? I hunted in worse conditions." Xenovia threw him a pout. "But the cloak could be used for shade and to hide our approach."

Rolling his eyes Shirou made a show of opening his door again to hide his upper body as he Traced two mundane objects of the same kind but as a joke he worked a little extra to make them different.

Just when Xenovia approached to ask what was taking so long the Mage turned around and placed something in her head. "Here. That solves the problem, right?"

Noticing it was a cap, the blue haired swordswoman moved it off her eyes to see the magus also had one in his head. "I suppose..." Removing it, Xenovia noticed a chibi Rias on hers while his own had no symbol.

"It matches." He asked the obvious question. "Kinda funny she is a mascot in another world, right?"

Spinning her cap with her finger, she couldn't help but agree. "Fufufu, maybe we should start selling her products here?" She placed her cap back on her head. "I still would prefer my

cloak, it has more utility.”

“I already said it would attract too much attention.” They both approached the building and Shirou saw no sign of Altria anywhere. ‘Either they didn’t arrive or they are inside.’ He debated calling since he really didn’t feel any urgency for the situation. After all, he knew nothing about other Mages. “Maybe I should-”

The disguised redhead couldn’t help but freeze with what he was seeing, his next action being a facepalm even as Xenovia looked around in confusion searching for what caused such a reaction.

He almost let out a groan escape but instead decided to take a deep breath and march inside the small parlor. The temperature immediately dropped thanks to the air conditioner but the Mage of Swords didn’t care about it.

No, what he cared about was the two figures he saw on the corner of the parlor, figures he was sure more than once strangers paused to look because they utterly failed in blending in with everyone else.

‘On one hand, I am kinda disappointed Xenovia hasn’t noticed them yet.’ That could be because of their clothing or the fact one of the figures, the taller one, had a huge sundae in front of her that was being devoured with gusto. ‘On the other they aren’t showing any sort of ill intent... but using long cloaks with hoods in the middle of summer away from any cosplay convention is asking too much!’

Indeed Shirou had found the two Pendragon siblings rather easily because both of them were using long hoods somewhat similar to the ones issued by the Church. Those had their own spells, pretty much a different ‘brand’ if his nose was right, but the design was close enough if not by the colors.

The small figure, Le Fay Pendragon without a doubt who had a small ice cream in front of her, was using a dark teal color while the taller one, he identified Altria Pendragon by a pleased moan over her food, wore dark blue and had an obvious sword by her side.

To be fair the bundle of cloth was well tied and could be confused with a hockey stick nine times out of ten unless someone expected a sword. Which the Mage did and even if it was covered in ways that blocked mana detection or made the bundle look normal he knew what it was.

Caliburn Ruler was in Fuyuki, the Sword of Selection could finally be truly completed.

But that was for later. “How are you two doing? Enjoying the ice cream?” Shirou asked with a smile as both girls turned to his direction and he saw their faces. If they were surprised by his hair color they didn’t show it. “You made it all sound rather urgent so we rushed a little.”

Swallowing some of her sundae, Altria watched as the Mage of Swords and his knight sat on the other side of the table. “You don’t look in a rush.”

“Hard to be since we don’t know exactly what is going on... But I admit I am rather concerned.” The white haired man commented as he sat down. He also noticed Xenovia giving him a glance. “Yes...”

“They are using their cloaks, why can’t I use mine?”

“Because they are attracting attention.” His thumb pointed to the outside and all three noticed some people stopping whenever they noticed the odd attires before moving on. “Sure not everyone is going to pry but...”

“These are good disguises.” Le Fay said with a pout as she pushed her ice cream cup away, completely empty. “Magic keeps people from looking too much.”

“But why not just dress simple and appear normal?” When he didn’t get a reply he began to pay more attention to see if there was some sort of trick he was missing. It wasn’t a trick, it was a detail. “Why are you two still in your school uniforms?” He hissed as low as he could.

Altria leaned forward to reply. “Because we told our brother we were going to school.”

Mesmerized by their similarities with Artoria or not, Shirou wasn’t going to let that slide. “With a sword?”

“Would you rather I left it with the Khaos Brigade?”

“Aren’t you their ally?” That was something he needed to know more than whoever was in his city.

And her response pleased him immensely. “Only because I can’t leave my friends with them.” Altria replied fiercely and the white haired man nodded, much to her confusion. “Was this some sort of test?”

“No- I mean, not really.” ‘Can’t necessarily say that she looks too much like Artoria for an explanation.’ Shirou almost winced at such thoughts and the sort of talk they could lead to. King Arthur, Artoria, was long dead and the girl before him was just her descendant from Morgan’s line no doubt. “My questions were honest; you two need better disguises.” A half truth, one the older sister accepted. Not the younger, he could see. “Anyway, you called us here saying there is another Mage around. I thought I was the last person to earn the title of Mage in the last hundreds of years.”

“Yeah and he is hundreds of years old.” Le Fay informed as Altria sat down and focused on finishing her sundae. Sounded so simple but the implications alone sounded the alarms on Shirou’s head as Xenovia rubbed her chin. “Aren’t you two going to eat something?”

“You just told us a century old magus is in my city doing who knows what and you are suggesting we really stop for lunch?”

“Well, we did invite them.” Xenovia offered while calling a waiter. “And you just had breakfast, Master, but I ate hours ago.” Her disposition grew more serious. “If we are going

Stray hunting it will be better if we are well fed.” She then offered him a more casual smile. “Also, we didn’t get any news from anyone about missing people or attacks of any sort which means this supposed Mage is laying low, giving us plenty of time.”

Altria and Le Fay looked at the bluehead, impressed, with the latter saying, “That is an Exorcist for you, I suppose. Ready to hunt at the drop of a hat.”

“I am just working over your information, speaking of which.” All at the table could feel her Ki growing stronger, a clear threat. “If this is some sort of trap to take out my Master, know neither of you are walking out of here alive.”

It was Shirou’s turn to stay calm as he placed a hand on his knight’s shoulder. “Altria isn’t one who fights with such methods. The way she chastised Vali was too honest for it.”

What earned him a smile also earned him a grin and a comment from the younger sibling. “Maybe she was just tricking you.”

“Le Fay!”

“Ria, I am just saying the obvious, right? Honor is a good excuse to stop people from doing things. A distraction before a stab in the back.” The worst part for Shirou and Xenovia was that the girl said everything with the most gentle of smiles. She even giggled when her sister threw a karate chop in her head. “Just saying, Ria.”

Altria's shoulders dropped and she began to massage her forehead. ‘Really wish you acted more your age.’ Of course she didn’t bother to voice her thoughts. Instead she said, “Yeah? Then say less.” After chidding her still smiling younger sister, the older one looked back at Shirou. “I don’t know what that Mage is doing here but he is dangerous. Everyone in the Khaos Brigade knows about him... many fear him and with good reason.”

“What is his name?” Shirou leaned forward but immediately retreated as a waitress stopped by to get their orders. Xenovia asked for a parfait but the white haired man politely declined getting anything as he had just had breakfast. “So?”

Before her sister could speak, Le Fay raised her hand and with a wave created a boundary field. It got raised eyebrows from the other two which were ignored. “Look, Ria. you know that I want nothing more than that guy dealt with because of his magecraft...” She shivered and made a face of clear disgust which just served to get Sihrou more worried. “But this is real treason. Even if we aren’t officially with the Brigade, that will make us enemies... Even more enemies.”

Both Fuyuki’s inhabitants could understand her logic but were more impressed with how someone so young could create a small boundary field from nothing. Shirou used Structural Analysis to see if she used a rune or something of the sort and yet he found no such thing.

All they were sure was that since nobody noticed her raising her voice nobody would eavesdrop.

The older sister gave the younger a look before shrugging. "Whatever he is doing, it can't be a good thing." Turning to the others she added, "That is the sort of guy who never leaves his workshop and has the Old Satan Faction deliver his supplies whenever he needs them. That he left the dimension we were in was already a shock. That he came to Fuyuki, a place with a huge ley line and two Heiresses..."

She left the sentence hanging but they got her point. "So, name?" Xenovia asked as she saw her parfait quickly approaching.

Once the bluehead got the treat, Le Fay answered. "Zolgen Makiri, the Mage of Insects."

While the name was familiar, Shirou couldn't exactly pick up from where, the title didn't sound that impressive. "The Mage of Insects?"

"Who's that?" Xenovia's question was followed by a pleasant moan over her parfait. Not Shirou Standard but excellent nonetheless.

Neither of the girls looked surprised at their reaction. "Exorcist or not I wasn't expecting you to know someone that has been off the grid for over a century." Altria acknowledged verbally for their benefit. "Yet I can guarantee he is dangerous and he being in this town can't be good for anyone."

"Zolgen Makiri, originally from Central Europe, is a man so old he has been around since as early as the Renaissance." Le Fay began with a serious expression, almost detached. "Not that his appearance would indicate that since he mastered the secrets to extend his youth far too early to ever look his age. Regardless it is said that... he was a good man once." The smaller blonde looked at the table, the hood hiding her expression. "A who made several friends including a particular Einzebern who sacrificed her body to try and make a better world."

"He knew Justeaze..." Obviously that wasn't enough to make him concerned but truly spoke of the man's age. And gave him some context. "Was he there? When they tried the Holy Grail War?"

"Yes and apparently the event changed him for the worse." The younger sister said with a nod. "Whatever their goal with the Grail was important, so important in fact that Justeaze changing her mind and imploding the ritual made him mad in every sense."

"That was when he started to commit crimes worthy of calling him a monster." Altria took over, lowering her hood and making sure they could see her face. Her look was haunted but also sympathetic. "The Pendragon Family faced him in the past, obviously the Church did too and I find it easy to believe every Pantheon in the planet would have a god or two who tried to stop his... experiments." When she said the word it was cautious but full of disgust. "Make no mistake, I know magicians can be... amoral in many cases but even the Clocktower disavowed Zolgen after his crimes, barely allowing his family to keep their magical practices so long they stayed away from the man. They live in Japan if I am not mistaken."

“Lived. They are dead.” Le Fay said before pointing a finger in Shirou’s direction. “You killed their last Heir.”

“Wait. Wait. Wait!” He raised a hand to stop her but Le Fay was already silent as Altria turned to her sister and studied her carefully. “I killed his last ‘Heir’? Who? I remember every life I have taken,” personally, indirectly and those he left behind, at least their faces for the latter, “and I am pretty sure I killed no one named Makiri.”

A brief moment of silence passed by them and Altria, seeing her sister was not going to elaborate, took over. “His family, when they moved to Japan, changed their name to Matou.”

“Matou... Matou Shinji...” Once a classmate, less than a friend but more than just an acquaintance, Shirou remembered the arrogant boy very well.

He remembered exactly the kind of monster that boy became at the end.

“Maybe he is here for revenge.” The former Exorcist suggested. “If that is the case we need to reinforce our home-”

“He barely had any contact with his family after going off the grid.” Altria rebutted before the bluehead could even finish. “They renounced him and Zolgen never cared for anything other than his experiments. Not after the Grail War went south.”

“And what is your source on this?” Xenovia retorted with a frown. “No offense but if he is so reclusive as you say then nobody can know what he is doing. Hell, how do you know he is even here in the first place?”

Le Fay shivered before saying, “The moment I heard we were in the same dimension I sent several familiars to keep track of the Mage of Insects.” She shivered again. “Never managed to get inside his mansion but I know the company he kept... Rizevim Lucifer. Apparently they are friends.”

Leaning forward once again, Shirou asked, “And why is he here? If you had an eye on him-”

“Rizevim was informing someone else in the mansion that Zolgen was going out, Katerea Leviathan.” That was someone they were familiar with, the woman who escaped Kuoh after the failed attack the same day they met. “After her defeat at Azazel’s hands she moved into the mansion but...” Le Fay looked about to say something but shook her head. “That isn’t important. What was important was that she asked Rizevim where ‘his pet magician was’ and I heard from the devil’s own mouth ‘my friend is in Fuyuki collecting some data, Lady Leviathan. Data that will benefit us tremendously’.”

Everyone froze in place as they delved in their own thoughts about the subject. ‘It is convenient that a man like Rizevim would just say such things in the open... then again...’ Shirou tried to focus on sensing the younger magus’ presence and found himself falling short.



It was almost like she was invisible to most of his senses, like a ghost he could see but barely interacted with by the way mana seemed to avoid touching her body. Either way it showed that she could hide well and if the Son of the Original Lucifer didn't know her familiars were present he would have no reason to lie.

Yet something didn't fit. "And why is he here? Now, I mean?" Shirou asked out loud with a hand on his chin. "Can't be vengeance, Shinji died last year and he would have shown up earlier so that gives credence to the story. Maybe he finished a time-sensitive project and decided to move now... but for what? Vengeance still doesn't fit." He would have acted early otherwise.

Despite the saying how revenge was a dish better served cold, the reality was that most couldn't just wait to get it. Anger doesn't give way to patience, after all.

"We don't know but we know he is dangerous." Altria held her sword as if Zolgen could show up at any moment. "Way, way too dangerous to trust he is not plotting something."

Emiya believed her but found himself trying to figure out what his fellow Mage was doing. "He is the Mage of Insects, right? That was also Shiji's magecraft so maybe that- What if he is here to recover Shinji's notes? Or worse, maybe a sample."

"That is a possibility." Le Fay began to nod eagerly despite not knowing exactly what he was talking about. "If Matou managed to preserve something Zolgen could find worthwhile and it was time-sensitive then moving now makes sense."

"His last work was a type of worm that connected to the brain and was able to control someone." Shirou saw the younger blonde lose her smile and shiver with disgust. "Several of them were even capable of controlling a Lord from the Clocktower. If any of those survived."

"Then we have no time to waste." Altria stood up and got her sword but Xenovia raised a hand to stop her. "What?"

"So far all we have is your word and the belief this isn't a trap." She said after a bite of her parfait. "Also this story is too convenient for my tastes. The Church teaches their Exorcists the name of every known dangerous entity around and I never even heard of this Zolgen before."

"He has been hiding-"

"For a century, I heard. Maybe I even missed that lesson or he is considered irrelevant or people believe him dead. Is he even that dangerous?" Xenovia turned to Shirou with a frown. "Sure those brain controlling worms are but there is no way Rias and the others didn't flip this city under its head to make sure they weren't around anymore."

It was Le Fay who spoke next. "Some magicians have secret passages and compartments that can only be found and open by family members. Even if this Shinji didn't plan on dying he may have left something. And whatever Zolgen is doing can't be good anyway."

“Wasn’t he a good man once?” Shirou asked carefully, basically asking for her to elaborate.

Le Fay turned pale then green and Altria placed a hand on her sister’s shoulder before speaking. “Two words; human centipede.”

Nobody liked what they heard. “As in-”

“As in one of Zolgen’s victims found by the Pendragon family was a giant centipede like the bug but with a human face that begged for death until his last moment.” The older sibling kept her hand on the younger’s shoulder as she shivered. “Once I read, from my great grandfather’s journal, ‘its carapace was a thing of horrors made of bone letting out a dark lubricant made from its blood, its arms looked human but also not, distorted without fingers and the face was perpetually crying and begging for the pain to end.’ He was a little boy.” Altria concluded, Le Fay looking ready to puke, Shirou also was slightly green and Xenovia dropped her spoon on her half eaten parfait.

“I think I lost my appetite.” The swordswoman saw many awful things in her previous profession so it was easy to picture what was described. “But if this is a trap-”

“I swear it isn’t.” Altria said while massaging her sister’s back. “You can call back up or we can try and search for him. Whatever you want, Zolgen must not be allowed to get whatever he is looking for. But we will help, if you will have us.” Le Fay nodded, to show her support even if she was still close to vomiting.

“Matou’s old mansion... although I am sure it was demolished... we should look there first.” Shirou refused to allow someone like Zolgen in Fuyuki, trap or not. Even if his instincts were telling him that Altria wasn’t lying, even if she was, he wasn’t going to take the risk. “It is on the other side of town and lucky for us we have a car that fits four people.”

“Do we really have to?” Le Fay’s question wasn’t for him.

With a look of understanding the older sister smiled gently and kept massaging her back. “If you don’t want to go then don’t. This isn’t something we need to do-”

“But it is something you want to do.” Le Fay concluded.

Only for Altria to shake her head. “It is something that needs to be done and I refuse to allow a monster like that to walk on Earth without at least trying to take him down.” When she smiled again it was like she was radiating sunlight. “And if this is the only chance we have to exterminate this creature, I am going to take it.”

After a few seconds Shirou chuckled and shook his head. “Now I am really sure this isn’t a trap.”

“Heh, can’t help but agree, Shiro.” Xenovia still wasn’t touching what was left of the food but her spirits were lifted. “Certainly it can’t be a trap unless Altria is the best actress we ever met.”

“Certainly worthy of an Oscar or two. Would you say best actress?”

“Hmm, maybe support? Her sister is loving it.” They moved on from the topic and by the Pendragon sisters’ smiles it was quite a success.

Accepting the complements for what they were, Altria nodded in thanks before her gaze returned to Le Fay. “I am sure we can find a place for you to wait if you want.”

“And it won’t be a problem.” Shirou added.

Yet none was surprised when Le Fay took a deep breath, let out a huge sigh and said, “Letting you face that disgusting creature with minimal help would make me a poor sister.” Suddenly her eyes grew cold. “A coward without a doubt.”

“Nobody is going to call you a coward for not challenging a Mage. Especially one as dangerous as Zolgen.” Altria spoke calmly but her sister gave her a look before letting out a sigh.

“Besides, the nature of fear is that we have to face it. Sooner or later.” Le Fay turned to look at Shirou, her eyes regaining some life but hiding some legitimate apprehension. “Also make no mistake, Emiya Shirou. Just because both of you hold the title of Mage, doesn’t mean you are on the same level. He is, after all, hundreds of years old.”

“Yeah, I got the picture.” The young man acknowledged with a smile. “But I am not fighting alone, am I?”

“You bet you won’t.” Xenovia punched her palm with a grin. “Just another Stray Hunt. Maybe we should call Irina? It would be cool to get the old band back together.”

Pulling his lover's cap over her eyes he said, “Maybe next time.” Then he stood up with a serious look. “If you two are ready to go I will take care of the bill-”

“No, please, leave it to me.” Altria stood up as well but his hand stopped her from going. “We already-”

“And I invited you for lunch-”

“A lunch you didn’t eat. That seems hardly fair.” Rolling his eyes Shirou took Xenovia’s abandoned spoon and ate a piece of the parfait which earned giggles from the other two girls as Altria glared. “That doesn’t count.”

“Live with it and let me pay. We have a bug to squash.”

Both stared at each other, each waiting to see who would retreat first. Then a memory began to play on Shirou’s head and he knew Artoria wouldn’t back down so easily. At least when it came to fighting, Caliburn never knew retreat. That was why it had been broken in the first place.

Considering the girl before him could be some descendant there was a chance her actions wouldn't be the same but just looking at her eyes he pretty much doubted it. They held the sort of steel that wouldn't bend easily for anything.

Then, as if cementing his thoughts, the platinum blonde girl grabbed Xenovia's plate and asked, "Are you going to eat the rest?" The bluehead shook her head, stunned. Then Altria promptly finished the dessert with a grin. There was half of a parfait left. "There, now I even ate your part. Let me pay."

"Are you joking?" The magus asked and he saw the smaller blonde hide her face with a groan.

"What? It is wrong to waste food." She said decisively. "Hunger is the enemy and we should always combat it. If you aren't doing your part you are insulting those who can't."

That line sounded so familiar to Shirou it was almost unnatural but at the same time it was the sort of philosophy he subscribed to and even said something similar once in a while. Yet coming from Altria it resonated with a memory from both sword and sheath resting in his soul.

The stand off kept going for a few more seconds when Le Fay realized something. "Sister, did you bring your purse?"

Everyone could see the moment the girl went from confident and certain to stunned, then confused and settling in horrified before she began to path her cloak and uniform for any sort of money.

"Ehhh... Ahem." Cleaning her throat she lowered her head respectfully. "I am sorry to bother you but... could you pay for our lunch. I promise to pay you back!"

Had it not been for the boundary field the whole place would have heard her shout but Shirou didn't think much of it and just chuckled. "You are already helping us with an extermination. Paying lunch seems like the least I can do."

Xenovia rested her hand on her chin with a smile. "Don't worry. First time I dropped in Fuyuki I also needed someone else to pay the bill because my former partner lost our money."

While she accepted the sympathy it didn't stop Altria from sitting down and walling in shame a little. Her sister giggled at her confident older sibling looking so dejected but also noticed how the Mage of Swords was holding back his own laugh.

'Now we just need to deal with the... insects.' Le Fay shivered again, trying to not think about it.

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Touka Yoshida was the typical Japanese highschooler. Not too tall, average grades, someone who loves his parents very much and was considered a cool guy. He was also part of Kuoh's baseball team, their main pitcher and an average batter.

Overall he wasn't professional level in no way, shape or form but during the summer his team managed to play in the regionals and even got a good placement despite not claiming the podium.

It was important that they haven't won because Yoshida was planning to confess to his crush, the team manager of the baseball club, if they got to the finals at least. He was a romantic at heart and believed that if they got there the power of love would certainly give him the boost he needed to take his team to victory.

In reality he just wanted to impress Kazuya Nohana but he didn't even need to as the girl saw how depressed he was after their defeat and asked what happened. Shyly the boy confessed then and there, standing straight as an arrow as he apologized for not being able to prove his love by giving her the victory he dreamed.

Nohana was more than flattered because, much like Yoshida, she was an average highschooler, not a great beauty like the Onee-samas of Kuoh, who could be models or actresses, yet the boy truly and genuinely didn't think about them but her.

After a couple dates they ended up cementing their relationship before their return to Kuoh and it was all written over his face. "There is another one who got lucky over the summer." Matsuda couldn't help himself and complained out of jealousy.

An action fully supported by his friends. "That is a popular guy for you, having girls left and right without having to work."

Ise, having grown more aware of things, remarked, "Isn't he a baseball player? That usually involves work."

"Doesn't matter. Look at him." Motohama rebuked, his glasses shining. "It is obvious that guy managed to get laid."

"That confident stride and the happy go-lucky look he gets from time to time," taking a tissue from his pocket, the bald boy began to bite it, "it is obvious he is getting some-"

"Geez, do you kiss your mother with that mouth." Another of their classmates, Aika, appeared from a hallway with her usual smirk and a bag over her shoulders, freezing two members of the pervert trio.

"Kiryuu!" Motohama exclaimed, surprised. "You're back?"

"Cutting a little late, don't you think?" Matsuda observed. "What happened? Was going to skip until next week but changed your mind?"

"My internal clock is getting used to Japan again, jerk."

“Hey, Kiryuu. Wasn’t expecting to see you this week. How was summer?” Ise asked kindly at his returning classmate, to his friend’s disbelief.

‘Since when he is all chummy with her?’ He wasn’t but getting stuck in a forest for a month gave Ise perspective.

That he missed any sort of social interaction that didn’t involve an ‘almost to the death’ for territory meant he just wanted to talk with as many people as amicably as possible. There were also his instincts demanding him to fight with every male in a fifty kilometers radius but Buchou had Kiba beat that out of him as quickly as possible.

Surprised at her fellow brunette’s reaction, she took a second to process before responding. “It was nice. Otou-chan managed to score some tickets to Paris so we spent it in Europe. What about you?” She snapped her fingers happily at remembering something. “You went with your club there too, right? Did you guys spend somewhere nice in Belgium or Gremory-senpai comes from somewhere else? There is a pool going and-”

Ise shivered, remembering his training. “I don’t want to answer that.”

“Didn’t you spend it with the rest of the ORC? Including Rias and Akeno, the biggest chests of our whole school?”

“Hah! Ise didn’t get that lucky.” Motohama commented, the bald pervert nodding in agreement. “They spend the whole time doing activities for their club so he ended up with a bunch of old men in a forest.”

“Hey, there were some women too... just not any cute girls.” They know the self proclaimed Harem King wasn’t lying by the dejected look on his face. It spoke of suffering, lots of it.

Yet, even if it was real, that sort of look absolutely confused Aika. “So what does a forest have to do with research in the occult? Were you after Bigfoot or something?”

“Giant lizards in some forest close to where Buchou was born.” He replied convincingly. “Also I am under strict orders to not tell anyone where she came from. You know she gets the money if nobody can guess.”

“Oh yeah? That is why you had to withdraw?” The girl got a nod of confirmation. “So any of the guesses-”

“All wrong so far.”

“Huh. If you are saying, I believe it. You are way too honest.” Aika turned to the other perverts who seemed to retract on the corner. “Unlike these two.”

“You have no right to say anything, witch. You are as bad as we are!” Motohama declared with conviction but only got a big smile from the girl. A smile that incentivized him to go into the offensive. “So what, you gotta spend some time in Paris? Did anything cool happen or

did you just go to see the tower?"

"Ahh~ you don't need to be jealous."

"I am not jealous. Like some stupid tower of steel can compete with the mountains of a-"

"Dude, we're in a hallway." Ise said quickly, making the three frown and/or glare. "What?"

"You're never so... subdued before, Ise." Matsuda pointed out as he and Motohama took a step back. "I knew it! Some stuff must have happened in the summer."

"I already said I spend most of it in a forest." Fighting Kiba also helped. Punching the pretty boy's face repeatedly was excellent therapy.

"Then after. After!"

"He is right. Not even talking about the childhood friend situation!" Motohama pointed at Ise's face and the other boy, as gently as he could, pushed the hand away.

"I already told you I didn't know Irina was a girl."

"Ohh~ sounds like something interesting happened in the last two days." Aika leaned over the wall with an arm, making sure to cut one of Ise's escape avenues. "A transfer after the summer is uncommon so I am supposed to expect an old flame from Harem Pervert past?"

"We're just friends." Ise replied quickly, ready to deny anything.

"But don't you want to be more? What is wrong? Are her breasts too small?"

"What? No, Irina's breasts are perfect."

"Aha! So you were looking!" Motohama said with a triumphant tone.

"And you tried to hit us for trying to take a peek." Matsuda added, which confirmed to Aika that the girl must at least be beautiful.

The Pervert with Glasses kept going. "You, blasted hypocrite. You even have the 'Childhood Friend Who Comes Back Hot' to help you out. Are you going to really betray us like that?"

"Is that really a trope?" Aika asked but she was completely isolated from the conversation at that point.

"Stop it already. Nothing is going to happen between me and Irina. She is-" For a millisecond Aika was sure she saw a pained look cross Ise's eyes but just as quickly it vanished. "-way out of our league."

"Screw that, you have 'childhood friend's privilege' here until some guy gets her." Matsuda then blinked slowly and began to rub his chin. "Unless she starts dating a girl and I could

take a picture of it.”

“I dread to think what you are going to do with said picture.” Commented Aika with a deadpan stare. “But either way, happy to have your friend back?”

“You bet. Didn’t know how much I missed her until she dropped by my house and said she was coming to Kuoh.” Ise grinned at the tears in his friends’ eyes. “Asia is showing her around today.”

“So she is in our class?” Aika was curious about Ise’s childhood friend and what sort of girl she grew up to be. ‘By the way they are reacting she is probably a bombshell.’ Studying the pervert, who gave her a confused look, she let out a sigh. ‘Who is also competing with Asia who may or may not be aware of it and yet is still showing Kuoh around.’ Which gave birth to another thought. “Why aren’t you showing her around?”

Ise grinned at the question. “I was but Asia insisted she wanted to do it and both of them are getting along so well that I couldn’t say no.” Clearly he was happy for their friendship.

“Ise-san. Oh, Aika-chan, you are back.”

‘Speak of the angel.’ Aika thought amusedly as she saw her blonde friend and froze upon noticing the beauty besides her. ‘What the fuck? What sort of puberty did she hit that she looked like a boy before?’

Indeed, dressed in Kuoh’s summer uniform with the addition of black shorts which almost reached her knees beneath her skirt, Shidou Irina was a vision to behold of femininity and bright cheer with a smile that illuminated the hallway with a greater intensity than Asia’s presence.

Everyone still around stopped to give her a look or a glance of any kind not only for her beauty alone but a quality about her that only a few could see, almost like a Light of some sort that gently asked for attention and coaxed people to have a good day.

But not everyone could see it and Aika was only aware of that aura for a second that she barely noticed. “You thought she was a boy?” She couldn’t help but ask with a playful grin.

Ise glared back and whispered, “She didn’t look like that when we’re small.”

“Hey, Ise. Back to classes?” Irina asked before noticing Aika, her smile growing. “Haven’t seen you before, are you our Senpai? Nice to meet you, my name is Shidou Irina.”

“Nice to meet you as well, Irina-chan. Are you liking Kuoh? Did Asia show you all the sights or does this Senpai need to help you two?”

“You aren’t her Senpai.” Ise stated bluntly, turning to Irina. “This is Kiryuu Aika, she’s in the same class as us. Just arrived a bit late.”



“Spoilsport.”

Before the boy could answer Irina was giving him an one armed hug. “Ise’s just watching his buddy’s back.”

The other three perverts could see how her breasts jiggled barely a little as Ise watched them, mesmerized. ‘I knew it!’ Two thirds of the Pervert Trio thought while Aika nodded in understanding.

‘So she is Asia’s competition. Not that she cares... or knows?’ The girl fixed her glasses and approached her friend. “Did you have fun in the summer?”

“Humhum~ By the end of it everyone got together and we had this big banquet and shared stories about what we all did. Also, Buchou helped me find some people to teach me Medicine.”

Matsuda jumped in brimming with curiosity. “Really? Are you going to be a doctor, Asia-chan?”

“Yes.” A reply full of cheer and happiness combined with a pure smile which was enough to make anyone's heart melt.

“Congratulations!” Motohama said next, leaning on Aika’s shoulder and taking a punch on his own as the girl didn’t like that. “You don’t need to be cruel, Kiryuu.”

“Then you can stand on your own two feet.” She saw him glare and grow but knew he wasn’t going to do a thing. The two even traded glares and she raised an eyebrow in challenge but Motohama respected her space. “So Rias-senpai managed to find a stagiaire for you? Isn't it a bit too early to be thinking about that?”

“Why?” Asia asked with a cute tilt of her head.

“I mean, are you sure you want to be a doctor? Harsh hours, lots of work... barely any time for romance.” She said while throwing side glances in Ise’s direction who was trying his best to look at Irina’s breasts while she greeted Matsuda and Motohama.

It didn’t need to be said the two were envious of the brown haired young man at that moment but Aika found it amusing nonetheless.

“That is what I wanted to do.” Asia said as carefully as she could to try and not reveal the existence of the moonlit world. Fortunately that didn’t mean she had to lie. “And while it wasn’t... usual, I will be forever thankful to Buchou for giving me a chance to help and learn how to help people beyond prayer.”

Not only was she being careful to not mention her nature as a devil but she was holding back her past as a nun for similar reasons. Sure she wasn’t exactly ‘on the grid’ during those days but that wasn’t a conversation she wanted to have with Aika or anyone else from Kuoh for that matter.

And the moment someone learned of it there would be a lot of questions born from the rumor mill and everyone agreed that wasn't a good idea. She wasn't ashamed of her past, she was proud of it, but one question would eventually lead to another and Asia didn't want to lie.

Aika, of course, knew nothing of that and instead just saw that her friend found her career path. "Well, damn. I knew that Buchou was rich but paying vacations to everyone and prepping a stagiaire trial for you is just insane. Why can I never find her family on the internet if they are this loaded?"

Ise and Irina turned their heads towards her so fast everyone thought they broke the speed of sound. "You tried to research Buchou?"

"What did you find?"

"Just some stuff about a book of Ars Goetia, Dukes of Hell and devils." Aika shrugged, clearly not believing in any of that. "If her family's name existed until recently makes sense they don't have that many references but if she is that loaded-"

"You should research 'Gremory Group' in the entrepreneur chart and Wall Street." Irina suggested quickly. "If the company is from another country it may be hard to find details in Japan. Also it may be under another, more official name." All information she knew as true, one way or another.

If there was one thing that Irina learned in the Church was that devils were masters in covering their tracks.

"I see..." It wasn't like Aika was an investigator of any sort, she just researched the Gremory out of curiosity. Besides, she had another mystery to solve at the moment, one which interested her far more. "So, Irina-chan-"

The signal to end the small break rings but nobody was in a hurry as they normally would. First week in Kuoh was surprisingly lax so long everyone behaved.

Didn't mean they could stay outside for too long so there was a casual parade of young men and women moving to their respective classrooms. Some teachers could be seen doing the same, one particular tigress rushing to her classroom with a cup of coffee. Her direction was the same as theirs but despite her rush every student knew that Taiga would give everyone time to go inside the classroom.

However, hers and the group's way was barred by a wall of other students, some of which certainly didn't belong in that class like Kiba who was standing there with Asuna, his girlfriend. The girl was shorter than her boyfriend by just a few centimeters with long marrow hair and similar colored eyes.

Pretty was the first word that came to mind whenever people looked at her, pretty and cute with a shy attitude but matched with a dedication to her studies. As usual Kuoh's uniform

worked well to highlight her gentle curves that were every bit as shy as the girl herself. Shy and small but distinctly feminine.

Considering Kiba was once the most desired bachelor of Kuoh, Asuna developed a certain reputation for being the girl to break the handsome boy out of his shell; that she had something no other girl could have.

Be it talent, interests or an appearance that appealed to Kiba's aesthetics more than any other there were few from Kuoh who didn't want to know what made her special.

There wasn't anything and the Rias Peerage knew for certain as they got together because of a whim of his but he didn't announce that outloud and legitimately liked her company. Asuna was pretty, with a chest slightly bigger than Kiryuu in Ise's estimation that earned him a purple eye, but everyone else in Kuoh was lost trying to figure out what Kiba saw in her.

And both of them were in front of the wrong class but by Kiba's face it was clear he was worried while everyone else just stood there curious. He soon noticed his teammates' approach, while two thirds of the Pervert Trio cursed him under his breath, and turned to them.

"Did something happen?" Irina asked, taking point and ready for a fight. She really wasn't used to being back at a normal school as her whole posture screamed caution.

Asuna shook her head before replying. "We just saw something and Kiba-kun said we should check it out."

"Someone got a bouquet of flowers." The blond said cautiously. "Those are not common in Japan." He tried to say discreetly, throwing the members of the ORC a knowing look.

Unfortunately none of them was the most insightful when it came to subtlety and the Knight had to hold back a disappointed sigh when Ise asked, "What? Someone imported from Europe?"

"Maybe the Americas? I heard they have all sorts of exotic flowers there." Motohama asked while fixing his glasses.

"Either way it sounds like an expensive gift." Aika observed as Taiga clapped loudly to get everyone's attention.

"To your seats people! To your seats! I know we're taking it easy this first week but enough with the riot!"

"Sensei, you are the one shouting."

With a fiery aura worthy of the nickname Tiger behind her the teacher replied, "Because you kids won't listen unless I'm loud! Now, sit down!"

Quickly the students did and those who didn't belong to that class began to evacuate swiftly to not get in the way of the Tiger of Fuyuki. Doubly so for those in the Kendo Club who knew the woman would give them hell if they were skipping classes over a bunch of flowers.

It just couldn't be helped since they were the sort of flowers that both held an extremely sweet aroma as well as an appearance borderline impossible green that made every rose-like flower shine like emeralds.

Except they were flowers and all could see, a type of rose that shouldn't exist. Some students had tried to grab some petals before Taiga forced them back but the huge bouquet remained intact. Those plants were resistant to the point some thought they were made of plastic but the smell told otherwise.

An unique fragrance filled the room, too strong to be fake or just perfume. It was captivating, desirable and certainly not from Earth. Irina turned to Kiba with that realization but the boy was already retreating with his girlfriend, giving only one last glance to the flowers before leaving.

Meanwhile the two interacted, Taiga struggled with controlling the room. "Okay, okay! Enough! Back to your seats!" Several students did with the exception of Ise and Asia, the latter who was staring at the flowers with clear confusion. "Asia-chan, did you place this during the break?"

"No, I didn't, Sensei." She replied, hesitating to sit down as her classmates began to ask where the flowers came from and what they meant.

"Maybe a secret admirer?" Someone suggested while Aika began to search around the bouquet.

"Secret admirer? With something this expensive? No way."

"It's for Asia-chan."

"Mou, if I could I would get her flowers like that."

"Hey, maybe you shouldn't touch that." Irina suggested as she dug into her knowledge, trying to identify the flowers.

Seeing the former Caliburn wielder's hesitation, Ise quickly moved to collect the thing but Aika slapped his wrist. "What? Jealous."

When the Red Dragon Emperor replied it was with a good deal of embarrassment. "No- no. If these flowers are for Asia-chan then-then," he gulped, "then we need to separate them to take them home after class."

"Relax, I'm not going to rip them apart or anything, I'm just looking for a note." Nobody else interrupted her but Asia moved to pull the bouquet away from her friend. "Hey~"

“Sorry, Aika-chan but you need to be careful. These could have thorns-” In that moment a small note fell from the flowers, basically in slow motion for Ise and Irina.

Yet it was Aika who caught it first. “Ohho~ What do we have here?”

“Kyaa, a secret admirer!”

“So romantic!”

“Who was it, Kiryuu, who was it?!”

“Shouldn’t you all let Asia read it alone?” Irina protested and quickly silenced the room.

“Whoever they are, they will get detention!” Taiga announced it to everyone. “Rules are clear and exotic plants certainly fall on the list of things good students shouldn’t bring.” She raised her hand to ask for the card and Aika hesitated. “I promise to give it back.”

“Well...” The girl with glasses turned to Asia who was stunned like a deer under highlights. Still Taiga had a reputation as the ‘cool’ teacher and she lived by her reputation. “Sure, I guess.”

Aika gave the note hesitantly and Taiga immediately opened, getting ready to call that student before freezing. The words were in Italian which was odd but not really strange considering who was the receiver so she could barely make sense of what was written. Also it seemed to have been typed from an old typewriter.

However she could clearly see a signature written at the bottom. “Who is Diodora Astaroth?”

Everything came crashing down on Ise’s head. ‘Diodora? He sent flowers?’ It wasn’t like he could forget the blond devil who professed his love for Asia back in the Underworld but he had actively pushed any memory off his mind. ‘Why did he send flowers to the school? No, no, no, no, obviously he is trying to get with Asia- I mean-’

While Ise was having a mental breakdown, Taiga began to massage the bridge of her nose with regret after saying the name. Almost every student jumped to ask Asia questions about her admirer.

Simple stuff like ‘who he was’ and ‘where they met’ but the teacher had other problems as she couldn’t put a name to the face. Fujimura Taiga couldn’t claim to know every student but with an exotic name like that she knew he couldn’t be from Kuoh. There was just no way someone with a name like that would go under her notice.

Those doubts gave the students enough time to surround the Gremory Bishop to ask questions she didn’t know how to answer but Irina and Aika did their best to dissuade them for their own reasons.

However, even while helping her friend, Aika had that nagging feeling again once she heard Astaroth. ‘Ars Goetia again?’ Suffice to say that she had no time to think as Asia grew

increasingly tense at the attention and so the girl focused on helping her friend. “Back off-”

“Everybody quiet!!” Roared the Tiger of Fuyuki and everyone turned to attention. “Your seats! Now!!” And they obeyed because their laid back teacher wasn’t so laid back anymore. Not when one of her students was being overwhelmed by others. “Sorry about reading the name out loud. It was just too...”

“Foreign?” Asia offered as she got the card back. Her face was a mess of confusion which she wasn’t able to hide but Taiga avoided thinking too much about it considering her own blunder.

“Yes, that is a good word. I think.” She placed a hand on the Bishop’s shoulder before turning her around and addressing the class. “Nobody is going to bother Asia about this. Nobody!! You do it then I’ll get you all detention with Kuzuki-sensei for a month!” The threat worked because every single one of them, even Asia’s friends who wouldn’t press her in anyway, winced. “Are we clear?” She waited but the class stayed silent. “I said; are we clear?!”

“Yes, Sensei!!!!!!” Nobody would challenge the Tiger when she was showing her claws.

Taiga gave everyone else a look before picking the bouquet gently and moving it to the side of the classroom. “Asia-chan, it’s going to stay here until it’s time to go, okay? Once we get to the next break I’ll take it to the teacher’s breakroom and you can collect them once classes are done.”

“Actually, Sensei, we should just leave it here.” Irina said quickly but respectfully, trying to not rouse the Tiger again. “I am sure nobody is going to mess them up because nobody wants to upset Asia-chan again,” she and several students nodded, “and it will make it easier for her to take it home if she doesn’t have to drop by the teacher’s room.”

In reality the young woman wanted to keep her eyes on those flowers because she was sure they were from the Underworld at least, magically enhanced at most. Case in point; the aroma in the room wasn’t diminishing and while it didn’t have any side effects that Irina could see, she wasn’t going to risk it.

Observing her newest student, Taiga massaged her chin in deep thoughts. When her eyes shot back up towards her students they were surprisingly sharp. The silly teacher everyone knew was gone and in their place was someone in complete control of her emotions.

“Very well. I will leave the flowers here.” She voiced out loud while placing them at the table’s corner. “I will also tell the next teacher about them and suggest they remain in sight. I will also ask them to make sure Asia isn’t harassed in any way.” Taiga’s hand pointed to the ceiling, her eyes sharp like the tiger she was nicknamed after. “And if I hear a peep, a noise that she was perturbed because of this... Diodora-san, I will make sure the culprit is severely punished. Knowing how kind Asia is... Issei, Aika!”

““Yes, Sensei!”” The two replied at the same time equally startled. ‘It’s like when Buchou is going around giving orders... the same sort of presence.’ Thought the Pawn of Gremory.

“You two care a lot about Asia so you are in charge of her security. If I left it to her, she won’t tell me anything happened even if she was hit by a truck.” Taiga’s sharp eyes then focused on the two perverts. “But know something; if you dare to abuse your position, there will be pain. Capiche?”

““Yes, Sensei!”” Once again the two replied at the same time, Taiga’s eyes studying their expressions.

Before her happy smile returned. “Great. Now, where were we? Right, we were sharing stories about our summers and it was Yoshida’s turn.”

The difference was jarring to many but nobody dared to challenge Taiga or even try to ask Asia anything about her admirer again. The Tiger of Fuyuki was on the prowl and her cubs knew better than to provoke her.

Yet nothing was stopping everyone to watch the former nun with either curiosity or concern, especially Ise who still didn’t know how to react.

[Calm down, damn it! How can you face a dragon with ease and lose control like that?]

‘It is just...’

*“Will you die for me?”*

‘I don’t know...’ The young man stared at the flowers, finding them both pretty and terrible as the smell left him more irritable. ‘I just don’t know...’

.....

Shirou’s indicator tapped the steering wheel as he drove through Fuyuki. Unfortunately the traffic grew a little more intense during the trip towards the old Matou manor and the trip was taking a while. Silver lining was that it gave them plenty of time to make some calls and send some messages.

For Xenovia to make those at least as Shirou refused to touch a cell phone while driving. “Okay, I think that was everyone.” The bluehead swordswoman closed her phone and relaxed on the back seat, Le Fay anxiously fidgeting in place by her side. “You all right?”

“No.” Confessed the girl. “If there is someone I never wanted to fight it was Zolgen.” She shivered.

“Le Fay, you can wait in the car.” Altria, who was besides Shirou, suggested as she turned around to regard her sister.

“And leave you alone against him?”

“What are we? Chopped liver?” Xenovia asked sarcastically.

"It is a sibling thing." Said the Mage, eyes never leaving the road as the traffic lights turned green. "Don't worry too much. Odds are that he isn't at the manor. If it is even standing, that is."

Immediately after he finished speaking, Xenovia's phone began to vibrate. She opened the screen and frowned. "Apparently the denomination was delayed over reports of ghosts in the area."

"You gotta be kidding me." Had he not been driving the disguised redhead would hit his forehead somewhere.

"Not surprising really since Shinji massacred his family and staff." The knight kept fiddling with the screen, reading the reports. "Several of them needed to be exercised but the area itself remained with a... dark presence, their words not mine, despite several purifying rituals." Altria and Le Fay watched the bluehead talk as the Mage looked through the mirror "Fearing an Artifact of some sort the whole place was searched high and low but nothing was found."

"Why was the demolition delayed?"

Le Fay replied before Xenovia could. "Probably because it was estimated it was easier to wait for the curse to fade than risk anything."

"Nailed it." Said the former Exorcist. "They still dismantled every equipment and turned off any sort of power source, magic or otherwise, but the manor itself was left alone pending a new evaluation for when they should demolish it."

"So Zolgen can use it as a base." Altria observed with a frown as the possibility became more plausible. "Did they at least mapped the area?" After a nod from the other woman the blonde turned and extended a hand. "Can I see it?"

Xenovia didn't hesitate to pass the device before replying. "Since we are already going there I suggested they wait for us to call but the Watchers, the guards who keep an eye on Fuyuki for the most part, said they would check other areas where Zolgen may be hiding."

"Well, that is something at least." Shirou said it with a sigh. "Maybe after all this we can destroy the place ourselves, just in case. I bet falsifying a report of an accident or blaming vandalism isn't that hard."

"That would be vandalism regardless so wouldn't the report be true?" Asked Le Fay which made Emiya hum in agreement.

"Better to do it after we investigate." Altria commented, eyes focused on the map. "The entrance to the workshop is deep in the mansion and if we destroy it, finding it will be a challenge, to say the least." Her fingers zoomed in the area and some notes popped up. "The structure seems to be a cave and says here that some magicians associated with the



Gremory confirmed that the spells there will still last another ten years.” She turned to look at Shirou.

Who shook his head. “Unfortunately I wasn’t in the best mind space to check the place so that wasn’t me.” The Mage of Swords couldn’t help but smirk. “Then I went to Greece to do some snake hunting and ended up stumbling into a goddess so that was never a priority.”

“Understandable.” The swordswoman by his side replied, eyes back on the phone. “The search teams managed to find two entrances for the workshop, supposing there are only these two then we can get access either from the master bedroom or one in a corner of the manor.”

“Why don’t we just destroy everything?” Xenovia suggested, Durandal glowing in her neck. “Give me a minute and I can make a crater of that place.”

“Against a Mage? Not that easily.” Le Fay pointed out. “Supposing Zolgen is really there it isn’t a stretch to say he repowered the boundary fields. Maybe even made them stronger.”

“Against Durandal?”

“Allow me to repeat that this creature is a centuries old Mage. The Mage of Insects.” The small blonde shivered but powered thought. “There will be tricks and traps. If we bring the manor down we may trigger them all.”

“Or none.” Was the bluehead’s rebuttal. “In my experience, a good blast of Holy Light deals with pretty much everything.”

“And also scare the whole town.” Shirou pointed out. No need to have everyone see a second sun and think a bomb fell. “If we are going to destroy the manor we are going to do it in a more discreet manner, Xenovia.”

“Yes, Master.” With that they fell into silence again. For a moment before the former Exorcist asked. “Where is your brother, by the way? Pretty sure that even if Durandal couldn’t get past Zolgen’s boundary fields, Rhongomyniad absolutely could.”

“He is on a date.” Altria replied with a cheerful smile.

For a moment Shirou blinked and almost slammed his feet on the brakes. “Are you kidding me? Doesn’t he know about Zolgen?”

“Of course not. He would never let us come alone if he did.” The swordswoman replied, raising the wrapped weapon in her lap. “He thinks we are here just because of Ruler.”

“And why did you bring it again?” He knew the answer before it left her lips.

“To complete Caliburn once more.” A pensive expression settled on her face as she stared at her sword. “The reforging of the Sword of Selection is something that I want to see happening. Don’t ask me why but-”

"I understand." Shirou's words shocked her but when Altria looked at his face she could see he really did even if she didn't know how.

Xenovia leaned forward to collect her phone while also asking, "So you are going to give up your weapon? I mean, I agree it probably is a good idea but if you want to draw Caliburn, well... I wouldn't recommend it."

"If I am worthy-"

"Don't." Shirou cut her off again and this time Altria glared at him. "Trust me, you don't want Caliburn. The cost-"

"Is irrelevant so long as Caliburn is necessary." Altria said confidently while everyone grew silent. "Recent times have been growing darker. Zolgen is moving, the Khaos Brigade plans to start several wars and... maybe we need someone like King Arthur again to fix this mess."

"Could you close your heart to everything but your duty?" The Mage of Swords asked carefully. "Could you renounce your humanity and abandon all emotion to avoid the sword breaking again?" He parked the car at that exact moment so their eyes could meet. She held a resolve far surpassing anyone else Shirou had ever known. He needed another approach because if it was just for her, Altria would go through with it. "Please, consider the people you care about before trying, no, before even thinking about it. Because if you draw that sword, you will become more of a machine than a woman. All for the sake of completing Caliburn's mission. Its purpose." Her resolve wasn't wavering which only made him more worried. "Becoming something more than human... you will lack empathy and understanding. Both from yourself and others. Isolation and solitude will be constants which will never leave for the moment they do... you will stop being the perfect king."

The car remained silent for a minute as the two looked at each other's eyes, Altria feeling her heartbeat rapidly increase before she answered, "If the World needs me, I will answer the call."

"But there are other ways to answer the call, ways that don't involve killing yourself."

"Caliburn will literally make me immortal."

"You understood what I meant."

"I did." Altria recognized, looking at Caliburn Ruler pensively. "Regardless, things are going to escalate a lot in the next few years. Caliburn's power will be needed."

"Probably not. There are stronger things around." Surprisingly it was Xenovia who said it. "The Sword of Selection was one of God's creations... and He is dead." Pausing for a second, both for Altria and herself, she continued. "What He wanted wasn't for us to depend on Him but for us to find our own strength. Caliburn and the Chosen King are a clutch, we need to grow by ourselves."

Le Fay showed a face of amusement mixed with disbelief. "Do you intend to surpass God?"

"I intend to not die of anything but natural causes. If even that." Xenovia commented with confidence. "So yes, to protect those that I care about, I will surpass God because I bet He would approve."

"The Tower of Babel says otherwise."

"Because people were trying to artificially reach Heaven. He didn't shoot down the rockets or anything else. That is my proof."

"Fufufu, I suppose you are right." Le Fay turned to her sister who now held a pensive look. "But I agree with them. I like that you are human, Ria."

Letting out a sigh the older sibling nodded. "Fine, I won't try pulling." She turned back to Shirou. "But why reforge it then, if you are so against what it represents?"

"... Because it is better to have Caliburn and not need it than not having it." Taking a deep breath he began to drive again. "Also because Caliburn deserves to be reforged. It is a magnificent sword."

"Speaking of magnificent swords, would you repair another for us?" Le Fay suddenly said, surprising the Mage who stopped the car again. Someone began honking behind them. "You see, when we left our family we may have taken some of their treasures."

"Fay! You didn't!" Altria said with a scandalous look, clearly surprised.

"What? It wasn't that much, Ria. Just a sword, a shield, a few gold coins, some books. Nothing much." The younger Pendragon said it all with a mischievous grin then turning to Shirou. "And since she is about to give up her weapon I thought 'why not ask the Mage of Swords to fix one of the old ones'."

Chuckling at the proposition, the Mage offered one of his own. "I can make a sword for her on my own if she just needs a new weapon. Something close to a Noble Phantasm."

"But an actual Noble Phantasm?" That made everyone but Altria freeze as the older sibling knew exactly what her sister was talking about and turned to the disguised magus, waiting for an answer.

However he could only offer a glance of confusion as they were back on the road. "A broken Noble Phantasm? That is hard to believe."

"It was damaged before ascending into a Crystalized Legend and even before that the sword wasn't in its best condition." Le Fay offered as a justification. "Besides that, it broke long ago in one of King Arthur's last battles." Her eyes grew sharper, as if she was studying Shirou for the first time and Xenovia couldn't help but feel like the girl had a greater presence. "Mage of Swords, can you repair such a blade and help it become what it is meant to be."

“I will only know if I try.”

Despite the non committal answer, Le Fay changed the subject. “How long until the manor?” Once more they could hear fear seeping in her tone.

Shirou threw Altria a glance but the older Pendragon didn't see nor cared about what he tried to communicate. “A few minutes... if traffic lets up.”

Which did for the most part as the cars diminished as they left the middle of the city and started to go towards a corner of the town where nature showed lesser signs of urbanization.

Dusk was starting when they reached the area, Xenovia gapping. “Isn't this close to our house?”

“Yep.”

“What? Why did you schedule a meeting in the middle of town then?” Altria asked next.

“Because I wasn't expecting us to drop back here. The plan was, if you were being sincere, go to Kuoh, decide on a plan and then do what we needed to do.” Shirou defended his decisions calmly but everyone could tell he was a little frustrated. “In either case, depending on how long it takes us to look we can go back and I can make dinner early. By the way, you two are invited if you want.”

“Are you really inviting two possible enemies to your residence?” Asked Le Fay with clear confusion.

“Yeah, sure. Neither of you look like bad people... And I still think I own Altria because of Vali's stubbornness back then.”

“You know me nothing... but I will accept a free dinner.”

Shirou smiled at noticing her small blush and the younger sibling's sigh. It died when they arrived at a huge residence behind. “Here we are, the foreign district.” He said coldly as he spotted the huge manor. “Our home is in the traditional one a few streets in another direction, if you want to know.”

“I can see why this is called the 'foreign district'.” Le Fay pointed out, noticing they were moving towards a huge building that looked to be falling apart. “That one?”

“Yes.” The other magus confirmed.

“Big, lots of places to look.” Xenovia commented. “There is no guarantee he is in the workshop but we should check there first, anyway.”

What they all saw was a huge manor like castle with three floors, a tower and obviously several rooms. The iron bar fence looked intact if falling under disrepair as several plants grew around it and the garden shared a similar fate.

Stopping the car close to the fence, Shirou began to come up with a plan. "We first should check for boundary-

"There are none." Two pairs of eyes turned to Le Fay with confusion. "At least not around the gate or the manor."

"How do you know that?" Xenovia asked out of curiosity.

"Fay has mystic eyes. Sort of." Altria commented while opening the door. "Going to open the gate so we can get it inside. Is it safe, Fay?"

"Yes, no boundary fields anywhere in the area. I also can't see any traps." Which helped her relax as that meant Zolgen probably wasn't around.

Believing that the Pendragon sisters were telling the truth, Shirou advanced with the car and parked it between two trees close to the manor's entrance in hopes to hide it between the leaves.

Le Fay sensed his intention and summoned a magic wand carved out of wood to start altering the plant life around the car, making them all grow more until bushes formed around it. It was like there was nothing between them and a perfect spot for the car to stay while they investigated the manor.

Made mostly of bricks, it was still habitable, at least from the outside as the double wooden doors were closed and they couldn't see anything inside. Neither they could see anything from the windows as they were covered in newspapers and dust, with one or two broken upon close inspection.

Before they approached the door, Altria unveiled her sword, the red blade with square guard shining brightly as its owner controls its power perfectly. Flawless even as Xenovia threw the girl a glance and was shocked by how 'docile' Caliburn Ruler seemed to be.

'It is more powerful than Destruction but even if it is weaker than Durandal, there isn't a single leak of Holy Energy.' She observed as the platinum blonde held the blade firmly in her right hand. 'Even Mimic let out some energy when Irina was using it but I can't feel anything from either Ruler or Altria.'

After another moment of reflection Xenovia called Durandal to her side and studied her own blade noticing how the 'horse' was playing along with its 'reins' but even calm its power pulsed like a steady heartbeat.

"Everyone ready to go in?" Shirou asked with Muramasa in his hands while stepping besides his knight as Le Fay stood by her sibling. "Xenovia will take the front and I will follow after her. Altria, you stay at the back with Le Fay in the middle. Are we fine with that?"

"Fine by me." Said the older sibling as the younger nodded and raised her wand.

With that Xenovia took the front and tried to open the door which was locked but it wasn't a big deal as she rose Durandal to cut it into pieces. Once that was done they could see the dark place that felt more like a cavern which the sun couldn't reach. No furniture was left behind but just looking inside everyone had an eerie feeling..

The former Exorcist took a cautious step forward and observed the area with care. Her experience in the Church was fundamental so sending her first was the right call. That and also her equipment meant Xenovia would be the hardest person to take down from the trio, at least from what Shirou was aware.

After a second she detected a door to the side and cut it open to reveal a closet which meant there were no ways direct to them other than the front. With that information she stepped forward, signaling the others to follow and soon everyone was inside the abandoned manor.

Dust was kicked up with every step as one year of neglect turned the place from an opulent home to a ruin far more noticeable from the inside as parts of the wall and the floor had been removed during the devils' inspection.

Even the bulbs of the lights were removed for a reason or another so only darkness greeted them. Darkness and the bugs that Le Fay quickly dispatched with a small fireball. Then she coughed a little because of the dust which froze everyone.

The two in the front turned back as Altria placed a hand on her sister's shoulder. "Calm down."

"I am calm. More than you all." Le Fay said with conviction, doing her best to sound honest. Nobody believed her but all respected her determination. "Do any of you mind if I make some light?" Light to see the things she wanted to destroy.

For a moment no one replied but Shirou turned to his lover with doubt. "You are the one who ever conducted a raid like this. What do you say?"

Durandal began to glow before Xenovia answered. "If he is in the workshop it isn't like he is going to see the light anyway." Muramasa was altered and began to emit an orange glow as a fireball began to float around the younger Pendragon's shoulders. "Also he probably knows we are here."

"If he is really here." The youngest of the group said softly but everyone heard.

"Well, nobody expected it to be easy." Altria commented and they kept advancing towards the main living room. "About that dark presence in the reports, I can feel it."

She didn't need to say it because every single one of them felt some unnamed hostility in the area that they couldn't identify nor pinpoint where it was coming from. All said they advanced despite the feeling, stepping forward carefully and never being more than three or four steps apart from each other.

Once they arrived in another hallway they saw the first traces of dried blood and a lot of it. "Looks like nobody bothered to clean this place." Xenovia pointed out as the wallpaper was completely stained with the vital liquid.

Visible all around the area were more blood splatters, all dried of course but still visible with the light they had. Nobody reacted immediately upon seeing all of it and the group pressed forward on the hallway, soon arriving at the entrance hall a manor like that had.

And a lot more dried blood. "Shinji..." Shirou said the name with hatred. "How many people did you kill?"

He never bothered to read the reports but with that much dried blood around, patterns only broken in areas where furniture once stood, showed that nine or so people had died in that room alone.

And since the entrance's hallway lacked any it was easy to guess nobody managed to even come close to escape, at least from the front door. Altria noticed blood by some windows and guessed an attempt was made but the blood told the tale and clearly there was no success.

"We should keep moving." The older Pendragon said respectfully, a small prayer going for the victims of the massacre.

"Why didn't they clean this place?" Xenovia asked while taking another step forward. "Blood is a clear indicator of grudges and malicious actions. Maybe that is what is causing... this bad feeling."

"Probably because spirits themselves have already moved on." Le Fay suggested. "If I had to say what is causing this state is truly the malice of the place." Her eyes focused on Shirou. "Clearly this... Shinji guy enjoyed the act, relished in it. That certainly left an impression on the land."

"... One way or another we are burning this place to the ground once we are done." The Mage of Swords declared, nobody disagreeing. "I know he had a bad temper but enjoying murder like this..." He shook his head.

"You two were friends?" Altria asked coldly, keeping herself distant.

"No, I wouldn't say we were. Just classmates. Even then, I never saw him as someone who would do something like this." He gestured around the room, dried blood everywhere. "Shinji was arrogant, overly confident and more than a little entitled but... he was hardworking and popular because of it." Clicking his tongue, Emiya used Muramasa to study a blood splatter in the wall. "I thought him trying to destroy Kuoh to 'evolve' was him crossing a line but... the line had been crossed long before that."

Subconsciously Shirou never regretted killing Shinji and that ate him up for days before his trip to Greece where he strengthened his resolve to save those he could. To hear and understand what was happening before taking a life.

To always give the benefit of the doubt.

Hearing that Shinji killed people before their fight didn't compare to watching the crime scene and whatever guilt the Mage of Swords felt over his former classmate's death vanished as he couldn't help but see the people he killed in the dried blood.

"Shiro." Xenovia called his name, looking back with clear worry. "You did the right thing."

"Yes, I did." His actions prevented Kuoh from suffering a similar fate without a shadow of doubt. "Just wish I could stop this from happening too."

"Did you know?" Le Fay asked immediately. "That he would do something like this. Did you know?"

"No-"

"Then it isn't your fault." Altria rebutted before he could get any other word in. "Besides, you stopped him and the people here were allowed to move on. Now we need to make sure there isn't another monster around."

With renewed resolve everyone quickened their pace while still retaining the same distance for safety until they arrived at the main living room where only the family and close friends would get access too if the manor was still in use.

"Where is the entrance?" The bluehead asked, stepping back and allowing Altria to show them the way.

She had studied the map longer than anyone else and obviously had an eye for detail if her confident stride when approaching a specific wall was any indication. Pressing her hand against the wall revealed a door ajar that easily gave way to them. A disgusting smell hit everyone's nostrils as she gently placed the fake wall to the side.

At that point Xenovia was ready to go ahead again but Altria didn't wait and marched inside with Caliburn Ruler ready. The former Exorcist was surprised but only lasted a moment as she was fully in combat mode and took over the second place in their formation. Shirou chose to watch everyone's backs while Le Fay kept the third spot in the line.

Stairs of stone began to echo in the area and soon everyone began to identify the smell as decay. Which form it had or how long it was there none knew but all of them focused on ignoring it. Thanks to their lights they saw several 'pedestals' sculpted in the wall as they marched down.

Marched down to a pit that seemed to be made of the void itself as no light could reach it until they approached the middle steps. It was slow, the smell getting on the group's nerves, but they were being cautious. Cautious enough to not take another step further when Altria raised a hand.



Didn't take long for them to notice they weren't alone as they heard some movement at the bottom. "I will illuminate things a little." Le Fay offered and nobody disagreed.

Holding the wand in her hand firmly the girl focused her magic on its tip before waving it to the ceiling in a blast that appeared to be ice for anyone else. However it wasn't such as when the crystal connected it began to spread until it was the size of a motor home which began to pulse with white light.

Shirou had to hold the girl back to stop her from falling as she had jumped in fright at the collection of creatures in the walls and the floor of the workshop, hundreds of thousands of small insects habited the place to the point no one could see most of the ground.

But there was an area where there were few, a corner of the room where they could see a desk with books and a man who opened his eyes when they arrived.

Just by looking at him Shirou saw a ghost of who his classmate was supposed to become if he hadn't killed him; noble features that looked less grandiose by his disinterested eyes, eyes that still held a sharp inquisitive nature, dark blue hair, tall enough that despite sitting he would still tower over Le Fay and clearly irritated by their intrusion in his home.

That was until his eyes gained a glimmer of recognition. "Well, well, well. I didn't expect this." His voice was gentle and smooth like a casanova with a tone like silk as he smiled while standing up from his comfortable chair. "To think someone would visit my workshop after it was abandoned. And such an esteemed person at that." The man fully stood up and a coat suddenly appeared over his suit while he fixed his black tie. "Sorry about the mess upstairs. I haven't had the time nor interest in fixing things up since I didn't plan to stay here for long."

"Is that Zolgen?" Xenovia asked carefully as every instinct and training was telling her that man was dangerous. It wasn't his demeanor or attitude, just the animal part of her brain warning her about a predator.

She could only remember such an instinctive reaction once before and it was when meeting Mephistopheles of all people yet that was still a completely different flavor. With that particular devil it was his unhinged appearance that gave him such a presence while the human-like creature couldn't truly be described as such.

Just by meeting his eyes the former Exorcist felt like the bugs which gave the man his title, a mere insect ready to be cut into pieces by a bigger creature with no name. An instinct that came with seeing that sort of predator that would devour her whole and move on with his day like nothing happened.

It was an instinct everyone shared. "That is him alright. Zolgen Makiri." Altria confirmed as her eyes jumped around to make sure no insect was approaching them.

"I think it is obvious but he is dangerous." Flames fully covered his Muramasa as Shirou prepared for combat. At seeing the fire the blue haired man barely reacted and if anything his smile only grew. "We should-"

"I remember you Japanese being more polite than that, last time I visited the country." The tall man said out loud, silencing everything. Even the insects around the place had grown quiet. "Where are your manners, Shirou Emiya, is that way to refer to your... What is the word again? Ah, yes, Senpai?"

Nobody was intimidated by the man knowing one of their names but it allowed Shirou to step forward in the stairs to be their spokesperson even as his eyes kept jumping around to watch every corner in the room.

Despite not being a proper trap, the quartet felt they fell into one. "It is usual for someone to introduce themselves first when sneaking into one's territory, Zolgen Matou!"

"Huhuhuhu. Then again, perhaps protocol is discarded when we know each other's names beforehand? Or that we each 'infiltrated' each other's territory." Zolgen pretty much admitted his identity while waving his hand towards another of the present. "Isn't that right, Xenovia Quarta?" Durandal's Owner held her sword more firmly as his gaze shifted to the remaining two women. "And, don't tell me anything, I would recognize those features anywhere, in particular from those members of the Pendragon Family." Altria gritted her teeth as Le Fay prepared her spells despite shaking.

"You don't need to know our names, you cur!" Said the taller blonde with her sword pointed to Zolgen whose smile grew bigger. "What is your intention on this city? You would never leave your den unless you had something to gain!"

A raised eyebrow later, the man chuckled again. "Are you, perchance, a member of the Khaos Brigade?" Altria didn't react but Zolgen took her silence as a 'yes'. "I wonder which group you are a part of; someone bribing my suppliers or perhaps the owner of one or other group of familiars surrounding my friend's home. Ah~ Which one are you?"

Neither of the Pendragon sisters showed any indication of an answer but that just amused Zolgen more as he knew he was right. Only a few individuals knew legitimately where he was, two, and neither had reason to tell anyone as one could benefit from his search while the other didn't care.

Which only left the many, many spies watching Rizevin's residence, a manor smaller than the one they were currently inside, as the culprits. It was all a matter of figuring out who they were and that was something he could have after interrogating his unexpected guests.

However, one person was in the way. "Answer the question!" Shirou demanded loudly as his sword's flames seemed to pulse and Zolgen insects reacted at the intensity of the Noble Phantasm's power. It only served to make the ancient being more curious. "What are you doing in Fuyuki, Zolgen Makiri?! Someone with your tendencies is not welcome here!!"

"'Tendencies'? Odd thing to say in a city full of magicians. Do you think I am the only one with a basement full of skeletons?" He was being quite literal as the group could see quite a few bones in the area. If they were old or new, none could tell but the oldest man in the room. "But sure, I suppose I could lecture you a little, from a Mage to another." There was mocking in his tone and his next words affirmed it. "I am a magician and I shall not unveil

any of my secrets.” For good measure Zolgen threw a small bow before adding. “That said, I confess I am curious of what my supposed peer can do outside a lab.”

“LOOK OUT!!!” Xenovia warned as a veritable swarm composed from every type of insect descended upon them.

Durandal’s Light burned a path open as she took a swing towards the ceiling, the giant blade of energy decimated much of the insects but several still kept charging. Her hold grew tighter as she began to move the Holy Sword around as more and more insects came from the front. Unfortunately that did nothing to the army on the back but the others had it covered.

As in they had no intention of fighting in that position at all. Altria threw Shirou a look as she charged mana in her sword with a particular thought in mind as she grabbed Le Fay. Before she even said anything the disguised redhead was on the same page, doing the same with Xenovia as their swords pulsed with mana.

Both jumped from the middle of the stairs towards the pit of worms, the former Exorcist and younger Pendragon working to attack up as Shirou and Altria turned their blades down. Flame and Holy Light pulsed in several directions, pulverizing every single worm on a radius of several meters before they paused.

While destroying the creatures was important, what the group truly gained with that jump was space. “**Trace on!!**” Several copies of the sword in Shirou’s hand landed on the ground forming a circle as he slammed his hand on the floor to activate them. “**Fire Muramasa!**”

All blades answered their creator’s calls and began to expel a powerful flame but the Mage of Swords knew he couldn’t sustain it for too long. Several insects were already dragging themselves towards the fire while others began to jump from the ceiling and the sides, trying to go over it.

It was Altria’s turn to make a move and she danced with her blade for a circular slash. “**In the name of Caliburn Ruler hear my command; Form a Barrier of Fire sustained by the mana in this place!**”

Shirou felt when the control over his blades was lost and the fire gained a life of its own to obey the order. Despite its proximity to the group none of them could feel the heat and the fire barrier moved around perfectly to keep the insects at bay.

“Neat trick.” Shirou commented.

“So is yours.” Altria rebutted, both still glaring at Zolgen who was studying them with interest.

“Caliburn, huh. Truly most of the restored sword is still in Kuoh but...” His shoulders began to move in an odd pattern like they were made with bubbles, reminding them the person they were fighting couldn’t be called such. “Even as a Fragment the Sword of Selection kept its luster... Then, what are you going to do now?” He asked with legitimate curiosity as his swarm stopped charging and began to circulate the barrier. “I doubt this place, disconnected

from everything, can sustain that barrier for long.”

“He is right.” Shirou pointed out as he fished for his phone to call for help. Only to notice it had no signal. “It was working just before we got here. Is it because we are underground?” If so he had other alternatives.

Every single one of them was shot down when Le Fay shook her head. “There is a boundary field in the area.”

“Fay, why are you only warning us now?” Her sister asked as she held Ruler close to her chest.

“It wasn’t there before.” Everywhere she looked Le Fay could only see insects which unnerved her greatly. But her eyes could also see more. “This boundary field just showed up from nowhere. It is even blocking the entrance.”

Looking back up for a second Shirou could see a string-like pattern made of purple mana blocking the way out. With the smell of decay around he couldn’t confirm the rest of what the smaller magus was saying but he believed her.

“Master, I am going in.” Xenovia allowed more of Durandal’s power to escape but Altria held her shoulder. “You better let go if you don’t want to lose that hand.”

“Not yet, Xenovia.” Shirou’s call calmed his lover as he could see several problems in allowing her to charge by herself. “We are in a magus’ workshop and while we don’t know how he hid so well there is no denying we fell into a trap.”

“Attacking carelessly will only risk your life for little.” Altria took over. “The Barrier of Fire will last a few minutes and he has no intention of attacking himself, happy to let his bugs do the work.”

Tracing his bow, he watched the two women step aside. “We also need to hold back on what we can do inside the barrier. Is it solid or…”

“You created these flames, you know more about them than I do.” That was all Shirou needed to know as the Muramasa in his hand began to change shape. “Plan?”

“Let’s poke the nest and see what comes out.”

“I definitely don’t like that plan.” Le Fay said in a weak voice as Xenovia laughed.

“Hahahaha, don’t worry. If anything,” her eyes turned feral, “Master is going to make sure no insect leaves the colony before he is done with it.”

“Then again, it depends on his defenses.” The Mage of Swords began to take a proper posture for archery as his sword turned arrow grew bright with mana.

Which amused Zolgen. "So we shall have a competition between Mages? It has been a long time for me." He began to crack his neck as several giant wasps emerged from his back. They were all a mixture of gray and black with menacing red eyes, each bigger than a bowling ball. "Now then, shall we-" His body suddenly moved to the side without actually moving a muscle as an arrow flew by his head and blew up his desk and books. Not that he cared. "Where is the politeness you Japanese are so known for? As your Senpai and Mage of Insects, huhuhu, I will have to teach you manners."

Several more arrows flew in Zolgen's direction as Shirou Altered the same number of Fire Muramasas. Nothing of which was sufficient to hit the Mage of Insects as his body moved without actually moving. It wasn't speed alone, even if it was a factor somehow, but the movement itself was him being repositioned by something else.

Zolgen went left before his existence shifted to the right, avoiding two more arrows that exploded the walls and spread more fire in his workshop. However that wasn't as relevant as the smoke that began to form around the place and his insects were burned to a crisp. The last part made him frown for a second before chuckling again.

"So you really are a 'Noble Phantasm specialist'. I heard," his body moved again as several arrows hit the place he was standing on for Zolgen to stop several meters away from it without a scratch, "you were capable of mass producing those with Gradation Air but... that is more than I expected. What I wouldn't give to have taken a look into your body and what makes your circuits 'tick'. Maybe I will do just that before," fire traveled freely in his direction, opening a way by burning more of his insects. He dodged again, without moving a muscle himself, "I collect what I came for."

"How is he moving like that? If we can even call it moving..." Altria questioned out loud as her eyes never left the Mage of Insects. "He isn't moving a muscle but his body is still repositioning. If I didn't know any better-"

"It is like the ground is moving." Xenovia finished her thoughts with a frown. "Probably it is considered how many insects he has."

Every pair of eyes widened in horror as Zolgen's grin grew unhinged. "Ah, you finally realized." The 'rock' beneath his feet raised up revealing itself to be several dozens of worms. Truly the man wasn't moving, his familiars were doing it for him. "Don't feel too bad. It has been quite a few decades since I had to raise a finger to actually kill someone. Speaking of which..." He looked up, prompting the four to do the same.

There were his wasps but also another type of bug that looked like a cross between a ladybug with the wrong colors and a tick bigger than a couch. Those creatures were also camouflaged between the rocks but when they moved the group managed to see them for what they were as the bugs opened their mouths and saliva began to drop.

In large quantities too, like globs of green water that were clearly dangerous. "**STOP!!**" Altria commanded with a swing of her sword and the saliva stopped short of the fire barrier only for the wasps to drop down and collide with them and then the barrier. "We need more-"

“Already on it! **Fire Muramasa!**” Stabbing one of his arrows on the ground it broke apart and spread fire around them which Le Fay quickly directed to the barrier with her wand.

However the creatures above their heads were dropping more corrosive saliva on their heads and something needed to be done. “I will take care of them.” Yet Xenovia didn’t jump immediately, instead focusing on her choker. “Make the barrier stronger or it will break apart.”

“It isn’t safe.” Altria warned as she held Caliburn Ruler above her head, one hand on the blade the other in its grip.

It was Shirou who said next, “Just do it,” while quickly creating several more arrows and firing them around to get rid of as many bugs as he could.

A clear sign his opponents were planning to do something yet Zolgen barely reacted other than waking some of his creatures. He had brought a few thousands of them for several purposes so it wasn’t like the attacks were making any real dent in his swarm.

Something the group knew very well by just looking at the place and seeing just how many of the Mage of Insects’ familiars truly filled the area. Worse yet was that the barrier wasn’t working at peak efficiency. Not when the insects were avoiding the flames thanks to some sort of conscious thought.

And making the matters even worse they also knew better than to stay in the open, hiding in places where the light of Le Fay’s crystal couldn’t reach. “And what can you do, girl? Do you really think Durandal’s Light can save you? Then it shall be extinguished first, together with any false hope you have.”

It was Le Fay who noticed it first. “Below!!”

With that warning everyone jumped in several different directions, the flames ignoring them completely, to get away from the giant worm with shark teeth that emerged from the stone. By size alone it was bigger than most trains with each tooth taller than a car, several dozen of them visible from the side.

All of them had different reactions at the sight and at the army of insects that jumped to get them when they left the Barrier of Fire; Le Fay was the fastest one, her wand growing in size until it was a broom which she used to fly, Altria focused on controlling all the flames around to decimate several insects while Shirou dismissed his bow to Trace another Muramasa and increase the heat.

None of them could react as the worm turned to Xenovia and opened its mouth to swallow her whole. “One down!”

The Pendragon sisters had looks of panic in their faces but Shirou just smirked at the older Mage. “Didn’t you want a competition between us?” He asked while cutting down some wasps. “Since you showed your ‘creations,’” Emiya said with disgust before a confident smile took over, “it is my move!”

After his words a bright light pulsed from inside the worm that was starting to shake in clear pain as its body began to bulge in several places. Zolgen couldn't help but watch with curiosity since he was pretty sure his pet could survive Durandal at the very least.

Yet, from the creature's middle, a sword of blue Light exited one side as another blade made of bronze exited the other. Already dead, the worm began to fall apart as its body burned due to the Holy Energy consuming it with a heat stronger than any flame.

From where the blades had manifested stood a figure clothed with a suit of blue armor the same color of her blades. Most of it was made of blue metal but the bronze highlights around her shoulders, arms and boots shone brightly.

The armor itself looked to be made in the European style but clearly for a woman emphasizing her chest and exposing her midriff and tights. However those were covered by something that looked like the Church's Exorcist leotard but made with a different material that suited the armor's colors.

Shoulder pads which folded down like silk, with one spike each that looked like small thorns, were connected with gauntlets that protected the whole of her arms. Plate covered the back of her hands and wrists as fingerless gloves kept her palms protected. There was also a belt that had plates to the sides of her tights with the symbol of a sword in the front.

A sword that looked nothing like the ones she was holding but was instead what Durandal once was in the distant past; a two handed classical sword with a handle that looked very much like a gold cross standing proudly, blade pointing down.

Her boots, much like her leotard, matched well with her old uniform but everyone could see a white light coming from her feet as she remained floating in the air. There was also a green cape on her back which matched her own and moved around despite the lack of wind.

In Xenovia's hands were her weapons of choice, Noble Phantasms both; in her right hand was Durandal of which everyone knew and could recognize from a glance but sword in her left hand was a mystery to all but herself and Shirou for the bronze blade was the reborn form of Durandina modified to look like a smaller Durandal, just ten centimeters shorter, and just as strong.

When the newly armored maiden turned to regard Zolgen with a glance he couldn't see her eyes but knew they were glaring at him from behind the steel-like helmet, a helmet of a true knight, fully armored to cover her head and neck where it connected with her breast plate.

The only thing that didn't match was the slim biker visor that was big enough for Xenovia's eyes. A fierce golden glow appeared when her eyes looked at Mage of Insects.

**"Peerless Armor!!"** She declared for all to hear as an aura of power covered her body for a split second. "Zolgen Makiri, your evil shall be cut down here!!"

“So that is your personal work, Mage of Swords?” He asked rhetorically as the insects in the area grew more agitated.

Before he could say anything else Xenovia repositioned her legs and allowed jets of Holy Energy to propel her forward at ludicrous speeds that she couldn't control properly just yet.

However she was skilled enough to stop in the right position and raise her two blades to cut Zolgen into pieces. The man still didn't look concerned as the Holy Weapons came for his head and chest.

The hits never landed as Zolgen 'sunk' in his insects, escaping the blades before they could get close. Not that it was enough as the jets on Xenovia's feet accelerated her spin while she changed her grip to point her swords downward and stab the area unleashing a blast of Holy Light.

Combining it with the flames and smoke already taking over his workshop, Zolgen found that he could only escape to the right corner of his workshop. Still his amused smile remained on his face and he was about to say something only to suddenly duck as Caliburn Ruler almost decapitated him.

Altria clicked her tongue as her attack missed but remained undetained, stomping the ground hard to kill several worms as the fires from the area converged in her blade. She began to unleash a quick succession of slashes that despite her enemy dodging them all it spread the flames further.

Didn't take long for the Mage of Insects to realize she was trying to kill all his familiars and it took even less time for him to decide on a course of action as from his chest emerged several of his wasps immediately flying towards her face.

Forced to take a step back, Altria took a wide swing that killed the creatures but left her exposed to a giant cockroach suddenly coming from below the worms to attack from the side.

Yet Altria ignored it, extending her movement a little so she could stab Zolgen, something which shocked the Mage as his worms pulled him away from danger. Despite his successful evasion, fire was still an issue and the red sword's flames moved to consume him, costing more of his worms.

But the cockroach was about to bite off the blonde's limb so he prepared to unleash more wasps and finish her only for several arrows to kill his creature. Trying to feel the insects around Shirou showed the younger Mage had already got rid of them so Zolgen could see how he was free to attack from afar.

However his immediate concern was Altria whose stab almost connected with his gut and his body recoiled because of the Holy Sword. Mana involved it as the middle Pendragon sibling followed the stab with a upward slash to his shoulder as she advanced, moving to bring the sword back around for his head.



Only for one of the ladybug ticks to fall and be cut in half in its creator's place forcing Altria to grit her teeth. 'Caliburn almost failed to cut it'. Unbelievable as it was, Zolgen's insects could survive even Holy Swords to an extent. 'I need to-' A grin came to her face as she sensed an opportunity and dove for the blue haired Mage's legs.

His worms were already moving Zolgen out of harm's way but before he could call more to counter an arrow came flying and lodged itself on his shoulder before exploding in flames. It wasn't the only attack coming as Altria shifted her feet and aimed for the man's waist only for the sword to stop short.

She saw dozens of lice-like creatures emerging from the man's clothes as several of them fell from his body, the flames with them. "You think it was going to be that easy?"

When he saw her confident grin the answer was clear. "**STOP!!**" Commanded the swordswoman and her sword forced his obedience as even the bugs in his body felt its effects.

Sure he had faced Caliburn's Fragments in the past but Ruler didn't have that much power, enough so to neutralize the hundreds of creatures in his body. But the cause was also visible to his eyes as mana poured from Altria like a broken hydrant flushing all water in a perfect geyser.

Even then it wasn't enough to stop him as Zolgen knew how to counter Ruler's powers both physically and mentally. His own mana flowed in his body like a river, freeing all worms in his system, while his mind snapped out of the command by reaffirming his will. The whole process took one second.

Xenovia came back for another swing with one sword and a stab with the other in less time than that. Durandal pierced his body front to back forcing Zolgen to feel something he hadn't in a long while; pain.

True and excruciating pain as the Holy Energy from the sword began to burn his insides and Durandina came for his neck. Fortunately for him at that point he and his worms could move which meant he was quickly extracted while several of his body's insects jumped to overwhelm Xenovia.

Or to try pathetically as Durandina shone brightly before expanding an bronze aura that blew them away. She continued her swing using the thrusters in her feet to close the gap once completely, her target having lost all means of escape.

It was a checkmate or would be so if it wasn't for the territory. A magus' workshop, their inner sanctum, was where they were at their most dangerous. Despite having made it his home just a few times over the centuries and it being stripped of most of its resources, Zolgen had two days in it.

Two days for a being like him were more than enough to set up more experiments than it would be to every single magician on the planet at that current point in time. After all his work wasn't steel, spells, carvings, blood, tubes, or anything else that needed transportation.

He was the Mage of Insects and his colony went wherever he wanted it to go.

While Xenovia could bisect Zolgen rather easily she found herself stopped again when another creature emerged from the floor and flew up to slam her in the ceiling before dropping down with its large dark form which forced Altria to retreat.

Seeing the new creature which was as big as a car, Shirou unloaded several Muramasa arrows in its direction but neither fires nor explosions seemed to have any effect against that new insect.

With a black carapace covering the whole of its massive body, four huge jaws, two enormous ones by the side of its mouth, surrounding its head and a huge horn on its center that raised in a crescent shape up it cut an intimidating figure indeed.

“A rhinoceros... beetle?” Asked the Mage of Swords as the creature opened its wings to beat them rhythmically to generate a sound dropped him to his knees, hands holding his ears.

He wasn't the only one as Altria almost dropped Caliburn Ruler while doing similar actions and Le Fay, who was flying around the area looking for something, lost her balance and was only saved because her broom had spells to keep her on it.

The sonic attack's frequency kept going as Zolgen laughed. “Fool! This is my workshop! Even if most of my useless descendants' creations were taken or destroyed, this place is still the best to cultivate our insects!” Recovering his composure he controlled himself. Worms moved around and replaced his flesh as he combed his hair back. “Then again, you youngsters are certainly dangerous.” By the point his suit had fully repaired itself he looked up. “Especially you, Mage's Sword.”

Xenovia descended from the ceiling with both her blades pulsing with energy but Zolgen wasn't afraid as his giant rhinoceros beetle flew up to meet her. Durandal came with a mighty blow that shook the air but the creature's horn didn't break. Instead of being shocked, the bluehead swordswoman used her sword to push it away and charge towards the monster.

It lowered its head enough that all she hit was the carapace. ‘It is intelligent?’ With a push the beetle launched her back up as the others in the ceiling fell on her back. ‘Shit!’ They exploded on her body, acid covering her completely.

‘That is right. You noticed at this point, right? My familiars are far more intelligent than the average insect.’ Zolgen couldn't control the ugly smirk that grew in his face. ‘Attack, defense, opportunity. Most insects, even magically enhanced ones, can't see such openings. However my familiars can do all that and more just because they are mine.’

With the situation returning to his control the Mage of Insects calmly watched as Durandal's Owner was slammed on the ground by his beetle. All his teeth were showing and he couldn't help himself as his work was proven superior to the Mage of Swords'.

Then one of his worms warned him of danger and Zolgen felt his feet shift as Altria's sword almost cut off his arm. "How are you still moving? My beetle's wings sound has a frequency high enough that most humans lose consciousness after a few seconds."

"I Ordered myself not to hear it." Altria replied painfully and Zolgen knew exactly why. While that wasn't beyond Ruler's power, her own mana was combating its influence.

Little by little the sound was growing in her ears and both of them knew that the stop gap was just that and never meant to last long.

Which was why Altria threw herself against her enemy with several rapid stabs to his body, heart and head as fast as she could. It wasn't enough as the worm user danced around her sword and didn't even try to counter attack. Perhaps because he was still underestimating the group, perhaps because of pride, perhaps sadism but he didn't want to make the effort to kill them.

Also he was growing ever more confident as Altria slowed down since the beetle's wings started to affect her again. Her choice soon would be to stop attacking to use another Order or fall.

Her eyes suddenly gained more focus as both realized, 'The sound is gone.'

A screech echoed in the area as two blades of Light destroyed the rhinoceros beetle with extreme prejudice and Xenovia flew towards Zolgen again completely unscathed, much to his shock.

'She should have been melted to the bone!'

"You aren't escaping!!" Declared the former Exorcist as she threw two long swings from opposite sides like scissors. Altria was small enough that she just needed to duck and for the first time Zolgen moved his hands to defend himself. "OOOOHHHHHHH!!!!!!!"

Roared the knight as she advanced while putting more strength in her attack, fully intending to cut the magus down. More creatures emerged from the floor and walls to defend their creator before all of them were shot down by several arrows as Shirou also advanced. He was already preparing the next shot, one which would certainly put Zolgen in the grave.

If several human-like insects hadn't suddenly raised in front of him out of nowhere. They had six arms, four legs, ant's heads and carried bone-like cleaves. Their bodies were covered with a red carapace so Shirou let go of his Noble Phantasm and used his bow to hit one's head while kicking the other.

Those were not the only ones to show up as a centipede several meters long grabbed Xenovia by her midriff. The young woman's reaction was swift, Durandine losing its Light blade and stabbing the creature's head.

Which still gave Zolgen an opening to dodge Durandal and raise an arm to unleash a cloud of locust in Xenovia's direction before grabbing Altria's arm which was about to cut his neck open.

"Congratulations, looks like I will have to try." Zolgen sounded sincere before turning around and using the blonde as a shield against a fire blast coming in his path.

Le Fay, seeing her sister in peril, immediately cut the feed from the spell and turned it upwards which damaged more of the area but otherwise was harmless. It was still useful as she saw something hiding between the rocks of her crystal.

Meanwhile her sister held back her own attack, Altria let her sword go with one hand to grab it with the other and went for another strike. It was successful and Zolgen let her go with a kick to send her away for good measure as he held his side to close the cut. Because it was a Holy Sword there was more damage than it could just be seen but his worms were already working on it despite him taking a step back.

Everyone saw the Mage of Insects retreat even if a little and Xenovia acted first. "**Twin Slash!**" Two blasts of Holy Light were unleashed and all the locusts were exterminated.

However, some giant insects jumped from the floor and took the hits. "What exactly do you all fail to understand?" Zolgen asked as from the walls two new rhinoceros beetles revealed themselves. "Even if it is not my main one, you are in my workshop. There is no end for my options or resources." He claimed with a wave of his hand that several of his ant soldiers raised to surround pretty much everyone as the rhinoceros beetles' wings began to beat. "Here I can only be called god!!"

"**Caladbolg!!!**" The spiral arrow was unleashed ready to destroy everything in its path.

"**Caliburn Ruler!!!**" A blast of Holy Light melted many of the rocks before reaching its target.

Both attacks hit and the rhinoceros beetles fell before the sound became too unbearable. "I don't care if you are a god!" Shirou started as Bakuya appeared in his hand.

"We are taking you down!" Altria affirmed as both leaped over his newly formed army and charged straight at Zolgen.

Both reached at the same time and their slashes made contact cutting the man into four pieces in a perfect 'X' front to back. But that wasn't all as Xenovia charged Durandal with power and thrust it forward, unleashing a blast that consumed Zolgen's head and torso completely.

The rest of the ancient Mage's body fell down and began to form a pool with his own blood. 'We got him.' The three thought simultaneously.

Nobody had time to celebrate their victory as the insect army charged, the ant soldiers drawing more weapons made of bone. They weren't the only ones as several creatures of all sizes and kinds began to emerge from all around the floor.

"Really wish they stopped moving when their creator died!" Altria commented, dancing around an ant soldier before cutting its head off. She moved four steps to the left, cutting another one down before her back connected with Shirou's. "Would make everyone's life so much easier."

"Believe it or not," Bakuya claimed a soldier and a grasshopper the size of a cat as he talked and leaned forward to give Altria space to roll on his back, "some are like that." She killed a worm that tried to get his back. "My old man said most of the time there is some sort of 'self destruction' sequence."

Both began to move to join with Xenovia but they didn't need to bother as the former Exorcist was running circles around the giant bugs. "Master, they don't stop coming."

"Focus on taking down the ones in the ceiling." It was Altria who said it and Durandal's Owner stopped for a moment to look at her giving a bug the chance to bite her neck. There was no damage and Durandina killed it a second later. "We can take care of the ground forces but we need to find a means of escaping- **In the name of Caliburn Ruler, Stop!**"

A praying mantis blade-like hand almost got Shirou but the magus was already in motion to cut that army off and then destroy the giant creature's chest. "Do as she said. Try to find whatever is sustaining the boundary field."

"I already found it!" Le Fay announced as she focused a blue and black mana sphere in her hands, shooting it at her crystal in the ceiling.

When it was destroyed the others expected darkness but while they were fighting the younger Pendragon had created several of the same kind but smaller around the room. Much, much smaller as they were barely the size of light bulbs but to compensate for the darkness the girl had created over thirty of those and spread them everywhere.

The insect army didn't disrupt them but she wasn't surprised since her real target had used the giant one as simple terrain. "That is the thing sustaining the boundary field."

A creature capable of casting boundary fields by itself or with a silent command was by itself impressive but the one trapping them had been made seamlessly with a hint of disruption to the group's senses.

However it was its appearance that made the biggest impression, the first time they were seeing it since it was hiding behind the crystal. "A giant spider because of course it is a giant spider." Altria was happy her sister wasn't panicking but she could see the signs she was barely holding back.

Of all the creatures Zolgen had concocted that spider was by far the most monstrous even if it wasn't as big as some of the others around. Size wise it was barely three meters tall, or nine feet, but that was just the torso and head which had two huge fangs the size of swords.

The legs were taller than the body by some meters and all in all it was a huge thing that could be nothing but artificial as most of its body was covered with black eyes that undoubtedly gave it vision from all angles.

Thanks to Le Fay's call everyone could see that from its feet there was some purple mana covering the ceiling, a phenomenon that was once being hidden by her crystal. That spider had its own huge mana pool and was using it to create a web that spread around the whole room.

"Xenovia!" Shirou didn't need to call because his lover was already flying full speed to kill the creature.

As she approached the bluehead noticed all of its eyes turning to her and while that wasn't enough to make her flinch it still filled her with a sense of dread. 'Creepy.' Xenovia thought before roaring with all her might.

The spider didn't stay quiet and before she even thought of attacking it the creature had already turned around to unleash its web towards her. Maneuvering around it the knight kept her flight path clean until the spider's head turned to shoot webbing from its mouth. That one ended up catching Xenovia but only because she saw an odd expression for a spider.

'It smiled?!' When the web ball hit her the substance spread around to trap her body like the world's fastest acting glue. Dark blue mana made the thing move around like a river spreading in several directions while its chemical composition tried to melt her alive.

However Xenovia's Noble Gear wasn't to be underestimated as it was powered by Durandal itself. Sure it wasn't as indestructible as the sword but there was a reason it earned its name and so she didn't fear for whatever the web was. Instead she was just furious that the creature dared to try to stop her with cheap tricks.

First she tried to power thought but the web appeared to be conscious in some fashion as it moved to lock her legs and stop her from flying how she wanted. It wouldn't be enough for in her hands she had the key to rip it apart and recover her freedom.

After all, her second sword was made for defense. "**Durandina!**"

Bronze aura covered her body for a second before forming a sphere around her that decimated the web, allowing Xenovia to fly towards the creature at full speed again. There would be no escaping for the spider but it knew that.

All insects in the workshop knew their duty well, they knew death was in the corner but fear wasn't implemented in their creation. To be more specific Zolgen saw no point in giving them such an emotion, not when their job was to die for him. No emotions at all if he could help it as they were insects and the only will they needed was his.

So the ant soldiers threw themselves at Shirou and Altria only to be cut apart in instants. A giant scorpion emerged from the floor, its tail going for the redhead, only for the appendage to freeze with Caliburn Rule's power. The blonde quickly jumped over the tail to cut it off before turning her sword to stab its head.

Her sister made to fly above her while unleashing several spells in all directions, a look of confusion in her face. "Why are they still so... coordinated? Their creator is gone."

Shirou blocked a second praying mantis sword arm before charging ahead and stabbing its chest with Bakuya. 'I don't even need Bellerophon for this.' Which actually raised his suspicion as he had the same doubts as Le Fay. "We need to get out here! Fast!"

"This is too weird." Altria said in agreement and they all heard Xenovia killing the spider as it screeched in pain. Neither paused their advance and approached each other, cutting everything in their path. "If these creatures are that intelligent then they should be running away."

"But they are still fighting which means-" He saw the shadow coming faster than any other creature from the corner of his eye but barely had any time to defend. It was going for the blonde and he had no time to turn around to cut whatever that was

Shirou managed to reach her in time but his defense wasn't perfect and the attack was too fast. The young woman turned her head, the hand pushing her away lost strength as the redhead ended with a hand piercing his abdomen from behind.

"Shirou!" Altria's shout caught the other two women's attention as her sword tried to take the attacker's head.

And since Zolgen wasn't willing to risk it against a Holy Sword he quickly freed his hand and jumped back several feet. "And you call yourself a Mage?" He asked with a smug smile as everyone paused to look at him. Out of courtesy he even stopped his army just to show them the futility of their efforts. "If that wound is enough to cripple you, then we aren't even close to the same level!"

It wasn't a simple boast either as everyone could see that Zolgen Makiri's body was intact to all events and purposes. Even his clothes had been fixed and there was not a single drop of blood on his person except by the drops of the vital liquid on his hand.

And obviously that wasn't his own and the Mage of Insects made a show to lick it just to taunt everyone else. "If you can't survive something so simple then I will be even more disappointed."

"Bastard!!" Xenovia shouted in fury as she descended like a bomb, her collision with the ground killing everything in a ratio of several meters. Gritting her teeth she raised her head to charge at Zolgen who was safe and sound far enough the blast didn't catch him. "I will kill you!"

“Heheh, you can’t blame me for how I deal with invaders. I also expected more from him.” He started as several ant soldiers and giant scorpions charged at the bluehead. She tore them apart easily but he didn’t care. “The title of Mage is both praise and insult; we are the ones who raised our magecraft to its utmost limits.” He ducked Durandal before raising his leg to avoid Durandina and using it for a kick. Xenovia barely moved but then his bones flexed in itself and somehow a ‘second kick’ sent her flying. “But we are only considered great by sacrificing other avenues for magic. Only the Great Mages of the past like Solomon and Merlin can claim otherwise.” With a wave of hand his army resumed its attack.

Altria dropped by Shirou’s side as the swarm advanced, Caliburn Ruler ready but also knowing that her movement would be limited if she had to protect Shirou as well. And as far as she could see he couldn’t fight even as the Mage of Swords attempted to stop the bleeding.

Their eyes met and for a moment it was like they were frozen in time as the girl saw the boy fight for his life despite the fatal wound. The attack had pierced too many organs and he was losing too much blood, a baseball sized hole now present in his midriff. Still he was fighting as his fingers managed to Trace a scalpel but keeping his grip on it was a challenge in and off itself.

Her hand dropped on his as she ignored all the blood and tried to help even if she didn’t know exactly about its utility. When they failed and the blade fell she started to think what she should say to console him.

Words died in her mouth as she saw the fight refusing to leave in his eyes. Time was frozen for them as their gaze refused to leave each other. It didn’t last forever as Shirou turned to the side and Altria knew exactly why.

It was a warning so she went from her crouched position to her feet for a moment even as her hand refused to leave the boy’s. Caliburn Ruler destroyed three more giant insects as her other hand left the magus’ to punch a centipede away from him before stabbing its head.

“Le Fay! We need some potions!” It was the best option they could use to both buy time and get him back on the fight.

There was just one problem. “We didn’t bring anything but I can heal him!” Offered the small magus as she unleashed spells all around to cover her sister.

Except that it wasn’t enough as the insects ignored fire and explosions to reach Altria with a mad frenzy. The platinum blonde shifted her footing but refused to abandon her position, cutting down everything her sister was unable to stop. Still she was surrounded so it wasn’t long before a bug of some kind reached Shirou.

With a flip of her sword Altria quickly dispatched of it but by doing so she left her back open to a third praying mantis that was about to kill her. Only for Bakuya to fly and decapitate it just below its torso. The swordswoman turned to Shirou, barely believing he was still alive, much less that he was standing up.



“How?” She asked before turning around and cutting another giant roach.

“I don’t know...” He had Trace an EM to heal himself and was working on it but his wound, which should be fatal, was closing faster than expected.

Not only that but he could feel his organs recover as his body began to function normally and at a pace he couldn’t process. For an instant both looked to the hole in his shirt where the wound should be and they saw a light that was neither Holy nor Divine.

Yet it had a warmth that couldn’t be described and runned through his whole veins with his blood. He knew it wasn’t Bellerophon, knew it wasn’t something he should have and knew it was real.

Also, Shirou knew, it was familiar. ‘This feeling...’

*His legs couldn’t carry him any further as he fell on the ground unable to take a single step.*

*Hell too over his surroundings and despite having sacrificed everything and making as far as he could that was the boy’s limit.*

*No longer he could muster the strength to do anything yet he kept pushing to try and get up again, to save himself.*

*Barely remembering why, he was so weak he could only raise his arm as a building began to fall apart in his direction.*

*Next the boy noticed he was buried beneath debris, his body hurt more than ever, the heat was insufferable and he had no idea how he woke up again nor why he was trying so hard to survive.*

*Someone told him to do it, twice even from different people.*

*At least he thought they were people.*

*When his hope was practically gone and the fire of his life began to flicker and disappear the rocks burying him began to shuffle around as someone pulled them away.*

*Disbelief colored the boy when he saw the sky again.*

*It took over when he saw a person, a man with a grateful smile.*

*A beautiful and grateful smile that went beyond comprehension for the boy was certain of something.*

*In the midst of hell, that was a smile of pure genuine happiness.*

*The man said something. “Farther... message was right... need to...” He picked up something from a briefcase*

*Next the boy felt the heat of Hell vanish as a sensation of peace and tranquility took over, his vision cleaning up so he could look better at the man whose happiness was easy to see.*

'Avalon?' Shirou wondered before Tracing another Bakuya instinctively to cut down an ant soldier. "Geez, my old man is going to be disappointed if he knows I almost died because I forgot about my armor." He joked to try and brush the situation off as his armor and coat covered his body. "Sorry for worrying you. Haven't slept much over the last few days."

Altria watched him carefully before standing up as well to cut down a giant tick. "Considering magicians and their secrets, I am not even going to ask." Her sword rested firmly in her hands. "We still have an army to destroy."

"For that, I may have a solution. We need reinforcements." Looking up Shirou saw the youngest Pendragon watching him with a sharp gaze deprived of all fear. "Le Fay, how is the boundary field?"

Blinking with some surprise at how the Mage had recovered so fast, she replied. "It is already down. We should retreat!"

"No way we are retreating!!" Xenovia moved fast to cut Zolgen down but the man either dodged or sacrificed more of his army to keep her at bay. "If we leave, this bastard is going to escape!"

"A retreat implies you are the ones escaping instead of me letting you go." The Mage of Insects said mockingly even as one eye focused completely at his recovered peer with suspicion. "I already saw what I needed to see in Fuyuki. While it wasn't what I wanted, I will make sure to take a souvenir before my departure."

In other words the man was done with the town regardless but remained because it held something which caught his interest. Without knowing exactly what it was the four knew that leaving or retreating meant that Zolgen would most likely get whatever drew him to Fuyuki in the first place.

And considering his experiments nobody wanted to risk giving him the chance. "If we aren't leaving then we need to consider stalling our enemy." Altria said calmly as several strategies crossed her mind. "Since the boundary field is down, Fay can go and get help while we hold Zolgen here."

"Since it is down, we can bring the 'help' to us." From his pocket he pulled a piece of paper, one that Altria never saw but easily recognized.

It was a pamphlet with a familiar symbol, one that even the platinum blonde knew well for it was the emblem for one of the 72 Pillars. Between Shirou's fingers it began to glow red as she realized that from the very beginning the Mage of Swords had reinforcements hidden in his back pocket.

With some flair, both because he could see his opponent's shocked face and because he knew his first lover would appreciate it, Shirou threw the pamphlet in the air and the magic circle in it pulsed more intensely.

"Rias Gremory, come concede my wish!" A red magic circle quickly expanded which startled some of the swarm but they remained undetained for long.

It lasted only as a figure began to emerge from it, Rias Gremory's summon was successful. With a glance she understood most of the situation, came to her own conclusions and acted decisively.

Barely her feet had touched the ground and the Power of Destruction was already annihilating the army that surrounded her lover and his allies as she called Born To Be Wild and started blasting.

In a few seconds the army of thousands had been reduced to a few hundreds as, unlike Le Fay, Rias had no problem unleashing her magic on that sort of enemy. Her control also was such that the younger Pendragon sibling couldn't help but be impressed as each blast was just enough to decimate part of the army and nothing else.

"It seems it took you a while to call me." Rias said softly even as her tone carried gratitude for Shirou had called for help and she didn't doubt he did it as soon as the situation demanded. Her eyes turned to Altria who studied her cautiously. "And your warning was true, Altria Pendragon. I offer my thanks and guarantee you won't find an enemy in me this day."

Because she was still technically part of the Khaos Brigade but that was a problem both of them couldn't care less in the present.

For in the present they all watched as Zolgen evaded each of her blasts with several of his worms, hiding himself behind Shirou's position and emerging several meters away from everybody once the attack ended.

"Nice to see you, Rias. Thanks for coming." Shirou smiled warmly as he repositioned to face his fellow Mage. "Also sorry for dragging you into this problem but that monster is really hard to kill."

"It is fine, I was waiting for your call." Informed the Heiress but she knew that was expected. The moment he called she left her familiar in her place and rushed to the ORC to teleport at a moment's notice. "Bat-chan will probably demand a meal as payment." She half joked as her hand touched his hair and it returned to its natural red.

Their eyes never left the ancient being who stared back coldly. "Hehe, she took your place in class?" A small nod was her response as the other women approached their location. Le Fay floated behind Altria, watching them with wariness as Xenovia landed beside the redhead pair.

“So, what is the situation?”

“That guy must be an immortal of some sort.” The Mage of Sword’s knight reported in a military fashion. “We destroyed his head and he just got back up.”

“After we cut him into pieces.” Altria repositioned her sword away from Rias, just to be safe.

The redhead devil nodded in appreciation despite it not being necessary. “And the army is obviously his. Any idea why he is in Fuyuki?”

“No clue, he is smart and every single one of his bugs has an ability and intelligence of some sort.” Her lover informed as Bakuya rested in his hand. She noted he hadn’t used his Phantasmal Beast just yet.

Le Fay’s eyes finally moved from one Mage to the other, if only for a moment. “Worms, that is how he did it.” Everyone grew silent and even Zolgen watched to figure out what the girl discovered. “He used those to fix his flesh but that isn’t really it either. Every time we hit a decisive attack there were insects protecting him in a way or another. Not only that but their intelligence is more than unusual, even for familiars.” The girl was shivering in fear and disgust. “That means his body is made of them and every single insect around is a part of him.”

“It would certainly explain why they are so intelligent.” Altria said to support her sister quickly in a way Rias couldn’t help but find cute. “So, if every insect is him...”

“We have to kill everything.” Just fine with Xenovia and everyone else for that matter.

However, while she would want nothing more to get rid of all critters, Le Fay shook her head. “He must have a core of some sort. Something to bind his soul to this plane of existence.”

“A brain or a heart?” Shirou offered and the girl nodded. “And every other insect here is him?”

“In theory.” She wouldn’t know more unless she dissected and studied the Mage of Insects magecraft up close but that wasn’t going to ever happen if she could help it.

Clicking her tongue, Xenovia glared at Zolgen behind her helmet. “If that is the case it isn’t much different from a puppet.” She could deal with those, the Church taught her how. “The Power of Destruction is probably enough but if it isn’t... Durandal can kill him if we hold him down for a while but the best alternative is...”

“An exorcism.” Shirou concluded, understanding why his knight looked apprehensive. Doing such a thing with the first one around could be extremely painful. “Let’s leave that as a last resource.” The bluehead nodded in agreement.

Rias took the whole situation in and watched as more insects emerged from the walls. “Any chance the core is on his body?”

“High but not certain.”

That was all she needed to hear. “So more blasting with lots of explosions.” Born To Be Wild cannon hands began to glow ominously for added effect. “Just will have to make sure not even dust is left for this guy to recover.”

A plan as good as any and everyone was on board as the last giant insects emerged from the walls. They spread themselves around as their creator snapped his fingers and the tallest of them all, a giant moth with dark blue wings, revealed itself.

None of that impressed the Heiress of Gremory who smirked. “Time for some extermination.”

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