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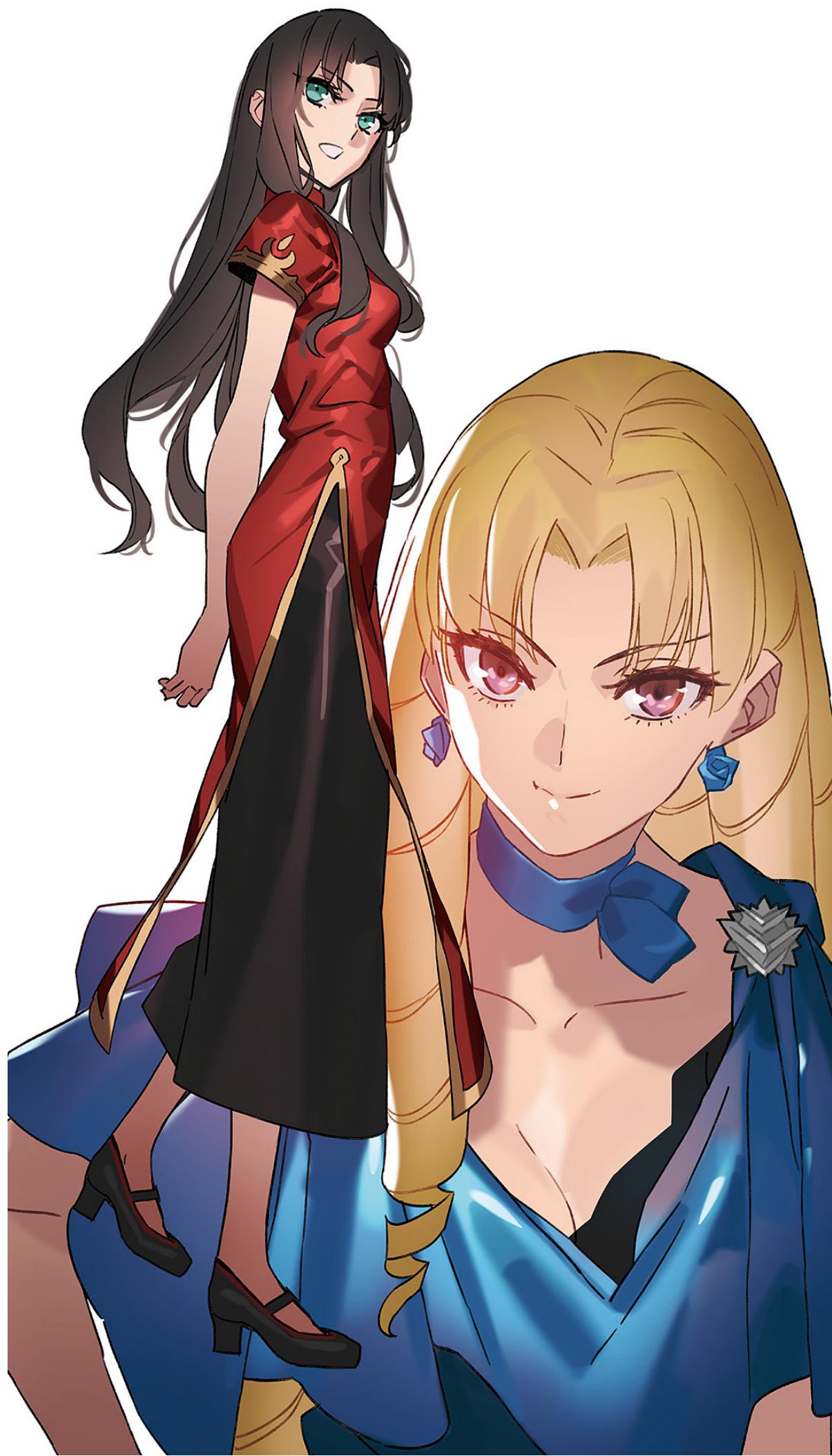
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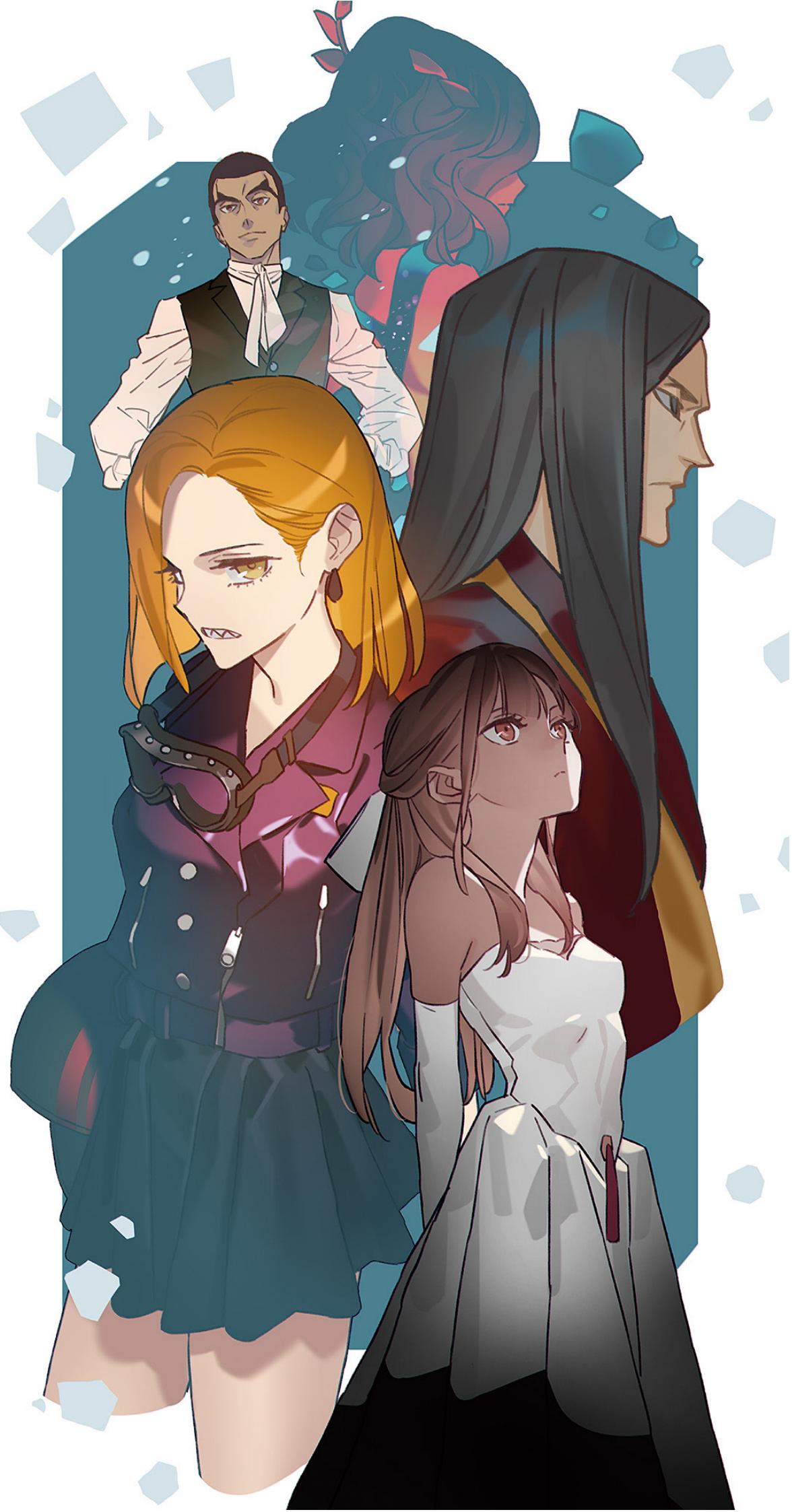
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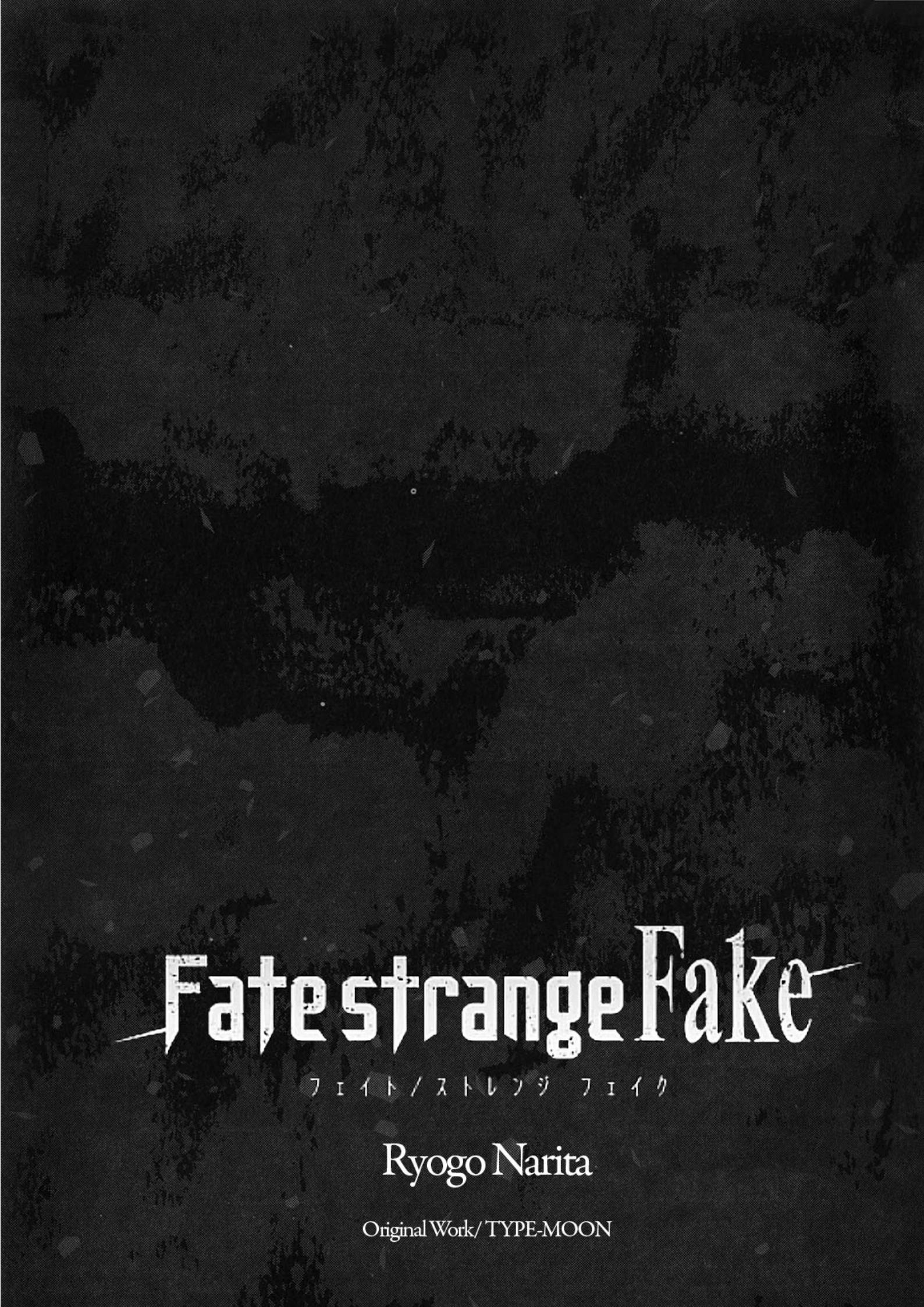


Fate/strange Fake 7

Fate/Strange Fake

Volume 8

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Fate strange Fake

フェイト／ストレンジ フェイク

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Original Work / TYPE-MOON

Fate/strange Fake 7

Fate strange Fake

フェイト / ストレンジ フェイク

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a t e / s t r a n g e F a k

Intro

“—”

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London, words by Lord El-Melloi II's sister.

I'm not much one to talk myself, but my brother is completely insane.

The Archibald family contracted an astronomical debt with his predecessor's death. Yes, the debt's figure would leave even the Animusphere astronomers out of their depth, and he took it on himself alone to pay it.

Itemize the debt? Are you asking because you want to pay for it in our stead?

I'm joking, of course. Now that my brother said he'd shoulder the debt, he's not letting anyone else pay for it. Besides, here's what I've been thinking lately: no one other than my brother could pay all that debt. Though it could be impossible even for him, maybe.

I say it including the non-financial losses, such as the loss of his predecessor's life and the damage to the Magic Crest, but also... you could produce a Hollywood ultra blockbuster with all the physical assets the Archibalds lost. There were multiple losses that could have collapsed the whole faction, but one of them was the greatest of them all.

One damaged item on our property... It was something not even the other Lords could easily obtain. It's for good reason that that item used to be El-Melloi's Supreme Mystic Code until the previous El-Melloi perfected Trimmau.

Yes... The previous Lord losing it in the battle of Fuyuki was the biggest of the 5 fatal losses we suffered.

It's not as big a deal as the Holy Grail... but there are mages who would start a war for it.

For that *** of ***** ***** ***** *****.

a t e / s t r a n g e F a k

Bridge

“Puddle”

Fate/strange Fake 8

Bridge: Puddle

5 days ago, Snowfield

When the Heroic Spirit Hippolyte was granted knowledge from the Grail and manifested, she was met with sparkling lights everywhere.

When she felt a torrent of magical energy all over her body, she determined that that was the energy from the summon, and tried to make the formal appeal to her contractor.

Because she understood her role as a Servant from the moment of her summon, much like most living beings understand the need to breathe from birth.

—I ask you, will you walk the fertile plains as my Master?

The instant she tried to see the person she was supposed to direct those words to, her intellect quickly comprehended the situation she was in.

She understood that the lights and the torrent of magical energy didn't come from the summoning ritual.

Violent collision sparks.

Bones creaking

Roars leaking out of a throat

Muscles bursting with resentment

A symphony of grinding teeth

A song of instantly expanding blood vessels

The wicked laughter of tearing joints.

Bridge: Puddle

Slashing attack	Blunt attack	Piercing attack
	Crushing attack	
Magecraft	Burning magecraft	Freezing magecraft
	Thunder magecraft	
Shouts of anger	Shouts of sorrow	Shouts of anguish
	Shouts of delight	

The area was charged with all forms of discord and violence.

Hippolyte was the queen of the Amazons. The head of a warrior tribe. This air was something she was used to.

Conflict. War.

Hippolyte was summoned not to a formulaic ritual altar, but to the middle of a trenchant conflict.

“...?”

She was of the many, many Heroic Spirits of Ancient Greece; the daughter of the god of war, Ares; and the leading warrior guarding the temple of the goddess of the hunt, Artemis.

Therefore, the conflict could never make her lose her nerve.

Because it was a battle between flesh and blood humans, not a battle between the heroes from the Age of Gods.

But it did confuse her.

According to the knowledge the Holy Grail gave her, a Heroic Spirit summon was a ritual performed with a catalyst and an incantation.

Some few tribes and religions have a ritual of offering to the god of war, but this one is not supposed one of that kind.

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Why was she summoned to watch a battle?

She thought that an enemy exploited the moment of the summon for a surprise attack, but her history as a warrior leader immediately rejected that guess.

The battle between the two had been going on for a long time.

What's happening here?

The warrior leader didn't panic despite her confusion.

Wait... Considering the level of this battle, maybe... This was not a proper ceremony but it might have been enough to call me.

Two figures collided and she had no reason to take either's side.

She was summoned but still not contracted.

Thus, Hippolyte observed.

To know what was happening in the holy grounds of her summon.

Or to determine what exactly this Holy Grail War was.

“Aaaargh! Can’t you ever give up?”, said one of the figures exchanging shots—a woman in red clothes—as she fired Gandr curses.

She launched cursed bullets with the force of a triple burst from an assault rifle, which the target dodged by a hair, pulverizing parts of the concrete walls behind her and exposing the steel beams inside them.

While the woman in red confirmed the result of her shot, her dark eyes found Hippolyte.

“Seems like our guest couldn’t stand to wait until we were finished. Wanna keep going?”, she

Bridge: Puddle

added as she furthered the distance between herself and her opponent.

The other figure—a woman covering the area around her in black smoke—responded to her enemy in red's question with a sharp glare.

"Leave her waiting. Or did you want a break to have tea with the Heroic Spirit?"

From the gaps of the woman's black smoke, she could peek at a harmonious face with shark-like teeth and a pair of gothic goggles on her eyes, engraved with magical letters.

Her words were weaved with wicked laughter, but in contrast, the woman in red sighed and shrugged.

"Well guessed, that's exactly what I was planning to do this whole time."

There was no delay between the woman's words and her actions.

"Without you, of course."

Her sigh and her shrug were no mere provocation.

Each and every movement had a purpose in adjusting the flow of Od inside her and were preparatory steps for an explosive drive on her joints and muscles.

Her approach was so explosive the ordinary man would have thought she disappeared.

A superb way of walking that combined her magical energy, technique, and all of her arduously cultivated physical strength.

Her slender body reached top speed in a blink of an eye.

At that point, she had already switched her limbs to their next form.

A perfectly delivered backhand blow flew toward her opponent's body.

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A hit to the ribcage. Even a normal backhand to that area had the chance to prove fatal to an undertrained body.

Nonetheless, this was not even the worst she did.

At the start of her movement, the woman in red fired a ball of curse from her fingertip, ran at the same speed as her shot, and delivered her twisted backhand together with it to push the shot further.

“Gah...!”

The woman’s goggles cracked with the blow.

The blow hit the chest, quite distant from the face, and yet the impact spread through her body was intense enough to cause visible damage to her facial accessory.

“Kh... Kh... Haha, hahahahaha!”

Hit with a strike and curse inevitably capable of knocking out a boxing champion in one hit, the woman with the goggles laughed ecstatically.

“I get it now... You’re as good as the rumors say! No, better than the rumors! Average One!”

“I don’t know what rumors you heard, but I’m much more than my attributes... Ah!”

Toosaka Rin—the woman in red dodged the opponent’s chop mid-sentence.

“True, my bad!”

The mage with the goggles—Doris Lusendra’s chop was also superhuman.

The first thing to call attention to is that her fingers were nothing like human fingers. Their form and hardness were altered to resemble the talons of a bird of prey—or rather, of a phantasmal dragon. This makes them blades capable of bisecting a human being. She rushed in at Rin for a follow-up.

Bridge: Puddle

What makes her chops so difficult to fight against is how all of them cause the whole cloud of black smoke around her to move.

It can sometimes serve as a traditional obfuscating smokescreen, sometimes serve as shackles to slow down the enemy's movements, and some of the smoke can concentrate to attack Rin as a third arm.

The Lusendra family.

A lineage that determined that one of their end goals was to replicate an allegedly extinct phantasmal species from Japan, the oni, with their own flesh and blood, and spent the past 1000 years modifying their own bodies and Magic Circuits.

With a special form of Reinforcement Magecraft passed down in the family, they repurpose their skeleton, each muscle fiber, each nerve, each lymph duct, and each capillary vessel to pass as a makeshift Magic Circuit.

Their final destination is defined by the contradiction of making the already lost past reach the distant future.

To take hold of, understand, or rewrite what is lost with the progress of the current form of Human Order, many mages keep the engine of their bloodlines running.

Doris Lusendra is one of many using their lives and souls as fuel to the ends of the rails set by their lineages.

"I really want to praise you right now, but the first word to come to mind is 'nasty'." Rin shrugged looking at the half-wrecked walls, floor, and pillars. "In no time, you changed this room's attribute into your own without even a Mystic Code or a catalyst... no, I guess at this point, your very body is already a Mystic Code and a catalyst."

The room had marks of destruction, some done by Rin's magecraft but most done by Doris's own body, and the parts she broke were drenched in remains of the raging magical energy seeping from her.

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Meaning that the more Doris destroyed, the more this environment became magically advantageous to her.

The debris housing magical energy had already begun to resonate with Doris. The room's interior was expressing its hostile intent to remove the unwelcome element that was Rin.

"You are the greatest wall in my path! You are worth bringing out all the deepest secrets of us Lusendra!"

"Do I really look nice enough to play along with everything you want to show?"

Her actions were faster than her words. Rin deployed jewels around her.

"Anfang."

Simultaneously with her power words, surges of magical energy of multiple attributes erupted from the spaces between the seven floating gems.

Then the light continuously reflected inside the gems, expanding their magical energy as it shot flashes of light.

Magical energy of multiple attributes twisted into a beam of light aimed at Doris Lusendra.

The spell known by the name Cutting Seven-Colors.

And what was behind her seven jewels was even more terrifying.

The flash of light was concealing five floating jewels disposed in the shape of a pentagram.

It was the magecraft she perfected under Lord El-Melloi II's tutelage: Fünf Sterne im Umlauf.

The unfair technique that allows Rin, the Average One, to initiate magecraft pre-deployed in the gems in response to the enemy spell, ensuring her attack will always have the upper hand in any compatibility interaction.

Bridge: Puddle

The jewels' magical beam served as a distraction to give her time to speak the chant that induces its activation.

"You won't!"

Black mist explosively expanded out of Doris's body to cancel the glimmer circulating in the jewels.

It was the blood that sprayed out of the cut she made on the arteries of her own wrist.

The blood sprayed out already on its acidic black color and tried to crush the jewels around Rin in a form like a water jet's blade.

At the same time, Doris's body morphed considerably.

Doris's skin, previously reinforced like steel, was ripped apart as her right arm's bones started to morph into a blade.

And then the debris around her floated and began to gather on Doris's right arm, compressing all the steel beams and concrete.

The bone blade coated in steel and debris finally covered the whole arm, turning into armor as it grew larger until the black hand eventually surpassed her own height, almost reaching from the ground to the ceiling.

And next,

with a twisted sound, the right arm made of debris, bone, iron, and most importantly, Doris's Circuit-converted flesh and blood, plunged forward, assaulting Rin with the palm of a giant.

And the worst of all is that this whole alteration and strike took place in less than 1 second.

Normally, Rin could effortlessly dismantle the physical components if she had only completed the Fünf Sterne im Umlauf chant.

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But Doris's speed left no room to complete the spell.

All cheats and counters are swallowed by her diligently optimized bodily alteration speed and the physical strength created by her Reinforcement Magecraft.

Even if Rin did activate her spell and tried to dismantle it, the debris had already gained impulse unrelated to magecraft and an improvised barrier or defensive spell couldn't stop their masses.

Rin's Fünf Sterne im Umlauf is practically invincible against constructed magecraft.

However, this description refers to magecraft which eventually dissipates into the world. It's powerless against real phenomena connected to the world, like for example special permanent projections, a mercury being taking a fully physical form, or simply a dump truck running in her direction.

Lusendra knew nothing of the Fünf Sterne im Umlauf spell, but in the depths of her obsession, she unwittingly achieved a counterplay for Rin's greatest secret.

"You don't get a choice, you will play along, Toosaka Rin!"

The Lusendra lineage has been in rapid degradation in recent years.

Not because they've been getting any less arcane.

They simply tried too hard.

The Lusendra lineage devoured everything it could to grow closer to the phantasmagoria of the oni, or to live life the way they did.

The previous family head, the most powerful in their history, devoured man and fiend alike, sometimes even vampires, and lastly, in an attempt to devour a god, he headed to Japan, where

the God Possessor clans are.

And there he randomly came across the real deal. Which means to say he was slaughtered by a one-eyed man with thick oni blood in his veins.

They lost most of their Magic Crest and then had to deal with the heavy consequences of their quest for “sacrifices to devour” continuously making large amounts of new enemies for them.

The only options left for them were to disappear into obscurity or to be instantly ruined by an enemy attack.

That's when Doris, the only one who hadn't given up yet, was visited by Francesca and invited to the Holy Grail War.

She was told that the Grail was fake and most likely incapable of reaching the Fount.

But she was told it was somewhat effective as a wishing-granting device.

Doris Lusendra didn't blindly trust the story but accepted the invitation.

She believed that seeing a hero from the Age of Gods with her own eyes and having her magical energy connected to one was worth it, and most importantly, if something close to a god manifested, she had a chance to incorporate it into her body.

But that was not what was happening.

A powerful enemy appeared before she could even summon, and faced with this enemy, Doris lost sight of everything. The Holy Grail War, the revival of her family, and the roadmap of her future were all trivial.

But she didn't forget her thesis as a mage.

She was sure of it.

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This mage right here was the greatest obstacle in her whole life.

She was sure that blasting through this wall was the way to perfect her lineage's magecraft.

Thus, she poured everything into this blow.

She didn't mind losing the chance to fight those who appeared alongside Toosaka Rin or the chance to contract the Servant.

It was with that much resolve that she launched her Giant Oni Grab.

This blow was her ultimate technique to crush any enemy regardless of whatever magecraft attribute they could have.

"Fantastic.", Hippolyte approved of the magecraft Doris poured her heart and soul into.
"But..."

Her eyes were the eyes of a warrior Heroic Spirit. They clearly saw the bigger picture.

By the time the palm strike of the giant was composed, the woman named Toosaka Rin had already abandoned the chant and the jewels.

She judged that the greatest magecraft she ever constructed couldn't do a thing against the physical strength generated by her opponent.

And as soon as she did, she repurposed half of the magical energy in all the deployed gems to conceal herself and construct a power spot, and then she jumped close to the ceiling, slipping between the giant's fingers.

Any misstep and she would have ended up a victim of the oni's claws, but regardless, the mage named Toosaka Rin escaped the jaws of death.

This wasn't a gamble. That mage... she went through all her options and knew which was the

best one.

The mage Rin only turned behind for one instant to look regretfully at the gems going to waste, and while she did, she kicked the ceiling, switching the vectors of her body, mind, and magical energy flow into her next move.

Drawing all the excess energy from the crushed jewels back into her body, she composed her favorite spell, one she can do without requiring a chant.

Dense misfortune spouted out of Rin's fingertips at the start of her free fall from the ceiling.

Hippolyte recognized that as a curse, although one quite different in design compared to the curses of her land.

Hippolyte never heard the word "Gandr" before, but as someone who fought loads and loads of demonic beasts and sorcerers from the Age of Gods, she could easily guess what it was used for.

But what radiant curse!

The Gandr was just a curse. Hippolyte's heartfelt admiration was for the refined tricks around it. She presumed this magecraft finesse to be on the high end of what the tactical minds of the modern age can do.

And so came the time for the match's conclusion.

"You wily-!"

Doris voiced her surprise at the same time she internally commended her enemy.

The spell Rin had previously compiled was one of the greatest achievements of her mage lineage.

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The decision to discard that magecraft after so much buildup was not an easy one even for the most rational of mages.

Doris judged that her opponent had extraordinary combat experience on top of her diligent study of magecraft. She prepared to counter her opponent's attacks, with the corners of her mouth raised high.

She had already seen this Gandr many times before.

It was a refined cursed bullet named Finn Shot, capable of piercing concrete. Since Toosaka Rin fired those with the frequency of an autocannon, no ordinary man fighting her could escape certain death.

Even if their body can somehow withstand it, the essence of the curse would infiltrate their body and stop their heart.

However, my skin is now iron and can block the consecutive curse volleys!

Doris surrounded her whole body with intense magical energy, with the intention of landing the most effective counter she could deliver.

But the Gandr impact she was prepared to take never came.

“!?”

Doris felt let down but didn't have the time to feel confused. Before she could, she saw the Gandr shot out of Rin's fingertips intercepted by something invisible.

For a moment, Doris assumed someone other than Rin interfered. But she discerned it was not the case. The qualities of the magical energy emitted by the barrier were identical to the qualities of the energy covering Rin.

Meaning the one who set the boundary was Rin herself.

She's... keeping her Gandrs caged inside a Bounded Field?!

Bridge: Puddle

In its normal form, this boundary was powerful enough to lock an enemy inside a room.

Rin compressed the boundary to the size of a football, making it into a cage to circulate the Gandrs she produced.

The cage was now a pressure cooker full of curses, shrinking even further as it dropped to Doris's feet.

Doris envisioned the explosion of the accumulated curses and focused her magical energy on her feet to jump away, then Rin sank her foot to the ground with a full-powered stomp.

A blow on a moment of distraction.

With the Gandr cage taking all of her attention, Doris forgot about Rin for a moment—an instant, even.

To Toosaka Rin, a mage who once survived a Holy Grail War, an opponent who lets their guard down like this is an opponent who surrendered the battle.

And Toosaka Rin's style was to break an enemy's spirit beyond repair, surrendered or otherwise.

Rin approached from an angle Doris wasn't looking at and shoved the Bounded Field compressed to the size of a golf ball into Doris's foot with her stomp.

Doris had her whole body down to the capillary vessels turned into makeshift Magic Circuits, and this strike aimed for the moment she would focus all her magical energy on her feet for a jump.

What could only be described as a curse cannon loaded with a grapeshot of Finn Shots wrenched open her steel body and spread through her body when her foot had the maximum amount of magical energy paths open.

The impact on the foot could be felt even on the top of the head, and its shockwaves broke

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Doris's goggles to smithereens.

“GAH...!”

Doris coughed black blood and her body bent backward.

Rin’s movement flowed into the next, preparing to use her palm heel to shove in her next Gandr along with a jewel she suddenly had in her hand. However, this blow was blocked by another palm coming from her side.

Rin cast a sharp glare at the intruder. Hippolyte looked straight into Rin as she spoke.



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“I apologize for putting a damper on your combat,” said Hippolyte. Her right hand calmly stopped the blow that would use a jewel to drive a Gandr to someone’s insides.

Rin just saw someone block an attack powerful enough to knock down a giant elephant, but showed no signs of surprise.

Because she knew that Heroic Spirits were overwhelming power inaccessible to modern mages.

“But this match already has a winner. Additional attacks those who can’t move won’t be allowed on my watch.”

In sync with Hippolyte’s words, Doris’s knees gave in and she collapsed.

With the magical energy composing it dispelled, the giant palm made of blood and debris crumbled.

Meanwhile, Doris’s left arm was extremely injured, but due to the original properties of her body, it had already stopped bleeding.

“Hmmm...”

Rin looked as if she was the one testing the Heroic Spirit’s values. She sighed while she put her magical energy to rest.

As she stepped away gripping her gem, Doris formed sentences in the gaps of her ragged breaths.

“I don’t need your mercy, Heroic Spirit... Now that I’m defeated, I have no problems with my blood, flesh, and soul being devoured by the victor.”

Despite the blood coughs interrupting her speech, Doris’s face had an expression of satisfaction. She couldn’t stand up. It was taking all that she had just to keep talking.

Seeing Doris like this, Rin spoke with an expression of disgust.

"Hey, can you stop making it sound like I'm a Strigoaică or a carnivorous dinosaur? I was never after your life... That said, I hate being mistaken for a naïve mage, so listen. Ahem." In contrast with her previous violence, Rin's assertion to Doris was completely rational. "Regardless of our pact, the Command Spells appeared in you first. I can't imagine the Heroic Spirit right there will be happy if I kill you to steal them like some bandit... Although some Heroic Spirits would like me better if I finished you off without mercy."

Rin looked at Hippolyte as she spoke.

Doris had also perceived Hippolyte's nature at first glance. Her face alone could vaguely move when her limbs still couldn't, so she faintly smiled and closed her eyes.

"I was soundly defeated. I have no regrets."

"Good for you. I have a lot of regrets. Sigh." Before continuing, Rin directed a mean smile at Doris. "How many gems do you even think I spent on you? I can't make you pay compensation if you're dead, can I?"

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"I see, the two mages made a pact before the duel. I assume with the rights to my contract at stake."

"More specifically the bargaining chips that enable our contract. That'd be the Command Spells."

After hearing the situation, Hippolyte looked at Rin with new eyes.

A mightful mage.

And still with a lot of room for growth.

Rider's simple impression is that despite all this growth potential, she was already far too perfected for her young age.

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And she wasn't the only one.

"And you don't resort to your numbers to steal it...", said Hippolyta, feeling the presence of the dozens of mages outside the room.

"We do, depending on the situation. But the Holy Grail War is not even started yet, you know?"

Taking Rin's word as their signal, the ones outside stepped into the wrecked room.

"Well, it was really fortuitous that she accepted a personal duel bound by a magical pact, Toosaka Rin. It's already humiliating enough that our Svin and Roland, due to being a wolf and snake, had to negotiate a peaceful resolution to their fight against the Zempulus beast hunter the other day. Having to resort to our superior numbers to beat the Lusendra oni imitation would put a dent in our teacher's glory.", said a young man with the airs of a noble.

"Still, what a boorish battle. You could have ended it so much faster and easier if you had ever learned a grappling move or stopped being a penny-pincher with your gems.", continued a woman in a blue dress.

Hearing that, Rin took one more look at Doris lying down on debris before delivering her counter-argument.

"Hello? Have you seen her magecraft? I'd be dead with my bones full of holes if I've ever tried anything as slow as a grappling move."

"Sweet, ignorant child. Once you master your locks and throws, you can neutralize your enemies as instantly as you can with punches."

"Honestly, you're the only one who even tries pulling off these niche tactics on mages, do you know that?"

"And that last hit... The Bounded Field sealing the Gandrs was shoddily composed. Were you taking suicide bombing as your plan B again?"

“What the hell do you mean by ‘again’? When did I ever do that?!”

The women in the red and blue continued their debate. Watching it from the sidelines, it was hard to determine if they were serious or just bantering. The aristocratic young man, the first one to talk, bowed to Hippolyte.

“Sorry for my classmates’ shameful display. Am I right to assume you are the Heroic Spirit summoned for this ritual by the call of the Holy Grail?”

Seeing his elegant posture and the perfect harmony of his magical energy circulation, Hippolyte was sure of one thing:

All the dozens of people in this place were like Rin, diamonds polished beyond their age.

But conversely, she couldn’t find any other common element between them.

Thus, Hippolyte had one question to ask before she ever talked about her contract or made her requests.

“You don’t look like a very uniform organization. What kind of group are you?”

Her status as a queen and her experience leading a warrior team only made her all the more curious about what connection formed this strange group.

This made the mage Toosaka Rin pause to think before answering.

“There’s really only one way to describe it... we’re disciples studying under the same teacher.”

This answer made all the dots connect. Hippolyte spoke with heartfelt admiration.

“Makes sense... He must be quite the capable mentor. Much the widely famous Chiron of our era.”

The group responded by looking at each other’s faces. A fair number of them nodded without

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thinking twice, but the majority silently shook their head trying to hold back laughter.

"I can't say for sure... but I think he's the complete opposite of the mythological Chiron."

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There was a man named Lord El-Melloi II.

If the amount of magical energy a person has can be described as a river or an ocean, then that mage is a puddle.

The man once participated in a magecraft ritual in Japanese lands and managed to survive despite then being a novice mage-in-training.

Any normal magecraft ritual would have finished with no life-threatening accidents and that would have been the end of the story.

The problem is that this ritual was essentially mage duels, and dubious rumors say a wish-granting device manifested. The most esoteric saying about the ritual is that it is a pivotal ceremony in the world of magecraft. One likely to even touch the Fount. That is the Holy Grail War.

At the time he survived the ritual, he was still just a boy. Years later, he became a Lord of the Clock Tower.

In the same Holy Grail War ceremony, Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald lost his life.

After inheriting his position and all debts the Archibald family contracted due to his death, the young man went to encounter numerous cases and epic adventures, but that's a whole other story not directly related to the Snowfield ritual.

What's important to Snowfield's counterfeit Holy Grail War is the fact that his predecessor

Bridge: Puddle

Kayneth lost everything he had in Fuyuki's lands.

And the ones who grew under the tutelage of the man who inherited the El-Melloi name.

The El-Melloi Classroom.

The students that El-Melloi II raised as an instructor of the Department of Modern Magecraft.

El-Melloi II doesn't see himself as the one who raised them. He often mumbles that talented people break out of their shells on their own with just some minor support pointing to new directions, and is genuinely jealous of his students' talents.

It is a fact that the class brings talented young mages together.

He's the least influential of the Clock Tower Lords, and very few students were completely affiliated to the class due to faction politics.

However, it's said that all the ones who stuck with the class until graduation reached the highest mage rankings in the Clock Tower—the status of Pride and Brand—and the ones who went on to graduate in different departments are also widely praised mages.

Consequently, while the El-Melloi Classroom has only about 50 alumni, the other departments in all factions, hundreds or thousands strong, fear the classroom. The general opinion is that if they make a move, it'll change the Clock Tower.

This appraisal is a thorn in Lord El-Melloi II's side, but due to his slightly eccentric character as a mage, he maintains his undesired Lord status.

Due to how he is, his students have all sorts of different stances about him. Some are fanatic zealots toward their teacher, while some genuinely hate him to the point of wanting to kill him,

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and one would even betray him without remorse despite openly wishing to be his lover.

But most students take Lord El-Melloi as simply a fine mentor.

Not a master immune to mistakes.

Not a flawless superhuman.

Far from a saint. A weird bad apple searching for ways to make the good apples prosper.

Ask any El-Melloi Classroom student to speak of Lord El-Melloi II's worst aspects, and they all will have something to point out while holding back laughter.

However, most of them understand one thing:

For better or for worse, they only are who they are today because they had El-Melloi II as their mentor.

The puddle metaphor is perfectly appropriate.

But this puddle is far more valuable than any river or ocean.

It reflects the one who looking at it, and any ripple in the water can twist the image.

Through some form of correspondence, the puddle changes people's lives.

This is certainly a blessing for those wanting to continuously evolve as mages...

but it's also a most troublesome curse.

a t e / s t r a n g e F a k

Chapter 24

“Fifth afternoon - Be silent, *****”

Fate/strange Fake 8

Chapter 24: Fifth afternoon - Be silent, *****

The distant past

Many paths lead to this mausoleum.

Although looking at their destination, one could say all paths were the same.

Some called the sacred grounds of the mountain a belfry blessing the natural end of life, while others called it the threshold of the underworld.

It's the embodiment of a concept all those born in this world will eventually reach, yet at the same time, it's a land that cannot be walked to lest one crosses a ravine men avoid.

The Mausoleum of Azrael

Among those who actually set foot on this mountain, very few reached the end and the beginning at its summit.

It goes beyond a matter of reaching it or not. Most in the transient world of the living don't even know whether or not the temple is real.

Because reaching that place means ending your life in this world.

It's possible to perish to the perils of the path.

But that's not the essence of the matter.

Because one's life is only truly lost if one arrives at the place unharmed.

Because the recompense granted to those who arrive at the Mausoleum is a bell blessing the literal end of their natural lives. A ring of the evening bell and a glimmer of a blade that invites peaceful rest.

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At all times, only one person remains in this resting place of the spirits.

An old man with no face. It's impossible to determine if he remains there alive or remains there after death.

The announcer of death, which the assassin leaders known as Hassan-i-Sabbah respect and revere above any other man.

Cursed Arm.

Intoxicated Smoke.

Serenity.

Shadow Peeler.

Quaking Pipe.

Hundred Personas.

Throughout every generation, the leaders of the Order of Assassins had unique epithets and feats of assassination correspondent with those names.

The Old Man of the Mountain was the only one with no such name. He could be considered the Order's originator and its very concept.

An unreachable star, unseen regulation, and unavoidable executioner to the eighteen leaders who followed him.

In every generation, the Hassan-i-Sabbah's degradation would not be tolerated.

At the moment that those permitted to stray from morality drown in human pleasure, great causes are corrupted into personal desires and become contrary to the dogmas.

And because this was intolerable, the Old Man appeared to the Hassans carrying the evening bell.

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To some, due to age and degradation dulling their assassination feats.

To some, due to the corruption of desire consuming them.

To invite them to the everlasting darkness with his blade of demise, much like demise itself eventually appears before all.

A proper leader of the Order of Assassins needs to dedicate all they have to the dogmas and chain their egos under the Hassan name.

When, for any reason, they become unable to comply with this, that is the moment their lives end.

There's no need for them to be in the mausoleum. Wherever they go, the Old Man will be standing behind the Hassan that was living their life wrong.

It's as if the true Mausoleum of Azrael is wherever the Old Man is.

Thus, although all leaders of the Order of Assassins heard about the spiritual mausoleum, barely any of them ever walked to it, and the few who did went to offer their heads because they could sense their part was done.

But in the unending flow of time, it's possible for someone to defy the strong crosswinds of reason.

The hollowed figure was not like the others.

A shadow crossed the misty ravine of the arid region like a heat haze.

While he was certainly alive, he was clad in an aura that suggested he stepped on the frontier between the transient world and the underworld, blending in with both sides. This figure simply advanced, advanced, advanced, advanced...

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After overcoming many trials and hardships, the shadow arrived at the Mausoleum.

The figure finally reached the old man with no face that guarded the mausoleum.

Basking in the presence of the Old Man who resembled death embodied, all the figure did was proclaim words of respect for that venerable place.

For this figure, who wasn't an assassin, let alone a leader of the Order, life ended without him ever getting to hear the evening bell.

And then time flowed its course.

200 years passed. 500 years passed. Enough years passed for the shadow of the great tree to disappear without a trace.

Enough time for the shadow of doom to leave a burn mark on the world.

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A few days ago

"What's your wish for the Holy Grail, shadow Assassin?", asked the Master who contracted the shadow in this Holy Grail War in the interstice between truth and falsehood.

He understood perfectly well that his Servant was always untalkative.

But this Master of the shadow made this his first question after they tied the contract. An attempt to understand at least the bare minimum about his own Servant's nature—or to find his weaknesses.

In a normal Holy Grail War, most Heroic Spirits are called because they have some wish the

Fate/strange Fake 8

Holy Grail may grant.

The shadow's Master's goal is to more effectively know his partner by understanding the central reason for his presence.

The shadow manifested as Assassin—this Heroic Spirit going by the name Hassan-i-Sabbah is someone seen as abnormal in the eyes of a Master who is knowledgeable about the Holy Grail War.

After all, his own Master's eyes can't see his amount of magical energy, let alone his physical abilities.

His choice of words showed he was blatantly testing his Master, and one wrong response could easily lead to him being beheaded in his sleep.

The Master had the option to spend Command Spells to limit the Servant's movements, but the Servant was sinister enough to make the Master believe that binding this Heroic Spirit through Command Spells required being ready to lose everything.

There could not be even a hint of a mistake in the command's content.

This Heroic Spirit doesn't have a hint of fear for his erasure... his second death.

That's the only thing he understood since his contract.

That's why it felt so sinister.

What is someone without the fear of death, someone who can go out without regrets, doing here?

At that stage, he still didn't have enough information to know if he should be using the Heroic Spirit or preparing for its insurrection.

So even though the Servant would see through the calculated self-interest in the question, the Master still chose to ask.

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"Can you tell me? If your wish is incompatible with mine, I know how to make us reach a fair compromise."

Despite the Master adding sincere-sounding words to his question, the shadow said nothing.

The Master could only hear noises coming from the monitor of the computer he was looking at as subliminal letters raced across the borders of the screen.

As if the shadow despised saying such words out loud.

--The wish granter exists not in my teachings--

"...?"

--My path has no need for it, as it is corrupt from inception, and therefore I am here.--

The flickering words among the strings of letters sounded like a riddle. He made a point to use the term "wish granter, which is practically a token function to the ritual. It felt as if he was intentionally avoiding the term "Holy Grail".

The shadow simply left the following string of letters and melded his presence into the city's darkness without waiting for further words from his Master.

--The light of thy wish granter does not reach me, and for all eternity, I who am shadow shan't touch it.--

And then the shadow slipped into the darkness of the Holy Grail War.

Equally measuring the shadows of all those illuminated by the Holy Grail.

Even now that the shadow was summoned as a Heroic Spirit, his consciousness remained the same.

The "individual" here is merely a shadow of the Old Man cast by a glimmer.

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The glimmer of the blade that cut his head off.

He was not the Old Man of the Mountain, but instead a shadow that only imitated his will.

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Back to the present.

The shadow remained still, submerged in Snowfield's forest, now turn into a hellscape centered around the trio of the Mesopotamian goddess, her divine beast, and her demonic beast.

To verify whether or not his role was over.

Thinking that if this is the end of the world, returning to the perpetual night alongside the rest of Human Order is also part of his role.

However—the shadow's eyes reflected the image of one Assassin.

One seeker of the truth, struggling through the path she believed in, without an answer.

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Coalsman Special Corrections Center

"How is the progress with the communication cuts?", said Faldeus.

"On schedule. The city's telephone tower will cut off both the civilian and military lines soon. We're fully ready to jam all wireless transmissions, except the ones using magecraft.", his subordinate Aludra reported.

"The hurricane knocked down the telephone tower. Neat enough of a cover story. I was starting to feel sorry for the gas company after pushing the blame on them so, so many times.",

Faldeus shrugged.

"How do we proceed with the THORN and BADGER units dispatched to the marsh and desert areas?", Aludra dispassionately asked.

"Ask them to remain on standby. They are disposable assets, and any thoughtless movements will make them notice that. There's not much low-end spellcasters and mercenaries can do in this situation."

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West Snowfield, Neo Ishtar Temple

Watching the remains of what once were modern weapons falling from the sky, the Assassin with no name forced a groan out of her throat.

"Quite impressive... you heretical power incarnate!"

The bloodsucking hellspawn she was chasing was before her, and even then this fully stole her attention away from her enemy, although only for an instant.

But the same is true for the enemy in question—her hematophage summoner Jester Karture. Despite the lengths of his obsession, Assassin was gone from all his sensations for an instant.

No, it'd be more accurate to say that their attention and sensations were forcibly drawn.

What happened the moment the alleged goddess on the temple exerted her power went much beyond catching Assassin and the vampire's attention. They could feel their whole soul being dominated.

She couldn't feel her feet. She was suddenly thrown into a zero-gravity darkness. Her common sense was being rewritten to tell her that the temple before her eyes was the only thing that existed. Perhaps she could only remain conscious through this whole process due to her powerful faith and mental strength.

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That's how much overwhelming power—or perhaps the concept called “beauty”—filled the the solemn edifice in front of her. That was the Neo Ishtar Temple.

Bring reverence and adoration.
The azure sky is present every hour.
Bring sacrilege and profanation.
Words are meaningless before true power,
they fade to nothing with a thundershower.
Live ignorantly. Search is damnation.
The mad whirlwinds shall permit all.
The azure sky shall forbid all.

Since, in the sky's veil, every star
reflects the image of goddess Ishtar,
the season of harvest comes at last.
Lives hatched out of the land here,
return to their place in the celestial sphere.
Greens and grain will be moist by the planet's shed tears.
Reverence to the seas billowing with ire.
Adoration to the crops set afire.
From the distant Venus pours fair might,
with equal parts glory and ruin to raise this land right.

Our Ishtar shall be the last god granting creation her blessing.
She will permit everything and she will punish everything.
She is the goddess of love, therefore, harvest.
The upcoming season will be the best.
Bring reverence and adoration.
Bring sacrilege and profanation.

A form of ritualistic prayer could be heard everywhere around the Temple.

Words announcing the coming of a new era flowed out of the mouth of Haruri, now the head priestess of the Neo Ishtar Temple.

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The announcement wasn't directed to anyone. Haruri was telling her own heart that.

The scene she saw was a scene of knowledge being presented to the fools opposing the goddess. Knowledge that modern weapons are rendered powerless by Ishtar's charm. Knowledge of how pathetically they drop to the ground.

And the goddess Haruri worshipped was above the temple.

Ishtar, advened in the vessel named Filia, imposingly lorded over the lands, indicating she no longer had a care in the world for Jester and Assassin standing next to her.

"Fine."

And then she delivered her divine proclamation. Not only to Jester and Assassin, but to all mages and Heroic Spirits participating in the Holy Grail War, or perhaps to all people living in Snowfield—no, to everything on the planet's Texture, not limited to categories of land and mankind.

"You have permission to kneel."

A most arrogant sentence.

Nonetheless, from a powerful voice.

The unreasonable sentence runs to the lands like an immutable truth.

Harvest.

Her mere presence manifests bountiful crops to the world.

The forest's air was saturated.

As if everything was completed. Concluded.

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The goddess in the forest generated a unique air that induced ecstasy and resignation.

The temple to her worship increased her graces, turning them into winds filled with a feeling that the end of times has come. The winds began to travel across the world.

The winds were carried by the divine beast standing on the west side of the city: the Bull of Heaven.

The now-completed temple became the lynchpin for a new world order. It seemed unavoidable that the Singularity created in this forest would corrode the world.

But it will be met with some resistance.

Will this pushback come from the power of self-purification or from the collective struggle of the doomed weak? The answer is not yet clear.

One fragment of the pushback was in the marsh region on the opposite side of Snowfield, letting out an idiotic scream.

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“HYAAAAaaaAAAAAaaaAAAAAA”

Dull screams reverbed on Snowfield’s marsh region.

“Are you okay, Ayaka? We can still go on foot if you can’t handle it...!”

“I’m f-f-f-f-fine. We gotta h-hurry!”

The reason for Ayaka Sajou’s panicked yells is that she was heading north of the city by horse.

She rode clinging to Saber’s back, advancing through the boggy grounds of the marsh area

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at extraordinary speeds.

The horse, presumably a power borrowed from one of the Saint Graphs that Saber called “his retinues”, barely didn’t sway like a normal horse would.

The only cause for Ayaka’s screams was moving at speeds she never experienced before, but she still never told him to slow down.

It had gotten to a point where even someone as unknowledgeable about magecraft as her could detect the abnormality in the city.

If she looked west, she could see an unmoving wall of clouds so dense it looked like there was no world beyond it, and the news reported abnormal phenomena all over the world, most notably in the Arctic.

To top it off, she was visited by a Servant she never interacted with before, and invited by her Master to fight in a united front.

A normal mage would have considered a trap, but this didn’t even cross Ayaka’s mind.

But she’s a complete amateur and wouldn’t have been able to hold her base if that really was a siege.

Saber would have offered a plan if she asked but he was clearly invested in this idea of a united front. Ayaka found no reason to oppose him, and more relevantly to her decision, she didn’t get the impression that this visiting “Rider” was a dangerous woman.

She considered her a lot more trustworthy than any of the other Heroic Spirits she saw in front of the hospital or the demonic beasts she met in the dream.

Ayaka had, of course, some level of caution, not taking the visitor’s every word at face value.

Clinging tight to Saber, she took a peek at the Rider’s horse running next to hers.

It kept up with the extraordinary speed of Saber’s horse. If anything, it was Saber’s horse that

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seemed to be exerting itself more.

Since she mentioned her Rider Saint Graph, Ayaka arrived at the elementary conclusion she's called Rider because she was really good at riding.

In turn, Saber expressed his admiration for Rider.

"Amazing! And here I thought I was a good rider. To think you can reach these speeds without even stirrups or a saddle!"

"I'm a little abashed with all the sincere admiration, but thank you. My tribe prides itself in treating horses as comrades.", answered Rider, looking at the Heroic Spirit with curious eyes as he spoke his praise with boyish honesty.

Rider was happy that her horse gained more recognition than herself.

"Woah woah, are you should be saying things that hint at your True Name?"

"It's not a problem. You won't see me naming myself for no reason, but I do have my Master's permission to disclose my True Name. Besides... the enemies already know who I am."

"Your enemies? The people who called this tremendous hurricane here?", said Saber, looking west.

"Those are not enemies. They're obstacles our united front must remove.", Rider denied. She closed her eyes before continuing. "The only enemies in my Master's eyes are the masterminds who arranged this Grail War."

Saber was intrigued by her choice of words being "in my Master's eyes" instead of "in my eyes", but chose not to press the statement.

Because his greatest interest was the Holy Grail War he must fight, not other people's personal battles.

"Gotcha! I wish you good luck in your battle, be it as my enemy or as my ally!"

Seeing Saber running by her side, making such declarations with a smile on his face, got Hippolyte thinking.

This man... he may sometimes seem scatterbrained... but he must have been a general or a monarch. I guess he seems this way because of his personality that lives only for the moment.

This is their first time talking, but Hippolyte had seen Saber before.

She only watched from afar as Saber battled the golden king. Although he lost, he provided an incredible sword fight.

He had the eyes of a general who keeps track of everything around him, not just the warriors.

It did feel like he fought always executing the first idea to come to his mind, but in every choice he made, he picked the best path and ran through it with what seemed to be divine speed on his legs.

She surmised that either his eyes were set on long-term strategies or that he worked closely together with a tactician doing it in his stead, but either way, he dominated a vast area.

If he becomes an enemy, he'll be a fearsome one.

She no longer sought the Holy Grail.

There was no point in doing so.

Since the person she was going to communicate her will to with her wish is also manifested in this Grail War, in a form dedicated to revenge.

Do this Saber and Master even know that the Heroic Spirits called here are sacrifices to fill up the wish granter?

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That's when Hippolyte turned her eyes to Saber's Master.

She had the appearance of a woman somewhere between her late teens and early twenties.

Hippolyte recognized that figuring out what she was was beyond her capabilities.

Her presence... is she even human?

After some hesitation, she concluded she didn't need to try to find out more, so she faced forward.

That's because she knew they were about to leave the marsh region and to the straths.

My Masters will have a much more reliable answer than mine.

"We're almost there. Remember, we have no intention of antagonizing you. Whether this will remain true after our united front is over will depend on your objectives, but at the very least... WHAT?!"

Hippolyte interrupted her sentence and looked at the city.

Far in the distance, she could see smoke coming out of the industrial district.

From the source of the smoke, the presence of her enemy intensified.

His abnormal presence was transfigured, even more ominous than it was the last time she confronted him, and with magical energy on a higher order of magnitude.

Perhaps sensing the same presence, Saber looked in the same direction and yelled.

"Whoa, something awesome's happening over there, huh!"

The start of the battle wasn't going to wait for Saber and Ayaka to join Hippolyte's Masters.

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The herald of this chaos was the Noble Phantasm of the Archer exacting revenge on the gods.

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Snowfield, industrial district.

The tallest chimney in the district.

Neither heat nor smoke came out of it, as the factories have been out of operation for the past few days, either due to the local quarrel or the hurricane.

But instead, the chimney released a presence as ominous as it was heroic.

“Echo grasping into godhood.”

Twisted magical energy, reminiscent of black mud, started gathering on his bow-gripping hand.

Inside his robust Saint Graph, hydra venom and pitch-black mud consumed and neutralized one another.

“May this shot, product of a martial art refined to its completion, burn down your hollow interior.”

The hero manually circulated the two substances through his body. Alcides began his revenge against the gods.

Shooting a hundred heads

“Nine Lives”

The Noble Phantasm that shot down Gilgamesh a few days before in the avenue in front of the hospital.

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However, now Alcides was freed from all possible shackles, and his Master Bazdilot Cordelion provided him with as much magical energy as he could handle. This resulted in the Noble Phantasm manifesting in a completely different form this time.

With his feet planted on the narrow foothold of the chimney, Alcides drew his bow.

As he did, the entire factory, and then the area around it, began to be sucked dry of magical energy, with the energy traveling through the chimney to be absorbed into Alcides's body.

Watching the chimney was like watching the land's blood being sucked by a giant pipe.

With Prelati's Noble Phantasm's illusions being peeled off, the nearby factories were gradually returning to their original forms: destroyed by Haruri's Berserker Servant.

The chimney he stood on was the only part he was intentionally keeping in place with a voluminous mix of mud and magical energy. It was transfigured into a dark tower resembling a giant tree.

Nine arrows were perched on the bow.

In his hands, he had a greatbow which was made in a strongly arcane era and sucked the blood and magical energy of his enemies on numerous battlefields.

Famously, Philoctetes later inherited this Demonic Bow from Heracles and used it to shoot the Trojan hero Paris.

An item that required above-average physical strength, on top of the skills of an Archer. A regular Heroic Spirit could not as much as pull its adamantine string.

He casually drew the string to its maximum tension, pointed nine arrows west, and shot.

It looked as if the man was trying to dispel the incoming hurricane with arrows, but before anyone could laugh at his comical idea, the arrows suffered a visible mutation.

The magical energy coated in dusky mud reacted complexly with the hydra miasma the arrowtips were laced with, provoking an enormous distortion in space as they traversed the gaps between the ground and the sky.

With a thunderous noise, clouds of dust rose, engulfed in the world distortion caused by the arrow shot, taking the form of a black-colored colossus.

The Hydra.

The trajectories of the nine arrows became nine jaws rushing to take a bite out of the world, as did the legendary serpent he once sent to its grave.

An ordinary man would see only a black sandstorm, but anyone remotely sensitive to magical energy could understand how abnormal this was.

It wasn't an illusion, much less Summoning Magecraft.

Through a combination of the overwhelming techniques that the always battle-ready hero spent his life cultivating, the ominous spell of curse resembling jet-black mud which he obtained in exchange for discarding his divine aura, and the sheer volume of magical energy supplied by his Master, Nine Lives finally developed the move that manifested its former nemesis into the world.

Needless to say, this wasn't the real Hydra, only an almost miraculous feat created by a part of the Noble Phantasm that put the legendary poison dragon to rest.

This force traversed the world, bending the laws of fate and physics to its will.

All to bite off a literal god trying to take hold of the world order.

Without waiting to see where the venomous snakes go, the archer of revenge readied his next set of arrows.

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On his arm, he wore a girdle imbued with the war god's power, identical to the girdle Hippolyte wears.

But this godly power was now entangled and subjugated by black mud, mutedly sending only a constant stream of raw energy to the bow and arrow.

"This curse... fits well with my body."

Foreign magical energy merged with his own.

Watching the magical torrent which screamed its grudges and cursed everything in the world, Alcides talked to himself.

"Perhaps a previous incarnation of me had some contact with it, but it is all trivial."

He then spoke addressing the "cornerstone" at the heart of the "jet-black mud" seeping into his body. The essence of this mass of curses that always felt so strangely familiar to him.

"I cannot begin to guess the volume of the concentrated human sins boiling within you. All I know is that in your essence, you are meant to curse humans... Forgive me, but I'll attune your power to my grudge."

Alcides drew his bow, pouring magical energy once again.

The blood coming out of his mouth was accompanied by dusky mud.

The Hydra's venom was consuming his body, and he knew perfectly well that he was running out of time.

The virulent poison that drove him to suicide during his lifetime.

The same poison laced in the arrows the avenger shot without a hint of hesitation.

"You can have my dead body."

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While the “mud” moved as if it had a will of its own, Alcides offered it a smile as if they had been friends for many years.

“Feel free to curse me to your heart’s content. I who discarded godhood and returned to humanity.”

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In front of the Neo Ishtar Temple

Destruction approached.

An immense torrent of power approached the Neo Ishtar Temple, growing progressively larger as it fed on not only the trees of the forest but also the very divine aura of its surroundings.

Nine incoming arrows coated in layers upon layers of dust, curse, miasma, and energy in the shape of the Hydra, with a next mass of energy coming behind it.

Each head of the wind serpent was about as thick as a building, and they rose to swallow Ishtar’s temple and its object of worship whole.

The nine arrows changed trajectory in front of the temple, momentarily spreading their nine heads as they rose to the sky, then initiated a sudden drop, locked to the temple like homing missiles.

Had they landed a direct hit, the torrent of power would have pierced the land for intense physical destruction, which would have been coupled with an area spread of curse and lethal venom, trampling the god’s domain with maximum tyranny.

This faster-than-sound ruin was stopped by one guardian and one divine beast.

The halo atop Haruri’s Berserker’s Servant’s head shone and transformed into a dome-shaped rainbow wall covering the temple.

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The tyranny was blocked by the halo's power which symbolizes everything mankind considers a calamity.

The power of a calamity can hold off a calamity. Berserker alone blocked all fangs of the giant venomous dragon created by the demonic arrows.

Naturally, this was not something she could afford to do with Haruri's magical energy alone.

Due to her constructing Ishtar's temple, she was directly powered up by the divine power filling up this place.

Nevertheless, she couldn't repel the arrows. The curses in the shape of serpents attempted to bite off her calamities charged with divine aura.

But the divine bull's walk wasn't slow enough to let them get away with it.

With thunderous noise, Earth's atmosphere raised its voice.

Gugalanna, the divine beast manifested in the form of a giant hurricane.

Per its title of Bull of Heaven, the pressure it exerted on the whole area truly felt like the skies were falling.

All those on the ground could see was the bottom of a giant hoof.

A classic folk story tells about a huge accident that happened because the people of the nation of Qi were driven to paranoia by their groundless fear that the sky would fall.

But at this moment, the moral of the story was flipped on its head.

The groundless fear of the Qi people became reality.

The power of goddess Ishtar, who is Venus and the azure sky incarnate, and her companion bull's hoof.

The skies fell onto Snowfield's forests.

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The skies above America

In heights more distant to Earth than the stratosphere.

Thia Escardos watched that moment, with his feet pointing to the firmament and his head pointing to the Earth's surface.

“...”

He observed the hurricane's shape distort slightly, as a portion of the cloud expanded, stretching toward the forest of Snowfield.

But that was not the part he was paying attention to.

It was further north.

The strath of north Snowfield, not yet covered by clouds.

Thia lined up some of the fruit-sized “satellites” floating around him, forming a row starting from his eye.

In doing so, the space between each satellite was distorted, becoming multiple lenses amplifying the image of the aboveground.

Through this magically-created makeshift telescope, a video relay was projected onto the void of the mesosphere.

It displayed a group standing on the strath.

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Countless familiar faces to Thia.

But they didn't know about him.

Some might have been vaguely aware but nothing beyond that.

They were basically strangers to Thia...

but not to Flat Escardos.

The El-Melloi Classroom was something irreplaceable to the boy that was his host. The only place where he belonged.

Because of the way the two were always together, he knew everything about Flat.

The classroom is the home he must return to, and it wouldn't be home without those humans in it.

“Tch...”

Thia manipulated the magical energy orbiting him to slowly descend to the surface.

Will he eliminate them to rid himself of his lingering regrets and grief, or will he interact with them mercifully because of how good they had been to Flat?

Unable to decide between these two extremely opposite options, Thia locked eyes with the lonely blue planet and tried to slip back into Snowfield's stage of incoming destruction.

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North Snowfield, strath region

A woman looked at the blue sky to see the afternoon stars.

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As all the clouds were sucked into the hurricane in the west, the blue sky was still plainly visible from the strath region. She rose her ringed left hand to the sky, blocking its blinding light.

“What’s wrong, Mary?”, said Caules Forvedge, noticing her behavior. Mary Lil Fargo returned her line of sight to the ground to answer him.

“It’s nothing, I just got a feeling someone was watching us from the domain of the stars.”

Overhearing that, Yvette L. Lehrman also turned her eye to the sky.

“HUUH!? When an Animusphere veteran says stuff like that, it sounds like a really big deal, you know?”

“Well... what’s happening here on the ground is a really big deal, too.”, said Org Rum, the bespectacled goliath. His eyes pointed to the forest west of Snowfield, watching the scene immediately after a giant something clad in cloud swung down.

The serpentine mass of curse and magical energy was stomped out by what appeared to be a giant hoof clad in galestorm, lightning, and divine aura.

It wasn’t something as basic to handle like a building falling from the sky. The best way to describe it is “what if a downburst dropped the Ayers Rock with it”.

“I don’t even want to theorize on what that was.”, said Org, adjusting his glasses with one finger. The man standing next to him shrugged snidely.

“The Professor would have figured it out at first glance. The answer is always the worst-case scenario among his conjectures. Cue the headaches and stomachaches.”

Adding to his seemingly-derisive comment, Fezgram vor Sembrem mumbled “Although knowing he was facing the worst-case scenario never stopped the man from accomplishing anything” to himself.

These mages had numerous laudable accomplishments under their belts despite their young age. And now all of them watched the head-on collision between the return of the Age of Gods

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and the opposing force that rejected it.

Its consequences reached the ravines less than a minute later.

Despite something that giant swinging down from the heavens, the ground didn't shake or crack.

Instead, a mighty gust of wind ran across the world, reeking of curse and magical energy.

This air current beyond 50m/s blew wildly around the forest, accompanied by clouds of dust.

Perform a dance in the unclear ether

Perform a dance, Anywhere and nowhere

With the hand movements of a ballad's conductor, Werner Ceasarmund sang his chant with a soft timbre to his voice.

Doing so, all the countless butterflies spread around the ravines started flapping their wings in unison.

They were magically created familiars, which emitted a dim light reminiscent of the hazy moon on a spring night.

Next, the gentle breeze created by the butterfly wings neutralized the high winds that could easily send a car flying, canceling the dust clouds and miasma along with it.

The tremors generated by these frail familiars combined to create a Bounded Field. While they didn't generate a solid wall, this was still a baffling situation, and yet no one in the group seemed particularly surprised.

Hansa Cervantes, the overseer priest watching them, speculated about the chain of magecraft techniques that just impressed him.

*Chapter 24: Fifth afternoon - Be silent, ******

I see now. So this is Werner Ceasarmund's so rumored butterfly magecraft. I can see why someone so young would become a Brand and be put on the Church's watchlist.

He kept amusedly studying the prodigy mage participating in the Holy Grail War, as if he didn't consider himself a member of the aforementioned Church that should be wary of him.

While his senses told him that everyone around him was similarly powerful.

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Less than a minute before, Snowfield, urban area

--An extraordinarily powerful hurricane is approaching. We ask all citizens to refrain from leaving your houses. We further recommend retreating to underground shelters until the tornadoes have passed.--

All televisions and radios in the city repeated this same warning in a loop, while sirens rang all over the place, with their sound adjusted for the purpose of amplifying the anxieties of the people in town.

It's the same siren that would normally ring when there are ultra-large tornadoes capable of blowing away residences. It alerted the people that a calamity on this level was coming.

Nevertheless, the people in town didn't fully trust the sirens.

They could see the cloud wall in the west, but the winds lacked the intensity of a regular hurricane and the sky above the city was perfectly blue.

The thunderous winds were audible everywhere in the city, but only as a distant sound. The wind never trampled the city.

If anything, the city's air felt heavier than ever.

Many citizens ignored the warnings and walked around outside, questioning if any destructive damage would actually happen. Many more went to their west-facing windows to

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photograph the giant cloud.

“Ain’t this place kinda weird?”, said a drugstore clerk dressed in punk fashion as he made his way to a show house sturdier than his home. “With the gas explosion, the terrorist attack, the epidemic, the meteors, and now this, I’m getting a feeling that this is the end of the world.”

At this point, even a rebel spirit like would start to feel sorry for the politicians having to deal with all this. Without giving much thought to the evacuation warnings, he set foot to the show house, thinking it’d be at least better than his rundown apartment or the drugstore.

“It’s underground, at the very least... Though it’d suck if the rain got inside...”

That’s when it happened.

“!?”

The gusts blew all over the city with much greater intensity than before, instantly repainting it in the colors of the dust and rain carried by the winds.

“Woooooh! So freaking sudden... What... No way!?”

He had never seen a storm like this in his life.

The punk man rushed to the show house’s entrance, but he tripped on the wind flaps and fell.

And an empty car rolled in his direction, knocked by the winds.

“Ah... Damn...”

The punk man knew he’d die.

But before it happened, a shadow grabbed the man and jumped away.

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The shadow used the flying car as a stepping stool for his jump and kept this momentum until he carried the man next to the closest building.

It was a police officer.

“Are you okay? Hurry inside.”

“Y-yessir.”

The punk man blinked fast, unsure of what he saw.

“Uh, hey! ...T-thanks, man.”

The man was confused about the officer’s clearly superhuman movement but delivered his flustered thanks.

The officer also wasn’t expecting any expression of gratitude so after momentarily flinching from surprise, he flashed a smile.

“No problem. I’m just doing my job.”

John was a member of a unit codenamed Clan Calatin. After saving a citizen, he went back to running through the city swallowed by the windstorm.

“That just now wasn’t an arcane concealment problem, was it?”

John did nothing to lower the power of his legs, having decided that he could disguise his actions as floating carried by the wind flaps.

The chief’s Servant’s Noble Phantasm gave John superhuman power for a limited period of time. This Servant is Dumas.

It’s been a few days, but he was still not used to handling his new strength. He handled this power quite naturally amidst a fight against an extraordinary enemy, but now that he was out of

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that battle, he had been feeling like the power is too much for him to handle.

John and many teammates were currently patrolling the city, with the goal of speeding up the evacuation of civilians for the sake of arcane concealment.

They were all informed that the city would meet its destruction in 1 day.

But the chief declared he would fight until the last second to prevent that.

John saw himself as a police officer first and a mage second, so he couldn't be happier with the chief's decision.

He was happy.

—You are justice.

The words said in the war's opener supported him even now.

A lot happened in a short period of time, but all those events became a greater source of power allowing John to keep running against the rainstorm, as well as his reason to do so.

—Do you hate Emiya Kiritsugu?

John suddenly recalled someone's voice.

Who was it who said that?

If he recalled correctly, it was someone he met in front of the police station.

Maybe a girl but maybe a boy.

Your mother's airplane

It wasn't an accident

Not a terrorist attack either

The crash was caused by

a spellcaster

A cover-up

Concealment

*Chapter 24: Fifth afternoon - Be silent, ******

If he recalled correctly, they just dumped a bunch of keywords with no context.

Their voice enticed and confused him.

Memories of John's past returned to a corner of his thoughts as he was bathed in the showers of the rainstorm, sometimes saving a person along the way.

If he recalled correctly, his soul was shaken when he heard those words.

If he recalled correctly, he was consumed by hatred.

But he already got over everything.

Thanks to the chief.

That is why he could still fight.

Because he ordered me to protect the city?

No, because this is the choice I made for myself.

John kept moving forward, believing this from the bottom of his heart.

His body was light.

He could go as far as to say it didn't feel like his own.

But it's alright. Even if I'm no longer myself... Even if I'm no longer human, I know... I know I can keep protecting the city.

With these thoughts running through his mind, John was not noticing what was happening to him.

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Not yet.

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Strath region

“Taking a closer look, it seems considerably more efficient than it was last I saw it. I don’t remember you undergoing any sort of special training course since then. Is this not somewhat of a major problem?”, asked Luvia gelita Edelfelt, watching the Butterfly Boundary deployed around her.

Despite Luvia’s weird phrasing, seeing problems in an increase in efficiency, Werner nodded with a stiff expression of agreement.

“Yeah, this is close to the best expression of magecraft I’ve ever done. Things couldn’t be worse.”

Hearing this news, Toosaka Rin raised her voice, with her eyes still on the forest.

“Werner’s magecraft approaching perfect form means... this area is already becoming ambiguous, is it?”

The Ceasarmund family’s butterfly is centered around the arcane process of transforming into a completely different lifeform as demonstrated by the caterpillar using the chrysalis to become a butterfly.

It’s a magecraft that interferes with the world by dominating the unclear interval where certain becomes uncertain, the moment of ambiguity in which anything in the universe can switch into something else.

This magecraft being “at its best expression yet” implies one possibility.

Watching the forest in horror, Rin states what this fact is.

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"If we don't do anything now, this metamorphosis really will end the world as we know it."

The essence of the human world was gradually changing, starting from the temple in the middle of the forest.

So far, only the quality of the magical energy and the overall atmosphere changed, but with enough time, the alterations would reach the physical realm. As things currently were, this temple would become the starting point of a Singularity corroding the world.

And it didn't end there.

A new wave of demonic arrows shot from the industrial district, once again clad in serpentine curse, entangled the giant "hoof".

This wave's actions could be interpreted as it waiting to see what the first wave would do—or perhaps they indicated the first wave was nothing but bait to lure the "hoof" and the genuine raid started now.

"Ugh, I'm starting to regret going along with this idea..."

"Sure, but you would also regret missing this, wouldn'tcha?"

"I guess! You don't see stuff like this every day."

The Pentel sisters, Radia and Nazica, whispered to each other watching the grotesque spectacle in the western zone of the city.

Hearing that, Luvia offered them an elegant shrug.

"Well, maybe if you ever went along in our teacher's fieldwork, you'd be seeing things like this a lot more frequently, you know?"

"You tell me. His luck with this kind of thing almost makes it look like he's doing it on purpose.", Rin complained in agreement. The comment certainly reminded her of something.

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Away from their conversation, another pair of youngsters had their own conversation, one with the presence of a beast and one with the presence of a reptile.

“The hoof that fell from the sky is without a doubt a divine beast. The thing was transparent like water, but from here I can feel its smell is anything but that. It’s a smell that forces everything into submission.”

“Meanwhile, those snakes might be the ancestor to all snake venoms and snake curses.”

“Did your familiars tell you that, Roland?”

“All snakes in my world are united expressing fear, praise, hatred, and worship for that thing... Fascinating.”, cackled Roland Berzinsky.

Hearing his words, the beast boy—Svin Glascheit—made his own comment as he stared fixed at the battle between two beasts from the age of the gods.

“Thanks to them scattering everything, I can’t track the idiot’s scent.”

“Regardless, we need them to leave this land... no, retire from this Holy Grail War.”, said Werner.

“The first thing we do after announcing our participation to the overseer is to pick a fight with a god.”, answered a tired Rin with a huge sigh.

Rin noticed that she had an inexplicably positive aptitude for the current atmosphere. To distract herself from this lingering question, she remembered her mentor, a young man she picked up in her pirate days, and a series of incidents relating to these two.

“Honestly... how can we be so sure the teacher isn’t intentionally trying to hunt everything arcane to extinction?”, she grumbled as she thought back to those memories.

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Neo Ishtar Temple, upper area

“...”

“What’s the matter, Ishtar, my goddess?”, Haruri asked after seeing Ishtar ignore the tumult in front of her and turn her eyes to the north instead.

“Hmm... nothing, I must be imagining things. I felt a really weird presence... but there’s no way any human from this era is directly linked to me or any other incarnation of myself. Could it be a descendant of Uruk’s people? Eh, doesn’t matter either way.”

After a quick shrug, she pulled her attention away from the trivial detail.

“Anyways...”, said Ishtar, shifting her gaze to what was in front of the temple. “What a waste of talent.”

Her companion animal’s front leg had stomped from the sky.

Watching the tangle of serpents trying to eat way his flesh made of divine aura, the goddess advened in the vessel named Filia mumbled:

“Had he not let revenge degrade him, he could have pulled off the same thing with his divinity alone.”

Sensing the Heroic Spirit who kept shooting the demonic arrows modeled after a serpent from the Age of Gods, she spoke with no fear, no caution, and no respect.

Simply an indifferent onlooker’s impressions.

“Well, those freeloader gods of the western lands were some real weirdos. They acted like they had no rules to follow, and more often than not, the humans they hated and loved didn’t have a say on the matter. With how deeply twisted those parasites are, I can’t blame him for turning out like this. The people dominated by the Mount of the Stargazers must have suffered awful lives, victimized by the cultural differences between humans and Olympians.

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Crystal Hill, top floor.

“She’s always been support for the gods. I can’t talk her out of it.”, whispered Enkidu atop the Crystal Hill rooftop.

The screeching gales around them had their volume lowered by the Bounded Field the mages of Tine’s organization set around the upper floors of Crystal Hill.

Behind them was a mage they only met that day.

The woman’s most prominent features were the goggles she wore and her shark-like teeth.

She said she was Servant Rider’s Master, although she added an “against my will”.

Although her status demanded a lot more explanation than her curt statement, Enkidu wasn’t particularly surprised.

As she approached, they noticed her presence was qualitatively linked to that of a Servant, and they could also tell she wasn’t hostile.

For that very reason, the moment she mentioned there was an enemy she needed gone so much that she wanted others to fight alongside her, they already predicted she was going to talk about the god’s sect west of town.

Her words were dispassionate in delivery, but couldn’t hide the implicit excitement she felt about its subject.

“I wonder, does this era still have those vain parents who force their unwilling children to wear jewelry? That’s pretty much what she is. She acts only to feed her ego and honestly believes what she does is what’s best for the other person. She’ll listen to anything you say but only listen, making no effort to understand, or even thinking she has any need to understand you.”

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The mage was confused at Enkidu's clear-faced speech but Enkidu continued, paying no mind to her.

"Be it the original or an emanated stain in the planet, she's always the same. And that's why I must reject that goddess... and her temple."

And with a fluid movement, they created the thing atop the building.

Golden chains wrapped the trees and minerals created out of Enkidu's feet, molding them all into one giant figure.

The construction process was sudden but flowed so naturally that an onlooker would assume the speech Enkidu just presented was part of the procedure.

The only actual onlookers witnessing the process were the female mage introduced as Rider's Master, Tine's subordinates standing guard by the rooftop's entrance, and Enkidu's own wolf Master.

But many more saw the finished product.

If an ordinary citizen was to look up to Crystal Hill's rooftop in the middle of this galestorm, all they could see would be some light shining atop Crystal Hill.

The unaffiliated mages who chose to stay in town would be drawn to its dense magical energy but need time to process what manifested there.

Its form was too eccentric for an object created with magecraft, yet none could call it completely impossible.

And due to its massiveness, the El-Melloi students on the north strath, the moving Saber and his two companions, and the goddess standing majestically on the western temple all could visualize the thing.

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“The piece of junk is pulling all stops to mock me...”, said the goddess in the western forest, erasing the expression off her face.

“There’s another one on that level of insanity?!” exasperatedly said the mages on the canyon.

“Hooooly shit, no way! Is that Mesopotamia’s brand of comedy? I’m pretty sure Mesopotamia didn’t have anything like that.”, a mastermind in the desert rolled around in laughter.

“I think I should be glad they waited until most citizens closed their windows. Who would have thought I’d be thanking the windstorm...”, said another mastermind observing everything from his safe underground space.

But the one with the most dramatic reaction wasn’t either of those.

Sigma was heading toward the marsh region on the east.

But the reaction didn’t come from him. It came from the aged captain “silhouette” that appeared next to him.

“Oy, oy, oy, oy, oy, oy, they must be pulling my leg here!”

“Hm? What’s wrong?”, asked Sigma, quite confused at seeing the aged captain far more energetic than he has ever been before.

His eyes could see what appeared atop Crystal Hill, but he couldn’t find any reason to be shocked about it. It was not too different from the crossbow on his back, as far as he was concerned.

However, the old captain started cackling instead of explaining anything. Nonetheless, his eyes were somewhat distorted with a hint of frustration.

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"How ironic... Of all things to build, that's what they choose to go with! That's what they pull it off right under Watcher... right under that wretched monster! Right before the shadows of my eyes!"

The laughing man's gaze pointed to the creation rooting itself on the rooftop of the tallest building in town: one giant harpoon cannon protruding out of the roof.

"As always, he produces an awful amount of noise.", mumbled Enkidu, standing on the rooftop of Crystal Hill, where the cartoonishly gigantic weapon popped from, with sharp eyes directed at the immense overflow of divinity on the west. "Thanks to that, I can't hear her voice."

Their usual clear smile was gone from their face, replaced with a somewhat saddened visage and, even rarer for Enkidu, eyes demonstrating human-like irritation.

"If you are arrogant enough to try to hinder the progressing order of man, you are a beast."

Their voice retained its serene tone but spoke pure anger and hatred.

"I don't mean the Beasts, Evils of Humanity. You're nowhere near as filled with their noble affection. As you are now, you're just a vermin both to Human Order and to the planet... nothing more."

The Heroic Spirit placed their hand on the object they created while still weaving scathing words with a serene face.

"With that in mind, I supposed this isn't exactly made for vermin, but..."

The majestic harpoon cannon had shining gold-colored crests amidst its clay base, resembling Uruk's stronghold.

With their hand on its platform, they pumped their magical energy mixed with divinity.

"Borrowing this product of mankind's wisdom and fruit of their accomplishments, I declare to the goddess Ishtar:"

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Dialogue was wholly unnecessary.

Enkidu simply sent the message that their conversation was already over a few millennia ago.

A promise that they would fulfill their duty, in the form of a makeshift pledge crafted with words they normally would not use.

“Shut your mouth... now.”

At that instant, a thunderous flash enveloped Crystal Hill’s rooftop, repelling the gales and the rainstorm.

The cannon fired its harpoon gigantic as a ballistic missile.

The back part of the harpoon was attached to an equally sized chain of gold.

The chain had the same properties as the ones Enkidu creates as his default weapon. The chain and harpoon turned into a single streak of light, forming a golden westward rainbow as it ripped through the galestorms.

To be precise, the golden rainbow was an attack but at the same time, a bridge of light spanning the world whose atmosphere began to be recolored with the air of the Age of Gods.

The giant harpoon kept moving west, piercing through the hazardous winds that symbolized the dominance and tyranny of the gods.

Like a lone hero tearing through an army of infinite soldiers.

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Neo Ishtar Temple

“Nnnnnnnnot a single shred of respect...,” said goddess Ishtar, stopping her eyes from trembling.

*Chapter 24: Fifth afternoon - Be silent, ******

She quietly held her hand out toward the harpoon.

Around her, the space above the temple unleashed a tremendous volume of divinity, making the atmosphere denser.

But unlike the missiles fired before, the harpoon showed no signs of reducing its speed.

Due to Enkidu's body being originally a weapon made by the gods, it's in their nature to be effective even against the gods.

The power made to allow humans to use the power of the gods now became the piercing power to reject the gods.

"You're one rude piece of junk."

However, Ishtar was perfectly aware of that.

She chose the correct target to dominate with her Charm: the air.

She compressed the winds set in motion by Gugalanna's gale, held them in place, and transformed them into viscous vapor.

She is the sky incarnate.

Everything in the sky is subjugated and can be made part of her body.

Like a meteorite entering the atmosphere, the giant harpoon flying in her direction was covered in intense heat, and the air around it changed color.

Nonetheless, this is still not enough to erase the heavy blow of Enkidu's Age of Babylon Noble Phantasm.

The radiating harpoon continued to tear away the new Age of Gods that Ishtar was creating, albeit at lower speeds.

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The harpoon continued its even clash, unable to reach anywhere—but the fact that a third-party attacked was enough to affect the state of the battlefield.

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Industrial district

As Alcides was shooting his venomous snake arrows from atop the chimney, his eyes caught the chain of light running through the sky.

“Not a god, but one of their relics...”

With the air being altered, the power of the series of arrows he fired decreased.

But he didn’t mind. With the vast volume of magical energy at his disposal, he could compensate for the lower damage with sheer quantity.

The image of the nine-headed serpents assaulting the temple one after the other resembled a black deluge.

And then Alcides’s next move made this description literal.

Glaring at the targets of the chain, the temple of Ishtar and the Bull of Heaven entangled with the giant serpents of his own creation, he said:

“Share Augeas’s fate, livestock.”

At the same time, he activated his Noble Phantasm, King’s Order.

The serpent copy created from his next arrow shot popped like a water balloon the instant it reached the forest.

And then it turned into a genuine black flood that began to swallow the forest.

*Chapter 24: Fifth afternoon - Be silent, ******

One of the labors in Alcides's life was the Augean Stables.

An order to clean in 1 day a giant barn with three thousand cows left unattended for decades. A service that was more like harassment than a labor of penance.

The king who ordered it and then annulled his own agreement was ultimately killed for it, but that's not the important part of this chapter.

The method he used to clean the stables whose owner never visited since its construction was honestly simple and truly out-of-the-box.

He changed the flow of the rivers near the stables by force, pulling their muddy streams directly into the stable grounds.

As a symbol of the tremendous strength it took to pull that off, he can use the power of his Noble Phantasm to replicate the muddy streams he stole, pouring the venomous snake's miasma and the "mud"'s magical energy into it to form the black flood splashed onto the forest.

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He paused to think amidst the rampaging stream of magical energy.

He didn't know everything.

In fact, he knew very little.

He didn't even know his reason to live.

It's true that most living beings don't come equipped with this answer, but he in particular had never even thought about the matter.

He could reduce his whole body and mind to ash if that's what it took to remain alive.

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Without even considering his reason for it, he always screamed his wish created from pure instinct: to live.

But what about now?

He lasted this far thanks to the power of the one called by his wish.

He never again saw the animal purely driven to kill him, and the being he met—the creature called “Servant”—protected him from all obstacles that appeared before him.

This was the first time he experienced peace.

As such, his nerves gained some breathing room.

Thoughts slowly started to cross his head.

Thoughts, not instinct.

Reason, not impulse.

For as long as he can remember, he always felt his life was threatened, and now, for the first time, he didn’t.

This was the first time he thought about who he was and what he is living for.

One day, two animals appeared in the forest.

Both very similar in form to Servant.

But it was easy to tell from their presence.

One was from the same species as the Servant who saved his life, but the other was someone

like him.

Due to her lack of hostility, he snuggled up on the creature he judged to be his equal, and they watched the Servants' conversation.

It led to a fight between the Servants.

His equal, who was lying down, panicked but since she knew neither had any intention to kill the other, she simply watched the scene with a look of wonder in her eyes.

He learned that the Servants were tremendously powerful.

He wondered why they didn't dash freely through the lands if they had more than enough power to do so.

The next day, his doubt was replaced with apprehension.

It all changed when a bizarre presence appeared on this land.

A presence that felt like a comforting embrace and irresistible terror at the same time.

Come the first signs of this presence, Servant's presence also changed.

Their face and words were the same as always.

They permeated hints of themselves into the forest and ground. And despite their apparently serene smile, he couldn't help feeling that they were always struggling against something.

It was only a vague sign.

Something most trivial, barely perceptible, but he could feel it.

Inside Servant, there were hints of a whirl of hatred and aggression. Not unlike his owner at that time his owner took a weapon and chased after him.

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Eventually, the “warm but scary presence” grew stronger... and since then, Servant has been producing an emotion akin to sadness.

Their face remained unchanged.

Their voice and mannerisms were the same as always, and they never stopped protecting him.

Even now, atop this rooftop, with this jaw-dropping mass of power approaching and this windstorm covering the lands...

Servant was still with him.

Here is where he finally understood.

That he was Servant’s cage. Their chains.

That he was no different from that “mage” animal who chained him and locked him in a cage.

That Servant had something they wanted to do.

But as long as he was there—as long as Servant was protecting him, they weren’t free to do what they wanted.

The moment he noticed that, a new emotion sprung inside him.

The emotion was similar to the one humans call “sadness”.

It could also be called rage against himself.

He didn’t feel anger even when his creator was one step away from killing him, but now, he was furious at himself for unknowingly doing the same thing his creator did.

*Chapter 24: Fifth afternoon - Be silent, ******

There was one thing he couldn't spare attention to back he was desperately trying to survive:

His wish—his dream—already came true.

Servant showed him the path to continued survival. They protected him.

What next, then?

His newly-formed ego was in deep thought, rushing for an answer.

If he had one wish...

If he had one reason to live...

That would be to free the living being before his eyes.

He could never allow himself to be someone else's shackles.

That's why, filled with the will to watch them until their final moment, he raised his paw to Servant.

To proclaim a Master's desire to his Servant.

His raised paw took a step forward.

Not to run away, but to make out of it alive, following a conscious will independent from his instincts.

To fight against the world still unknown. Or against himself.

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Fate/strange Fake 8

Crystal Hill, rooftop.

The female mage wearing goggles and Tine's subordinates were blown away by the shot's shockwaves, but golden chains sprang out of the rooftop, preventing them from falling off the building.

"So that's a Heroic Spirit's full power..."

The mage with the goggles, Doris Lusendra, tried to analyze their immense power with eyes filled with a mix of joy and frustration.

She was defeated by Toosaka Rin and granted her Master rights to the El-Melloi Classroom.

But due to their method being more stable if they used the first person to have the Command Spells as a catalyst, she was added to the party as Rider's lowest-ranked Master.

Of course, this was done under a very restrictive magecraft pact, and the Command Spell isn't being shared with her.

Still, the Heroic Spirit's power wasn't the only thing that astonished her.

She's also impressed at the supplier of magical energy enabling this level of construction.

It's dumping this much energy into the Servant and still has more to spare...? If I was the supplier, creating the harpoon cannon alone would dry my magical energy reserves. A Heroic Spirit being able to spam Noble Phantasm is inconceivable from a regular mage's perspective.

Doris shifted her gaze to Enkidu's Master.

She saw a Chimera who was, like her, fixed to the rooftop by Enkidu's chains.

Enkidu's Master, the silver wolf, quietly approached them, still protected by the chains, and held their clothes with his mouth, trying to convey a message.

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“... Oh, sorry, Master. That must have scared you.”

With an honest apology, Enkidu put their hand on the silver wolf’s cheek.

“Calm down, Master. Your life is safe in my hands. I can stay here if that’s what you wish... and if anything happens to me, you can ask that girl on the top floor to...”

Enkidu stopped mid-sentence.

The silver wolf pulled their robe harder and stared at them with fiercer eyes than ever.

Catching what that meant, Enkidu kneeled to speak with their eyes on the same height as their Master.

“You don’t need to worry about my wants, Master. I’m a tool. Born disposable... Not to mention I’ll be gone no matter what once this ritual is over.”

The way they spoke their mind to their Master was bizarre, but those who knew Enkidu could confirm that this was this Heroic Spirit’s natural state.

The Heroic Spirit Enkidu will always place themselves as a tool, be their Master a person, a Natural Spirit, or a Chimera.

The gods created them to be a tool and they knew that their purpose as one was to grow able to perfectly imitate a person, a creature the gods struggled to comprehend.

For that reason, they could identify the glitch in their own system, and its causes: the deity emerging west and its companion Heroic Spirit.

Taking all that into consideration, Enkidu chose the logical way to do what’s best for their Master and fix their own bugs at the same time.

What they didn’t expect is that their Master wolf would go against their choice.

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“ ”
...

Having pieced together the silver wolf's intentions, Enkidu calmly weaved their words.

“You should think only about your wish... to survive. I exist to be your tool. So, Master, stay where it's safe until I dispose of all that threatens the world, and threatens yo...”

Their words were interrupted again.

This time their Master's howl.

The wolf who previously only wished to live now pulled Enkidu with a powerful will reflected in his eyes.

What could he be thinking?

The two paused and watched each other in silence.

As a silver wolf and Heroic Spirit.

A Chimera and a Divine Construct.

A Master and a Servant.

It only took a few seconds but that was enough.

Enkidu understood everything.

“Sorry, Master. I'll admit that I forgot I was a tool when I saw that garbage of an ancient goddess and... my old friend.”, Enkidu said hugging their Master.

“ ”
...

“But you're... not mad that I forgot. You're mad I was trying to return to being a tool.”

*Chapter 24: Fifth afternoon - Be silent, ******

Their voice was serene but contained a mix of sorrow and joy. Enkidu's next message to their Master was an expression of gratitude and at the same time a confession of guilt.

"Thank you, Master... I'll be back soon."

The same soft smile the first greeted the wolf with.

The Master hadn't seen this face clearly since he was on the verge of death at the time.

Regardless, the wolf felt that their aura had the same color it did back then, and understood that Enkidu was making the same face they did the first time because this might be the last.

After looking at Enkidu one final time, the wolf howled strikingly at the rampaging sky.

"May your life go as you wish."

With these last words, Enkidu jumped to the sky.

The silver wolf watched them leave. He didn't wag his tail. He didn't bark. He only watched their back.

He watched the creature who momentarily lived with him flying away to live in freedom.

The silver wolf knew two things perfectly well:

That his fate would be roughly the same no matter where his road takes him.

And that, just like Enkidu, he would also be gone soon. His life wasn't made to last long.

He didn't know how many months, weeks, or days he still had.

Numbers don't make a difference for a wolf who doesn't know how to read a calendar.

Fate/strange Fake 8

All he cared about was watching Enkidu living.

The silver wolf was a crafted Chimera.

He didn't know what family, friends, or followers were, and he didn't care to learn about the concepts.

The only relationship that mattered to him was Master and Servant.

He had zero interest in finding out the hierarchy in this.

Enkidu demanded to be used as a tool, but now the wolf wilfully rejected this implication of the word "Servant".

The terms Master and Servant could be reduced to non-indicative names, devoid of their original meanings. To the wolf, the one and only form of relationship was simply being there for each other.

That was enough to give his life purpose.

That gave his life purpose.

That's why the silver wolf only wanted to see the Heroic Spirit Enkidu living.

Doing what gave their life, and none other's, purpose.

So that at the moment his life is finally over, he can say that they lived together rather than just existed together.

They didn't share an adventure to be remembered in history, nor did they develop a deep love for each other.

Even then,

The silver wolf looked proud as he watched the creature he spent very few days with leave.

a t e / s t r a n g e F a k

Interlude

“Backroom Rhapsody”

Interlude: Backroom Rhapsody

East Snowfield, marsh area

“If only I had one of those in my time... Nah, what a sad thing to say. That thing was built with the power of the gods, so if I overpowered the monster with that, it wouldn’t have been my win... humanity’s win.”

Hearing the captain silhouette laugh with heartfelt joy with a tinge of frustration, Sigma thought “I don’t know what’s so funny but I’m jealous of his ability to laugh”.

“Well, we Shadows are just some duplicates. Just Watcher recreating how she thinks the originals would react in this situation. The bastard doesn’t care to put every detail into the simulation, so we’re more like magecraft constructs than anything.”

“As an outsider, I can’t see the difference between that and talking to the original.”

The silhouette responded by taking the shape of the boy with wings.

“Shouldn’t you work on fixing that? Someone using illusions to make fakes of us could easily deceive you.”, he warned.

“If there’s any third party involved with the intention to deceive me, then I simply won’t trust you.”

“Yeah, makes sense that’s how you think.”

“The original is as likely to betray as a fake. There’s a lot that can be said about philosophical zombies but my knowledge of magecraft is not enough for this debate. Instead of thinking about whether the other is the original or a copy, I think about how the other is affecting me at each given moment. That’s all.”

Two opposite figures popped into Sigma’s mind as he spoke.

Interlude: Backroom Rhapsody

One was Lambda, a living human he spent his childhood with.

The other was the Assassin Servant, who just like the Shadows, was copied from the throne.

The former backstabbed Sigma when he least expected and fell to a retaliation he has no strong feelings for.

The latter was someone who barely knew him but fought against a horrid monster alongside him because that was what her faith or creeds determined.

Although she almost killed him when they first met, in their farewell the previous day, she said they would save people for as long as they could, and to top it off, showed him her smile.

There are no differences between copies and originals.

On the contrary. Sigma felt these replicated shadows feel a lot more human than the Instructors in his childhood.

Why bother distinguishing an original from a fake or simply a copied soul?

Since Sigma couldn't tell them apart, the only things he knew to be real are the products of his interactions with others, no matter which they are.

Sigma watched videos of comedians from all over the world until the discs wore out. Now a thought occurred to him.

All those people in the videos were, strictly speaking, copied. And they follow a script, making the thing doubly false. But here I am, enjoying comedies. Does that make me also fake? If my ego was shaped by fakes, what would my ego and my emotions qualify as?

After some thought, Sigma shook his head, deeming these questions a waste of time.

It was always in Sigma's disposition to trust nobody, not even himself.

He could be real or could be fake, but regardless, he could only play the cards at his disposal.

Fate/strange Fake 8

After all, he needed to save a girl—Kuruoka Tsubaki—from the clutches of both a god and the government.

It was his decision. Trusting himself or not, the dice were already cast.

Whether he was real or fake is up to others to decide when it's all said and done.

Authenticity is determined only by the lasting impression you leave on those who saw you., Sigma commented to himself.

What was it like for mom? She fought alongside Emiya Kiritsugu, a legend. What was she seeing when she died in obscurity?

Sigma's thoughts stopped here, with a self-derisive chuckle.

Many people die with their heads blown off, unaware of what they were seeing in their last moments.

He realized he was romanticizing his mother too much in asking what final conclusion did she reach, hence the pained chuckle.

Yeah, my head could be blown off at any moment. So... I'll choose to believe that I already found my conclusion somewhere.

When Sigma asked himself where, the first image to come to his mind was Assassin's smile.

“The faith I obtained?”

In response to these words that Sigma mumbled while carefully traversing the marsh, the Shadow of the boy with the caduceus spoke with a serene smile.

“Why don't you start a new religion with that? If your teachings rebuke the Greek gods and set the logical practice of medicine as an absolute creed, you have my support. Gotta make sure Apollo is the one you'll demonize the most.”

Interlude: Backroom Rhapsody

“You want to worship medicine itself as a deity? Maybe try someone else, all I’d be able to produce is weird gods in lab coats and nurse outfits... Also, who is Apollo?”

“He’s... no one interesting. You don’t need to know.”

“Ok. I thought that sounded like a comedian’s name, but if he’s not funny, I’m not interested.”

Amidst his words, Sigma thought about the Shadows.

Is it just me or... have they started to joke around more lately?

The silhouette of a boy interrupted his musings.

“I found them. They’re hidden in that rocky area.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

Saying that, Sigma activated magecraft that hid his presence and braved closer to the rocks.

“Hey.”

Hearing a sudden voice from above, the mercenary reflexively pointed his assault rifle.

“I’m FAMINE. Are you from THORN?”

“Don’t scare me like that... You couldn’t blame me for shooting you when you show up like that.”

The THORN man confirmed that FAMINE had Sigma’s face and let go of the trigger.

He pointed the barrel slightly away, but remained in the position to shoot any time, presumably because he was ordered to keep watch on Sigma and Saber a few days back.

Fate/strange Fake 8

THORN was Faldeus's codename for his pet squad, an ambush team heavily armed to suppress mages.

"Sorry, my comms are broken... Can you contact CATTLE?"

"He told us to be on standby here and hasn't messaged since. We get responses for the regular reports but it's his subordinate woman talking. Not CATTLE."

The "CATTLE" Sigma asked about referred to Faldeus, much like Sigma himself was codenamed FAMINE. The question was a farce. Sigma already knew from the Shadows that Faldeus had cut off many low-importance teams and was operating in sigil with a team that was sort of like his personal guard.

In short, Sigma was with the discarded THORN members.

Sigma could imagine why they were abandoned.

They came in contact with Saber a few days prior.

Saber offered the THORN soldiers meals and after some difficulties, they came to accept it.

He didn't know if they honestly opened up to Saber. Knowing they are a special squad, there's a high chance they simply pretended to be on good terms with him.

But from Faldeus's perspective, regardless of the answer, that's an element of uncertainty.

Faldeus can't ignore the possibility that Saber or his Master placed brainwashing magecraft or something to that effect.

After all, he's working on the most confidential operation possible: carrying away the base of the Holy Grail before they destroy the whole land of Snowfield. Teams should be cut off at the slightest suspicion.

Through Watcher's information via the Shadows, Sigma knew their situation better than

Interlude: Backroom Rhapsody

they did.

That was something he could exploit.

He knew that in the north of the city, there was a united front fighting against the deity in the west.

But they didn't trust Sigma, who is aligned with the masterminds.

He felt that he could easily have been invited if Saber and Ayaka were the leaders of the alliance, but Sigma would rather avoid being a source of discord within the united front.

Thus, he set his scheme in motion.

From the backroom, his trick would push the lead actress away from the stage.

It had low chances of success and quite high chances of death.

But they did not need to shoot silver bullets against a monster.

Sigma had to fight in a way only an actor in the backroom can. His next words were the first step.

“Faldeus didn't tell even you?”

“? Tell what?”

“Everyone in the JACKAL, SPADE, and WINEGLASS units is dead. And their reaction to that was calling Operation [Aurora fall].”

“! All of them!? And what's this operation codename? No one told me about that one.”

Sigma noticed the special squad member tensing up under the mask.

Fate/strange Fake 8

One wrong answer and they'd be trading bullets.

Sigma couldn't understand others.

But what he could do was follow the good faith growing within him and speak a mix of truths and lies.

"I know about it because I'm a Master but Faldeus froze his line to me. Looks like I was discarded."

"What is Operation [Aurora fall]?"

"This city will be wiped off the map tomorrow... with all of us in it."

The soldier could figure out the rest from just that.

His words would normally be hard to believe but they were Faldeus's subordinates. They knew his personality and they knew the power of the people above him.

Not to mention that if the hurricane approaching from the west was related to the world of magecraft, then they had a perfectly valid reason to resort to such measures.

After waiting for him to slowly digest the situation, Sigma opened his mouth.

"We were abandoned. If you want to escape, it won't be me who will stop you. If you don't trust me, try calling CATTLE. It might get you wiped earlier, though."

"What's your plan?"

"I'll do what I can. There's one minor problem that can change the upper echelon's decision if I solve it."

And so the spellcaster opened negotiations.

Interlude: Backroom Rhapsody

He was a taciturn and inarticulate man who didn't trust others or himself—

but to fight against the tyranny of both gods and men...

“Are you willing to help me out?”

Or perhaps to enact the final stage of his ruinous comedy...

“My Servant... Charlie Chaplin is ready for action.”

Chapter 25

“The shadow brings an end to a journey out of
the ravine”

Chapter 25: Backroom Rhapsody

“You’re finally here...”, hatefully murmured Fillia. Her Authority held a giant harpoon in place, and her eyes faced the eastern skies at the opposite end of its golden chain.

The change was dramatic.

The golden chain instantly inflated. It grew fast and suddenly, much like the beanstalk in the fairy tale.

The stepped links recoiled with magical energy simply having Enkidu racing atop them.

Enkidu dashed on the chains with the pace of a pulsing heart.

A dense figure approached in a straight line.

She noticed days ago that someone was keeping track of her but they showed no signs of approaching until now. She tried to provoke them in the construction of her temple by choosing to conquer a forest like the forest where they used to live with that girl but even then, they wouldn’t give her the fight she wanted. Fillia speculated that the Master who summoned Enkidu was either a cautious one or a creature so weak that Enkidu was forced into defense.

“If you had ignored this silly Holy Grail War and jumped at me the moment you sensed me, you could have fought alongside Gilgamesh, but you didn’t.”

She spoke with her eyes almost closed. Her delivery sounded almost nostalgic for an ever-distant past. After those words, the goddess Ishtar quietly raised her head.

Fate/strange Fake 8

“Be however you want. There’s some virtue in living only for the sake of others without hypocrisy or dishonesty.”

“Ishtar, my goddess...?”

Haruri stood in front of her, restraining Berserker. She noticed Ishtar’s divinity expanding behind her and turned back.

The goddess walked to stand side by side with her appointed Head Priestess Haruri and, glaring at the enemy force approaching from the east, held her right hand out to the sky with a fearless smile.

“But...”

Next, goddess Ishtar’s divine power expanded and charmed the land between the forest and the city.

“You, this piece of junk who can’t impose themselves on anyone, were able to insult me... It’s too late to regret, atone, or make amends for this disgrace. You will never amount to anything. Let me see you crumble, rot, dry, writhe, unravel, and collapse as you try.”

This was Ishtar’s first manifestation of hostility in this era.

“...!”

A nasty chill raced across Haruri’s whole body as if the end of the world happened seven times over.

Her mind could have broken and ceased its vital functions had she not been blessed by Ishtar with her temple head priestess mindset.

Yet even all this violent rage becomes a voice that charms the world when unleashed by Ishtar.

A reversed nexus.

By being charmed, the otherwise inorganic land gained a faux intellect and organic life functions, enabling it to in turn gain emotions.

It became either a giant lifeform or a colony of small lifeforms.

Claymation-like waves surged as the excited lands raged like a turbulent ocean and went to attack Enkidu in conjunction with the gale winds.

“...”

Enkidu, on the other hand, said nothing.

Words were as needless as they were worthless. They only directed hostility at Ishtar.

The power of charm can't as much as reach their eyes. The chains and the air touched by Enkidu reject the goddess and everything she represents.

Through physical means alone, Enkidu escaped the assault of the earth turned into Ishtar's zealot.

In two steps, they kicked the flying waves of dirt away and punched their way through the omnidirectional hostility.

A simple stomp reverberated loud as thunder and the pulverized bedrock transformed into complexly entangled chains that began to envelop the main chain.

A tunnel of light guarding the golden bridge.

Enkidu pumped more power into the harpoon as they infiltrated the Age of Gods.

Ishtar squinted upon seeing the contending harpoon approach.

Fate/strange Fake 8

“You cheeky piece of junk.”

And then she commanded Haruri, who was holding her breath as she watched the events.

“Get Berserker to help me stop the piece of junk. Leave the snakes to Gugalanna.”

“! Yes, ma’am!”

Haruri ordered her Berserker Servant as told.

Now that Enkidu already came so close to them, she ordered her to stop—or destroy—them.

Berserker turned her giant body to face the eastern sky, making a quiet grinding noise against the galestorms.

She turned off all the functions she was using to block the incoming serpents and deluge and reassigned Enkidu as the sole target of all her processes.

The watcher of the forest of the gods, told in legend to have brought fear even to the Hero King Gilgamesh.

Faced with this dreadful monster—

Faced with the old friend they reduced to piles of flesh with their own hands, Enkidu quietly mumbled.

“We need to talk... Huwawa.”

Enkidu charged their limbs with magical energy as they said that.

“But only after... I get this goddess that filled you with fear, and at the same time, blessings

and tranquility, to shut up.”

Next, Enkidu leaped in, fast as lightning, and took aim at the goddess at the temple.

But they were blocked by Berserker—the colossus called Huwawa.

Despite this agility one wouldn’t expect from her gigantic size, she didn’t counterattack.

Both Haruri and Berserker could feel Enkidu’s power and opted to fight defensively.

It was clear that any moment of distraction was all Enkidu needed to tear them apart.

Berserker shot down an entire rain of modern missiles before, but nonetheless, she was pressured into the defensive.

The weapon created to be the linchpin keeping the gods on the surface watched their opponent solidify her defenses out of a duty to protect goddess Ishtar.

“That’s a problem... Battles of attrition are not my thing. The best I can last is three days and three nights”, spoke Enkidu, remembering their duel with their best friend Gilgamesh.

Nostalgic days of their lifetime.

Enkidu’s words were honest and heartfelt, without a hint of snideness or sarcasm.

Because if possible—they wanted that 3-day short duel to last forever.

×

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Strath region

“The units are mobilizing.”, mumbled someone from the El-Melloi Classroom upon seeing the energized chain of gold launched and stretching in the air.

His words also applied to this ravine.

Because almost at the same time, two horses from the east of the city appeared, shortly after the city's police force and Tine's suited subordinates.

"I see you called this Holy Grail War's organizers. Are you insane?"

Tine Chelc's secretary doubted her eyes. She directed questioning glances to the El-Melloi class and the police squad.

Vera Levitt, representing the 20 subordinates accompanying her, replied with an indifferent face.

"This is not the moment to concern ourselves with positions and relationships."

"... It isn't. Sorry for my remark."

She had something she wanted to say but preferred not to because her statements could hurt her lady's dignity. She reminded herself a mage needs to know restraint and directed her line of sight to the members of the El-Melloi Classroom.

But her attention quickly turned to the two horses.

A man clad in armor that projected an image of fortitude and vigor looked at his surrounding with sparkles in his eyes. Behind him, a woman clung to his shoulders, trying to catch her breath.

"Oh, now that's amazing! You can't hide it from my eyes! Everyone here is a first-class mage! You look more powerful than that Saint-Germain, my self-proclaimed court mage! Ah, sorry, that might have been a rude comparison, considering he was an obvious charlatan..."

Seeing Saber casually drop information about himself, many mages momentarily suspected that he was not a Servant, but instead a local street performer.

Tine's subordinates understood that he was a Servant but were still taken aback by the huge statement. Hansa folded up with laughter.

On the other hand, the policemen who knew him well enough only smiled awkwardly.

Some El-Melloi students frowned at what they assumed to be a joke, while some others exchanged serious whispers about his identity.

"Did he say Saint-Germain?"

"Which means he's... Louis XV?"

"Could be Alexander the Great..."

"A Rákóczi...?"

"I'll take the risky bet and say he's Queen of Sheba."

Watching the little group of youngsters whispering predictions like they weren't within his earshot, Saber laughed in rhythm with the clip-clop of his horse's hooves as he walked it to a position where he could better see the western forest.

"Wait, wait, wait, Saint-Germain was cheating on me with how many other kings? I guess I should have expected that from a guy who says he's perenially unaging. And in my era, he nonchalantly drove one of those 'car' vehicles that are normal nowadays. Is it normal for a mage to normally do these abnormal things?"

"Was the Count of Saint-Germain an Atlas Institute absconder or something...? I think I learned one more thing I shouldn't have..."

Saber shrugged upon hearing the bespectacled giant say this.

"His presence alone spreads information everyone is better off not knowing. And for all he called himself the court mage, the only magecraft he ever taught me was how to fix damaged

jewels."

His words left a couple of mages starry-eyed, but they refrained from making comments, perhaps judging it was not the time to pursue the topic.

"Oh! But still, things are getting impressive!"

From atop the cliffs, Saber watched the forest with childlike wonder, like the mood of the people around him was nothing.

His eyes were set on some creature's leg entangled in giant serpents. The leg fell from the sky, stomping the black flood that swallowed the forest. The series of golden explosions incurred by it occasionally lifted the bedrock into the air.

"So, is our united front to fight that creature over there? If I were manifested as a Rider, I could have distributed my power among the whole squad, but unfortunately, I'm a Saber."

Saber joyfully analyzed his forces while he gazed at the fantastical scenes before him.

And then, he suddenly turned his horse and introduced himself to the people present, as if he only now remembered to do it.

"Forgive the courtesy of addressing you from atop my horse! I'm a Servant participating in this Holy Grail War under the Saber Saint Graph! Please understand that I can't get off the horse at the moment! This isn't a matter of status, it's simply my Master's shaky legs would prove a problem if she were to try to set her feet on the ground!"

"Uuugh... It's f-fine, I'll be able to get off soon enough...", said the groaning girl before she raised her head to look at her surroundings.

Oh, the priest from that church... He's alive.

They hadn't seen each other since the church's collapse. Ayaka sighed in relief upon seeing the eyepatched priest mostly unharmed.

Chapter 25: Backroom Rhapsody

Great, Ms. Vera's team is also doing fine... Huh?

There Ayaka noticed something strange.

Aside from the police and the group wearing suits, there was a third, non-uniformed group of young people staring at her with startled shock and caution.

“It’s Sajou...” “Ayaka from Yumina, right?” “She dyed her hair?”

Ayaka shivered upon hearing those whispers, making her forget her unstable legs and gulp.

“Huh...W-what?”

Ayaka couldn’t recognize anyone there.

A Japanese-looking woman wearing a red dress observed her with a sharp glare, but Ayaka still couldn’t remember.

Oblivious to Ayaka’s anxieties, the youths exchanged confused words.

“But Sajou is in Romania now. We confirmed that.”

“No doubt about it...”

“Really? I don’t find them any similar. Sajou’s smell is more harmonious and winding.”

“You’re just not judging with your eyes, Svin.”

“However... If Svin says so, we can take it as certain that she’s someone else.”

These strangers were discussing her.

For the first time in a while, Ayaka remembered she was thrown into a merciless fate. She got off the horse bracing herself for worse, and spoke with a strong will.

Fate/strange Fake 8

“Hey.”

All youths reacted to Ayaka’s voice and turned their eyes to her.

Ayaka was staggering from the pressure. It was hard to believe they were so close to her age.

She didn’t notice Saber getting off the horse, but there he was grabbing her shoulder.

“It’s all fine.”

“...Right, thank you.”

Ayaka calmed down and asked them a question.

“You all have been saying things about my face, but... Who even are you? Do you... know me?”

Hearing this, a visibly more strong-willed member of the young group took a step forward.

“No, we don’t. To be more exact, we knew you existed for a few days and that’s all.”

“Huh?”

“We’re the ones who want to know who are you. We can still team up with someone we don’t trust, knowing we’ll betray them later, but with someone we don’t understand, we’ll have bigger problems than a need for extra caution.”

The woman gestured to shoo her teammates away.

“Stop wasting time. I’ll get the questions about her answered, so you go back to observing the forest. You know the world could end while we’re busy with this, do you?”

In response to her words, other members started deploying magecraft tools and magic circles to react to the abnormal changes in the forest, many with a shrug.

The woman in red, with her gaze fixed straight on Ayaka, asked a direct question.

“Asking again, who are you? Why do you have Sajou’s face?”

Ayaka’s vision distorted and bounced back in an instant.

Not comprehending the words directed at her, Ayaka found strength within herself and replied with a question of her own.

“Why? That’d be because... I’m Sajou Ayaka... Wait, there’s someone with the same face as me?”

“The answer is yes. Her hair is of a different color, but otherwise, you’re physically identical. Ok... Different question, then. Have you ever heard the word Fuyuki?”

“...Well, yes, that’s my hometown.”

“Heh... Which part of Fuyuki did you live in? Shinto? Miyama? Homurahara?”

“Huh? Err...”

Her head hurt.

Her past ached.

Her memory twisted.

After feeling a thick fog instantly fill her brain, Ayaka managed to barely pull out a location name from the depths of her mind.

“Kurokizaka... The Semina Apartment Complex.”

The woman in red squinted for a moment when she said that name, but only Saber noticed it, not Ayaka.

When Ayaka came to this city, when she said her name, the police said they would investigate her and didn’t press for more details on her past.

Fate/strange Fake 8

Perhaps if she had stayed there longer, they would strongly press her over the discrepancies found in the document they received.

But since that didn't happen, Ayaka remained in the city as "Ayaka Sajou from Japan".

That's why she—Ayaka herself—didn't have any deep questions about who she was until now.

No one before confronted her.

"Can you name any friends you have in Fuyuki?"

The woman in red continued her methodical questioning, not aggressively but not softly either. Saber judged that she had no malice and that her methods were quite honest and gentle for mage standards.



Fate/strange Fake 8

That is why Saber didn't impede her questioning, but he was prepared to move in case anything happened.

"Friends...?"

The haze in Ayaka's head grew thicker, but she didn't run away from it.

I can't run away here. If I give up now, this fog will never clear up.

Fumbling her way through her memories, Ayaka reached out for the times in Fuyuki that she avoided looking at.

"Right... I have... had friends..."

Amidst her blurred thoughts, Ayaka remembered something.

People whose faces weren't clearly memorized. The ones who said her name.

"They told me my name was Ayaka, Sajou Ayaka..."

The names of the people who taught her she was "Sajou Ayaka".

"Gotou... Gai... and... Tsunokuma...?"

"What? ...Huh? Are you serious?"

The moment these names came up, the woman in red showed a new reaction of surprise.

"Never thought I'd hear those names here... Since you mentioned the Semina apartments, I expected to see Himuro mentioned, and maybe Mitsuzuri and Saegusa if you were really intent on fooling me... Gh... If your goal was confusing me, great job."

"????"

Chapter 25: Backroom Rhapsody

“C’mom, anyone can tell Ayaka is way more confused than you are.”

Saber came for the save and started interjecting in the conversation.

“Hmmm... I see you can’t trust Ayaka because... a friend of your group looks identical to her and has the same name, but is someone else entirely.”

“Can you blame us?”

The mage in red cautiously stood her ground with her response.

Saber instantly figured out it was not a case of a Master or mage belittling a Servant for being just a familiar.

Though she’s not lacking in self-respect either... She feels truly used to this situation. She must know a lot about Servants and Heroic Spirits. Not only that... she knows a lot about Fuyuki too.

Despite knowing that, Saber maintained his policy of never hiding who he was.

“Aye, we could only be dealing with a Changeling here. The fae are terrifying, I’ll have you know. You never know what they’ll pull off, and most of them see humans as nothing more than a scribble on a piece of paper.”

“Saber?”

“What are you trying to say?”

Ayaka and the mage in red look at Saber with many questions in their eyes. Saber responded in a clear and unevasive tone.

“Replica bodies. Illusions. Phantasmal beasts. Vampires. In this age, it’s even possible to change a person’s face with medical technology, no? Even simple make-up and sleight of hands could work. There are as many possible causes for there being multiple Ayakas as there are stars in the sky. But that’s not the problem.”, posited Saber, nodding in agreement at his own words. “It’s true that you have reason to suspect Ayaka. It’s only natural. But the only Ayaka I know is

Fate/strange Fake 8

the one I've been watching since I was summoned, and I say she's trustworthy."

"So you want us to believe her Servant's opinion?"

"Nah, I mean I'm your guarantee."

"Our guarantee?"

"The only reason why I haven't killed all of you is that Ayaka wants to prove she's a good girl.", said Saber, flashing his brightest smile.

"...Excuse me?", Ayaka herself raised her head with a voice of disbelief.

Saber coldly continued, as if he wasn't listening to his Master's voice.

"I came here because you invited us to fight side-by-side, but all I'm seeing is my Master being lambasted with questions. As far as I'm concerned, that's enough to sign your death penalty."

"Hold up, what are you...?"

"Don't worry, Ayaka. If it comes to it, I can mobilize all my retinues at once. I'm not gonna lose this.", Saber stated with a shrug, as if it would be no big deal.

The mood of the room took a cold turn.

It was not only the woman in red. The unspeaking mages busy with their own tasks also flipped their mental switches, despite their backs remaining turned.

Next to them, Hippolyte's face was unagitated, but she had already shifted her center of balance.

She was ready to start a fight any time but Ayaka was naturally oblivious to the change in situation, Saber had a fearless smile, and the police and Tine's subordinates stiffened their expressions.

But the one to make the first move was the only one who failed to notice the rise in tension, Ayaka herself.

All Ayaka had in her mind were the scenes of the dream she had earlier that day.

Saber was in some fortress town and she saw a huge amount of people painted red.

Covered in sweat from top to bottom, Ayaka tightly gripped Saber's arm.

"Saber!"

And then yelled with all her strength.

"Don't even joke about that!"

"...Ayaka, you thought I was joking?"

"If you weren't, that's even worse! I told you before! I'll take the dirty jobs! I don't have the power to do it myself! But doesn't me being a Master mean that you will only kill people with my command?! Or maybe you don't really trust me all that much?!"

He had never seen her this serious.

Silence dominated the place.

Despite the violent attacks, flashes, and windstorms from the western forest in the background, the Bounded Field made by Butterfly Magecraft was bizarrely silent for a few seconds that felt like an eternity.

And what broke this tension was Saber's daring smile disappearing to give place to the smile of a child after a successful prank.

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“Did she look like she was acting to you?”, he said to the mage in red.

“Wha?”, Ayaka mumbled, not understanding what happened.

The red mage closed her eyes in exasperation and answer Saber after a long sigh.

“Yeah, okay, you at the very least convinced me she’s not a mage that could live off as an actress. Also that, while I still don’t know if she’s human or not, whatever she does, she’s an amateur at it, to a terrifying degree.”

“Yup. But allow me a formal apology. Faked or not, my death threat to you was awfully rude. Let me redeem myself to all of you with my future work.”

“Well, these games of deceit and trickery are business as usual for us. Just apologizing already makes you better than most. But notice I didn’t say ‘don’t sweat it’. We will, in fact, work you to the bone.”

The conversation between Saber and the red mage normalized the general mood, and the mages returned to their tasks exchanging whispers like “Man, he really fooled me.”, “Heroic Spirits really are on a whole other level. I couldn’t see us winning.”, or “I wasn’t worried, Toosaka is perfect at dealing with this kind of gamble.”

“... AH? ...Was that what happened?”

After some thought, Ayaka realized she was roped into Saber’s charade.

“Saber?”

“Eh, all is well when it ends w... Wah.”

Saber groaned as Ayaka pulled his braid hard.

“...Hmm, but yeah, I understand that you pulled your little farce because you thought I needed help...”

"Hahaha, your talent to understand others is a real virtue, in my opinion."

"I'm really torn between my wish to thank you and my wish to scold you for joking about killing everyone. What should I do here?"

Ayaka's veins were still popping but she managed a stiff smile. Seeing that, Saber paused to think, and still with his hair being pulled, presented what he believed to be a genius idea.

"This is the kind of moment where you should try singing. When I was taken prisoner, I felt so lonely that I composed a complaint song basically saying 'I'm here so I want someone, anyone to rescue me'. I also gotta apologize for angering you, I'm sorry!"

As Saber's grandiosity neutralized Ayaka's caustic feelings, she found herself unable to feel the relief she was supposed to feel.

The dream featuring Saint-Germain was one concerning matter, but her main source of unease was the understanding that his performance now wasn't a farce, that he was indeed determined to kill all humans in sight. The knowledge that this was part of his nature.

As Saber said, she had a talent to understand others.

It's not about being good or evil. Saber's deal is that he doesn't know how to hesitate. Saber thoroughly ignores all fear, guilt, and anxiety toward the idea that his actions have consequences. Or maybe he keeps marching forward while embracing all these elements head-on.

Ayaka couldn't think of that as something entirely bad.

It's a fact that she was many times saved by this tendency of him.

And that is why Ayaka revised her beliefs.

She now thought that she couldn't allow him to be alone in bearing the bad reputation he was needlessly accruing for her sake.

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That's what she decided when she firmed their formal contract.

When it's time to sink, we sink together.

The mage in red commented on Ayaka's renewed determination.

"...You were already in America when we got here. So it's hard to imagine this is a bluff targeted at us, and if the goal was to keep Flat and the teacher in check, you had a lot of better people to choose from. Honestly, there's no reason you would choose Sajou, someone we can confirm things with on the phone."

"Huh? You can... call her on your phone now?"

"We did try asking her, but it was pointless. She doesn't have a clue. She seemed to suspect someone in her family did something, but it turned out she had nothing to do with it."

"O-ok..."

Someone had the same name as her.

Confronted with this fact, Ayaka...

found herself acting more cold and rational than she expected.

Huh? Why am I so calm about this?

Normally, it would make sense for her to react with anger, madness, and panic to the sudden realization she didn't know who she was.

But instead, she now found peace in the fact that she can clearly perceive the contradictions.

The uncomfortable part of it was how she couldn't understand what was making her feel so relieved.

Wait, this makes no sense. It's clearly off. Why am I not actively trying to remember my past?"

Even now, I'm looking for excuses... No, now is not the time for this.

It's true that the fog greatly flickered due to the words said by the mage in red, but she remained unable to take a step into her past memories no matter what.

In fact, if Ayaka lacked the courage to ask for urgent help to make her recall her memories, she wouldn't have been able to remind herself of her logic and motives and would have failed to produce strong replies.

The mage in red ignored Ayaka for a moment and questioned Saber, with whom she hoped to join forces.

"Still, I can see you're some kind of knight Heroic Spirit... If you took part in any battle in your life you should know well how scary it is to have an unknown factor on the battlefield."

"Well, if that's your point, I'd things don't get more unknown than what's happening in the western forest."

With this sarcastic remark, Saber turned west, there seeing the woods tightly wrapped in galestorms, making it difficult to identify what was happening by looking from a distance.

Even in this situation, deafening impact and thunder were sometimes audible, accompanied by golden flashes and some giant appendage moving.

"We're not stupid enough to rush into whatever that is head-on."

"True. You're all very intelligent.", said Saber, enjoying himself as he took a look at the gathered teammates. "Isn't this exactly why you need someone to play the fool's role?"

Saber got a response from the aristocratic man manipulating butterflies to maintain the Bounded Field.

"We would obviously never invite you to fight together commanding you to be a decoy or a sacrificial pawn alone. Much less to you, who shows in your style and personality that you're a royal."

"That's not really how things work. I hear my esteemed King Arthur personally headed to battle, and it was with his own hands that he took down Vile King Vortigern and the traitor Mordred. I also went to battle many times as the first lance or solo. As one who always idolized Arthur the Ancestor King and Alexander the Great, I unrealistically dreamed of taking down a country with my martial prowess alone.", told Saber, singing more praise of past heroes than of himself.

The mage in red's faint reaction when Saber talked about King Arthur didn't escape his eyes, but knowing it was not the time to pursue that question, he contained himself.

His self-restraint didn't last long.

"By the way, you who know Fuyuki, have you seen King Arthur in- Woooooooooh!"

With Ayaka pulling his braid and arm, Saber looked at the mage in red with a wish to talk more, but Ayaka's scolding convinced him to proceed with the conversation. "You'll have all the time in the world to talk about it after we solve this situation."

"I see we're both out of brilliant ideas for how to deal with the temple in the west, but we gotta do something before this war of attrition is over."

"You call something that big a war of attrition... What...?", Ayaka mumbled to herself, watching the forest west after taking in Saber's words.

But she wasn't going to interject, so she stayed quiet and let the conversation proceed.

The ones participating in the strategy meeting were the butterfly manipulator Werner Caesarmund and the mage in red Toosaka Rin.

They were joined by a mage in a blue dress named Luvia gelita Edelfelt, and numerous mages claiming to be Tine Chelc's associates.

Lastly, a familiar face for Saber and Ayaka: Vera Levitt.

Priest Hansa chose to watch the debate from a distance, saying “I won’t argue against your direction. At this point, the only way to conceal that thing is to defeat it, no?”

When he walked away, he joked “I’ll make something up for my report. I imagine the Holy Church will wipe this city off the map if they don’t buy my bullshit, hahaha”, but no one present took it as a joke.

After Saber mumbled “Sounds like a thing the Holy Church would do...”, he asked Vera questions to put the conversation back on track.

“Ok, tell us what is your plan. Is it to wait for that to settle and then sweep the exhausted forces? Or is it to reinforce the city or this ravine as a fortress for a siege battle? In this summon, I’m manifested not as a general commanding military tactics, but as a simple knight. I’ll follow whichever strategy you capable modern mages chose.” Saber then looked at Hippolyte. “Don’t you think the same, Amazonian leader?”

“Pretty much. However, the traits of my Saint Graph facilitate leading marches.”

Hippolyte silently nodded to Saber’s hint that he guessed her True Name.

Ayaka had been ignoring the conversation, but out of sudden curiosity, made a comment to Saber.

“Knowing you, I was expecting you to say you could raid the temple alone.”

“Well, to be honest, that is what my knight self wants to do. But I can’t do that when we’re uniting in a joint army with different forces, can I? I already commanded allied forces once and I have to tell you, it’s a pain in the ass.”

Recalling the distant past, Saber closed his eyes in a rare expression of fatigue.

After silently shaking his head, he spoke to himself out loud.

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“Well, there always is gonna be one guy who makes his own decisions and what really matters is how well you can adlib your strategies to account for his moves. But even if someone breaks formation upon failing to resist the enemy’s ferocity and element of surprise, or an ally disobeys commands, their moves can be exploited to catch the opponent off-guard.”

Having said all that, Saber turned his eyes to the forest in the west.

“If you think of that forest and temple as a city, whether or not a swift attack can conquer it depends on the characteristics of the general guarding it. If not a general, a king... or a god. I once defeated a kind of fiendish creature called Dead Apostle, but this will be my first time conquering the castle of a god.”

“Oh my, I’m surprised you have slayed a Dead Apostle in your lifetime, Saber.”

Saber reacted to Luvia’s words with an awkward smile and a side glance at Hansa.

“Only one, and it took teaming up with my lifelong enemy and pretty much exhausting our combined forces. And if anything, the cleanup after it was the toughest part. I recommend you never interact with anyone from the secret side of the Church. I can’t say all, but most of them are annoying.”

“I agree.”, Hansa replied from a distance, suggesting he heard everything.

“I agree.”, also commented Rin without elaboration.

After that, Vera raised her voice as the police’s representative.

“So... are you suggesting we wait here until the state in the western forest changes?”

It was a natural question for Vera, who knew they were in a race against time for the city’s destruction, but it resulted in Werner shaking his head.

“No, we don’t have time to wait for their conclusion. If the self-proclaimed god in question wins, things get worse for us.”

“What do you mean?”, asked Tine’s secretary in response.

“When a Heroic Spirit is defeated in battle, their soul flows to the Lesser Grail. Do I need to say more?”, answered Toosaka Rin, presumably the most informed on the subject of the Holy Grail Wars.

In Holy Grail Wars following the Fuyuki model, the Holy Grail is split into a Greater Grail and a Lesser Grail.

The Greater Grail is like a storage tank accumulating magical energy from the pulse of the land, and the Lesser Grail exists as the device that scoops up the souls of the summoned Heroic Spirits.

After a Heroic Spirit is defeated in battle and can no longer sustain their Saint Graph, their soul flows to the Lesser Grail, where it is deposited.

When the Holy Grail War is concluded, their spiritual forms solidify in the shape of the Holy Grail, forming a wish-granting device.

It’s said that at this moment, the official Holy Grail can reach the domain of the Third Magic (soul materialization), allowing one to obtain actual immortality.

She remembered a strange conversation where Francesca and Faldeus mentioned “Fuyuki’s Holy Grail had another purpose besides Third Magic”, but Faldeus said “That’s not our objective” and Francesca “I’m not interested in it, and besides, the best the Fake Grail I made can offer is a simulation of Third Magic... It’ll never be able to open the hole needed to go beyond it.”

The chief didn’t voice any objection to these details, so Vera didn’t ask for more details.

Toosaka Rin showed no signs of wanting to elaborate. She simply continued to talk about the Lesser Grail’s presence.

“Does your boss know what the Lesser Grail is?”, Rin asked Vera.

As someone on the side of the Holy Grail War masterminds, Vera had a moment of

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indecision, but since she got permission from the chief to reveal any cards in her hand except Servant True Names, she slowly nodded.

“...Yes. A collaborator named Francesca brought an Einzbern homunculus... Unit name Fillia.”

“What?”

It was Ayaka who raised her voice.

“By Fillia, you mean... that Fillia?”

“There’s a lot less to explain if you already know her. You can understand what Miss Toosaka is getting at.”

Saber followed up Vera’s words with a docile nod.

“I get it. Every time a Heroic Spirit dies, their soul flows to the Lesser Grail, which is this homunculus’ body. But the problem is that this Lesser Grail is occupied by this Ishtar deity...”

“A normal Lesser Grail wouldn’t be equipped with the function to convert a Heroic Spirit’s soul into power they can control. But it’s a different story if what’s inside her really is a god or something similar enough to one.”

Luvia then continued where Rin left off.

“If the first Heroic Spirit to lose the war had Divinity, it joining the Grail’s stream could be what caused this awakening... or so we speculate.”

“So what you’re saying is that if someone loses in this tumult and their soul is absorbed... that’s when things get beyond our reach?”

“Yes, and because of that, our plan is simple. We’ll raid the temple now.”

Intrigued by Rin’s assertion, Saber asked an amused question.

“What’s that? I thought I heard you say you weren’t stupid enough to rush there head-on?”

“Yes, keyword head-on.” Toosaka declared, with full disrespect, as a form of a challenge to a greater power. “I don’t care what that deity is... I’m going to slug her fair and square, from behind her back.”

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In front of the Neo Ishtar Temple

The definition of power.

The definition of world.

Those phrases were directly adapted into visuals repeatedly in the interstice between land and sky.

A giant hurricane, incarnation of a divine beast.

The guard of the gods, monster of calamity.

The black flood created by the avenger who rejects and opposes gods.

The chain-and-lynchpin weapon created by the gods.

The echoed emanation of an elden goddess trying to reach again the rank of god.

What once was the western forest now turned into a sandbox dominated by the relics of the Age of Gods and those opposing it.

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The Heroic Spirit and the magical creature who wandered there were no more worthy than grains of dust there.

Immense amounts of energy circulated the sandbox nonstop to prove this point.

She was unprepared.

The Heroic Spirit who stumbled into the sandbox simply lamented her lack of experience.

She was always conceited.

Perhaps, in a sense, her efforts to get closer to the great and pious nineteen were the first mark of her immaturity.

One exalted Heroic Spirit at the mercy of surging waves of power.

She hadn't accomplished anything since she manifested as an Assassin with no name.

She didn't obliterate the hellspawn who contaminated her soul with wicked magical energy.

She didn't save the young girl toyed with by her parents.

She didn't prevent the city's destruction by expostulating the stranger power professing herself as God.

The scene unfolding before the Assassin with no name could be described as the slow and gentle collapse of the world.

Mountain-like serpents entangled a colossal beast far greater than it, and the land was covered in a black surging deluge.

Furthermore, a giant harpoon approached, which she presumed belonged to the Heroic

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Spirit met in the forest. The woman calling herself Goddess Ishtar charmed the world itself and twisted it to her will.

That was something she could never tolerate.

No, even if she tolerated it, she had to put a stop to it for the sake of the people in the city.

But the situation was beyond a state where her feelings mattered.

She could barely escape the black flood by clinging to the trees of the forest, but that's all she could manage.

If she tried to go in spirit form to dodge, she was bound to be involved in the whirl of magical energy and die on the spot.

Her situation would leave any regular human, or regular Heroic Spirit, disheartened.

But her heart doesn't give in.

Faced with clashes of power that could be described as the ultimate brutality, the Assassin with no name kept looking for something she could do.

She was more than ready to offer her life.

But her life was far from enough to solve this situation.

"HAHAHA! My Assassin beloved, you and I are but grains of dust in face of the brutality of this power! Oh, the sweet joy I feel for my first time seeing the world on the same level as you do! The taste of despair is worth savoring! Yes, I finally find myself prepared to die if needs come! AH, YES! My one love! Perishing along with you wouldn't be—"

The Assassin with no name could hear nonstop words of delirium coming from the tree next to her, but she ignored them as she delivered a strike of her Noble Phantasm.

"

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Delusional Heartbeat

...Zabaniya...

“

By a hair's breadth, Jester dodged the strike of the dark red arm sprouted out of Assassin's back.

But his movements were much more lackluster than before—If Assassin dedicated her whole power to killing Jester, now she had a real chance to erase him.

But she didn't know how far the magical energy she was borrowing from Ayaka would last. In this case, wouldn't it be better for her to stake everything on a ray of hope and go exterminate the being calling herself a “goddess”?

She was indecisive.

The indecisiveness was a mark of her immaturity, the Assassin with no name thought.

She would lament her weakness, but she didn't have the time for that.

What to do?

What is the right choice?

To follow logic or emotion?

Am I even qualified to make the choice?

“Ah, ah, beautiful Assassin, my dearest beloved! There is nothing left we can do. But to see you of beautiful faith forced to your knees by a foreign power is... It is... AH! I'll be honest! It's all I wanted to see! My love was meant to be completed with me tormenting and breaking you. If that's now beyond my reach, I'm quite satisfied with the compromise of watching the gods break you! Are you disappointed in me? Please be. I said I'm willing to settle for less when it comes to

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our love! What a moral lapse! Then we, a disheartened man and a disheartened woman, have to find beauty in us disappearing together from this era in—”

Words of delirium came from the opposite tree, but the Assassin with no name continued to ignore them.

However, similar shock and impatience had begun to knock at the inner doors of her heart.

Every stomp of a leg the divine beast, familiar of the woman who wasn't even a Servant, caused a new cataclysm.

There were no means to prevent that.

She had nothing.

Then what would be the point in opposing it?

She imagined another one of herself reaching to her from behind.

Her other self whispered “You have done enough” to her ear.

It also felt like she was whispering grudgeful complaints.

“Life could have been so much easier if you had chosen to live as a normal person instead of aiming for the heights and thinking you could live like the Old Man of the Mountain.”

The words “You can rest in peace now” sounded unexpectedly inviting.

“Anything you try is useless”

“Then why don't you try everything away and run?”

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“Yes, you could”

“take that mercenary man with you and—”

With one arm, the Assassin with no name strangled her own self whispering behind her back.

“Gah...”

Turning back in surprise at the tangible sensation, she found a gasping Jester with a broken neck.

“...?”

Jester held the confused Assassin’s hand and forced her to retreat from the scene while he peeled off his neck’s flesh.

“Gha... Haha, HAHAHA! So you won’t submit! That’s what makes you bea—”

Jester fell into the black flood before he could draw the last words out of his contorted neck, disappearing on the spot swallowed by the current.

That’s when Assassin noticed it.

What she assumed to have been a shade of the weakness of her heart was actually an illusion cast by Jester.

“...”

That won’t be enough to make him perish.

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She thought of chasing after him, but she wasn't dumb enough not to understand how dangerous the black flood was.

Someone like Jester, heretical in origin, was safer than her, but she couldn't begin to imagine what effects it would have if a Servant like her fell into it.

Nowhere was safe for Assassin to stand, but strangely enough, she regained her calm.

Back in her rational state, the Assassin with no name steadied her breathing and looked at the sky with an unperturbed expression.

"I truly still have a lot to learn."

Her view was surprisingly clear amidst the turbulent winds.

Due to Jester's whispers, she remembered the creed a mercenary gained.

—"I'll look for a way to save Kuruoka Tsubaki even if the city gets destroyed."

He, the mercenary, said he would look for a way to save someone even if the city gets destroyed.

He accepted the ruin brought by a greater force, and nonetheless, he would still save the girl.

"Sigma is far stronger than I am."

Her face was clearer but showed a form of determination.

Fate won't test me. Because the greater flow is already determined. Not to say it's not my place to test Allah's fate.

Serene clarity.

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The rainstorms around her, the flood below her, and the maelstrom of bloodlust surrounding her felt distant.

By discarding all that made her who she was, she could combine all imitations of the great Old Men of the Mountain of the past, and by giving up her humanity, she had a chance to put a stop to the colossus and the woman with foreign power.

I fear nothing. I'll simply become what I must. I just have to discard all my immature feelings.

The Assassin with no name tried to let go of her emotions in order to see her path to its end.

The root of her Saint Graph wriggled starting to become something that would delete her ego.

But...

The change in her Saint Graph stopped completely.

“...?”

The Assassin with no name attempted to chant the name of Noble Phantasm, ready to erase everything she built up with time—her past, personality, body, and emotions.

However, she was unable to say the name out loud.

The scene before her suddenly lost its sound, and following it, the airflow caused by the violent gale also disappeared from sight completely.

Unable to listen even to the sound of her breathing, Assassin mistakenly believed someone took away her hearing.

Focusing on her ears, she could faintly hear the rustling of cloth, thus realizing that what was off was not her ears, but her relation to the space she was in.

Her presence was isolated from the world, as if trapped in a shadow with no depth.

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More precisely, her presence was cut off by a shadow creeping in the gaps of the world.

An invisible shadow.

There was no other way to describe the bizarre sensation enveloping her.

She couldn't move.

But despite standing exactly where she was before, she was now utterly unaffected by the galestorms and combat clashes.

No, she couldn't look at her hands and feet to tell if she was standing or sitting.

Her disconnection from the world was so sudden that she wondered if she had already died and lost the body she was using.

And then she saw a change.

The huge tree next to her greatly warped from the shockwaves of Berserker parrying Lancer's attack.

And when one of the scattered leaves phased through Assassin—

Something that wasn't there a moment ago floated in the center of her line of sight.

"It" naturally floated in the air, as if it dissolved into the world.

"It" being one skull mask, symbolic of the concept of death.

Time momentarily stopped for the Assassin with no name.

She didn't get the chance to question what was happening.

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She didn't have the need to voice her disbelief.

Without a shred of confusion, her lifetime memories, her soul, her cultivated body, and her faith now sullied by the hellspawn knew what she was looking at.

The skin of her face regained sensation.

She could feel tears spontaneously rolling down her eyes.

The skull mask stood there doing nothing, but strangely, a voice reverberated around her.

[Why didst thou visit the temple?]

A human voice.

But bizarrely, it sounded like the voice was coming from the entire world around Assassin.

Assassin instinctively felt like she was trapped in shadow but she immediately understood what was actually happening.

The shadow sealing her was the very manifestation of the exalted ones.

[Why didst thou seek the mountain?]

The question of this voice of pure calm sunk into Assassin's soul.

A voice with a peculiar mix of stern reprimand and gentle embrace.

Assassin couldn't get words out of her mouth.

The questions demanded her to lay bare the root of her character.

But the Assassin with no name had no answer to the question.

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To be more precise, she thought she didn't deserve to answer.

She believed that more than anything.

What the zealot sought was proof.

Certain proof of her faith. Proof enough to convince her she was a follower of Allah.

Only much later did she realize the act of seeking was an immature idea.

It is now that her life ended and she became a Heroic Spirit that she first noticed her immaturity.

But there was one thing she came to understand even less after becoming a Heroic Spirit.

Why did she seek proof?

Did she want the power to save more people?

Did she want to show off her piousness to others?

Did she want to offer all of herself to the greater flow, including what she would obtain through the proof?

Did she hold the arrogant wish to change the whole world by becoming the leader of the Order of Assassins?

Or—was her desire much smaller and more personal?

She no longer had her original memories in her.

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Only regret over the immaturity that inspired her to want proof.

Her initial reason was something she discarded partway through her long and harsh training.

After overcoming extraordinary hardships, her body and mind were rearranged, different from what she was born as.

To learn the eighteen feats of the past Hassan-i-Sabbah, she needed to sacrifice everything.

She would never admit to it but—

In a sense, she was more adept than any other.

She offered her suffering, offered her past, offered her future, and lost most of her emotions.

To get where she was, even her name and her initial wishes and prayers were offered as tribute.

That is why she reached heights no one else did.

As such, due to the way she lived, she was unable to answer the question.

It asked about her beginnings.

But said beginnings were tossed away as a hindrance to her faith.

She was unable to move or let out a word, but—

Even if she was always free to speak, she had no way of answering this.

She could answer why she entrusted herself to her faith.

If she couldn't, she wouldn't have been able to feel joy at Sigma's budding faith nor to attack the mages that sought the Grail.

But the question was her reason to seek the mountain.

When one of the exalted says the word “mountain”, they mean one name.

Hassan-i-Sabbah.

A name with a special meaning in the sect she followed.

Self-contradictorily enough, she was beyond the point where she could answer her reason to aim higher.

Despite her inability to speak out loud, the voice continued, perhaps reading her mind through her saddened face and her silent lack of resistance.

[I felt thy presence at the moment of my call to these lands.]

“!”

[And now, thou hast shown resolve in the face of the greater flow... As I imagined, thou art not one of us], the voice dispassionately announced to the Assassin with no name.

A phrase that could be interpreted as a rejection echoed across her world.

Words that, if taken literally, could bring Assassin into collapse.

However, she accepted the news.

It's obvious. The mere fact he took his time to reject and refute my immaturity is already an honor beyond my merit., she thought, ashamed of herself. *He came to stop me. I can hear it in his voice. The exalted one does not seek the Grail.*

His voice existed as a fragment of the world, devoid of arrogance or desire.

It had reached perfection.

He was the opposite of her inexperience.

Ab, ah, so that's how it is. I've made a mistake. I'm certain that the exalted ones called for past Holy Grail Wars wouldn't have sought the Grail either. I made a stupid assumption, felt anger at the mages and the Holy Grail, and hurt many for it. I was chained by sadness and hatred. I'm sure he is here to punish me.

"If you permit a few words,"

Before she knew it, she raised her voice.

She didn't know when speech returned to her, but she kept weaving her words as she was convinced natural providence demanded.

"My inexperience has brought nothing but catastrophe to the people I spent time with... Sigma, Ayaka Sajou, and a girl named Tsubaki, as well as many inhabitants of these lands. They haven't deviated from their proper walk. You may brand me as many times as needed in the fires of Jahannam. But please be tolerant in their judgment."

Her heart had already decided.

If the will of the great predecessor before her was to condemn her companions for her actions, she would rewrite everything as her sin alone—even accepting to sink into the depths of darkness for it—in other words, even if what it takes is to bare her fangs at the true Assassin before her eyes.

But—

[That is not for I nor thou to decide. No man is qualified to mete divine punishment.]

"...!"

The skull mask's declaration indicated he saw through her heart, leaving Assassin once more ashamed of her immaturity, and yet she once again would try to convince him of the innocence of the people she met in this summon, but—

The voice spoke first.

[Thou art not one of us. However... that is all. There is no further meaning to thy difference.]

“...?”

[Thou wast supposed to realize while thou wast still in the flesh.]

The Assassin with no name looked above, unable to understand the conversation.

She felt the pitch-black holes behind the skull mask's eyes looking at her.

And as always, the voice echoed through the entire shadow world around her.

[It is due to our doubts, losses, madness, loves, and wants that we reach the summit of the mountain, and since the summit is inescapable, it is through the mercy of the original that we are allowed to return to the ravine.]

The voice spoke slowly, allowing his words to sink into the nameless Assassin's body and soul—into the very life that built this Saint Graph piece by piece until reached the status of Heroic Spirit.

[Thou art one who treadeth the walk of life.]

The Servant present in the form of the true Assassin—Hassan-i-Sabbah—addressed the one pious devotee safeguarded within the shadow before him.

The shadow carved into the world declared:

[Thou art of the folk we exist to protect... Thine is the faith I tributed my life for.]

“.....”

The nameless Assassin was speechless. In contrast, Hassan calmly continued.

Fate/strange Fake 8

[The first of the Old Men wilt disavow thy choice. The mountain and the ravine wilt reject thee.]

Following that, the Assassin with no name noticed changes.

She began to once again feel the chilling winds on her skin and the sounds she was isolated from until now. She understood she was released from the “invisible shadow”.

“Thence...”

The voice came only from one direction.

There she saw a pitch-black shadow spreading around the skull mask, forming a human body.

“It is my role as his extended shadow to show thee to thy path.”

After leaving those bizarre words said with a voice full of almost parental affection, different from his previous mechanical tone—

He blended his body and skull mask into the shadow of the dark flood.



Fate/strange Fake 8

“Treadeth thy walk, devotee.”

To signal that the “shadow” remained the same “shadow” be it in the sacred mausoleum or within boundless curse.

“Thou needn’t forsake anything to the greater flow.”

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Industrial district

“If I continue this, it will only result in both sides repeating the same plays every turn.”

He continuously fired his demonic arrows with full intention to mow down the enemy, not for containment or diversion.

But the front leg of the Bull of Heaven was still in good condition and there was no visible damage to the actual temple.

Holding off the Bull of Heaven’s movements for a long time was already an amazing feat, but that didn’t matter to Alcides.

Because wasn’t really fighting to protect the city or its people.

After lowering his bow, Alcides sent a telepathic message to his Master.

“...Master, I’m going to use a considerable amount of magical energy. Any problems?”

His Master’s mind dispassionately asked him how much.

“All I can.”, Alcides answered immediately.

And then he added:

Chapter 25: Backroom Rhapsody

“If I accomplish this... Your magical energy supply will be no longer necessary.”

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The temple

The Neo Ishtar Temple was at the center of the forest’s alteration.

On it stood Fillia/Ishtar, the goddess emanation who continued to overrun the world despite being busy confronting both Alcides and Enkidu. One dancing shadow descended behind her.

The shadow was a shadow and nothing else. It got darker to some degree under the temple’s roof and nothing else changed.

Goddess Ishtar couldn’t see his concrete figure, but she knew for sure that a presence sneaked into her Authority’s range and asked a question to the shadow rising behind her back.

“Who are you? What do you want with me?”

“Afterglow of the Morning Star claiming to be the skies of a stranger land.”

The shadow blended in the darkness, letting only his voice extend to his surroundings.

Faldeus’s Assassin Servant—Hassan-i-Sabbah.

The one without a number indicating his generation. The one by the title of Hassan of the Fathomless Rift, known only to the others who also inherited Hassan-i-Sabbah’s name.

An anomalous skull mask, by some often called Shadow of the First, although his denomination doesn’t reflect his reality.

All he did was communicate from the shadows to the woman claiming to be a goddess.

“On behalf of the original blade yielded by the ancestor... I am here to deliver thee the evening bell.

a t e / s t r a n g e F a k

Interlude

“Do you have enough actors in stock?”

Interlude: Do you have enough actors in stock?

Interlude: Do you have enough actors in stock?

Snowfield City

“...No surprises, but all the powerful mages already left before it’s gotten this bad.”

The sky was blue in Snowfield’s urban area thanks to the hurricane in the west absorbing all clouds.

But regardless of the clear sky, rainstorms blew violently. Sigma calmly proceeded through this sun shower.

“Yeah, that’s because most of them scrammed once they realized the hurricane was magical in nature. Well, there was one or another who stayed here thinking they could handle it.”

“...Those types need to be dealt with caution... Most mages or spellcasters would be looking for an opportunity to take advantage of this.”

“Look who’s talking.”

Sigma chose not to answer the comment by the boy knight silhouette.

At this point, he was done contacting all special squads discarded by Faldeus, as he did before with THORN.

There was another squad in the desert region but since the Prelatis were nearby, he deemed them too dangerous to approach without a plan.

Faldeus shut down his communication network but his magical observation network was still online.

While he crossed the city using information taken from Watcher’s eyes to avoid the cameras, the Shadow suddenly took the form of the captain and started a conversation.

Fate/strange Fake 8

“Kehe. Lad oh lad, I didn’t think you’d be calling us Chaplin again.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Nah, I appreciate your guts. But if you’re gonna fake a famous name, wouldn’t it be better to go with someone more useful in a war? Could’ve picked someone like King Arthur, Karl der Grosse, or Mehmed II.”

The aged captain listed exceptionally famed heroes, but after some thought, Sigma shook his head.

“As I mentioned before, that’s the name of the first respectable figure to come to mind. If I had chosen anything else, they’d find my attitude unnatural. Those guys are pros, you know? The slightest mistake is enough for them to see through a lie.”

“I don’t think it gets more unnatural than a comedian becoming a Heroic Spirit, to be honest. Actually, the main reason why I don’t think he’s in the Throne of Heroes is that he’s too modern...”, said the Heroic Spirit transformed into the boy with the caduceus.

“Their knowledge of the Holy Grail War is not that deep. I mean, I didn’t know either that it was harder to become a Heroic Spirit in the modern age.”, emotionlessly said Sigma.

“That’s because arcanity is on the verge of fading away. It should be impossible unless you make a guardian pact with the world. Though that doesn’t necessarily mean older is better. There are times when which Heroic Spirits are summonable and which aren’t depends on the qualities of the Holy Grail. Heroic Spirits with deeper links to it are more likely to be summoned, so take for example the case of the Holy Grail used here and in Fuyuki. The main Grail is made using a European mage, so it’s a bit difficult for it to call Heroic Spirits more connected to East Asia... or the Americas. The Greater Grail’s characteristics take priority over the land’s leylines.”

“I see... Which means I’m safe because Charles Chaplin is British.”

“Really? That’s the part that gets you?”

The Shadow had an awkward smile, but then it suddenly shapeshifted into the aviator woman.

Interlude: Do you have enough actors in stock?

“Remember Thia Escardos? He’s back in town.”

“Hng! Where is he headed to?”

“Above the western forest, watching the situation from barely outside the hurricane’s reach. He looked quite interested in the canyon in the north, probably about the mages gathered there.”

“Ok...”

Sigma thought about this additional information as he walked.

“The West is getting more and more chaotic. Are you still going?”, asked the Shadow turned into an aged Japanese swordsman.

“Yeah, it’s my job and I’m going to do it.”

There he paused to think and returned to the Shadow with a question:

“By the way... Isn’t your woman with the aviator cap modern?”

The Shadow responded in the form of the boy knight.

“We Shadows aren’t necessarily Heroic Spirits. Watcher just takes the compatible information records from her past observations of the world and reproduces them personality included, so it doesn’t matter if we’re ancient or modern. Well, even if we’re the same as what we’re copied from, we’re still just lumps of compiled information.”

“So you’re like super advanced AIs? We might be close to the era when we can ask AI to come up with effective incantations and magic circles.”

“True, one of the mages gathered north seemed skilled in this particular field.”

“North, huh... How many mages are still in the city at...? ...!”

Fate/strange Fake 8

That's when Sigma noticed human silhouettes and hid in an alley, using magecraft to conceal his figure.

The person walking in the rainstorm was a policeman, presumably one of the chief's subordinates.

"A cop..."

After some thought, Sigma asked:

"Is the police chief still in his station?"

The Shadow reacted to the question, fully aware of everything happening in the city. Taking the form of a musclebound hunter, it gave a disappointed answer.

"Yup, he's there, why? That pretty Vera chick is gone though, went north for the discussion. Look, I'm just a Shadow so I won't tell you what to do, but that valley up north is full of fine mage ladies. Are you sure you don't wanna join them?"

"I am sure... There's no way they'd accept me, I've been working on the same team as Faldeus and Francesca. I'm honestly surprised a member of the police is there, even."

"Bleh."

The hunter disappeared with a sulk, and in his place, the old captain appeared again.

"So what's your plan? Since you asked where the police chief is... That's where yer goin', lad?", he said to Sigma.

After some pause, Sigma answered with conviction.

"Yeah... The more actors, the better."

"If you got too many characters, you won't be able to wrap up all threads in an easily wrappable plot, lad."

Interlude: Do you have enough actors in stock?

“We don’t need to wrap up everyone’s stories... If I can conclude my comedy, that’s all that matters.”

“Comedy, eh? I know you love those, but do you really think you got the chops for it?”, said the old captain with a hint of sarcasm.

Through faint memories of his past, Sigma weaved his words.

“I think all the realities I saw through my life were closer to tragedies than anything. Even the few comedies in it were the kind where you laugh at a character’s suffering.”

Thinking about Lambda and Tau, the companions of his youth... and the mother who died in the lands of Fuyuki before he ever met her, Sigma looked up to see the ridiculous weather.

“At least once, I wanna try performing the comedy that ends with me sharing laughs with someone.”

Remembering the smile on the nameless Assassin’s face when they parted ways, Sigma resumed his walk.

“Well... Dying with a smile on my face is also a valid ending.”

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Snowfield Police Station, chief’s office

Orlando Reeve was gathering information using the magical observation device on top of the chief desk until he felt a part of the police station’s boundary being damaged.

“... Did the galestorm cause that? No...”

It was quite likely an invader took advantage of the chaos in the West to attack him.

Fate/strange Fake 8

Remembering how Assassin came in by force and how Flat Escardos dominated the station through a back door, Orlando carefully inspected the status of the boundary.

He found that the boundary of the rear gate was destroyed.

Evidence at the scene suggested that an ordinary mage or spellcaster removed it through orthodox methods, without relying on any clever magical energy manipulation or breaking it by force.

“...”

Vera led one-third of the police on a mission to form an alliance in the northern strath, with one of the remaining thirds defending the station, and the last third, which includes John, was dispatched to patrol the city.

In addition, the non-mage officers were patrolling the city by car and performing regular disaster duties, such as checking locations for potential damage and preventing robbers from scavenging during the disaster.

Orlando was about to give instructions to the Clan Calatin members in the station through the magecraft radio when his phone extension rang.

I should have expected that the inner lines still worked.

He had already confirmed that the city was isolated from communication.

Finally feeling how seriously intent Faldeus's group was at folding the city under a lid, Orlando picked up the phone.

“Hello.”

--Are you Chief Orlando?--

“Who is it?”

Interlude: Do you have enough actors in stock?

The inner line indicated the call came from Archive Room 2.

It was the room where they stored the falsified files for cases speculated to involve magecraft. Officers were normally not allowed to enter.

--I am the Master of the true Lancer. Have you heard the name Sigma?--

“...Yes, you’re Francesca’s favorite.”

--I have no messages from Francesca. I’m here on my own decision. She would have come in person if she had anything to tell you, right?--

“Hmm...”

His voice and phrasing suggested that this was indeed Sigma.

But because a disguise still wasn’t completely out of the cards, the chief carefully asked:

“Why did you burst the boundary? If you’re on my side, you could have taken the front door.”

--Because I’d rather that Faldeus didn’t know about this. Francesca... is better not finding out about it either. I can imagine her trying to interfere with me for no reason.--

“I can agree with that... And? What are you calling for?”

He cautiously waited for the speaker’s next words, remaining vigilant because it was perfectly possible that the entire phone call was Francesca’s illusion.

--I want to borrow your Heroic Spirit... Alexandre Dumas.--

“Was it Faldeus or Francesca who told you that?”

--Neither, I investigated it on my own. I also already know tomorrow is the last day of this city.--

Fate/strange Fake 8

“Hmph...”

So he figured out about the emergency and came to get another Master’s cooperation. For what reason did he choose me and not the alliance in the north? Not to mention he’s just a spellcaster. The normal thing for him to do upon understanding what’s happening would be to escape.

“I can offer my Servant’s help but what are you offering in exchange? I’ll make it clear that I don’t know anything about your Servant.”

He could hear a strong determination in the answer on his phone.

--All the information.--

“What?”

--I’ll tell you all the information I learned. In exchange, I want to borrow Dumas’s Noble Phantasm.--

“That’s ambiguous... Give an example of what you know.”

The chief inquired further and—

The person negotiating through the phone answered without a second of pause.

--For starters, I was lying about my Servant being a Lancer.--

“You expect me to trust people who open up with ‘I was lying a few seconds ago?’”

Despite the snide remark, the chief was thinking about it.

Considering the manifested Servants... By process of elimination, the most likely to be the last one remaining is Lancer, but if that’s not the case, that is indeed interesting information.

--I assumed that telling you about my real Servant without context would only confuse you.

Interlude: Do you have enough actors in stock?

I'm hiding this information from Faldeus. No one knows about it other than you.--

“What?”

--With that explained, I have one more thing to tell... The topic that would be the most important to you.--

The negotiator on the phone continued to disclose information, having figured out that his intel caught the chief's interest.

He dropped a bomb that was hard to swallow, yet immensely important if true.

--One of your subordinates... A Clan Calatin member is leaking information to Bazdilot.--

“What do you mean by that?!”

--I mean that Bazdilot Cordelion already knows that the police are gathering north to form a coalition with several other Masters and that the city is in danger. And knowing that, he started his preparations.--

“Preparations for what...?”, the chief followed up with a question, doing his best to contain his agitation.

And the information disclosed was enough to give Orlando a new stress wrinkle.

--He plans to take advantage of the chaos to arm an ambush on either the Correction Center or Crystal Hill and kill Faldeus before he can relocate the Greater Grail.--

Chapter 26

“The age of gods and the modern age

<Maturation>”

Chapter 26: "The age of gods and the modern age <Maturation>"

"I'm so jealous."

That was what a girl told Enkidu long ago.

She said she was jealous of how Enkidu was eternally unchanging.

Enkidu couldn't understand her logic back then, since they were a mud doll that changed forms with every move.

However, what the girl meant was that changes in appearance never made Enkidu less Enkidu.

"No matter what happens, no matter how many people you meet, even if the gods condemn you, your essence will stay the same.", she said.

Even throughout their slow death, even past the day they returned to the dirt, Enkidu was eternally unchanging.

As long as the world still has dirt and people, Enkidu will remain eternally Enkidu, and the girl said she was jealous of that.

A slowly changing girl, a girl cast with a curse that forced her to change—In disobedience to her fate, she made a wish to Enkidu.

"Don't forget me."

That was all that she said.

Not to forget her. Not to forget them.

Fate/strange Fake 8

The girl feared that in her change, she might forget everything. She feared it more than death.

That's why she made her wish to the unchanging Enkidu.

She wanted at least one person to remember what they used to be.

Enkidu promised.

Before they had a human shape, they learned the system of promises and implemented it into their core operations.

Enkidu did in fact remember the girl's words and their promise.

Every time they met, the girl would ask the same happy and lonely question. "Will you remember who we were?". Enkidu always felt strange when it happened.

But the time came for them to say goodbye.

The will of the gods separated Enkidu from their first friend and sent them to Uruk, the city next to the forest.

But even there, Enkidu kept listening to the girl's words.

Because they made a promise.

Every day, Enkidu operated the girl's words on their auditive sensors in an attempt to record the data about them in their memory space.

But on the day of their farewell.

The last words Enkidu heard the girl say was—

Who are you?

Enkidu would later come to meet many humans, starting from Shamhat, change shape, escape the hand of the gods, and go on many adventures.

But Enkidu never forgot the words of the first human girl he met and the living records of the ones united with her.

Nor the bed and meals they shared with Shamhat.

Nor when she sent him to meet a king.

Nor the three days and three nights they spent fighting the king.

Enkidu never forgot the girl and the ones with her.

Not when they were dashing through Uruk's wheat fields.

Not when they traveled down the Purattum River on a reed raft.

Not when they dashed through the forest of Eridu.

Not when Gilgamesh declared he would clear land on the Cedar Forest of Lebanon.

Not when they learned that the guard of the forest was a group of children including their first friend.

Not when they confirmed breaking the law of the gods and killing the guard would lead them to suffer a tragic death.

Not when they confronted the guard.

Not when they defeated the guard with their own hands.

Not even while they dismantled her with their own hands until the shape of their former friend was gone for good—

Enkidu never forgot the children.

The children's words are the only part of the vague records of their past or their memories that are engraved on their body and soul.

But there's one thing they can't remember. Something previous to the promise.

The color of the flower that bloomed when they first met her.

Fate/strange Fake 8

The fact that they couldn't remember that color was a constant source of friction to Enkidu's system.

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Present day, Neo Ishtar Temple

"...I have a question for you, but I can tell it's going to be hard to ask before I exterminate Ishtar."

Enkidu's faintly forlorn words were accompanied by a series of attacks blocked by the lights of calamity.

The torrent of energy shined radiantly but what was contained inside it were modern concepts of calamity: disease, heat waves, and war.

Berserker blocked everything by defensively applying enough magical energy to destroy a corner of the city if applied offensively.

That was the correct thing to do when facing the Divine Weapon named Enkidu.

Even with Haruri's magical energy under the effects of goddess Ishtar's blessings, fighting defensively was the best they could do.

The Command Spell used a while ago drew her maximum power as a Guardian Colossus, but not only was the fact that she failed as a guardian engraved into the world, but she was also fighting the very person who defeated her as a guardian in the legends.

She couldn't be at a greater compatibility disadvantage, but she still could resist without letting them pass to the temple. That's because this place wasn't the Cedar Forest of Lebanon, it was the front gate of a temple where the goddess Ishtar was enshrined.

Berserker circled around them with unthinkable agility for the gigantic size of her body, posing herself in a way she could just as easily attack Enkidu from the front or from the back, and continued to endure their attacks.

They took countless turns attacking and defending.

They entered this tactical loop, both expecting the conflict between the Avenger’s toxic snakes and the Bull of Heaven to be over before anything changed on theirs. But then it happened—

Indescribable discomfort assailed Enkidu’s body.

“What’s this?”

A bizarre sensation they never felt in life or otherwise.

Something that didn’t exist until a few instants ago started oozing out inside the extended domain of their Presence Detection.

It was different from teleporting with Command Spells. Someone eerily “came to existence” by denying the nexus that said it “didn’t exist”.

But what surprised Enkidu the most was where this “something” manifested—

On the top floor of the temple, the space goddess Ishtar was manipulating, directly behind her.

They checked on Ishtar, and she had noticed the sudden appearance, a few seconds later than Enkidu did.

They could visualize her talking to something behind her back.

“What a surprise. I didn’t think there was someone with stealth capabilities that could slip past my radar.”

Honestly impressed, they conjectured that the entity had an Assassin Saint Graph.

They had already confirmed the existence of the other Assassin Saint Graph, but this one

Fate/strange Fake 8

was completely different. A Heroic Spirit with a vague yet extraordinarily heavy existence.

Despite having this amazing quality of presence, he was perfectly concealed within the world until this moment.

From this fact alone, Enkidu imagined how fantastically powerful that Assassin was.

Regardless, this was highly likely to change the state of the board.

Having analyzed that, Enkidu used the power of Shapeshift to increase their abilities.

They started absorbing mana little by little, so the increase in their magical energy values would be not immediately noticeable.

So that they were ready to make the best possible move on the goddess Ishtar whenever something happened.

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The sky above the Neo Ishtar Temple

“What... is going on with them...?”

This Escardos analyzed the magical energy flow he was watching and was startled for a moment.

The flow of magical energy he observed around the temple changed dramatically in a moment.

The trigger for it was a shadow spawning behind the homunculus woman distorting the space with her divinity.

He appeared quietly, mixed with the shades of the temple.

That's all the humanoid shadow did, but for Thia, whose eyes could accurately see the flow of magical energy, it felt like the world instantly changed colors.

It was like the world flipped from day to night in the blink of an eye, which confused Thia.

“...Would my other self... Would Flat have understood what happened here?”

The shock made him reflexively miss his lost other half.

After quietly getting a full picture of the temple, Thia shifted his eyes to the strath.

There he noticed a change in the group of dozens of figures previously gathered on the canyon.

Most figures were gone, less than ten of them remaining there.

“...Even under this turbulent of a conflict, you don't even consider running away... El-Melloi Classroom.”

Thia reminisced about the home Flat Escardos loved.

After a moment of silence, he rotated the satellites around him.

Thia created satellites with magical energy that grew denser with each rotation while he waited for the opportune moment.

So that he could turn everything in this land to dust if needs be.

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Upper floor of the Neo Ishtar Temple

“Wha!? ...Ishtar!”

Fate/strange Fake 8

Noticing the irregularity behind her, Haruri tried to run to defend Ishtar.

But Ishtar gestured to stop her.

“I’m fine, Haruri. You keep Berserker pushing the piece of junk back. One opening is all they need to barge in here.”

“Y-yes, my goddess!”

Haruri was still insecure but didn’t disobey Ishtar’s words. She dedicated herself solely to supplying Berserker with magical energy.

Behind her back, Ishtar eyed the further darkness in her temple.

She immediately acknowledged that this “something” was a threat.

But even in danger, Ishtar was still the embodied sky.

She confronted the skull-masked mass of the world’s blended shadows with a dignified posture and a daring smile.

But she had yet to release her charm on the ground and wind, as the growling earth and the viscous wind were still holding the midair harpoon from piercing her.

It was also possible that once something was charmed by Ishtar, it truly gained a mind of its own and continued to struggle of its own volition, without needing Ishtar’s further interference.

“So... did I hear you say ‘evening bell’?”, Ishtar parroted those words and squinted. “A guard of the ravine acting like he’s Ziusudra... Ok, I see you’re his extended shadow.”

Her word choices got more trying, but on the inside, she was raising her levels of caution.

The caution she had against Enkidu was offensive in nature since it was born from hatred and scorn, but here she showed caution in its truest sense, the kind woven by strong hostility attempting to pick up on the enemy’s every movement.

She knew it.

The guard of the Ravine Mausoleum is able to implant the concept of death in a fully-fledged god.

“I don’t belong to your land so you can’t allow me to call myself a god? Is that what this is about?”

Goddess Ishtar’s question was challenging, causing the shadow to silently flicker.

“Wrong.”

She felt all shadows in that space flicker.

It might have been actually what happened.

“I merely answered thee the reason why I ventured outside the ravine.”

Faster than he finished these words—

Hassan formed a pitch-black shadow in midair behind the skull mask.

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Northwest section of Snowfield, underground

Multiple human figures crawled inside an artificial cave dug with a fixed size.

Saber and Ayaka, as well as Rider and her Masters, walked in the darkness with the dim light of magecraft floating above their heads.

“I’d have never guessed they had such a huge network of underground tunnels...,” said Saber with a mix of amazement and annoyance. Rider nodded in agreement.

Fate/strange Fake 8

“I was also surprised. In only a few days, they opened roads under the land from the canyon all the way to the desert on the south.”

“Well, a few of our class graduates are experts in excavation work and leyline manipulation. We’re lucky they happened to join the current team.”, casually said Rin.

Ayaka interjected.

“No way... Did you dig this cave? With your own hands?”

“If using magecraft counts as doing with our own hands, yes. Well, the area around the Greater Grail is obviously protected by underground Boundaries, so we couldn’t dig everything exactly how we wanted it.”

“You found out where the Greater Grail is?”

“Well, the answer is a lot more obvious than it was in Fuyuki’s case. It’s like they weren’t trying to hide it.”, Rin answered, starting to get irritated.

Being a mage from Fuyuki, there was a high likelihood she’s been in a Holy Grail War before. I learned through the illusion Prelati showed me that King Arthur manifested in Fuyuki. Then isn’t it possible that this mage Toosaka Rin has seen King Arthur with her own eyes?

Saber has been curious about this whole time, but since Ayaka sternly told him to save this conversation for later, he’s been holding back on his urges.

However, the conversation came his way from an unexpected angle.

“You’re completely used to the hairstyle at this point, huh.”, said the young man named Caules.

Saber tilted his head.

“Hm? Her hairstyle was different before?”

Rider herself answered the question that came up during their mid-walk chat.

"Yes. When I was summoned, I was wearing the outfit and hairstyle I used in life... But they told me my hair stood out too much when I walked the city in physical form, so a Master did my hair for me."

"Huh... Well, I get the logic. I've also been in a few modern outfits."

After nodding convinced, Saber casually dropped the following words.

"So that's why your hairstyle is so similar to My Ancestor King."

Rin stopped her walk and scowled at Saber.

Saber continued his reasoning, ignoring someone staring daggers at him.

"Oh, I already found Miss Rider's True Name. And knowing her social status, I can think of one person of the same prestige wearing this same hairstyle. That'd be My Ancestor King."

"I've been wondering... you're associated with the Round Table, aren't you?"

"If being a fan is enough to be associated with in your book, then of course I am! Associated with Ancestor King Arthur... I love the sound of that! Thank you!"

Seeing Saber turn what could have been an easy chance for a deflection into a further hint toward his True Name, Rin looked at Ayaka with eyes full of pity.

"Yours is a handful too..."

"Please tell me this is like... normal for Sabers in a Holy Grail War."

Ayaka begged for confirmation, but Rin didn't say yes or no.

"When I watched him giving a speech atop the police car, I thought there was something wrong with my eyes or my head."

“I figured...”

Having instantly figured out what she meant, Ayaka out a big sigh.

Saber, on the other hand, remembered something.

“Oh, right... I still haven’t paid for the opera house’s repairs. I have to——”

But his words were cut short.

A bizarre chill breezed past everyone in the room.

“What was that...?”

“Stay on guard.”, warned the young man named Svin. “The smells around us... begun to flip inside-out.”

Ayaka didn’t know what he meant by smells but understood something serious happened.

“It’s coming from... west.”, Saber warned everyone, squinting to watch his surroundings. “Yeah, my mage retinue has been suspecting this for a while. This underground space is... being invaded... Wait, no... Swallowed?”

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Upper floor of the Neo Ishtar Temple

----- began to flip the world inside-out.

This was visibly different from regular black smoke or mist.

The spread of his domain inside the temple was less like a gas expanding and more like all surrounding light being sucked into one point.

The darkness embraced Ishtar's surroundings and all light was plundered away from her sight.

In this space where even the flow of the wind on her skin was nowhere to be felt, a shadowy blade approached Ishtar's back.

But—It was effortlessly brushed away.

A part of the Neo Ishtar Temple walls, manipulated via Charm, blocked the invisible blade without requiring Ishtar to move one step away from her position.

The snapping sound of the deflected blade was sucked into the darkness while two more blades approached Ishtar from completely different directions.

But they didn't reach their mark.

Ishtar, ever unmoving, blocked all directions by levitating charmed stones and ornaments.

The blades of darkness unleashed by Assassin lacked the third dimension, making them normally capable of piercing a steel shield or a tank's plate to reach the target's life.

A mage or Heroic Spirit with strong magical defenses would be able to block them, but that's no surprise to anyone familiar with battles between Heroic Spirits.

But the wave of dark attacks never stopped.

The two simultaneous strikes were immediately followed by a new series of 3 invisible blades, targeting the top of her head, her feet, and her back.

Three clash noises are produced and sucked into the darkness.

Before the sound had completely disappeared, 4 slashes assailed Ishtar.

But they didn't reach their mark.

Fate/strange Fake 8

Five slashes.

Six stabs.

Ten blades.

Twelve.

A hundred.

A thousand.

This culminated in a nonstop loop of hits from every direction, but aside from stones and ornaments, Ishtar also charmed the air, and eventually the laws of physics, causing the world to eliminate the blades touching her skin from the possibilities of fate.

Assassin's blades would have already returned a normal Heroic Spirit's Saint Graph to the dark, but the opponent was a fragment of divinity that a god left in the world, even if but a remaining stain. No lone Heroic Spirit is a match for her.

"I was so curious to see what you'd try.. but all you had was stupid tricks.", Ishtar declared to the assassin in the dark. "Were you thinking you could stop me from charming things here if you hid my looks and voice? Well, that won't work. What I do has nothing to do with the five senses. The world is simply destined to be charmed by my presence."

Ishtar held out her hands to swat away the "shadow" that erased the space's color and shine while enlarging his domain.

"Learn some respect, Mariner of the Umbrage."

The power of her words was beginning to affect the laws of reality.

"This would have worked in about any regular Heroic Spirit out there. If that's what you

wanted, you could have killed any Master or Servant before they noticed you. I'm not sure about that Avenger, since he's more sturdy than he has any need to, but since his Master is human, that trick you just showed off would be more than enough to get rid of him."

It didn't matter what was ideal for mankind or the other animals. Her words became the new ideal for the planet's surface layer.

"But..."

If Ishtar said crows were white, the black crows would be erased from the world. And if that resulted in the crow species disappearing from Planet Earth, no one would notice the difference.

"Don't you go thinking the Sky will allow any domain for the shadows."

Light radiated in the inner corridor of the temple, rejecting the ingrained darkness.

Clear blue light.

The ground gave birth to an azure sky, and the entire place was lit with the pale radiance of the Morning Star.

And—One shadow floated in the center of it.

"Looking dashing, aren't we?"

There stood the skull-masked Assassin, his body pierced by countless lapis-lazulis arranged in the shape of blades.

With his Spirit Core pierced, the pulse of a Heroic Spirit could no longer be felt.

"Looks like it was your ears hearing the evening bell."

The shadow, by the definition of the phenomenon of shadow, couldn't exist within the light.

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Assassin's full-power blinding took away light from the world itself instead of from eyeballs, but the goddess Ishtar overpowered it with her Authority.

Or so she thought—



Fate/strange Fake 8

The goddess misunderstood him completely.
The assassin's expanded shadow.
The loop of countless slashes.
Neither of those was meaningful to this Assassin's essence.

“...?”

Expression disappeared from goddess Ishtar's face.

At this moment, she finally noticed something didn't add up.

She felt Assassin's Spirit Core being smashed.

But she couldn't see any sign of his Saint Graph crumbling.

On the contrary—

Her face and divine aura changed, first expressing doubts, later minor disturbance, and lastly suffocating irritation.

“Are you... trying to twist the proper way of things?”

“Wrong.”

The voice of the shadow Assassin echoed.

The voice of a dead man echoed.

The voice of a man who had his Spirit Core pulverized, who cannot possibly exist, whispered into Ishtar's ears.

Ishtar heard the whispers emanated from somewhere in the distant past, and due to its distance, the voice repeated numerous times in her ears.

“Hereby this replica of mine engraved in memory concludes the transitory journey of a

Servant."

Logic dictated his words were newly spouted, but sensation suggested his words were recorded in ancient times.

"...!"

"It is time to relinquish this borrowed fragment of the perennial shadow to the boundary between dark and light."

With those words—Assassin's carcass generated a tremendous amount of shadows.

The shadows spread like a black explosion, began to swallow the light once more, and painted the newly-formed sky inside the temple darker than the night.

The inhuman technique suppressed even a god's words of law.

A normal Assassin Servant couldn't pull this off.

But the True Assassin did.

A Self-Sacrificial Noble Phantasm whose first activation needs to be induced by his own death.

He doesn't die as a consequence of using it. He seals one's fate as a consequence of his dying.

The most advanced version of Hassan of the Fathomless Rift's technique of merging with shadows—

The Noble Phantasm that he can only use by merging his Saint Graph with the concept of death present in every land and every era has made itself manifest.

Meditative Sensitivity

"Zabaniya"

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A long time ago, there lived one -----.

He was a blade meant to fulfill the desires of a group completely different in nature from the future group that would be known as the Order of Assassins. In other words, he granted the desires of men without a shred of faith. This ----- raised to be a "shadow" was reconstructed as a ----- through magecraft, curse, alchemy, and science. After -----ing numerous -----s, the organization that created him ultimately ----- him. The only ones offering their hands to the ----- degraded into a ----- were one good-natured ----- and a pious ----- with pure faith in ----- heart. Thanks to them, the ----- could -----
----- everything ----- killed -----
----- couldn't save -----
----- saving ----- was not
the right thing to do-----
----- sought -----

And so, he journeyed to the ravine.

He was after a mausoleum rumored to be deep in those mountains, the one which regulated the divide between the underworld and the world of the living.

Most of his past was dissolved at the bottom of that nothing.

The Saint Graph data supposed to be recorded in the world for this Heroic Spirit scattered apart along with his past.

It's not possible to deceive the planet's memory, but the world being capable of detecting him didn't make a difference when no one could perceive him.

No one—Naturally including his own Heroic Spirit self.

All that remained inside him was his semi-systemified ego and the ideal he dedicated all of himself to on the verge of his death.

"Fool."

The journey of his life ended with him reaching the Mausoleum and encountering a greater entity there.

"What doth thou think thou canst with thy hands etched into shadows not allowed to perish? Did thou believe atoning before the proper time would give thee salvation? Doth thou desire to eternally wander the boundary between dark and light, aware that the resolve thou carrieth will not take thee anywhere?"

The embodiment of death was human in flesh, and yet he was clad in shadow so deep that it seemed like the whole underworld was contained inside him.

At first sight, the man understood he would become this honored entity's shadow for eternity.

He didn't decide he would, he accepted it.

He got the answers to all his questions.

"Why was I reconstructed into a being with non-human characteristics?" and "Why am I continuing this walk, considering that someone with no reason to live has no reason to fear death?".

To become the shadow of one he saw.

That was enough to dispel all the doubts he believed he would carry to his grave.

There was no emotional sobbing or fear of the dense shade of death, only a plain resolution.

Where he was, there was only tranquility.

He rested in peace knowing that, despite never knowing what he was born for, he finally arrived where he was meant to reach.

"If so—bare thy neck."

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Condemning words and a silver glimmer.
And then the wind, sharp and full of mercy, passed through his neck.
The last sensation he felt in life shone far more brilliantly than anything in his memories buried in shadow.

That was what he remembered the most clearly in his Saint Graph mostly sunk in shadows.
He needed nothing more.

He continued to exist as a curse eternally loitering the shadows.

That was enough. He couldn't ask for a better reason to have treaded the arduous journey with no end.

The path with no destination wasn't a curse because, at the end of the extensive road, he earned a blessing.

Perhaps his mentality was no longer human at that point.
And lastly—
His life ended there, where one shadow was etched into the world.

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In front of the Neo Ishtar Temple

“What's that?”

Enkidu noticed the unusual event inside the temple progressing.
Their Presence Detection merged with the world now could clearly sense the abnormality.
The presence that revealed itself now disappeared again.
But they didn't stop sensing the abnormality.
Enkidu felt, heard, and saw the situation grow more unfamiliar than ever before.
Said abnormality being the disappearance of the very world.
A portion of the divinity filling up the Neo Ishtar Temple disappeared like a bug bite in a leaf.
Furthermore, the range of this presence loss gradually expanded, on its way to erase the entire world.

Color, sound, smell, magical energy—Watching the divinus air inside the temple be swallowed by shadow, Enkidu stopped for a moment.

Berserker did the same, momentarily turning her giant body away from Enkidu to fire her light of Calamity into the temple's interior.

Rainbow-colored radiance slipped above Haruri's head, passing by Ishtar's sides.

But the moment they touched the shadow inside, they silently disappeared. No explosions, no shockwaves, not even a mild breeze.

“ ”
...

That was the perfect chance for Enkidu to attack Berserker's behind, but instead of attacking this defenseless back, they directed their magical energy to the giant golden chain above them.

“Berserker!”

Watching the event attentively, Haruri issued a command.

If she hadn't received her blessings, she would have lost consciousness when the light of calamity passed above her head.

But despite everything, her status as Ishtar's head priestess was official.
She had no need to be anxious about Ishtar's well-being.

She could tell from her Goddess Blessing, a connection much beyond a magical energy link, that Berserker wouldn't hurt the goddess.

She suppressed her instinctual fear, not sure if she could do it thanks to the blessing protecting or purely due to her personal growth, and devoted herself to hers and Berserker's shared duty as Ishtar's believers.

“You don't have to stop Lancer or the Assassin behind me! It's that chain! Something is up with that thing!”

“I agree. Well done.”, Ishtar's voice echoed immediately behind her.

“Mm! My Goddess! I'm grateful for your kind wo...!”

Turning around made Haruri gulp.

Everything in the corridor to the temple's interior except the goddess had completely lost its light and color. And that was left was a pitch-black open space.

She couldn't tell if the blackness was a room or a wall. It was impossible to visualize what was

Fate/strange Fake 8

inside, given that the space let no light return outside.

It wasn't just light. She couldn't hear the echoes of sounds or feel any magical energy.

Haruri was struck with the unsubstantiated conviction that if she took a step in, her body would be gone forever.

The domain of shadow was trying to take over their territory and Ishtar was doing everything in her power to hold it back.

Unbelievably enough, that Assassin's Noble Phantasm was challenging a Divine Spirit on even grounds.

"Your evaluation was right. That chain and harpoon are the biggest threat.", said Ishtar to comfort the flabbergasted Haruri.

She nonchalantly issued a command that had nothing to do with the shadows, as if to say they weren't an issue.

"That chain and harpoon could have been a much more powerful Noble Phantasm if the piece of junk had transformed their body into it. And yet, they chose to instead plant the equipment on the top of a building... This means the piece of junk has some hidden plan, not that I expect anything clever out of them... Ah."

That was all she could say before the shadows squirmed explosively.

Every shadow within the temple gained physical shape and started predating the light around them—the light-consuming nothing was practically sending a message: "We are the ones who oppose the world ruled by Ishtar".

Ishtar raised her hand while watching them with serious eyes.

Ishtar instantly charmed the space around her—the air and walls twisted, and the staircase above her began to open like the soft petals of a blooming flower.

"I'll be right back after I deal with this tactless Assassin."

"My goddess?!"

Ishtar's words were absurd but she maintained her fearless smile while her worshipper was watching.

"Oh, right. Not even I can survive touching these shadows, so watch out, okay?"

"Wha..."

"The shadows already surrounded the forest"

And so, the shadows began to devour the lights of the world.

The signs of life disappeared from the forest around the temple. The world was stained with darkness and silence.

Shadows proliferated from everywhere—the shades of the foliage, behind the tree trunks, under the sprays of the muddy streams, and the crevices of the dirt previously manipulated by Ishtar's charm.

The shadows lauded themselves as the righteous form of things.

But the shadows swollen in the color of death didn't take the life of a single insect clinging to the trees.

Because there was one entity rejected by the shadows on the land illuminated by the azure sky. Only the mistress of the skies attempted to engulf the land in her false light.

"We're going out for a spin, Maanna!", Ishtar yelled as she jumped to the sky from the hole she opened in the ceiling.

In response, all gold and lapis ornaments composing the temple trembled, floated in the air, and flocked to her location.

They transformed into a bow-shaped boat with two beautiful arcs, which floated carrying Ishtar up into the skies.

But the shadows wouldn't let her escape.

The rabidly pursuing clusters of shadows appear from within the world, hunting the radiance that blinds the eyes of all creation: Ishtar. Where there is light, there is shadow, they prove.

Fate/strange Fake 8

The black geysers chased Ishtar from all directions. Although they were called geysers, their movements much more closely resembled pitch-black worms eating the sky.

Goddess Ishtar's charm takes control of the surrounding space and terrain, the flow of the wind, and the atmospheric density, allowing the continuously perform last-second dodges on the flock of shadows unaffected by her power.

Gracefully, elegantly, boldly.

But it couldn't last forever.

Maanna was originally a Boat of Heaven meant to fly across the world.

But since the Age of Gods hadn't fully started again, it can only maintain its max speed within the temple and forest areas.

Conversely, the shadows are in opposition to the new world, existing even at the current world's edges.

It's painfully clear that if the chase persists, Ishtar will be the first to run out of divine aura and magical energy.

However, that is assuming that Ishtar will not fight back.

"Ooo, that's perfect."

Ishtar saw the gigantic snakes coiling to Gugalanna's legs below her and reached down like a child picking up a stick to swing around.

"Come here, Cita!"

Those were incarnations of Hydra, the giant serpent of curses unleashed against those who defy the gods.

But who would have thought? The goddess emanation regaining her full Authority could charm the essence of the snakes and reconstruct them into a completely different entity.

The aura shaped in the image of venomous snakes condensed and shapeshifted into smaller snakes as all of its curses flipped inside out.

As Ishtar extended her hand while dodging around on Maanna, seven snakes coiled to her fingers and tangled themselves to form one ritualistic implement.

A stone mace built in the image of seven snakes.

With one hand, Ishtar grasped a weapon with a visibly atrocious appearance.

"Eat this!"

Before she could finish her sentence, Ishtar flew Maanna high into the sky.

Higher, higher, aiming towards Venus in the sea of stars.

And the shadows extended in pursuit.

True or not, Ishtar had declared that those shadows could kill gods on contact.

Like the Tower of Babel, the pitch-black tower rose taller and taller, extending its hand to reach a god.

Maanna's trajectory was like a roller coaster full of sudden turns and loops until it spun 180 and began a sudden descent toward the tip of the tower.

Ishtar, a god, could not allow a tower to reach the domain of the gods.

No, that was not it.

It was not about the gods.

She needed all to know that the skies were hers, Ishtar's domain.

To do so, Ishtar simply swung her weapon relying on Maanna's momentum.

Seven-Headed Warhammer Cita

A warhammer in the image of seven snakes. Legend tells that Ishtar was born holding this hammer.

Ishtar took this warhammer known for its ability to devastate her enemies without her needing to swing it, loaded it with her divine aura, and slammed it at the top of the tower of shadow with all her might.

Everyone who looked at that specific area of the sky at the moment her hit sparked mumbled the same words: "I'm seeing a second Venus".

Her moment of radiance continued as she descended to the ground with Maanna and the Cita warhammer flattening the shadows.

By the time she landed back atop her temple, she had exerted enough force to pulverize the shadows along with Assassin's Saint Graph—but Ishtar forgot to consider one thing.

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That was no Tower of Babel.

That's not the kind of tower any Hassan-i-Sabbah would ever build.

The tower of shadow was created by Ishtar's own light and symbolic of the heights of her arrogance.

Therefore, it's not radiance that can erase it.

"...Yeah, I really don't do well against these underworld kinds!"

In response to her words, the squashed shadow moved upward, turning its attention to the Divine Beast of the skies.

Completely vanquishing this shadow would require drawing out the full force of the temple. And to achieve that, she'd have to cross everything out of her list of potential concerns.

"Gugalanna.", Ishtar called for the Bull of Heaven that had been protecting her temple from the swarm of snakes. "Go destroy the source of the chain—while I hold this guy off."

This order wasn't a product of pressure.

It was as casual as telling one's favorite dog to fetch a ball.

But coming out of a goddess' mouth, this was now a new law of the world.

Many American meteorological surveillance systems, including the government, were observing "Hurricane Inanna" abnormal movements at the time, but what they saw was erased from the records in a matter of minutes.

Although, had that movement remained in the records, it's plain to see that the public would have taken it as a video edited for a joke.

Even mages would have a tough time believing this.

The hurricane that had been strangely unmoving for a while took a 2-meter-long... backstep.

Numerous arrows were stabbed into the colossal beast's leg.

From them gushed out the aura of giant serpents.

On the outside, they were the miasma of dark mud. On the inside, they were a deadly toxin that took many a hero and monster to their grave. They tangled to the Divine Beast's leg, sewed it to the ground, and attempted to rot its body along with its divinity.

But that's no reason to refuse an order from the goddess.

The Bull of Heaven took a big leap behind, not bothered by how it needed to let part of its

leg be ripped off for it.

One jump back was enough to pierce the land and ravage the forest with tremendous windstorms.

The colossal beast crouched into the shape of a hurricane while taking a deep breath, condensing the concept of galestorm within itself.

The quiet and pleasant sunshine over Snowfield made the galestorm one second ago feel like just a dream.

But the people locked inside their houses never noticed this abnormality.

In extremely rare cases, some fearless fools were watching everything from their windows. Those looked puzzled at this change in weather, but it didn't last long.

This fantastic scene of all the unstable air suddenly disappearing and all problems being solved only lasted 4 and a half seconds.

After that, he breathed out thunder and torrent condensed into one stream of death.

A massive tornado formed at the Divine Beast's mouth at unbelievable speeds and plunged toward the top of the tallest building in Snowfield.

A migratory anticyclone exhaled. A physical phenomenon induced by force.

If shot at the ground, the city would have been leveled then and there, without having to wait for the masterminds' scheme.

Its shockwaves alone would blow away the city and the forest with winds beyond those of a hurricane. But what engulfed the top floor of Crystal Hill's was the actual hurricane breath, a 200m/s vacuum blade covered in lightning and raindrops turned into ice.

"Tch... Is there a worse place I could have been sent to...?"

Doris Lusendra—one of Hippolyte's Masters—who was at the building's rooftop, circulated her magical energy through her whole body with a cold sweat.

And then she picked up the silver wolf sitting next to the harpoon cannon to watch the forest in the West.

The wolf tried to resist but stopped upon sensing no hostility from Doris.

"I didn't think the Master I'd invite for an alliance would be a chimera, but I still can't afford a Master on our team to die."

She still hadn't recovered from her fight against Rin but forcibly expanded the path of her

Fate/strange Fake 8

Magic Circuits to accelerate her hardening.

“Nope... I probably ain’t surviving this one. Sorry.”

She covered the wolf’s whole body with hers, half-aware of her imminent death—That’s when the breath of wind and lightning reached the rooftop.

That is the full power of a Divine Beast.

Those are the divine works of the skies.

A brazen strike of heavenly retribution, commanding the whole of creation to ensure Ishtar’s victory.

The perfect gospel to announce the return of the Age of Gods under her rule.

But—

One person still resisted the changing times.

A wordless chant echoed and soon 4 walls of magical energy surrounded the rooftop.

“...Hh?!”

Doris saw a girl.

A child. There was no other way to describe the youth still left on her.

When Doris first visited this place, she thought it would be impossible to get her to join their fight.

Partially because she was a child, but mainly because she was using all of her magical energy to preserve her Servant’s corpse, ceaselessly preventing him from naturally vanishing into spiritrons.

Doris had assumed that this was because the girl was too young to make decisions on her own, so she simply relayed the message that her allies would gather in the northern strath and went to the silver wolf’s company.

Thus, when she saw the girl arrive, she thought her Heroic Spirit had finally returned to the dust of spiritron.

—Tine Chelc.

This girl, Master of the Hero King, was the first one defeated in this Holy Grail War.

She had a powerful light in her eyes, which made Doris instantly rethink her impressions.

As this lone mage was challenging the god in the forest.

"My family... lives in this land..."

Her 12 brothers and 9 sisters were buried, sacrificed to the land.

Tine had already made peace with the fact that she lived as the "extension" of a series of lives cursed to offer themselves to the land, but that didn't make the time spent with her family disappear from her memory.

Her sisters made their poor attempts to teach her what normal people did for fun.

Her brothers did what they could to let the youngest Tine escape their fate.

She had no time to remember any of this in the middle of battle.

And yet those were the only thoughts running across her brain as she yelled with clear anger.

"So I won't let anyone take this land... this soil... My family away from me!"

With pure, unadulterated greed, the girl yelled words that could sound unreasonable from an outsider's perspective.

"Not even a god!"

—Children should act like children.

How ironic. I'm just like a child throwing a tantrum right now.

This land belonged to the planet and humans unilaterally decided to be its defenders for their own convenience.

When King Gilgamesh said all lands would eventually be his yard again, was that simply the king's arrogance or was it his serious views as the arbiter between man and the planet? I can't tell anymore, but I do want one thing.

Tine now stood in opposition against a god out of her own will, her own arrogant and self-serving anger—not for the clan of keepers of the land.

The magecraft of this ungrown child created sturdy walls of magical energy covering the top

Fate/strange Fake 8

of the building.

A defensive boundary capable of blocking an impact capable of collapsing the building.

This vast volume of magical energy didn't come exclusively from her Magic Circuits, it utilized power flowing from the dragonveins.

Nevertheless, this amount of energy is too severe for a single mage. The land couldn't recharge her magical energy fast enough. Her walls would lose potency in seconds.

With the Bull of Heaven's not stopping, she figured she only delayed the inevitable. But that was when she heard a silver wolf's loud and melodic howl.

One of the Command Spells engraved into the silver wolf's body shone red with this howl, generating an immense surge of magical energy.

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“!”

Having avoided the shockwaves of the Bull of Heaven's breath, Enkidu landed on the floating harpoon captured by the living dirt and felt the activation of the silver wolf's Command Spell through their magical energy path.

But it didn't have any effect on their Saint Graph.

On the contrary, they could feel the surge of magical energy passing through them and returning to the city's direction.

This must have been an instinctively activated Command Spell, but what did he use it for?

With milliseconds of examination, Enkidu understood their Master's reasons and quickly turned to the city to say one phrase that would go unheard.

“Thank you. I'm wholeheartedly grateful for having you as my Master.”

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“!”

Tine felt a sizeable surge of magical energy flow inside her along with the flash of the wolf's Command Spell.

It used the power of the Command Spell... on me?

An unthinkable act in a Holy Grail War.

Command Spells are made to be used on one's own Servant. They can't be used to boost other Masters because there isn't a connection of magical energy between them.

But Tine remembered she was currently an exception.

Tine had been constantly spending her magical energy to prevent Gilgamesh's corpse from crumbling.

And to prevent her own body from crumbling, Enkidu temporarily connected her to their own magical energy path with the wolf.

Thinking back to everything in full context, Enkidu doing that by simply laying their hand on her shoulder was already absurd in both idea and execution, but thanks to that, the silver wolf managed to pass its Command Spell's energy through Enkidu to inject it into Tine.

The power of a Command Spell is capable even of teleportation, which is almost Magic territory.

This energy instantly expanded the Magic Circuits in Tine's body, reconstructing her Circuits into a sturdier network so her body wouldn't crumble from her fusion with the land.

This resulted in the walls majorly expanding and the approaching cyclone of dirty water and thunderstorms completely dispersing into the air.

3 seconds later.

The walls vanished roughly at the same time as the breath attack.

Even with the power of a Command Spell, none can make walls capable of withstanding the goddess' attack last more than a few seconds.

“Thank you...”

Confirming that they managed to survive by the skin of their teeth, Tine hesitated but thanked the wolf who watched her from her side.

“
...”

The wolf looked like it wanted to say something.

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Something about the one Tine was trying to protect.

Its eyes showed concern about her version of “Servant”, which lay down on the top floor of the building.

Figuring out what the animal meant, Tine crouched next to the wolf and hugged it tight.

“I did all I could... It wasn’t a lack of trying.”

Remembering what she did a few minutes ago, Tine squinted, shaking in anxiety, and whispered something akin to a confession of sin.

“It was a gamble... but now his fate is up to the land to decide.”



Fate/strange Fake 8

Next to the Neo Ishtar Temple

The Bull of Heaven saw his breath attack blocked.

He meets this with no confusion, only pure anger.

Gugalanna was called to this world of fading arcanity.

Without being able to feel any other Sumer deity on this earth, his loyalty to the Mistress of Heaven became his only source of joy and reason to live.

And yet, he failed to execute her order.

His grudge against Enkidu—the clay tool that once insulted a god and destroyed him—meant less than nothing before Ishtar's direct command.

That is why the Bull of Heaven shook with intense anger.

He was angry at none other than himself for failing to execute Ishtar's order.

The Bull of Heaven looked to the sky and let out a roar of anger.

The roar took many different forms as it reached the other side of the planet, being heard in East Asia as an inexplicable rumble and terrifying people in Europe as an apocalyptic noise.

And in Snowfield, the land beneath the divine beast's feet, the roar manifested as hundreds of thunderbolts and howling winds.

Over 10 thousand bolts of lightning struck in the span of 10 seconds, causing most of those watching from their windows to lose consciousness and destroying every mobile phone and recording device that lacked the blessings of magecraft.

Next, the Bull of Heaven began to deeply inhale.

This time he poured not only the hurricanes around him but also the divinity that composed him, preparing for a breath attack many times more powerful than the previous one.

The divine beast knew Ishtar loved humans without distinction.

Therefore, it tried to minimize human casualties when fulfilling her order.

But he no longer needed such restraint.

He is the living concept of destruction, sealed by the gods defending the Akkadian lands, but set free by goddess Ishtar's kind requests (threats).

The Bull offers all that composes him for a continued attack in order to destroy thoroughly.

He converts his entire being into the gust of wind he blows and then reconstructs himself where the wind reaches, simulating hyper-speed movement. This feat would be his Noble Phantasm if he were a Heroic Spirit.

In short, it is a 396m/s head charge with all the immense mass and energy of a hurricane. A breath attack while at the same time a tackle from a divine beast.

The hurricane moved with speeds rivaling the winds in Jupiter's stratosphere. Its actualization would have irreversible consequences affecting everywhere on Earth. Except in Ishtar's divine temple.

Anything the Bull of Heaven could do is bound to the rules established by the goddess. No attack of his will ever harm Ishtar or her temple.

And because the divine beast instinctively knows this...

The executor of the will of the gods fully systematized himself as an agent of destruction, willing to give himself up if that's what it takes to destroy the enemies.

He inhaled deeply, condensed his divinity in his lungs, and then...

"Here's what Flat would have said here."

The Bull of Heaven heard a voice above his head, from someone he deemed small.

"Your move has too much start-up lag."

And with this nonchalant warning...

This Escardos launched a few of the bowling ball-sized Satellites orbiting him, making them ride the wind from Gugalanna's inhaling to strike his stomach.

And that started a chain of ruin.
Or perhaps... the chain had already started before.
Before Gugalanna blew his first breath attack.

When one Assassin guaranteed his success in Ishtar's assassination.

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Fate/strange Fake 8

Near the Neo Ishtar temple

The shadows had already infiltrated the ground below the forest.

Ironically, the first ones to notice it were Rider's and Saber's teams, the ones deeper underground than the muddy flood. And the vampire washed away by the flood.

The immense shadow created by Hassan of the Fathomless Rift was being held back from further spreading.

But shadows can't be erased from the world for as long as there is light and objects obstructing it.

The undetectable shadow continued to invade every place not reached by light. The gaps between the stone blocks that compose the temple. The interior of the leaves of the trees. The interior of human bodies.

Blackness as dark as the mud in the flood but of a different kind.

A mass of nothing, with no tangible magical energy or curse, wriggled in the forest.

"No..."

A chill ran down Haruri's spine as she watched this.

The sea of shadows clearly didn't belong there, and yet she couldn't feel any magical energy.

It hid itself in the dark flood to infiltrate the forest around the temple.

The goddess isn't letting it infiltrate her directly.

But the attack on her is both the shadow's main goal and a distraction.

The magical energy on Ishtar's hammer is visibly negating the assaulting shadows.

But erasing those doesn't help.

The darkness enveloped the world with a layer of nothing at alarming speeds.

The shadows rose from the flood, covered the trees of the forest, and recolored them into one black image that made it impossible to tell their distances apart.

The Age of Gods attempted its rebirth only to end up drowned in the shadows of the planet.

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Coalsman Correction Center

"I didn't imagine that he had it in his Saint Graph to slap this hard at a deity..."

The Heroic Spirit that he let loose with no concrete expectations used some kind of power. Faldeus could feel it from their magical energy path, and his observation footage let him grasp the state of the temple area.

The Saint Graph's core was shattered.

Contradictorily enough, he continued to exist regardless.

Faldeus was confident this was the power of the Noble Phantasm that he concealed from his Master.

The power of this Noble Phantasm ultimately got him evenly matched against the deity of the temple.

"What a surprise. Assassins usually have weak Saint Graphs..."

Faldeus raised his Command Spell-bearing hand during his dispassionate musings.

"You were a great asset and a threat... I'll take no chances."

What if the power of a Noble Phantasm can make a Heroic Spirit remain forever manifested after his Spirit Core is shattered?

To a mage and to someone who knows the mechanics of a Holy Grail War, this was an unlikely possibility, but not one he was supposed to dismiss.

With one shining stroke on his Command Spells, Faldeus played his insurance move against his own Servant.

"I actually wanted to preserve all 3 Command Spells, but well, here's a tribute to your memory. By my Command Spell, I order you: spend all of yourself to bring the Western forest calamity to her grave."

The Command Spell certainly activated, but he felt no hints of resistance or rebellion against that order.

"That really was a farewell, huh, Assassin."

Despite the nervous smile, Faldeus could say goodbye to his Servant with no regrets.

Fate/strange Fake 8

“I thought I was always as cautious about you as I could be... but it turned out that down to the very end, I never gave you all the credit you deserve.”

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Neo Ishtar Temple

With an explosive expansion of magical energy, the form of the assassin that was completely invisible to Ishtar’s eyes resurfaced.

Noticing that, Ishtar spoke to the Assassin fused with numerous shadows.

“What a pity. At the very last second, your Master betrays you.”

The shadow’s silence knew no end, but Ishtar continued, unbothered.

“That was a Command Spell, am I right? You got ordered to pour your whole Saint Graph into your Noble Phantasm.”

Her voice and shrug carried a tone of pity instead of mockery.

“See now how much humanity needs my leadership? When I don’t keep an eye on them, they always get blinded by greed and commit acts of foolishness.”

Nonetheless, she didn’t lower her guard in the slightest, continuing to hold back the shadows that kept gushing despite her divine Authority.

Without answering anything, Hassan of the Fathomless Rift continued to keep afloat the skull mask in the temple’s interior, the point the shadows started proliferating from.

Shadows don’t talk to goddesses.

Death doesn’t answer saints.

There is nothing left to talk about.

Everything is already over.

But the arrogant goddess hadn’t picked up on this.

Not yet.

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Neo Ishtar Temple

Haruri faltered for a moment, afraid of the countless pieces of nothing gushing out of the flood. But even now, she could still remember her mission and commanded Berserker.

“Lancer is above us, Berserker!”

She could see Enkidu atop the giant harpoon stopped in place by the wall Berserker created and the tangled earth controlled by Ishtar.

Enkidu bundled together countless chains created by their Noble Phantasm, tied them to the tip of the harpoon, and pulled them in an attempt to force the harpoon into the temple.

Their goal could be considered half-accomplished at that point.

The chains allowed Ishtar’s divinity—Mesopotamian divinity—to flow from the temple to the harpoon.

“...! How dare you?”

Haruri was shocked as her instincts told her that unless she did something, Enkidu would get even stronger and at the same time put Ishtar at a disadvantage against the shadows.

If she didn’t play her trump card now, that Heroic Spirit would reach Ishtar’s domain.

“By my Command Spell, I order!”

The head priestess didn’t waver.

No advantage is absolute.

At this point, any mistake can be fatal. She knew it as a mage, as one blessed by Ishtar, and as Berserker’s Master.

Hence, she yelled.

Not afraid to lose her life if that’s what it took to fulfill her mission.

“Crush goddess Ishtar’s enemy... Crush that Lancer with all your might!”

Fate/strange Fake 8

Ignorant of how cruel this order was to Berserker.

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The interstice between the era of gods and the era of men.

Snowfield strongly resembled the peak of Babylonian civilization, despite their transformations going in opposite directions.

For that reason, its True Berserker flickered between the worlds of dream and reality.

It was a pleasant dream, a nightmare, and a seemingly perfect recreation of the past.

She was swallowed by a flood of Maddened Spirits and there's no sanity left in her either, but in the dream, she has flashes of consciousness.

Their eyes see the sky.

A shadow stood atop a beautiful golden bridge across the air.

It was a friend she knew well.

In a form different from the one she knew.

But it's clear to her.

That was without a doubt—

“ en ki du “

While she called their name, the magical energy of the Command Spell flowed into her dream.

“ no “

The world instantly flipped into a different page.

The girl's consciousness was drowned in a mass of almost three thousand “voices” and pushed to its depths.

The numerous voices aside from the girl were very familiar with who they saw.

“It is the enemy we must take revenge on.”

“ that's no t it “

“It is the hated enemy who killed us.”

“It is the feared enemy who didn’t spare us.”

“It is the heartless enemy who didn’t save us.”

“It is the foolish enemy who tried to save us.”

“ enki du is “

"It's their fault,"

“it’s their fault.”

“That we amounted to nothing.”

"We couldn't be human."

“We couldn’t be useful to the gods.”

“We couldn’t protect the garden of the goddess.”

“We weren’t even allowed to be a proper monster.”

" they're not- our- "

"We must kill them."

“It’s what Master wants” “It’s what the goddess wants” “It’s what the gods want” “It’s what the people want” “It’s what the world wants” “It’s what the forest wants” “It’s what I want” It’s what I want too” “It’s what the children want” “It what everyone wants”

“

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“Give them death.”

“Give them destruction.”

“Destroy that terrifying person.”

"Kill that repulsive mud doll."

"Make them suffer with no meaning, no mercy, and no reason until there's nothing left of them."

X

x

"-----"

Fate/strange Fake 8

Berserker's roar could be heard around the temple.
Unlike the Bull of Heaven, hers wasn't enough to make the world tremble.
But it did assault Enkidu with intensely condensed madness and bloodlust of many.

“...!”

During the scream, the ring on Berserker's back shone, pouring seven colors of light on Enkidu.

After dodging them by a hair's breadth, Enkidu tried to use that momentum to jump from tree to tree for a faint, but the Command Spell-boosted Berserker didn't allow that.

The light of calamity irradiated in all directions, obliterating the trees around them.

The damage didn't reach the temple, but the guardian knew what she was doing. She wasn't going to allow Enkidu to reach the safe zone.

Seven colors of light chased the Divine Weapon that jumped around the forest leaving a golden trail behind them.

The calamity beams worked to restrict Enkidu's mobility. One created fire tornados while another used cold waves to make ice walls, among others.

When Enkidu chopped an icicle that appeared in front of them, they noticed the ice contained another calamity inside it: disease.

Enkidu knows this one is fatal to them, so they divert all power into changing trajectories, but...

It was all as the guardian predicted. She was in position to land a fully charged blow.

The shockwaves unleashed by the part that could be considered her right arm delivered a strong impact to Enkidu's body.

They crashed into the wall of earth risen by Ishtar's charm, knocking down many of the forest's trees along the way.

Due to being the guardian of this forest, she had previously chosen no action that would harm the trees that survived the flood of mud.

However, those restrictions were removed by the second Command Spell.

Enkidu was damaged but far from perishing.

Berserker knew it, so she raised her left fist with no mercy or hesitation to revert Enkidu

back into a pile of dirt.

When she least expected it, a shadow popped in front of her.

Raving Shadow Flash

"Zabaniya"

Rapid shots of black hair grabbed Berserker's gigantic limbs.

"It's you..."

The Assassin with no name inside all that hair replied to Enkidu's words with no expression on her face but a strong will in her eyes.

"As far as I know... my alliance with the three of you is still in effect."

"You're..."

Before Enkidu could answer...

The dirt on a corner of the forest rose and exploded like an erupting volcano.

And then... A flashing figure jumped out of the blast, dashing on top of the black waters at tremendous speeds to slash Berserker's colossal body.

A strike accompanied by a flash of light.

The slash cut through Berserker's skin, harder than steel and protected by multiple layers of divine blessing, and continued to hit the sky.

The damage was far from fatal, but it knocked Berserker off-balance and shook the forest grounds.

In turn, the Assassin with no name let her go of the hair bindings, causing her to fall into the trunk of a half-sunk tree.

And then the man who unleashed the slash dropped to a rock that was protruding out of the flood and grinned.

"Right... We're an alliance.", said Saber to Enkidu, propping on his shoulders the remains of a fancily decorated sword that presumably broke on this slash. "Of course I'll come running in

Fate/strange Fake 8

your moment of need. I'm the one who proposed the alliance, after all."

And then, with the innocent smile of a young boy, he proclaimed without a shred of malice:

"But honestly, I had almost forgotten about it!"

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Less than a minute earlier, in the sky above West Snowfield

"You don't need to give me back what you swallowed earlier.", quietly and emotionless said Thia Escardos to the giant hurricane.

In his orbital battle against Lancer, he unleashed a magecraft capable of annihilating Los Angeles.

The Bull of Heaven swallowed this Satellite and assimilated the magical energy contained in it.

Shortly earlier, Thia unhesitantly activated other Satellites loaded with magecraft.

Hollowed Hearsay/Oblivion turns to festivity

"A Clockwork Abaddon"

At that moment, a section of the world stopped moving.

This wasn't a time stop, merely physical stillness.

Thia's magecraft accelerates and decelerates objects, magecraft, and even concepts with enough effort. With the power of his Satellites loaded with a spell that brings atomic movement as close as possible to a state of rest, he began to directly freeze the Bull of Heaven's heart—that is, the heat source producing all the countless storms and cumulonimbus clouds: the Eye of the Hurricane.

The idea of reducing a hurricane's speed by dropping dry ice on it is prevalent in the scientific community, but calculations state one would need to accurately drop roughly a dozen jumbo jets full to slow it down a few meters per second.

But Thia's ultimate spell blew away most of the ice in the North Pole. Dedicating it entirely to freezing had a quick and tremendous effect on the Bull of Heaven.

The energy within Gugalanna slowed down, creaked, froze, and stopped.

The droplets of water within the gale winds didn't even get the chance to turn into snow before freezing completely.

There began the construction of the world's biggest ice sculpture, in the shape of a hurricane.

In a wondrous spectacle, the hurricane that had grown large enough to engulf Nevada in its entirety was being fixed in place piece-by-piece by a single magecraft attack.

This change in temperature was enough to dissipate a normal hurricane. In any other situation, it was bound to have serious consequences for the climate of neighboring regions.

Gugalanna, however, is a divine beast.

The physical dominance of the gods embodied in the form of the raging skies.

Be it a cold wave or a heat wave, any product of the laws of the land is to be denied, forced into submission, and trampled by the laws of the beast and the laws of the gods.

The bull is only allowed in the heavens because he's capable of doing it.

He needs no logic or reason.

Because the products of the goddess's Authority are everything. The laws come second.

Hundreds, thousands, millions of lightning bolts illuminated the sky, and the world roared with claps of thunders of the kind only heard during the moment of creation or the end of times.

He converted all the magical energy cultivated within himself into lighting while further absorbing the mana around him, causing the entire spiral of cumulonimbus covering him to shine.

The vortex of electric light compressed into a length of 500km strikingly resembled the golden armor of the Bull of Heaven.

"You monster...", said the irritated Thia as he increased the rotation of the Satellites around him.

The magecraft spell applied began to cover the satellites in a pale blue light...

This magecraft would turn Snowfield into a lifeless wasteland for the next ten thousand years, but when Thia was about to shoot it from the skies above, a violent torrent of energy passed below him.

Fate/strange Fake 8

“So you use godlike power... to dress yourself in thunderbolt?”

It was an avenger holding a bow as tall as he was.

“Was the god of the sea forcing you to wear the skin of the Bull of Crete?”

As Thia was observing from above, he realized that this was the Servant who was shooting toxic snake arrows shortly before.

It took him so few seconds to get here?

That speed was abnormal even to Thia’s standards.

The avenger’s body was no longer fully human.

His figure still looked human, but Thia had the ability to see his interior. To Thia, this individual had already turned into something incomprehensible.

His flesh was fused with the sinister devil Saint Graph stolen from Jack the Ripper, and his divinity, mud, venom, and a disproportional amount of magical energy all miraculously balanced out each other.

It takes more than a man or a hero or a god to accomplish this nonsense.

What Thia saw was a monster ready to cast off his own Saint Graph and hatch into something new to achieve his vengeance.

Words mixed with curses leaked from the gaps of the cloth made from the skin of the Nemean Lion.

“I’m used to manning bulls.”

His words sounded cold, but somehow twisted.

Was Alcides seeing the Bull of Heaven or was he seeing the embodiment of thunderbolt who ruled the gods?

“Never again will your thunder cleave the stars.”

His next arrow didn’t generate magical energy in the form of a snake like the previous ones.

Because all the magical energy necessary to create the transient Hydra was instead poured into the interior of the thin arrow.

A sonic boom stirred the air.

But when the Bull noticed it, the arrowhead had already reached its leg.
The Bull's right hind leg, as thick as a small town.
Its knee and surrounding parts disappeared into the interstice between the land and the sky.

"You pitiful bull, the container of divine fury spawned from the seas as an offering to the gods..."

Anticlimactic.

It disappeared like a water balloon popped by a needle.
The moment the arrowhead landed, everything contained within it rejected the bull.
By charging the tip of the arrow with the divine aura stolen from the sash of Ares, it pierced the surface equally protected by divine aura, and then the curse, venom, and magical energy within the arrow all worked to destroy the ox without interfering with each other.

"...Return to the dirt of Crete as an offering to humanity."

The avenger, the demon Alcides, was now one step away from his complete form.
Corroded by venom and curse, and paying his life and sanity as the price.
The former hero singlemindedly descended further down the deep and narrow spiral pit.
Once he reaches the bottom, no one in Snowfield will be able to stop him.

With one exception:

The queen with the power of a demigod. The one with the right to take revenge against the avenger.

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Top floor of the Neo Ishtar Temple

"—!"

Haruri saw a Heroic Spirit riding an oversized horse.
It was the female Servant who followed the Saber out of the giant hole in the ground.

Fate/strange Fake 8

The pit was surrounded by a tallish wall of ice created by someone's magecraft, preventing the black stream that conquered the forest from flowing in.

"A Rider...? How powerful...!"

The Heroic Spirit's parameters unfolded as a honeycomb pattern before the Master's eyes.

Seeing the opponent's power, Haruri immediately went on guard and surrounded herself with bees clad in lapis-lazuli armor.

A bee's sting would mean nothing to a Heroic Spirit.

But as Ishtar's head priestess, Haruri didn't have the option to stand and watch.

"Hng..."

A swarm of countless bees blocked Hippolyte's way.

Having immediately deduced that they were familiars, she looked around until her eyes stopped at the girl at the entrance to the top floor.

"The temple's priestess...?"

Hippolyte skillfully turned her horse back and dashed to reach the temple's entrance area in one jump.

"I take you to be the priestess guarding this temple! I must ask your forgiveness for the affront of visiting the sanctuary on horseback! Please understand these war circumstances!"

Hippolyte has been in her position both as the daughter of Artemis's head priestess and as a queen and warrior leader guarding her temple.

Therefore, despite this god being not one she worshipped, she voiced her plea instead of disrespectfully running wild.

"I have nothing against your faith! But my allegiance to my Master doesn't allow me to stand and watch as an ancient god frivolously toys with human society and subjugates its people! Thus I beseech the divine emanation returns to the ancient times!"

Hippolyte boldly declared war against the goddess.
The bees controlled by the girl believed to be Ishtar's priestess surrounded her...

But Hippolyte manifested a giant axe in one hand and swung her arm in sync with her horse's spin.

A wind strong enough to repel the hurricane's gusts instant blew away the swarm of bees, and the horse-riding Hippolyte declared her intent to the priestess.

"As a warrior and as a queen, I don't wish to take lives without need. You'll let me through to the temple's interior."

Having announced that, Hippolyte grabbed her horse girdles, ready to dash through ignoring whatever the priestess attempted.

There was a concerning skull mask producing shadows on the corridor to the inner sanctum, but her immediate plan was to ignore it.

When she decided on what to do, a divine voice of arrogance reverberated from above.

"That's blasphemy, daughter of the Western war god."

"!"

"Or should I call you... warrior chief of the moon goddess temple?"

Hippolyte looked above and saw a goddess on a floating ship carrying a warhammer modeled after 7 snakes.

"You weren't summoned by Alaya to defend humanity, remember? You're just a Servant in a Holy Grail War. You want to drive me away for humanity's sake? Not a very funny joke if you ask me."

She was surrounded by bright light.

Not by a blinding halo, but instead by a peaceful and transparent glimmer with the same soothing sensation as looking at the blue sky.

Her club produced a torrent of energy and Ishtar herself produced bright light.

Fate/strange Fake 8

The combination of these two kept her protected from the infinite shadows attacking from all directions.

A god. Even before this confrontation, I already knew she was an entity a tier above us Servants despite the limitations of the Lesser Grail as a host body.

Even so, Hippolyte didn't take a step back. From her horse, she glared at the Mistress of the Heavens above her and proclaimed:

"The reason of my summon matters not! My body is always a shield for the oppressed and my arms are the blade they'll use to resist! That is my oath to the moon goddess and my father, the war god!"

With this bold declaration and the matching words from the goddess, Ishtar's priestess discovered Rider's identity and let the words leak from her mouth.

"The queen of... the Amazons.

While Hippolyte argued loudly and with a glare, Ishtar closed her eyes and sighed.

"Dear me. First the piece of junk, then this spiteful Assassin, and now you..."

When her eyes opened again, their glimmer was unbelievably cold as she unleashed her Charm Authority in full.

"You're all underestimating me a bit too much."

For a moment, it felt like the ground around the temple crumbled down, but what actually happened was that the giant temple floated to the skies.

The giant harpoon remained chained at its tip and the golden chain connected to the launcher rose, like a rope bridge from the city to the floating fortress.

"What..."

Even Hippolyte was startled. She readjusted her horse's posture so they wouldn't fall off the

shaking temple.

"You thought I didn't notice the bunch of mice sneaking underground?"

Many holes opened in the ground that previously sustained the temple, revealing human figures moving about.

"I see the basis of the plan was the idea that the temple was boosting me... Not wrong, but if you thought that wrecking the temple was what it took to kill me... Yeah, that's blasphemy."

Ishtar raised her hammer as she spoke.

While also charging her magical energy on the warhammer described in legend as being able to deliver death to her enemies without her needing to swing it.

"But I gotta admit, it was pretty bold of them to use their Servant as the decoy. I'm about to pulverize them because I need them gone from my world, but they're the kind of humans I really like, you know?"

While sincerely stating she likes them, she prepared to hit the mages below the temple with death.

"Kalion!"

The horse neighed and jumped in response to Rider calling its name.

Rising amidst the raging storm as if its own weight meant nothing, it crossed the forest skies using the flying trees and the floating ground fragments as platforms.

"Rage forth, War Sash and Diamatheia!"

Hippolyte unleashed the power of her Ares sash Noble Phantasm and replaced her axe for a bow.

The sash overflowed with divine aura, imbuing the arrow with magical energy of a different color from the one filling the temple.

The fired arrow traveled in a straight line toward Ishtar, repelling the hammer blow loaded with her divine aura.

Fate/strange Fake 8

The shot also blew away the walls Ishtar set.

"So close.", Ishtar declared with a fearless smile to the falling Hippolyte. "If this era had the domain of Artemis or Ares, you could have pierced me with that shot."

And then, when she was about to aim for Hippolyte with the same Cita hammer she swung to parry the arrow...

Countless Gandr curses flew the temple below her.

"!"

Although the fragments of curse couldn't break through her walls, they obstructed her vision, giving Rider the opportunity to land her horse and position herself to protect the people inside the temple.

Two figures appeared on the top floor of the temple.

Two women wearing contrasting red and blue outfits. It was easy to tell they were both seasoned mages.

"We made it in time. Although it vexes me that the only ones who managed to reach the temple were you and I."

Rin barked back at the mage in blue—Luvia.

"Very well done, Hyena. I was just following your path because I figured a graverobber would know the right infiltration tunnels."

"How many times will I have to tell you this? Refer to me as The Most Elegant Hunter in the World."

"I can't call 'elegant' someone who stops to correct me at times like this...Here goes!"

Amidst her banter, Rin spent a jewel to shoot an energy bullet.

Roughly at the same, Luvia spent a large amount of jewels to deploy a wall and a shower of bullets to limit the flying goddess's movements.

A shadow lurked around the two but showed no signs of attacking them or Hippolyte.

"More importantly, what is this shadow?"

"Good question but ignore it while it's not harming us! Can't complain about having more allies!"

"True, after we came this far, we shouldn't concern ourselves with trifling matters."

Despite what they say, Rin and Luvia were constantly paying some level of attention to the shadows.

The two are mages, and any mage can tell that the shadows surrounding the temple are deeply related to death and that this concept of death wasn't necessarily being directed at them.

It's harmless to them unless they set their feet where they shouldn't.

That's the conclusion that made the women focus more on the flying goddess.

"I hear you're claiming to be goddess Ishtar... pretty low-brow of you. Though I suppose that's exactly what she is in the myths."

Rin went for a cheap taunt but—strangely enough, Ishtar simply stopped in midair and closely observed Rin's face with an expression of doubt.

"? What? Do I have something on my face?"

Rin was puzzled since she was expecting an immediate comeback. The goddess looked pensive as she opened her mouth.

"Have we met before? I'm not asking about this vessel homunculus, I mean the actual me."

"Huh? Me? Meeting a Mesopotamian goddess? You don't need to play jokes on me, your presence here is already enough of a joke. If I had met any troublemaker on your scale, I'd have remembered it."

While Rin only got more confused, Ishtar looked like she had found her answer.

Fate/strange Fake 8

“...If this uneasiness is only on my side, that must mean my connection is to a different version of you... Which means... I have no reason not to get rid of you.”

After some nodding—The goddess swung down her hammer without a shred of hesitation.

Immense shockwaves descended from the sky but Hippolyte’s arrows neutralized the impact at the last second... and the shadows take advantage of that timing to come out of their state of reduced activity and gush forth, swelling to encircle the whole temple as they attacked Ishtar.

“Ugh, will you ever stop? I already destroyed your Spirit Core. How long are you going to take to disa...”

Partway through her sentence, she noticed what was happening and her expression went cold.

She flew Maanna further above and glared at the swarm of shadows again from a distance.

“Oh... I get it. So that’s what this was all about.”

Rider, Rin, and Luvia went hiding further inside the temple while the shadows were covering them from view.

“Masters, why did you show yourselves? If you arrived at the temple, you should have...”

It was Rin who answered Rider’s question to two of her Masters.

“Sorry, Rider. We know that the plan was to destroy the altar from the inside...”

Luvia, the self-titled Most Elegant Hunter in the World, completed the other’s sentence with a shrug.

“But have you seen this temple’s altar? It was just a collection of gems sold in Snowfield’s common jewelry stores. We found nothing that could be called a catalyst or an artistic sense.”

“On the lack of proper Sacred Treasures, what’s stabilizing the deity in this land instead is that woman, the Berserker Servant, and that stupid hurricane.”

With Rin's additional explanation, Hippolyte glared at the sky above her.

"...Then to stop the world's alteration..."

"I do think blasting the whole temple would slow down the alteration and weaken her Authority a little... but for a more significant solution, we have to take out one of those three.", Rin was certain. "Door A has a hurricane, Door B has a Berserker, and Door C has a homunculus with a curse or a Divine Spirit or whatever inside. Splendorous prizes all around. I think I wanna cry."

"Getting rid of Berserker's Master would be inelegant, but an option, no?"

Rin, in all her Holy Grail War experience, shook her head to Luvia's question.

"From what I saw... that Master has a magical energy path connecting goddess and priestess. Killing or otherwise neutralizing the girl would only get her Master rights automatically transferred to the so-called goddess."

She paused for a moment to think about Berserker.

"A rainbow halo, the guardian of Ishtar's domain... Considering the intel we got from Mary observing the fight in front of the hospital and its tag-teaming with the Bull of Heaven, that Berserker is 100% Huwawa."

Huwawa.

The guard of goddess Ishtar's garden, the Lebanon Cedar Forest. The monster that terrified Gilgamesh in the world's oldest Epic.

But it was ultimately taken down by Enkidu when they and Gilgamesh visited the forest. It's believed that after death, its monstrous characteristics were integrated into the world, later spreading to Greek lands and influencing many monstrosities, such as the Gorgon.

"We asked that Saber to hold Berserker back... but we might have demanded too much of him."

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Fate/strange Fake 8

Western forest

Saber dodged Berserker Huwawa's right arm, but the intense shockwaves of the blow still sent him flying.

Before they knew it, the Bull of Heaven's movement had vanished the black flood that covered the land, and half of the trees that succumbed to the venom and miasma were knocked on the ground.

Anywhere else, the trees would have withered, rotten, and vanished, but it was presumably the blessings of the goddess operating from the temple to the forest that left things as they were.

After a tight landing on a nearby tree, Saber looked above and yelled.

"What the hell! The temple is floating, Lancer! Are those the fabled Hanging Gardens of Babylon?"

"Absolutely not. That temple doesn't meet the quality standards of a garden, much less does the goddess revered in it.", answered Enkidu, trying to contain Huwawa's limbs with golden chains flying from every possible direction.

"Is that how it works? What are the shadow geysers, though? I know it's the same thing that was recoloring the underground area..."

Shadows extended upward all over the place, defying gravity with their power. They fed on light to give chase to the flying goddess.

"Those are... the shadows of the ravine.", mumbled the assassin with no name.

She was also participating in restraining Berserker, combining multiple Noble Phantasms to keep her opponent in check.

"An exalted one... used his thread of life as a receptacle to create a true entrance to the netherworld."

"The netherworld?"

The nameless assassin's words intrigued Saber, but upon watching Berserker snap Enkidu's

chains, he readied his sword instead of demanding further explanations.

"Ok, that would make this huge Berserker this netherworld's Cerberus! How exciting it is to be able to slay so many monsters in a single summon!"

"Slaying monsters? That takes me back.", Lancer ran next to Saber. Their words carried a hint of sadness; of self-blaming. "I wonder why... considering there were no monsters in that forest."

"..."

Saber had run past Berserker's back with superhuman speed, but hearing that, he turned 180 with a sudden brake and spoke.

"I don't know your reasons... but you don't consider this Servant a monster, do you?"

Saber prepared his Noble Phantasm during the conversation.

"Yes... She's human... They all are..."

Saber charged his sword with magical energy as he asked, and Enkidu focused their energy on their limbs as they answered.

"It's thanks to her that I learned the meaning of life... She's my first friend."

They told themself that, but their determination didn't waver.

Saber readied his sword. Enkidu saying "She's human and my friend" about the giant monster showering them with light of calamity was all the answer he needed.

"Ok, sorry for calling your friend a monster! Let me rephrase that!"

Saber grinned as the glimmer of magical energy concentrated on his sword.

"First the goldie and now this... How exciting it is to be able to meet all the amazing friends you have!"

Words without shame, but also without malice.

“An opponent worth defeating! Assassin and I will keep her here, so you go do what you want!”

“!”

The action so far let Saber know that Lancer’s goal was not to defeat Berserker.

But he wouldn’t criticize them for it.

He got where he was by always doing what he wanted, and he believed Lancer was just as free to do the same.

“The real me... doesn’t belong in such an exciting place. He must still be burning in purgatory, as that was my greatest wish in life. So my point is... this version of me is a duplicate or a fake. Doesn’t matter which. The only one of me I care about is the one that’s here.”

He said something similar to what he said about Ayaka to the students of the El-Melloi Classroom.

He remembers a war where people from different sides united for a common goal.

It was an obnoxious experience, but at the same time, an exciting one.

The man now manifested as a Saber valued his momentary impulses above all else and believed those were worth staking his life for.

He ascended into a Heroic Spirit and was allowed to dash again for a short period—all that he built up in life was for the sake of making his heart flutter in this momentary present.

Things would be different if he was summoned in another Saint Graph. It was quite possible his philosophies as a king would show more pronouncedly in these other forms, mainly his Rider one.

But this time he was summoned as a knight, and a few days ago, he found his goal for the Holy Grail.

He will make allies and fight alongside them. But otherwise, he will do what his heart tells him to.

He’s not someone who would want to stop his allies from doing what they wanted as well, and even if he wanted to, he would never put that into practice.

"Our time is short and our memories will be gone once we return to the Throne! But records of it will remain forever like a page in the book of our lives!"

He increased the glimmer of his sword and his radiance was reflected on the wet soil.

Noticing that, the Berserker stopped engaging the assassin with no name, turned its upper body to face him, and began to light up her halo.

"If someday, perhaps after the end of humanity and the planet, there comes a day when my true self is allowed to leave purgatory and gets a chance to read this 'book'..."

Saber smiled with heartfelt joy despite how serious he was about this personal conflict.

"The least I could do is write one page I can be proud of, right?"

And before Berserker had the chance to shoot her rainbow-colored calamity...

Sword of Ever-distant Victory

"EXCALIBUR!"

One glimmer dominated the forest, unleashing its light in resonance with the shining chain of gold in the sky.

The sword, unable to withstand it, crumbled to dust—but in exchange, the rising slash cut through Berserker's body to reach the heavens, also dispersing the light of calamity.

The first Excalibur that Enkidu saw was one done with a branch when they formed their alliance.

Obviously, a branch and a regular sword are as different as heaven and earth, but that point aside, Enkidu judged the Noble Phantasm they saw as almost recognizably more developed than it was before.

The Heroic Spirit without a conscious goal in the Holy Grail War found his wish and officialized his contract with his Master.

Enkidu didn't know about this change, but one thing they did know was that something in this Holy Grail War enabled Saber to regain his original power.

Watching him from behind, Enkidu responded with their own serene smile.

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“I owe you one. I see, so this is what an alliance is about...”

While Enkidu recorded this subjective information in their body, they looked at the floating harpoon in the sky.

And then they placed their hand on the ground, causing the dirt under Saber’s feet to shine.

“!”

To Saber’s surprise, he found himself surrounded by... numerous replicas of famed and treasured swords created by Enkidu’s Noble Phantasm, Age of Babylon.

“That’s my modest way to thank you. Feel free to use them until they break.”

Each sword was a Noble Phantasm so legendary that Saber never had a chance to find them in the era he lived in... but Saber had no hesitation in replacing his sword with one of them and charging his magical energy into it.

“Thank you... You’re way too generous to be that Goldie’s friend.”

Enkidu flew away with a rare expression of awkwardness, unable to tell if Saber was serious or joking.

After getting back on her feet, Berserker’s eyes saw Enkidu.

Trapped by her madness and the power of the Command Spell, she extended her right arm to them for no discernable reason.

The lynchpin of the gods who once killed her.

A terrifying weapon. A hated enemy.

But now they turned their back to her.

As the bright green figure flew beyond the reach of her arm covered in metal, she saw the momentary illusion of a small flower crown... but the tiny fragment of her soul that recognized what that hallucination was instantly drowned into vast hatred and fear.

They wished greater death and ruin upon the one who brought them death and ruin.

The simplest law of retribution invited a new brand of madness.

And when all was consumed by the negative emotions...

Berserker’s sight was once again covered by a slash of light.

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Enkidu leaped as they felt the flash of Saber unleashing his Noble Phantasm behind them.

Enkidu's calculation produced serial predictions that Saber's Noble Phantasm was powerful but not enough to defeat Huwawa.

They could feel a strong magical energy path between Ishtar and Huwawa, connected through the temple and overshadowing the relationship between Master and Servant.

Meaning that Huwawa's Saint Graph won't shatter unless they steal control of the temple or remove Ishtar's divinity from the land.

In a sense, Huwawa now was harder to defeat than she was when they challenged her alongside Gilgamesh.

Even so... I was more scared that first time.

Strength alone can't frighten Gilgamesh.

What's truly scary about Huwawa is the human madness within her—madness manufactured by the gods—and how this madness doesn't erase the true human hearts deeper within.

If Gilgamesh saw Huwawa as she was now—connected to the temple, completely under Ishtar's control, and with her human hearts concealed by the power of a Command Spell—he wouldn't bat an eye.

But it was undeniable that her facet as a lackey of the gods switching to the forefront gave her power beyond the limitations of a Servant.

That was all the less reason to hesitate.

They were currently using Saber as a tool to buy time.

Enkidu interpreted the facts as “a tool using others for its own purposes”.

This perceived contradiction could form cracks deep within their Saint Graph.

But the cracks were no reason to stop.

They were also completely in the dark about whether or not their next plan of action was the right thing to do.

Maybe my wish is doomed to never ever come true, no matter how many miracles reunite me with Gil and Huwawa again. Am I doing it to save a friend or am I once again forcing an undesired salvation?

Regardless of what the answer is, since they decided to be their own tool, they needed to see their goal to its conclusion.

Fate/strange Fake 8

— You go do what you want!
Saber's words returned to them.
Their Master wished for the same thing.

“You talk like it’s easy.”

Their phrasing sounded like a complaint, but their voice delivered bigger hints of joy. Enkidu's recording circuits reproduced a scene of the past.

A record of the city of Uruk in an age now lost to time.

What was I back then? Did I remain ever the tool of the gods? Did I turn over and become my friend's tool? Did I offer myself to far more people? ...Or did simply live for my own wishes, doing what I wanted to?

Now that they were a Heroic Spirit with an objective perspective of their life, Enkidu could find an answer to this question, but they deemed this calculation as pointless.

The only thing they could do now was to tell the girl what lay beyond the cedar forest and who they became after reaching and resting there.

For that very purpose, Enkidu needed to once again destroy what Huwawa was staking her life to protect.

Destroy the laws of one goddess ruining humanity with her blessings and control.

For that, there's no line they wouldn't cross.

They were willing to break every last bit of their Saint Graph to overcome this momentary fantasy.

That was what Enkidu established in their settings as “what they want to do”.

“He said I’m more generous than Gil...”, Enkidu mumbled to themselves, once again remembering Saber's recent words. “Oh, I get it.”

The grip of the earth twisted by Ishtar completely stopped the giant harpoon.

The Divine Weapon landed on top of it and touched the harpoon with their hand, fusing their Saint Graph into the harpoon.

It was time to cage the beast called “goddess”.

“Maybe Gil became a hoarder because I was too much of a spender.”

The building-sized harpoon regained its brightness...

and shrugged away the dirt grabbing it by splitting its tip and hilt into 16 parts, spreading above the forest in the form of a fishing net.

Each of the 16 harpoons was loaded with Enkidu's magical energy and pushed forward with an intense charge, ripping through the divine air.

But a dreadful roar echoed through the world, desperate to stop them.

"-----"

Having noticed the spike in Enkidu's magical energy, Berserker reached out for Enkidu despite Saber's Noble Phantasm knocking her on her back.

She enlarged her left arm, literally ignoring the laws of physics, and tried to crush all the harpoon parts and the countless chains attached to them within her now cedar-sized fingers.

But...

Fantastic Recollection

"Zabaniya"

The Noble Phantasm of the Assassin with no name didn't allow it.

Berserker unleashed her oversized palm with enough force to obliterate everything with a touch, but the moment she touched the nameless Assassin blocking her way, her giant left hand turned into smoke.

And Berserker's hand wasn't the only thing that did.

Assassin's own body also vanished into a smoky cloud of morning mist, completely drifting with the wind.

"-----"

2 seconds later, when Berserker regained awareness of her left arm, it was back in the state it was before she stretched it, and Assassin was on the ground, unharmed but breathing heavily and on her knees.

This was the amazing feat of a leader named Hassan of the Intoxicated Smoke, considered

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the best assassin in the history of Hassan-i-Sabbah, discounting the First.

The assassin specialized in intoxicating his targets with a special smoke, but his true power was to inebriate himself, the opponent, and the world, erasing the borderlines between everything, turning himself into a literal smoke signal that enchants the world. In combat, this gives him the overwhelming power to return any and every enemy attack to zero.

His last moments had him switching off his technique and offering his life to protect a village, and learning this story was the inciting incident that led the unnamed Assassin to develop her respect for the Old Man of the Mountain lifestyle.

Not even the assassin with no name was able to perfectly copy his supreme technique. While the real deal could turn himself into mist for seven days and seven nights, she required immense amounts of magical energy to replicate it only for a few seconds.

Even so, her action clearly changed the battle state. It's no exaggeration to say that it was a decisive factor.

Because this short engagement resulted in Enkidu finally capturing the temple with the split parts of the "harpoon" they fired. Snowfield City and its temple were hereby fastened in place by the chains of the Age of Gods.

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A few seconds earlier, in the sky above West Snowfield

"!"

Sensing the light reaching toward her feet, Ishtar circled around with Maanna.

After barely dodging the Noble Phantasm slash stretching from the ground, Ishtar looked at the Saber who fired it and furrowed her brow.

"That Saber... I know his Holy Sword of the Planet is just a sham, but it makes no sense that he can fire his Noble Phantasm this much."

Saber was endlessly spamming a Noble Phantasm powerful enough to do substantial damage to Huwawa, although nothing fatal. While a goddess boasts ludicrous amounts of magical energy, Saber's inexhaustible tank got to the point where even she was finding it suspicious.

"That Ayaka that my vessel found... might be a bigger problem than I imagined..."

Once she was done talking, Ishtar swung her hammer while dodging further fire.
Shining light shredded at the surrounding waves of shadow.
The powerful shockwaves of the seven-headed warhammer Cita could cause critical damage
to a human city in a single swing.

The shadows expanded to enclose Ishtar, encroaching on the light and covering the sky with
the darkness of the night.

But they still couldn't overshadow the might of the goddess Ishtar.

"I figured your plan out, Mariner of the Umbrage.", she said while standing on top of Maanna
and repelling all the shadows around her with overwhelming divinity. "You merged your whole
Saint Graph with the concept of death.!"

The charmed air transformed into a giant invisible arm and blocked the incoming shadows.

"If we wait until your Saint Graph crumbles, your soul will flow inside me and I'll be
automatically merged with death..."

With a light swing of the Cita in her right hand, the air shone with sunlight, deleting the
pieces of shadow being held back by the air hand.

"You turn yourself into the Evening Bell, in an attempt to drag your opponent to the
underworld with you. Amazing, of all Noble Phantasms in this Holy Grail War, yours gotta be
the one I'd have the toughest time dealing with."

She spoke with a tone of spite, but no signs of mockery.

She tried to maintain her superior attitude but she already acknowledged that she wouldn't
come out unscathed if his plan came to fruition.

Not every Sumer god is immortal.

Ishtar specifically is a goddess with a long history with the underworld, having experienced
death many times.

The most famous of these cases is Ishtar's Descent to the Underworld.

Fate/strange Fake 8

A commonly spread myth tells that Ishtar and her sister Ereshkigal were goddesses who governed opposite but inseparable concepts, one with the skies and the other with the underworld; and when Ishtar invaded the underworld to antagonize Ereshkigal, she was killed by her sister.

Thus, her manifestation necessarily also adds Ereshkigal's attributes to that era, and Ishtar becomes unable to disregard her own death.

Had she manifested as a complete god... or if she had seen her project of rewriting the planet's surface layer to its completion and then elevated herself to a level where she was sufficiently prepared for the inevitable appearance of Gaia's Counter Force, she would even be able to employ the tales of her experiences reviving from the underworld to negate a limited number of deaths. Although the idea this would be helpful in resisting against Gaia's Counter Force is questionable at best.

Regardless, she was still just a divine emanation inhabiting the Lesser Grail. She could replicate the Authorities, but she wasn't immortal.

If she was in a state that lacked the concept of death, solving the situation would have required the power of the guardian of the ravine, the first one of the Old Men of the Mountain.

Ishtar knew she was still quite a ways from this level. Her Authority could put the maximum possible distance between herself and all this death, but the very concept of death flowing into her was not something she could shrug off.

"I won't ask for your motive. I missed my chance for that. Blessed be your human resolve."

Ishtar solemnly scowled at all the shadows with dignified poise.

She raised her hammer high, sending a message to every shadow on the planet, not only the ones enclosing her.

Her voice spread through the world's texture.

"The bravery of the brutes drawing their bows against a goddess will be remembered through the scar it will leave on the planet."

The area's divinity focused on a single point, spreading the message to the numerous shadows extending around it.

"Through my body and name, I'll make you learn the meaning of my designation of this land

as the second Ebih."

Long ago, the goddess Ishtar destroyed Mt. Ebih and vanquished its divinity.
She built her temple on top of it and rewrote the land into her possession...
And in the present, she tries to do it once more.

The "world" compressed by Ishtar's charm was being concentrated into a single droplet of sky.
At that moment, the droplet was the only blue sky there was.
That goes to show how much of the Earth's air was gathering at the goddess' Cita.
While all the thunderclouds gathered at the Bull of Heaven west of them, the brightness of
the azure sky came to Ishtar, bending to her will.

The Mistress of the Heavens shone her glow at the planet's surface, needing to express that
she was currently the only god of this world.

"If the 'shadows' of this land reject me..."

She dropped the spark of light created in the form of a momentary Venus. She would cleanse
the whole land of Snowfield so her purifying light would dispel the shadows of the underworld
clad in death.

"then I gotta crush you to dust, like I did with Ebih's summit!"

A purging attack aiming to destroy the entire area, except the temple.
Haruri's Berserker would inevitably become collateral damage. Did she simply forget she
was there or was she intending to play it off as a hopeless consequence of them walking away
from the protective blessings of the temple? No one knows what was going on in the mind of
the goddess...

Goddess Ishtar decided that the land of Snowfield would be erased from the map before the
masterminds had the opportunity to do it through their Operation Aurora Fall.

"Jabal Hamrin..."

The radiance of the skies was about to drop to the ground, announcing the time of judgment.
But the shadows had no fear.

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Nor haste.

Hassan of the Fathomless Rift didn't create these shadows to buy time or distract her.
That was not what they were, at least until that moment.

But at that moment—the shadows concealed the surface from her Divine Eyes, causing her to miss the most important moment.

The moment when Enkidu pierced the harpoon into the temple, connecting the forest's Age of Gods atmosphere to the top floor of the tallest building in the city.

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Top floor of the Neo Ishtar Temple

A few moments earlier, Ishtar began to gather light to create a Venus in the sky.

Rider and her pair of Masters sensed this enormous surge of energy and showed up on the top floor of the temple.

They could surmise that Ishtar was somewhere far higher than this floating temple, but the assembling shadows in the sky served as the perfect parasol, preventing them from visualizing the actual goddess.

But the three could sense the concentration of magical energy on the other side of the shadows, and it felt like the entire sky was being distorted.

They understood a conclusion was nigh.

"That's bad. That magical energy can blow out this whole area!", said Rider, manifesting her horse. "It will be hard to intercept it, but I shall do what I can! Masters! Full swing to defense! There's no time to retreat without teleport magecraft!"

Rider's yell to the sky was telepathically transmitted to all of her Masters in the forest area—the associates of the El-Melloi Classroom.

The telepathic message was answered by Werner Ceasermund, the representative of their will.

--You don't need to say another word. We don't have the best prospects on our end, but we'll have to deal with it. Rider, you do as you see fit.--

"...Are you sure?"

Rider questioned the casualness of Werner's response, but he explained his will with some awkward laughter.

--Yes. I have just finished my most honorable "task".--

"?!"

--Believe it or not, this is a moment where it's more efficient for everyone to act on their own accord. Besides...--

The telepathy got gradually more unstable, suggesting Werner had already begun to work his magecraft.

But Werner made sure to close out his message with a meaningful thought filled with a mix of trust and resignation.

--The ones with you right now are the two most uncontrollable of us.--

Set
"Anfang."

Hippolyte turned to see Rin after she began her chant.
She refined her magical energy as she deployed gems around herself.

Mind the Seraphic Heavens—This is the ward of the Circular Flower

"Brennender Himmel—Ich kenne den Kreis, Die Blumen beschützen mich, Der"

...

From the words of the chant, Luvia figured out what Rin was doing and went to take a gem to deploy her own spell... until she interrupted her action to shoot a Gandr at a target behind her.

The curse bullet traveled at high speeds.

But it was blocked by a Boundary.

The Gandr capable of shattering concrete crashed and dispersed against a barrier formed by

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lapis lazuli bees in a triangle formation.

"I won't let you... defile this temple any further!"

The Ishtar priestess and Master of Berserker surrounded the trio with a swarm of lapis lazuli bees.

Luvia readied herself to end the spell by eliminating its practitioner, while Rider readied herself to activate her Noble Phantasm to defend Rin.

But before they could, Rin's chant was reaching its completion.

And before she could, Enkidu's harpoon reached the temple.

In the name of Ajax

"Aias der Tera

... Huh?!"

When she would recite the last verse, a "world" flowed into Rin's body.

It felt like there was an eternity between every moment.

Enough power to drive anyone insane was forced upon Rin's body, but that inner power began to circulate with kind intent to safeguard her, causing no damage to her body or soul.

At that moment—Rin was living an awakened dream.

The azure and the night sky are two sides of the same coin. One flips into the other seamlessly. The transformed environment resembled the deep underground. The scenery was turned inside out, changing the distant shadows in the background above into a warm pale-blue light.

"HUUH? Wait, what?!"

At the same time, her body and the magecraft stored in the gems around her began to be forcibly restructured.

Normally she would be making futile attempts to resist... but strangely enough, Rin found herself accepting this mechanism despite her confusion.

Her reason for it was that, while it was the first time this force had been unleashing her magical energy, it circulated her power with the graceful flow of someone who knew what they

were doing.

This practically told her that whoever was controlling her body and Magic Circuits had done so regularly in the past... or in the future.

But there was one more reason for her lack of resistance.

Despite having the control of her Circuits stolen, Rin, in her magecraft genius, figured out at first glance that the spell this force was about to fire would be a far more powerful blow than the shield she was trying to make.

And so—the magecraft was released.

Luvia, Rider, and the priestess controlling the bees witnessed the moment.

For a few seconds, Toosaka Rin's hair turned gold and her two eyes shone bright scarlet.

But what truly caught their attention was the spell fired.

From Rin's chant, Luvia knew that she was going to produce the all-blocking shield of Ajax, unfolded in seven giant petals.

But the only thing this had in common with that were the seven giant petals. The petals here had the color of darkened earth and rose to the skies surrounded by a circle of pale blue flames.

They looked less like petals and more like...

one land trying to suppress the skies.

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The skies above

"Jabal Hamrin Breaker!"

Ishtar's finished chanting the name of her divine judgment...

The simulation of Venus's radiance turned into raw energy and began its descent to deliver destruction and demise.

But that's when it happened.

The shadows before her eyes dispersed all at once.

"?"

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To be more accurate, they only seemed to have dispersed. In reality, they were incorporated into the world rising from below.

Within the incoming pieces of land in the form of giant petals.

"Wha..."

The first expression of strong confusion she made since she possessed Fillia.

But Ishtar's Divine Eyes immediately deciphered what happened. She squinted as she understood everything.

"So that's what they were going for... Well played... Piece of junk."

For a long time, she has been feeling the presence of the underworld.

She could tell one of the Servants in the city governed it.

However, due to the limits of a Servant's power and the lack of overlap with the underworld with which she has history, she took it lightly, assuming it wasn't enough to bring her death by mythological association.

But in a matter of seconds, the table has turned.

There was a link to the underworld in the city: the building with Gilgamesh's corpse in it. And that was chained to this divine domain from Mesopotamia by the Chain of Heaven created by a deity of the same era.

The manifestation of the god vestige upon this world enabled the spawning of another god that is on the other side of the same coin.

Even so, she was confident that the other goddess wouldn't manifest for as long as she kept complete control over the Fillia vessel.

But here is where this premise is proven false.

"The black-haired mage...I get what was my problem with her now. She's been with the doom-and-gloom goddess in some other timeline...!", she blared with disgust as she switched targets to the underworld approaching from below and slammed it with the power that once crushed Mt. Ebih.

The skies and the underworld clashed.

The world was filled with light and shadow, spreading shockwaves through the air above Snowfield.

Light and dark race through the air. The scenery seen from the top floor of the temple looked like the end of the world.

"Still, this is not the underworld! It's my domain, Ereshkigal!"

After Ishtar screamed the name of her opposite goddess, she wielded her Authority to shove the rising underworld into submission.

She concentrated even more magical energy from the planet's sky, producing the light of someone who clearly would steal the whole world's sky if she could.

"If you think I'll let your Authority pass through the azure sky, you're..."

Before she finished her sentence, Ishtar flicked her head to the side.

Something was coming in her direction.

Something made to kill gods like her.

But it was already too late by the time she noticed it.

Something was flying from the ground to the east, too fast for her to dodge.

She didn't have the spare time to maneuver Maanna, and one wrong move would get her crushed in the clutches of the underworld below her.

Even so, Ishtar chose to invest all of her divinity into blocking the something.

She pointed her left hand, the one not holding Cita, eastward and activated her Authority at full force to stop the something.

But the something kept advancing in a straight line, crossing faster than sound through the generated shockwaves of light and darkness, crumbling every Authority along its path.

It was one arrow.

A simply-shaped piece of iron, contrary to the demonic arrows the avenger was firing a while ago. But Ishtar's Divine Eye could see it:

This tiny arrow was brewed with concepts meant to shoot the goddess Ishtar down from the sky. In fact, she could say this arrow was created specifically to remove a god from the skies.

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Why does this exist? I never heard of anything like it. There was nothing like that in the age of Uruk...

Powerful confusion took over the goddess before she had any chance to feel fear or anger. Unable to think straight, she staked her life and blood in her attempt to destroy the arrow.

But it was all too late... The arrow silently made contact with the goddess' left arm.

After piercing her left palm, the arrow continued flying, ripping off the left arm of the vessel in the process of becoming divine flesh, and later running out of momentum and heading toward the ground.

She managed to dodge her vital organs out of the arrow's trajectory, but it didn't matter.

"..."

The shadow of the underworld fused with her shredded arm, injecting a shadow in the form of a Garula soul—the concept of death—into her.

Ishtar knew that her soul had fused with death and that she was being dragged to the underworld below her, but she still made a point to talk to the flock of shadows.

"Assassin... How much of this did you predict, Mariner of the Umbrage?"

The shadows were gradually losing shape and she couldn't feel anything resembling an ego in them.

He reached the point where he can't fight anymore. Not that it ever mattered. Winning or losing, his soul fused with death would flow into the Lesser Grail vessel in me.

Her Authority could hold back the flow of death from entering... but since those Authority defenses were pierced by the arrow, she was out of tricks to avert it.

"I know I'm not a God as far as you're concerned... but be proud."

After a smile full of bravado, Ishtar's body began to fall from the sky.

"You certainly... made the azure sky hear the toll of the bell."

Lying down on the falling temple, the goddess turned her Divine Eyes east and searched for one more shadow.

And at last, she found it.



The figure of the one who shot the arrow that obliterated her Authority and shot down a god.

He was kneeling on the police station's rooftop, pointing a greatbow at her.
A mercenary spellcaster with his youth still left on his face.

a t e / s t r a n g e F a k

Not an Interlude

“A Toast to the Azure Sky’s Image Reflected on a
Puddle”

A Toast to the Azure Sky's Image Reflected on a Puddle

A Toast to the Azure Sky's Image Reflected on a Puddle

Police station, rooftop

Sigma's heart was surprisingly quiet after he was done firing his greatbow.
Everything would be over if he missed his shot but for some reason, he was sure he wouldn't.

It wasn't a matter of trusting his skills.

It was because he knew that this greatbow existed for the sole purpose of shooting down a god: Ishtar.

"Honestly... I didn't think it'd be this effective.", calmly whispered Sigma.

"A god-felling bow, huh? I personally got some mixed feelings about it, but fair. It's far from the first time someone made one of those cheat trinkets that reverses causality so that the hit never misses.", said the burly hunter silhouette sitting next to him.

After seeing the hunter talk with a serious expression instead of his usual grin, Sigma quietly recapped the events in his head.

The story of how his arrow was created moments ago.

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Less than an hour ago, in the police station

"I know a few things 'bout you, kid. Making some high-risk plays today, ain't we?"

Dumas appeared before Sigma with no signs of caution.

Sigma believed his allegation.

Dumas should be well aware that Sigma's Servant has no offensive abilities and that he's not an enemy of the police.

"Oh, I can feel some crazy stuff inside this thing, but I'm still barely able to tinker with it. Well, if you got something on a level where there was no room for me to improve it, you wouldn't be needing my help to make your arrow work on the goddess.", said that legendary

Fate/strange Fake 8

writer as he watched the greatbow that Sigma gave him.

It was the greatbow that Kuruoka Tsubaki's parents brought to use as a catalyst to summon a Heroic Spirit.

"That said, I gotta admit shooting a god dead is a tad beyond my weight class. We're gonna need advice from an expert.", Dumas shrugged.

"I know we're asking for too much. I'm willing to raise your magical energy level with a Command Spell if necessary.", said the police chief.

"No one was expecting you not to. You're gonna have to use one, but we're in need of some additional help beyond that, got it? We're trying to boost this Noble Phantasm beyond my capabilities here."

"You know I'm not knowledgeable enough on how to handle artifacts."

"Yeah, I didn't mean you, brother. I already called a professional for this job."

Upon saying that, Dumas took a cell phone out of his pocket.

An eye-catching blue phone from a model the chief had never seen before.

"Hm? What's this?"

"A secret weapon, brother. Well, I only got mine pretty recently."

The nonchalant Dumas placed the phone next to the greatbow and talked to it.

"So, could you hear everything, teacher?"

A voice on the phone responded.

--Loud and clear. This thing's audio quality is comparable to the latest Peligor model.--

"Wait, Caster. Why does this phone have reception?"

A Toast to the Azure Sky's Image Reflected on a Puddle

The lines were already cut, meaning this phone was getting signal through magical means—but the blue phone was so advanced in its magical energy concealment that the chief saw it as nothing more than an ordinary blue phone.

“He’s a special model.”

Next, Caster asked a question to the phone.

“So, how is it like on your end, teacher? Any interesting ideas?”

--I can’t imagine my ideas impressing one of the masters of literature... but now is hardly the time for hesitation.--

“Don’t tell me this voice is... Lord El-Melloi?!”

--As I already told you before, I’d appreciate it if you appended an II to my name.--

The Clock Tower Lord that Orlando had spoken to a few days before when forming his alliance with Flat.

Did that conversation bind our fates together, enabling this reconnection?

The chief had many questions for Caster but figured that it would be inappropriate to interrupt the conversation for that, so instead, he spoke to the phone.

“Pardon, El-Melloi II. I’d also like to request your assistance.”

And so, Dumas rushed to work under El-Melloi II’s orientation.

--The first question that must be asked is whether or not the Kuruoka couple’s greatbow is the real piece owned by Qin Shi Huang. This is very important but... combining Caster’s analysis with Sigma’s information, I believe it’s safe to assume it’s real.--

Dumas sat on his office desk and raced his pen through several sheets of paper as he listened to El-Melloi II’s voice.

Fate/strange Fake 8

An old-fashioned cauldron was set next to his desk, filling the air with a weird aroma.

Caster put the greatbow in the cauldron manifested by his Noble Phantasm and began regularly dumping the pages of his manuscript inside as he penned them. A most surreal scene.

Sigma knew he normally reassembled things with a touch, but he explained that larger projects required a more involved procedure.

--Assuming the Divine Spirit in question is Ishtar from Sumer or has a facet classifiable as Ishtar, the domain she governs is the sky. Furthermore, this city contains remnants of the Reality Marble-like world that my student fell into the other day... that is to say, elements of the underworld. Assuming this remains true, it's highly likely that aspects of Ereshkigal and the Sumer underworld will also manifest. However, that's only my wishful thinking and not an observation we should rely on for this project.--

"Then what's the actual plan, teacher?"

With a surly face, the magecraft lecturer gave his final answer to the hit author repeatedly calling him "teacher" over the phone.

--Correspondence.--

"Correspondence?"

--This greatbow of yours was fired to kill Dajiaoyu, the sea god who impeded Xu Fu's voyage when Qin Shi Huang commanded him to search for immortality—In other words, an avatar of the ocean. Likely, this "lady in red" that Mr. Sigma spoke of is a remnant of the sea god set to manifest if taken to the underworld.--

Following that, El-Melloi II switched to a softer pace—as he got to the topic of the trick to kill a god.

--The ocean is blue because it reflects the color of the sky. Rearranging things from this point, it should be possible to produce a fake act of godfelling.--

The chief and Sigma reacted with shock at the Lord establishing this base premise as "possible", while Dumas just joyously raced his pen through the paper.

A Toast to the Azure Sky's Image Reflected on a Puddle

--That is only if your Heroic Spirit is telling the truth about his ridiculous ability to overwrite Noble Phantasms... but I don't doubt it. This is tame compared to the ridiculousness of a god's emanation summoning the Bull of Heaven.--

"Whatever you say, man."

Dumas said that to introduce a pause in the conversation so he could progress on his writing, but El-Melloi II asked him to stop.

--Hold on. Your overwriting won't help when Chinese and Sumerian folklore have nothing in common. You'll need a translator to fit this round peg into the square hole. Werner is there with you, right? Invent a ritual to reincarnate the greatbow employing his butterfly magecraft... A good starting point to work with Sumerian content would be utilizing a spell formula derived from the transformation of the symbols and myths of Sagittarius; in this case, Pabilsag and Chiron, in addition to the horseback folks considered to be the origin of the centaurs... Oh, the tale of Hou Yi shooting down the suns is also very exploitable.--

Sigma was overwhelmed by this spilling torrent of knowledge and understood he would never surpass a Clock Tower mage in terms of information quantity.

El-Melloi II alternated raw knowledge and personal complaints, but his words never stopped, constantly providing the finest pen of Paris with the largest amount of research he could within their time limit.

--Venus has been loved through all of human history as the shining Morning Star, the starlight closest to humanity. Other depictions of the Morning Star are Lucifer, regarded as a devil, and the goddess in question, later also regarded as a devil. And that's why we can build a minimally functioning line of logic if we interpret this as using Qin Shi Huang's majesty to dispel evil spirits. Oh, damn, it was him who forced this intermingling of Eastern and Western myths. Things should fall into place neatly if we use a format from the Hellenistic period. If you tell all of this to Werner or Svin, they'll figure out the rest... Flat would have done this on pure guesswork... He doesn't understand this attitude is why he can't graduate...--

El-Melloi II's lecture continued on many other topics and Dumas kept writing his narrative based on that information.

Sigma was also astounded by the way Dumas immediately began rewriting the tales from the

Fate/strange Fake 8

information he gained, but what he was the most wary about was Lord El-Melloi II's stammering speech.

He heard the rumors about him.

That if his talented students were comparable to an ocean, his magical energy capacity was a puddle at best.

Yet in other rumors, he was feared by the name of Plundering Duke.

Sigma learned firsthand why.

Because at this moment, the puddle reflected the image of the blue sky and tried to form the memorable image of the sky on a sea's horizon.

This El-Melloi II person talked like he had a bird's-eye view of the whole situation, but the man wasn't in North America, let alone in Snowfield.

Nonetheless, he confronted the arcane like he was face-to-face with it... Seeing a proper mage coldly discuss godslaying was alarming, in fact.

"...Why are you doing so much for us? What does the Clock Tower stand to gain from it?"

He couldn't help himself and asked the question. El-Melloi II's answer:

--Arcane concealment. Saving the world from a threat. Mages are not heroes, but I do believe these are circumstances where anyone would have taken action... Although I admit my case is not any noble sacrifice like that.--

"Then why?"

--If there were only graduated students in this city, I'd have to say they made their choice to walk toward their deaths. I have no right to stop them, therefore no reason to help. After all, I only gave them their diplomas because I judged them capable of taking responsibility for their choices.--

Sigma could tell from his voice that he was having a headache or an ulcer, but even so, El-Melloi II answered him with complete sincerity.

--But this case involves many students still taking classes... Students whose choices I'm still responsible for guiding. No teacher worth their salt could turn a blind eye to that.--

A Toast to the Azure Sky's Image Reflected on a Puddle

“...That’s your whole reason?”

This situation had a chance of damaging his status at the Clock Tower.

El-Melloi II’s answer to Sigma’s question was delivered with a tone of honest exhaustion.

Yet without a shred of torpor or hesitation.

--There’s nothing more important than that. No matter how much they’re problem students, I chose of my own volition to accept them into my class.--

El-Melloi II’s final answer happened roughly at the same time as Dumas finished overwriting the greatbow with help from Werner Ceasarmund’s remote use of Papilio Magia on the other telephone line.

“There’s a word for sleuths that solve cases with just the information given to them, without stepping into the crime scene. They’re called armchair detectives.”

Dumas picked up the causality-reversing greatbow elevated into a Noble Phantasm with the concept of shooting down the Mistress of Heaven and expressed his sincere praise for the person on the phone.

“You’re one hell of a guy, teacher. You’re killing a god without stepping into the crime scene.”

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Top floor of the temple

“Ishtar! My goddess, oh no, no...!”

The floating Ishtar Temple shook immensely and began slowly descending to the ground.

By the time Fillia’s body fell onto the upper floor of the temple, it had already lost most of its divinity, and she had lost the effect of the Charm controlling the temple and the earth.

Rider had sensed the danger and already evacuated her Masters by this point, leaving only a tearful Haruri on the top floor of the temple, carrying the collapsed Fillia in her arms.



A Toast to the Azure Sky's Image Reflected on a Puddle

“This cannot be. Ishtar! Ah, agh, if only... If only I was more...”

“Don’t be so conceited...”

With a courageous smile, the remains of goddess Ishtar in Fillia’s body wiped the tears from her believer’s face with the fingers on her right hand.

“You’re just a human. No matter what you try, you can’t make a difference on whether a god lives or dies.”

“Ishtar, my goddess...”

“What a silly girl... Always fearful, following me against your will...”

She’s only been with the mage girl for a few days, and blessing her with head priestess status was a whim.

The girl wasn’t outstanding as either a person or a mage, but that’s what allowed Ishtar to be more genuine in the way she set out to interact with a living human of the present.

“Listen to the goddess’ final decree.”, said Ishtar caressing Haruri’s cheek. “Take good care... of Huwawa.”

She spoke Berserker’s True Name with a voice full of mercy.

“She may not look like it... but she’s a really lonely girl.”

Before she finished her sentence, Ishtar used the last of her magical energy to switch Maanna on.

And so the Boat of Heaven shoved Haruri’s body inside itself and ran on its last gas to fly only the girl away from the temple.

“Ishtar...! Don’t do this to me, I don’t... I still haven’t done anything for your...”

“C’mom, girl, you know you don’t have the wealth to repay me in any meaningful way.”

Fate/strange Fake 8

The words were an attempt to disconnect her emotionally, but the goddess had a tranquilizing smile and a final message that may or may not have been a joke while she watched her ark leave with her priestess.

“Live a long life and get rich... And when you do, offer lots of lapis lazuli to my temple, understood?”

Silence followed.

The distant thunders and wind in the west could still be heard, but as she was losing her five senses, they felt like events happening in another world.

It could be a sign that most of her was already caged in the underworld.

“That wasn’t like you...”

The silence was broken by her green-haired archnemesis.

“I don’t remember you ever caring about a human like that.”

A couple hundred options of insults crossed her mind, but instead...

“That’s the girl I personally chose as my head priestess, you know?”

...the goddess chose a calm counter-argument.

“I’m a guardian of mankind. I’d have no problem with ruining her on a whim... but letting my girl die because of my blunders is unacceptable.”

“...”

Upon hearing the fading vestiges of the goddess, Enkidu averted their eyes and commented.

“You’re still as arrogant and unreasonable as ever.”

“I can’t deny... Denying it would be throwing away my whole identity.”

A Toast to the Azure Sky's Image Reflected on a Puddle

Ishtar's soul envisioned Huwawa still fighting in front of the temple and the priestess worshipping her in this distant era.

"It would be an insult to the little people adoring the sky in Uruk... No, scratch that."

After catching a glimpse of Haruri flying away, the goddess declared with an insolent smile — the smile's arrogance was the secret ingredient for its ultimate beauty.

"An insult to the little people adoring the sky in every era, and most of all, an insult to myself."

"..."

"The one who ultimately shot me down... was human.", said Ishtar, recalling the young mercenary who dealt the fatal blow to her. "It wasn't you and it wasn't Ereshkigal. I was felled by human hands rejecting my new divine era."

"Why do you sound so happy saying that?"

"It's not about just me... Humanity doesn't need you or Gilgamesh anymore... They proved they reached the age where they can walk on their own feet... It's frustrating, sure... but it's far more gratifying."

The smile never left the goddess' face as she vanished into the underworld.

"Not that a... piece of junk like you... would understand it..."

She had her most splendid, noble, and beautiful smile yet—
One capable of even shaking the mercenary's heart.

The temple reached the floor and the rocks keeping it in place fell apart.

With no traces of the temple's previous shape left, this scenery became a symbol of the land losing a goddess.

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Fate/strange Fake 8

Police station, rooftop

Recalling his conversation with El-Melloi II, Sigma stood up at the police station rooftop and looked at the western sky.

“None of El-Melloi II’s words felt like a lie. Clock Tower Lords really are as amazing as the rumors say.”

“Hm... I don’t think any of that had to do with being a Lord. If you were talking about teachers, then I could agree. He’s not as rigid an educator as Chiron, but I did find them similar.”

After saying something related to his past, the boy with the caduceus also looked at the western sky.

“Well, seems like the goddess fell and began her journey through the underworld... The real trial starts now.”

Sigma glanced west, following the boy’s line of sight.

“The one who directly inflicted death on her was Assassin... Oh, I mean Hassan-i-Sabbah, not the girl. But you also played a major role by shooting the goddess, finally performing in the center stage of the Holy Grail War. Do you understand the significance of this?”

Francesca and Faldeus must have already observed what happened. I can no longer make excuses.

Furthermore, the silhouettes had already informed him that Bazdilot’s group was about to unleash a ravaging war on the city.

Imagining how the chief will react to the informant infiltrated in the police, Sigma could feel his problems piling up.

Sigma raised his head, quietly but with resolute determination.

“Yeah...”

Is Assassin... still doing well? She must be still seeing her faith through. Then I should do the same...

A Toast to the Azure Sky's Image Reflected on a Puddle

Watching the giant spirals of thunderbolt still present in the western sky, Sigma whistled and spoke half-jokingly.

“I have a few more days without proper sleep ahead of me.”

a t e / s t r a n g e F a k

Bridge

“One day, amidst the thunders”

Bridge: One day, amidst the thunders

Bridge: One day, amidst the thunders

A few hours later, somewhere in Snowfield

“You all... have to leave now.”, said the inhuman boy in the air to the mages on the ground.

“You of all people should know that we can’t.”

“Flat is gone. If there were any way to bring him back, I’d have already done it.”, the boy in the sky—Thia Escardos—answered Svin’s comment.

While overwhelming magical energy circulates around him in the form of Satellites, Thia attempts to drive away the mages below—the members of the El-Melloi classroom—with his words.

“You have no duty to stay behind and watch the city’s collapse.”

Having said that, he turned his eyes to the thunderclouds covering the entire sky.

A few hours ago, the hurricane was in the western sky was manifested as the Bull of Heaven.

But now, this mass cumulonimbus clouds in the form of living power and destruction, the calamity that would destroy the city, was someone else entirely.

“...I was just as surprised as you are. He could take more than just our Servant’s... Jack the Ripper’s Noble Phantasm. Flat and I assumed he could only steal Servant Noble Phantasms, but we were wrong...”

The students capable of detecting the flow of the magical energy immediately understood what was happening.

The hurricane, previously hundreds of kilometers in diameter, was now reduced to just a few kilometers.

But Ishtar dropping into the underworld didn’t weaken it to any extent.

The entire whirlwind’s energy was compressed in a single place—more accurately, into the one Servant in the eye of the hurricane.

Fate/strange Fake 8

The land and sky were covered in nonstop thunderbolts. It was clear that anyone who dared approach would get scorched by the rain of lightning with no chance of survival.

“I never imagined he’d be able to plunder a divine beast’s Conceptual Core in its entirety,” Thia quietly delivered the answer while watching the Servant at the center of the storm: the avenger Alcides. “Or... are you thinking about dealing with that monster?”

“Certainly.”, said Hippolyte, mounted on her warhorse. “He is... my enemy. Stopping him is my reason to remain in this land.”

“...”

Thia silently looked at Hippolyte.

In a matter of hours, the quality of her Saint Graph had increased even further.

That was the result of the magical energy load of 30 Masters being carefully refined to prevent rejection.

But even then, he didn’t believe she could win against the demon who stole a god’s lightning.

“So you choose to die fighting instead of surrendering? Or perhaps...”

Next, Thia set his sights somewhere else.

Fillia’s body—the Lesser Grail that no longer housed a god, collapsed under the El-Melloi Classroom’s protection.

And the distressed girl kneeling next to her: Ayaka Sajou.

“Does she... really think she can be humanity’s ally? Don’t you find it weird that she can continuously enable two Heroic Spirits to spam Noble Phantasms all the time? Do you think it’s normal that she’s an infinite fountain of magical energy?”

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Words by Reines El-Melloi Archisorite.

“The biggest material damage to our property... was something not even the other Lords

Bridge: One day, amidst the thunders

could easily obtain. It's for good reason that that item used to be El-Melloi's Supreme Mystic Code until the previous El-Melloi perfected Trimmau."

The previous Lord El-Melloi was Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald.

The girl from his family listlessly told the story of how the Lord lost his life in the land of Fuyuki.

"Yes... The previous Lord losing it in the battle of Fuyuki was the biggest of the 5 fatal losses we suffered."

Reines explained what the object was, with a hint of entertainment, or perhaps an attempt to provoke the listener.

"One of them can produce enough magical energy to maintain a whole building isolated from the world for weeks... and if you put the three of them to interact with each other, the natural recovery rate of their energy skyrockets. Centuries ago, the El-Mellois processed the highest-class Phantasmals taken out of the mines and completed the perfect magical energy reactor. It's got nothing super outstandingly unique about it, but its sheer output can overwhelm anyone. It's the ultimate symbol of 'simple is best', making it the perfect tool for the El-Melloi family, lauded for its versatility. Well, the El-Melloi's current Supreme Mystic Code takes the opposite extreme, having a little too much personality."

The girl spoke with joyful whimsy despite the lost items belonging to her.

The mercury maid standing next to her was the aforementioned current Supreme Mystic Code of the El-Mellois—That is, a Mystic Code that symbolizes their status as one of the 12 Lord families of the Clock Tower.

"Our esteemed predecessor said that an article that only makes magical energy lacks artistry, and created this here Trimmau, the Volumen Hydrargyrum, to be the new Supreme Mystic Code."

Which means the item she described could match the ridiculousness of a hyper-advanced humanoid mass of living mercury with a mind of its own.

"Well, if the previous Lord knew that my brother installed an ego in it to make it easier for

Fate/strange Fake 8

me to use her, he would call it a downgrade.”

After this comment, Reines’s mouth twisted into a grin and she returned to the topic of the previous Supreme Mystic Code.

“You, of course, know about the Spiritual Tomb of Albion, no? The last dragon dug its way to the phantasmal land until it exhausted itself and its body remained as a giant labyrinth. In the golden age of the El-Melloi, people mined the underground maze the dragon created and, through their most clever political games, the El-Mellois obtained the several phantasmal materials used to make these reactors... We know that our previous Lord had lost himself to a woman’s charm, so honestly, the very notion of taking them out of the country for an East Asian ritual should have been a telling sign that he was completely out of his mind.”

Reines takes a sip of tea as she enjoyed the opportunity to make cynical remarks about her relative.

“Worst of all... when said otherworldly workshop...that is, when that Fuyuki hotel collapsed to the ground, someone stole the items. Our prime suspect died on us, and since then we’ve been completely out of information on the thief.”

That is where Reines stopped her exposition to ask the listener a question.

“Since you have investigated Fuyuki’s Holy Grail War before, you might have heard about this case. The brutal murder of a mage couple in Kurokizaka’s Semina Apartments.”

Reines sipped her tea with a sadistic smile.

“It’s not as big a deal as the Holy Grail... but there are mages who would start a war for it.” she spoke as if she was dearly waiting for mages to start a stupid conflict over the items that are still around somewhere in the world.

“For that set of three magical energy reactors.”

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Bridge: One day, amidst the thunders

“She’ll... eventually become an enemy of mankind. Just like me.”, declared Thia, pointing at the kneeling Ayaka.

And as always, the first to argue in Ayaka’s favor was the Saber in front of her.

“C’mom now, no one likes when people talk like they’re prophets, you know? Look at Saint-Germain, his prophecies hit the spot time and time again, and that never stopped anyone from seeing him as a major annoyance!”

“You’re Saber?”

“But well, if Ayaka becomes an enemy of mankind, I’d be willing to join her. Here’s one prophecy from me: if it comes to that, I don’t think Ayaka will be the one starting the fight, you hear me?”

Saber may have sounded carefree, but his magical energy was already refined and ready to shoot a Noble Phantasm at the airborne Thia at any moment.

“I can loudly and confidently attest that my Master... Ayaka won’t become an enemy of mankind. It would be more accurate to say that mankind will become Ayaka’s enemy.”

But the devastated Ayaka grabbed Saber’s hand.

“Ayaka?”

“No... I’m not Ayaka.”, said Ayaka, with her eyes and lips shaking with distress and fear. “I remembered it... I remembered everything...! I remember...!”

Her line of sight dropped to Fillia. With the remnants of the goddess gone, Fillia lay down, sleeping. With her hypnosis dispelled, the floodgate for the returning memories in Ayaka was open.

Getting a taste of what it feels like to lose all strength, Ayaka still wanted to cling to something, so she grabbed Saber’s hand... and let out a sobbing scream.

“That’s not me... I’m not Sajou Ayaka!”

Fate/strange Fake 8

It was like she was confessing her sins to Saber.
Like she was fully rejecting the person she used to be.

“I’m... It was me... I’m the Little Red Riding Hood. I did it... I was the killer.”

Next episode [Fake09]

CLASS

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Profile Disclaimer: Ishtar is not a Servant and the stats presented are based on the supposition of "what if they counted as a Servant".

Master: Herself

True Name: Ishtar (Vessel: Filia)

Gender: Female

Height Unknown
Weight Unknown

Alignment: Lawful Good



Personal Skills

Manifestation of Beauty: EX

The goddess of beauty advened in an Einzbern homunculus. Her charm power can affect magical and inanimate objects and even the laws of physics, but she can't use them against concepts related to the underworld due to a poor compatibility match-up. She feels no need to use this against humans since they automatically worship her. The cause of Haruri's devotion was the goddess' natural charm, not the charm from the Skill.

Mana Burst: A+

She charms the land to directly draw magical energy from it, then outputs it without sparing any.

Shining Great Crown: A-

Due to her being a lingering echo, the power of her Authorities is somewhat lower than what Ishtar had in the Age of Gods.

Class Skills

Magic Resistance: A

Independent Action: A++

Because she's currently descended in and fused with a homunculus body.

Lingering Echo of the Goddess: B+++

A Skill equal to Divine Core of the Goddess, but since she is not the actual goddess, instead, the emanation of a blessing (curse) that the goddess left in the world to replicate herself, it's not exactly the same. She essentially burned a program on the planet that would generate a copy of herself if specific conditions were met. Its rank is B+++ because she falls somewhere in between a Pseudo-Servant and an actual Servant. Mental interference attacks generally don't affect her.

Noble Phantasm

Jabal Hamrin Breaker

The hammer of the skies makes frontiers kneel

Rank: A++; Range: 999???: Maximum Targets: ???

It's said that when goddess Ishtar physically flattened Mt. Ebih, a mountain even the gods paid respects to, she gripped its summit before driving in her spear. This Noble Phantasm is a feat that represents this eagle grip on the summit. She strikes swinging down Cita, her warhammer, after charging it with magical energy and Authority. The blow is, quite literally, pressure from the skies forcing the world to kneel.

Gugalanna Strike: Outrage

Bull of Heaven: Outrage

Rank: EX; Range: 999; Maximum Targets: 999

The strongest divine beast in Ishtar's command. Unlike the regular Gugalanna Strike, which temporarily calls for him to land a blow with this front leg, this version uses him as a permanently manifested avatar of hurricanes. Since she is a lingering emanation, not the actual goddess, she didn't have her divine beast with her, but she shallowly used her goddess powers to grab him from some unfortunate timeline without asking for permission. In this point specifically, he can be considered an avatar of Ishtar's tyrannical side.

CLASS

True Assassin

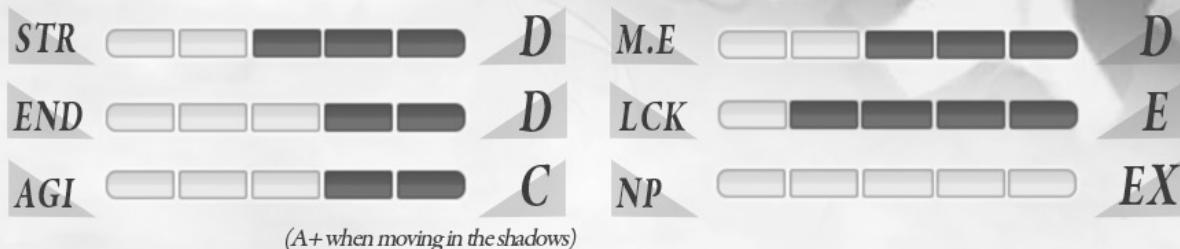
Master: Faldeus Dioland

True Name: Hassan-i-Sabbah

Gender: Male

Height
Weigh Shadows don't have heights or weights

Alignment: Lawful Evil



Personal Skills

Shadow Lantern: A

The Skill to merge with shadows. Since the darkness provides him with the magical energy of his surroundings, he barely doesn't need any magical energy supply from his Master, provided that he doesn't take physical form. It also enables him to conceal his parameters from his Master, unless the Master uses a Command Spell.

Fathomless Rift: A

A curse and blessing engraved in the world after his death because the First's blade allowed him to pay his death ahead of its time. In other words, a Skill that expresses how one man became Hassan-i-Sabbah by becoming the very shadow of death. He can move as a shadow and warp to any place that has a shadow. Therefore, his blade cannot reach one who is only in light. This doesn't allow him to negate any attacks like Hassan of the Intoxicated Smoke can.

Class Skills

Presence Concealment: EX Merged with the very world. Becomes A+ only when he proceeds to attack.

Noble Phantasm

Zabaniya Meditative Sensitivity

Rank: EX; Range: 1-???: Maximum Targets: 1-???

Activation condition: when it's guaranteed that his Saint Graph as a Heroic Spirit won't survive.

By connecting to the shadow of the world, he temporarily transforms into a simulation of the concept of death and merges with his target, dragging them to the netherworld. The activation condition also includes the situation where his Saint Graph won't survive because his Master died.

Although he's called the shadow of the First, the owner of this hidden Noble Phantasm can be more accurately described as a Hassan whose placement in the numbering order is unknown to all.

The future generations were left with no accurate tellings about it. Instead, it was described as the ability to connect with the shadow of the world to understand all that was happening in the land.

Afterword

Long time no see. It's me, Narita Ryougo.

Well, bodies are finally starting to drop.

"Alright, I'll follow the original plan and have everyone work together to get her defeated by the first third of the book...NO! I can't let her go out this quickly! She's not the infamous boss of the raid! (rips the manuscript)"

"That's more in line with how her strength has been portrayed before... Oh no, I made her too strong! They'll need 2 more volumes to defeat her at this rate! (rips the manuscript)"

"Huff huff, ok, here's an idea: ***** joins the fight and does the ***** earlier than I planned... Nuh-uh! ***** wouldn't allow something this haphazard! (rips the manuscript)"

In reality, I'm not ripping manuscripts, I'm deleting digital data, but the point here is to tell what led me to rewrite over half of this volume's length three times...My ultimate decision was to pull out the armchair Plundering Duke, Mr. El-Melloi II, and the greatbow of our dear Ms. Xu Fu's employer to deliver the azure sky's funeral rites.

In contrast, the Venus vs Shadows clash was an arrangement I decided on since I first released True Assassin and I want to pat myself on the back for finally putting it to paper...!

As you can imagine from the last scene, there are multiple pillars to FsF's narrative and one of them is what elements of Fuyuki's stories leaked into the greater world.

That's the main reason why El-Melloi II gets a lot of screen time here, but this is not Case Files, so that was his last active contribution.

From now on, it's his students' turn to engage with their classmates and Heroic Spirits to form a new future. And them aside, we have Ayaka's and Saber's story approaching its climax, and Sigma finally taking center stage instead of being relegated to the interludes, following his choice to fight against the masterminds.

Volume 8 started the domino chain of participants being removed from the Grail War—I hope you enjoy this Fake Holy Grail War for what will probably be two more volumes...!

Also, this volume's Interlude: Do You Have Enough Actors in Stock? was a placeholder title that I forgot to fix before sending to proofreading, which got "Holy crap, I can't believe you!" reaction from Nasu, and the only excuse I had for him was "Blame my hand, my hand wrote that on its own". But he didn't say "Don't do it", so I kept it like that. Don't tell Nasu.

Also many proofreads told me their brains glitched from reading the name Neo Ishtar

Fate/strange Fake 8

Temple in serious scenes, but I've been saying Neo Ishtar Temple with a straight face this whole time and never noticed how goofy the name was until the readers pointed it out. Don't tell them this either. Ok, I lied. I still say Neo Ishtar Temple with a straight face even after people tell me the name is goofy. Yay!

Also something huge happened between this book and the next.

An anime!

Yes, an anime! Animation!

A special feature anime of the Fake series is being produced and by the time this volume comes out, a 5-minute-long PV already aired in the New Year Special! The anime is being produced by the two directors Enokido and Sakazume, who worked on many FGO CMs and anniversary videos. The PV is online, so look it up if you haven't watched yet!

The original plan was to air a TV special that covers volume 1, but due to real life circumstances, it's now schedule for completion in the summer.

Entranced by the quality of the PV, I kept pacing around the room mumbling that I'll wait for as long as it takes. I hope you're excited enough about it to join me on my running in circles!

Special thanks:

First to my editor Anan, who I inconvenienced more than usual this time. Along with everyone in the publisher staff and II-V, who keeps track of my schedule.

To the Fate/ team who discussed many parts with me. To producer Kurosaki and his wonderful staff, both for their work in the anime and for the new reference material about the United States that I got from them...!

To Miwa Kiyomune's Team Barrel for the historical investigation for the magecraft content and one Servant's lore. Miwa also worked as the anime's magecraft supervised and helped out in some parts, such as making the chant for the nameless mage who summoned the Hero King!

To Sanda Makoto for supervising the Case Files characters, researching series lore, and giving many suggestions. He edited almost all of El-Melloi II's and Reines's dialogue...! I'll be making heavy edits to Flat's dialogue on the next Adventures volume in return...!

And to Morii Shizuki for breathing life into story and deepening the characters with wonderful illustrations both in the cover and inside the book. Thank you also for being both a visual and a script editor in the anime...!

And most importantly, thanks to Nasu and the Type-Moon staff, for creating the series and supervising my work. And to Fate/Grand Order's staff for letting me write Enkidu's Interludes. And to you who chose to pick this book despite the long wait.

Bridge: One day, amidst the thunders

Thank you very much!

January 2023, Narita Ryougo, celebrating Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's buffs in FGO