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「case. 双貌塔イゼルマ(上)」

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女は、くすんだ赤色の髪をしていた。
それこそ東洋人には珍しい色だったが、染めたのではないだろうと思った。
自分の瞳とは違うが、この女の本質に寄り添っているような色だったからだ。

Lord El-Melloi II Case Files

Volume 02 ~ “Case. Twin Towers of Izelma (Upper)”

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◆ 序章 ◆

◆ Prologue ◆



To speak frankly, I have a bad personality.

I smile when I see other people suffer. Even more so if they are a straight-forward, honest person. When someone who by all rights should have been walking a path overflowing with light is forced to step off the correct path due to some meaningless mistake, it fills me with pleasure.

If this had been some sort of result of my upbringing, or maybe an effect of some childhood trauma, then maybe I could be excused.

Unfortunately, I was just born this way. In that respect you might have thought it was something I inherited from my parents, or my ancestors. In reality though, there was no one in my family who could sympathize with my feelings. For the most part a bad personality was the default for a magus anyways. Even the notorious El-Melloi faction in the Clock Tower was little more than a group of unsavoury individuals who banded together under the name of Archibald to trip up everyone else they could.

So.

That day became especially deeply ingrained within my memory.

"...yes. That was pleasant."

Recalling it, I smiled again.

I had already been keeping eyes on 'him,' the man that survived that Great Ritual in the Far East.

The fact that he, who was the most inexperienced and unqualified participant in that ritual had managed to come out unscathed was not something anyone in the Clock Tower had considered even in their dreams, but if he came back there was nothing to do about it but leave him be.

In contrast, the wildly unexpected death of a Lord - Lord El-Melloi - birthed a new conflict over who would succeed him, could absolutely not be ignored. Assets, talents, lands, and Mystic Codes that were all amassed under the name of El-Melloi that had been passed down since antiquity were all stolen away as if by a flock of ravenous birds.

Not just rivals, even members of the family itself came forth in large numbers to loot the spoils. Branch families of the Archibald lineage came forth taking large chunks of assets under claims that it was theirs to begin with, dividing up huge portions of the family's assets. And as they did so, the other Lords just sat back and gladly watched it all happen. As a result, the only things left over for the main family were the title of El-Melloi, and a debt of astronomical proportions.

And yet, what did they think to do?

In the midst of all that, someone carelessly remarked that 'he' who had returned should be given the now abandoned El-Melloi classroom.

Classes in the Clock Tower followed a basic principle of only those who could keep up with classes needed to bother with them.

In magecraft, bloodline and talent decided almost everything. There was really no need to take classes seriously. Much of what lecturers in the Clock Tower did consist of just giving out information as bait, and using that to lure in assistants for them to use.

As such, the others found little value in the forgotten El-Melloi classroom. For 'him,' however, that was not the case.

As a lecturer for third year students, he quickly made a name for himself.

At first, he wasn't even placed into a specific Faculty, so his lectures had a vanishingly small number of attendees. Thanks to this, however, the lessons had a practicality to them that was unrivalled elsewhere in the Clock Tower, and the new generations of students with nowhere else to go flocked to him. Winning the approval of other lecturers that had failed in their struggles for power, he was able to take the stage and actualize a multilateral approach to education that had yet to be seen.

Thinking about it now, that had probably been an entirely unintended consequence.

For 'him,' who had neither the blessings of a powerful bloodline nor any inborn talent, the vague and rough style of teaching that was common was probably too difficult for him. Having somehow managed to become a third year lecturer while studying the bare essentials, he had no choice but to rely on others due to his own fundamental lack of ability.

Yes, the figure of his young figure trying to bear the pain of another stomach ache came to mind easily. No doubt this was the time when those deep wrinkles began to form between his eyebrows. They would probably continue to just get deeper as his life went on. It made me want to measure them a little, so I could compare them later.

In any case, under his leadership, the El-Melloi classroom continued to be used for three years.

You could call it a kind of miracle.

Of course, compared to the other assets owned by the family, it wasn't much. However, the oversight of a classroom was linked to the overseeing of lands. For someone like him who had no support or backing of any kind, one would have expected the position to be snapped away from him at the first mistake or sign of weakness. To think that he had managed to survive on his own for three long years made one think the other lecturers in the Clock Tower were being blinded by fairies or something.

Around that time.

Having taken an interest in him at a whim, I summoned him.

Well. Let me make a small correction.

I said I called for him, but it would be more accurate to say I took him captive. Thanks to a few small quarrels coincidentally ending around the same time, what little authority remained in the El-Melloi faction was concentrated around me. Using that authority, I had him brought before me.

And so, with him grovelling before me, I spoke.

"I know of your activities since returning to England. Day and night, I have been watching your actions with a racing heart. You could call me something like a secret fan of yours."

He had probably been preparing himself to die when he was brought before me.

From my position, he was nothing more than another thief that had stolen away the resources that rightfully belonged to the El-Melloi faction. To have insulted the El-

Melloi classroom, a renowned name even amongst the Clock Tower's elite, with such vulgar classes as those belonging the Faculty of Modern Magecraft, no matter who you asked they would say his death would be the only suitable reparation.

But.

But he was stunned right from the very beginning. Asking questions like who I even was, he hung his head and apologized, standing stiff like he had been struck by a bolt of lightning. It was such an unexpected response that I had been struck silent as well.

But then...

"...I have some responsibility in Lord El-Melloi's case."

As rude as it was, hearing those words I couldn't help but laugh out loud.

"Oh? Why would you say that? What responsibility could you possibly have had?"

Even I thought that it was a mean-spirited question. Just recalling it now is making me smile. I really am hopeless, aren't I?

Remembering the sight of him biting his lip, his shoulders shaking...it honestly makes me regret that I didn't record the whole affair. Of course, with a little effort I could replay the event in my brain with a little activation of my Magic Circuits, but in this world there were things that just had to be shared to be enjoyed.

Thinking about it like that, I guess I don't have any friends who would enjoy something like that with me anyways. How unfortunate.

"Your elder brother, Lord El-Melloi - my teacher, Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald, was driven to his death because of my recklessness."

"Right, right. If you hadn't fought against him, then maybe my brother and his fiancée would have lived a little bit longer."

It was a huge lie.

Just by interjecting when it seemed appropriate, I brushed off his claim.

I see, this man had been a stumbling block to Kayneth right from the beginning of the Fourth Holy Grail War. He stole my brother's precious relic, and then entered the war and stood against him alongside the Servant Rider.

(...but, that's all.)

So I thought.

Just from reading the records, I could tell my brother was destined to die.

Sure, he was a prodigious magus in his own right, but his specialization was not in combat.

In contrast, many of the others gathered for the ritual were beyond the level of being even professional killers. It was like he was trying to divert the flow of a river by throwing a rock into it. Sure, it was a fairly large rock, but it wasn't a job for a rock in the first place. That was my theory, at least.

If he had realized the situation he was in and fled home as fast as possible, then he could have had a long, productive life. But knowing his personality, that option was never on the table. Once he had elected to participate, he wouldn't listen to any warnings from me. His death was really the only possible ending. Well, it may have been rare to happen to a Lord, but it was the kind of tragedy that one expected in the life of a magus.

However, as if groaning, he opened his mouth.

"I acknowledge my sin. So please...at least spare my life."

"Oh? Are you saying that if I'm not satisfied that killing you is an option? You know, the Far East where that ritual took place was known for its ritual suicide. Isn't begging for your life like this a little too much?"

"I still have something I have to do."

He said it so plainly and clearly that it left me dumbfounded yet again.

What education had he received to become this kind of person? As far as I had been told, he had been a good-for-nothing, self-centered brat who couldn't even see his own immaturity before he had run away from the Clock Tower. Now he seemed like a completely different person.

I cleared my throat with a cough.

"...well then, since we're here anyways, how about I state my demands."

I decided to strike right at the main issue.

As the sound of him swallowing uncomfortably echoed in the room, I spoke with a bright smile.

"Right now, the El-Melloi faction is in a rather difficult place financially. With my selection as the next head of the El-Melloi faction, the Archisorte family has been burdened with that debt. However, dealing with that debt, and the accruing interest, is somewhat difficult for us. If you want to take responsibility for what you did, why don't you start by doing something about that debt?"

Right from the beginning, it was an impossible request.

For an ordinary magus, the amount of assets the El-Melloi family had lost was just too large. Even if they were to be supported by the Clock Tower as one of the twelve great families. To put it in modern terms, it was a debt large enough Hollywood would have been able to make a movie about it.

"...alright. I'll do everything I can."

How soft was this guy?

Please, I'm begging you, try to understand how it felt to be me in this situation.

No, rather than soft, it was probably more like he had already resolved himself. Biting his lip as if he was about to cry, he continued staring at me with a face that was so innocent it made me want to step on it.

Pushing down on that impulse, I made my next demand.

"My brother's Magic Crest - the El-Melloi family Source Crest was recovered by the Mage's Association. Unfortunately, what they recovered only amounted to about a tenth of the full Crest. For the Tuner in our employ, it will take at the very least three generations to repair the entire thing. I wonder if you can do something about that as well?"

"...alright."

Suddenly I became very worried that this man was not right in the head.

Maybe the Fourth Holy Grail War was actually a ritual to fill their heads with worms. No wonder my brother lost. He would never be able to take something like that.

"Then let's get to the most important point. The most important thing for what's left of the El-Melloi faction is to protect the title of Lord, at all costs. As I explained earlier, I am the primary candidate for that position, but I'm a little young, don't you think? I wonder if you'd be willing to keep that seat ready for me until I'm old enough?"

"That's...fine...but what exactly would 'keeping it ready for you' entail?"

"To put it simply, until I'm of an appropriate age, someone else has to take the position of Lord."

For the first time, his eyes went wide.

He may have resolved himself to take on something like the first two of my demands, but this last one was definitely far beyond anything he ever imagined. Hearing the groan start from deep in his throat reminded me of the pleasure I felt the first time I tried pulling the legs off a frog.

"Hold on. So what you're saying is-"

"Exactly. Dealing with the other Lords is sure to be mind-numbingly boring, but I'm sure you'll do great, Lord El-Melloi II. How does that name sound? You are now my beloved older brother, after all."

All at once, he collapsed.

He barely managed to catch himself before he hit the floor, but it seemed like he was only a hair away from fainting completely.

"Why don't I add a fourth demand while I'm at it? You will also work as my personal tutor. Yes, receiving private tutelage from a brother not connected by blood should send all the right messages."

With a laugh, I finished him off.

After this, I also took something from him as collateral to ensure he wouldn't attempt to flee from my demands, but that's a story for another time.

That was the beginning of our love.

It was a wonderful, heart-warming episode, don't you think?

...ah, there was one thing I forgot to mention.

My name is Reines El-Melloi Archisorte.

The woman responsible for sealing 'him' - the fledgling magus known as Waver Velvet - under the name of Lord El-Melloi II.

◆ 第一章 ◆

◆ Chapter 1 ◆



Chapter 1, Part 1

Hearing the sound of the coach's bell, my sleepiness vanished.

Rubbing my eyes and giving a word of thanks to the coachman, Trimmaw and I descended the steps onto the street.

Though the culture of horse-drawn coaches was still somehow persevering in my dearest England, a coach with four horses at the lead was rare enough that even the royal family probably didn't see it very often. The fact that the Trambelio faction had bothered to send me home with such a method of transportation was as clear as any threat could be. 'You understand how vast the gulf between us is now, right?'

That aside, having returned to my own town and applying my usual eye medicine, I stretched vigorously.

The City of Norwich (Modern Magecraft) - Slur was a street that clearly showed its cobbled-together nature.

On the west side, a cityscape displaying the area's rich history was laid out, but on the east side which was closer to London more modern looking buildings peaked through. Rather than looking like the area lacked a coherent theme, it was more like a bandage hastily applied to cover a wound.

"Well, to put it bluntly, they just don't have any money," I spoke to myself.

As I recalled, when the Faculty of Modern Magecraft bought up the area, they simply decided not to bother fixing it up. Even so saying, the environment around a magus made a big difference in their work, so, if possible, it would have been best to remodel the whole area back to its more archaic look. But in the end, they just didn't have that kind of money.

Before that, they were in debt before they even spent the money to buy the area in the first place.

I certainly wouldn't say everything, but at least seventy percent of the world is decided by budget. That fact is no different in the world of magecraft. As sad as it

is, the concept of the value of the world being calculated into a number and dollar value was approaching the realm of Mystery itself, so it wasn't something that could really be fought. The constantly continuing process of inflation all over the world was in itself an illusion produced by the collective unconscious of mankind.

Actually, magecraft that tied into currency directly has similar demands wherever it developed in the world, but that's enough thinking like my brother for now.

"Alright then. First..." Muttering to myself, I began walking.

Turning around an ivy-covered brick wall, I continued straight ahead up the hill and through a crossroad. Without delay, the structure I was heading towards came into view.

Of the twelve Faculties in the Clock Tower, it was the smallest main building of all the buildings designated for classes.

The surroundings were all nominally associated facilities of some university. The first Faculty - the main building of the Faculty of Mystile (General Fundamentals) actually masqueraded as a real university itself, but our Faculty of Modern Magecraft was not large enough for that to be feasible.

As soon as I stepped into the entrance hall, the chilly air of the building welcomed me.

If nowhere else in the faculty, with most of the loan from Norwich being focused here, at least this place held a serene calm and grace.

And within ten seconds, that grace was shattered.

With a holler, a person came sliding down the banister of the spiral staircase in the hall. Short, blonde hair and blue eyes. Though he had a jovial expression on his face, the minute he saw me stepping on to that same staircase his expression changed rapidly.

"Ah! U-um, hi, Reines!"

Trying futilely to stop himself, he continued to accelerate down the handrail.

Sliding to the bottom like on a roller coaster, the blonde-haired youth cried out in pain.

"S-S-Sorry! I'm Sorry!!!"

"...Trim."

As I muttered, the mercury-coloured maid - no, not just coloured, she was mercury through and through - stepped out from behind me.

Her full name was Trimmiau. Once the Archibald family's Volumen Hydrargyrum (Mystic Code - Moon Spirit's Spinal Fluid), I added a pseudo-personality and some functional limitations to it. In short, I had essentially made it into something like an autonomous golem. Currently, I was using her as a bodyguard and a servant for everyday tasks.

Raising a hand, she easily brought the still-sliding boy to a halt.

"Are you harmed, master?"

"Nah, I'm fine. Thanks."

Hearing Trimmiau's question, I nodded slightly.

The impact of him running into her hand had seemed a little too light, but I did notice that a moment before he made contact he uttered a One Count spell "Flow! (Float!)"

It was probably some sort of magecraft used to alter his own inertia. It seemed to have worked in conjunction with an amulet he was wearing, but the fact he was able to do that while sliding at that speed was impressive. Magecraft was normally something that took extreme levels of concentration to perform, so even most high-ranking magi would probably not have the confidence to perform a stunt like that. Looking in the eyes of the one called the "Genius Idiot," I smiled.

"You wouldn't happen to have an excuse, would you?"

"Well, if we're going to have a spiral staircase like this, it would be rude to not slide down it! It was waiting here for me, with its handrail polished up and everything, so sliding down it like that was just good manners!"

"...that's the 37th time you've used that excuse, Flat," another reproachful voice called out from the top of the staircase.

The boy put his cheek close to the railing Flat had just slid down. With his nose beside the railing, he sniffed.

"It's as unreasonably shiny and slippery as ever. I thought I had made it out of the classroom first this time, but apparently no such luck."

Matching Flat's age, the boy at the top of the staircase was about fifteen. His softly curled blonde hair looked almost like a designer candy as it glowed in the soft afternoon sunlight. His exasperated eyes were somewhere between green and ultramarine, and he had a sense of slender, refined balance that spread from his fingertips up his shoulders. And to top it all off, his figure was nothing short of miraculous, putting even sculptures of ancient Greece to shame.

That beautiful young man spoke out with obvious irritation.

"What did you do to make Mr. El-Melloi so mad that he tripled our homework?"



"Why would you say that? Adding more homework is just his way of encouraging us! I mean, even you looked happy when he gave us another report to do, didn't you, Le Chien?"

"Don't call people dogs! My name is Svin! Svin Glascheit! How many years will it take to get that into your skull!" As the corners of his eyes tightened, he pointed a finger at him. From that extended finger, something fired off that sent shivers down my spine.

Gandr, a curse originating in Northern Europe. With just the point of a finger, it could strike one's target with illness, but this Gandr had a beastlike ferocity behind it, an obvious bloodlust. That bloodlust alone seemed like it would be sufficient as a curse. If you thought about it like the Oriental practice of Poisoning, you'd be on the right track.

Oh, just to make sure we're all on the same page, that bloodlust wasn't magecraft.

It was just his nature.

"But Le Chien is Le Chien! It's the same thing as Professor Charisma, or Master V, or Great Big Ben London's Star, or Magica Disclosure!"

Despite having taken the shot head on, Flat's casual response wasn't even out of carelessness. The incomplete curse deflected harmlessly off him, unable to overcome the latent resistance offered by the absurdly powerful Magic Circuits he was born with.

"...all of those examples are Mr. El-Melloi though! And the only one who called him Great Big Ben London Star is you!"

"Professor Charisma is you!"

Svin groaned at Flat's protest.

As much as I'd like to call him Le Chien too, I suppose it would best to call him by his actual name. It might get annoying after a while.

Suddenly, Flat's breath caught.

"Wait...are you telling me that the in environment where you were brought up...the concept of 'Nicknames' didn't exist?!"

"Of course it did!"

Svin's shout of anger, a roar filled with Magic Energy, struck the floor below.

A moment before Svin's roar, which was powerful enough it had a physical force to it, I shook my head and took Trimmiau's hand.

"Adjust."

Gently, I blew air out my mouth.

To describe it simply, Trimmiau's mercury body became a mist and dissipated, spreading out across the room. A thin, grey veil absorbed Svin's shout, broke it down at the molecular level, and dispersed it harmlessly.

Seeing that, it seemed like Svin finally noticed my presence.

"Oh...uhh...Lady Reines..."

As his beautiful eyes went wide, he bowed his head so deeply it seemed like he might offer me his life as an apology.

"My apologies! I had no intention of so rudely making someone like yourself do such a thing!"

"Don't worry about it. It was an interesting thing to see," I gave him my honest opinion.

If an outsider had seen a scene like this one, no doubt they would get the impression magecraft was all about fun and games. When I thought of how much my brother must be suffering from having to deal with things like this every day, it suddenly made me feel a lot better.

Svin and Flat.

These two were the shining jewels of the El-Melloi classroom. No, if you at least restricted it to within their age range, they would still rightfully belong in the top ranks of the entire Clock Tower.

Indeed, that was why they were in the El-Melloi classroom in the first place - though Flat was actually cycled through a fair number of classrooms in the Clock Tower before my brother ended up with him.

"You two wouldn't happen to know where Gray and my brother are, would you?"

"Do you need my...er, do you need Gray for something?"

I decided to be kind and overlook the falter in his speech for now. After engaging in some rather stalker-like activity, he had been given strict orders not to come within a few meters of a certain girl. As hard as it might be to imagine, he was quite despondent over the whole affair.

As far as I was concerned, being that much of a pervert was perfectly fine.

After giving a loud sniff, Svin spoke.

"It doesn't smell like they've left the building, so I suspect they are in his private room."

"Thank you." Saying my thanks, I poked Flat's forehead.

"Reines?"

"I don't mind you being so familiar with me, but try to calm down a little. You're the oldest in your class, aren't you?"

"...actually, Lady Reines, I'm one month older than he is." Seeing his discontent, I couldn't help but laugh at Svin as he spoke.

"Well then, even more reason. You two are almost the same age, so try and keep it together."

Finishing my piece, I ascended the spiral staircase.

Now, the New Age students were just coming out of their classrooms. Of the twelve departments in the Clock Tower, the others did very little as far as attempt to attract new students, so most of them ended up coming to the Faculty of Modern Magecraft. I had yet to decide whether that was a good or a bad thing.

Regardless, I watched them out of the corner of my eye as I walked along the marble floor.

Eventually, a small noise reached my ears. The sound of someone humming. A very quiet, reserved humming.

Opening the door of one of the deeper rooms, the faint scent of oil wafted out into the hallway.

My brother's room was divided in two. Beside the entrance was a shelf for placing one's shoes. Of course, it was normal to wear shoes in the building, and it wasn't like there was an expectation for you to take off your shoes here. Maybe it was just a weird obsession of his, but he had numerous spare sets of clothes and pairs of shoes within his private room. Also at the entrance was a small little stool, upon which sat what looked like a little grey fairy.

The girl wearing a grey hood was holding a small cloth, using it to clean shoes. With various bottles of shoe cream and stain remover, and an assortment of small cloths to use them with, she was happily working away at polishing each of the shoes. Paying no mind to how dirty her fingers were getting; she was dutifully cleaning them right down to the laces.

"Polishing shoes again?"

"Ah, Miss Reines!" With a start, the hooded girl turned to me.

In all honesty, this was exactly the kind of situation I liked to tease people in, but for some reason with this girl I didn't feel up to it. Maybe because my favourite target was just a little further in. I normally wouldn't be one to pass up an hors d'oeuvre, but I guess I had had my fill with Flat and Svin earlier.

Seeing three neatly polished shoes lined up nicely, I spoke again.

"You enjoy polishing shoes quite a bit, don't you? I never thought polishing shoes could be all that fun. Let me give it a shot sometime."

"...it's just my job."

As reserved as always, the girl - Gray pushed the dirty cloths and bottles of shoe cream into hiding.

"It's not like I'm planning on taking it away from you." Her response had been so adorable, I found myself smiling despite myself.

This, too, was fairly rare for me. Maybe it was because, as closely tied as she was to magecraft, she wasn't a magus. When you didn't have to worry about politics and diplomacy with the person you were talking to, there was no need to constantly armour yourself. Though in reality I had grown so used to my armour that from an early age I had stopped distinguishing between that and my own skin.

"It just looked like you were having so much fun, it made me want to try it with you some time."

"...it looked fun?" Her grey eyes wavered as if she had heard a strange new word.

It was like this girl came from a completely monochrome world. Her skin, her hair, her eyes, even her clothes were all clearly divided up in whites and blacks. She was like a fairy of winter, from a world without colour. In a world blanketed in white snow, she alone was mournfully grey.

"Was that song earlier from your old home?"

"...umm..." Staring at the shoe she was currently working on, she thought for a bit before answering.

"...maybe it was."

"You don't remember?"

"I heard it first in my village, but I haven't heard all that much in the way of music anyways. It's possible that it came from my home, but I couldn't tell you if that's where it started."

"I see."

Now that I thought about it, I never did ask my brother about the time he went to pick her up.

Well, it was an unwritten rule among magi to never ask about another's past anyways. No matter how much you dug, all you'd find is pain.

With the conversation falling into a lull, Gray returned her gaze to the shoe in front of her. After a long while, without stopping her hands gently working away at the shoe, she spoke again.

"...do you have any memories of your home, Miss Reines?"

"Who, me?" Having been so engrossed in watching her work, the sudden question caught me by surprise. "Well, even besides the situation with the El-Melloi family, I was brought up in the Archisorte family tradition. It's the same story as any magus, really. Actually, I did live fairly close to the Clock Tower, so I guess there would be more examples of underhanded dealings in my story? The past ten years has been an awful lot of tight-rope walking, that's for sure. And in the Clock Tower, being young just makes you look like a convenient pawn. But looking back on it now, I feel like it was a fairly pleasant experience."

Though the majority of that came from paying people back once the authority of the El-Melloi faction was given to me.

As if steeling herself, Gray spoke again.

"...is that why my master became Lord El-Melloi II?"

Oh?

To think a girl who had only come here a month or two ago would ask a question as bold as that.

Though in reality, as if the question had embarrassed herself, she began to retreat further and further back into her hood, slowly dropping her head as she did so.

"Curious?"

"...maybe."

As if troubled, Gray went back to working on the shoe.

The shoe, which had a thin layer of cream on it, was now subjected to the brush. The soft horse hair brushed over the black leather again and again, like the job would only be finished when you could see a person's reflection in it. Once Gray's face was actually visible, she spoke again.

"...because he doesn't seem like he really wants to be a Lord at all."

How astute.

Indeed, if he had had even the slightest glimmer of interest in the position, there was no way I would have picked him. He was truly a magus among magi, with no interest in anything but magecraft and whatever lay beyond it. The whole purpose of the power struggles in the Clock Tower were to secure a good environment to perform experimentation with magecraft, but I wonder how many magi today remembered that?

"I do have a couple chains on him, after all."

As I spoke, I accidentally let a mischievous smile slip out.

And here I had decided not to tease the poor girl. Look what happens when I let down my guard.

"...do you have another request of my master?" Gray asked, as direct as ever.

Her personality, always acting like she was afraid of people yet always reaching out eagerly towards them, always made me lose my focus a little.

"You really are a good student, aren't you?"

With a thump, I put my hand on her head. What sounded like a small groan came out from deep within the girl's hood, but she didn't recoil. That's it, be a good girl and just let me pet you a bit.

"Speaking of which, you always have that hood on inside too, don't you? Is that not too hot for you? If my brother is causing you problems, I don't mind lecturing him for you."

"...actually..."

As if the suggestion troubled her, she pulled her hood on tighter.

"...its because he said it was okay for me to keep my face hidden."

"Is that so."

Once again, she replied with a logic I couldn't quite follow.

Regardless, unlike my brother, I didn't have the bad habit of mindlessly pursuing everything I didn't understand. If I didn't understand, it was best to just let it lie. Life is short. There is too much to do. The fact that there was an eternal mountain of abandoned homework left over was just a fact of life.

Anyways, this time I decided to move on to my actual goal first.

"My brother is inside?"

"Yes." She nodded, pointing furtively into the room.

"Very well. Goodbye for now."

Leaving Gray a final wink, I reached out a hand to open the ornate inner door.

As it opened, a well-organized room opened up before me.

At first glance, it looked like a single, unbroken wall of books.

Painstakingly arranged according to their genre and size, the books were arrayed in such a manner that there was no risk of damage from sunlight coming through the nearby window. The sliding shelf seemed like it could easily hold a good two thousand books, but naturally this was only a small fraction of the entire collection.

On his desk a fountain pen made of pure silver, along with a guillotine-like cigar cutter gave the desk a fashionable feel. If one were to look at just that, you might get the impression that this room belonged to an actually capable person. ...well, the presence of the latest portable video game console lying in the corner did give an undeniably uncomfortable feeling, what with being inside one of the Clock Tower's academic facilities.

"With the way your apartment is, how is it that your room in the Clock Tower always looks like this? Are you hiding a cat or something?"

"...isn't it perfectly normal to keep one's place of work neat and tidy?"

Neither of us bothered with greetings. Apparently my brother was in the middle of reading a book of some sort. Sitting on an antique chair on the other side of the room, he was staring at the pages with a gloomy expression. Rather than some ancient volume passed gratefully into the hands of the professors of the Clock Tower, it appeared to be a relatively new publication.

After confirming Trimmau had closed the door behind us, I took a look at the book he was reading.

"That's a new book, isn't it?"

"It's on a topic from the California Convention, discussing a theory about Nuclear Energy as it interacts with the five elements. Its scope is pretty narrow, but only a few dozen were printed, so I ordered a copy in. Well, I suppose they have started selling digital copies of these kinds of things recently too."

As if it was a nuisance, my brother explained the book. Certainly the field of Modern Magecraft was centered around California and the west coast of the United States. Every year they released a publication focused on Modern Magecraft Theory under-girded by modern science. Nowadays, the connection between that Modern Magecraft and actual magecraft was very weak - in short, it revolved primarily around the Occult and related studies, so the number of people who cared enough to read about it at the Clock Tower was vanishingly small.

Long black hair, and a faint crease between his eyebrows.

Though his perpetually pessimistic nature gave him the air of someone slightly older, he still bore unmistakable features pointing towards his youth.

Lord El-Melloi II.

Just recalling that name made me want to laugh.

The name I had given him. The position I had sealed.

"...so, what is it this time? Another complaint?" Without lifting his gaze from his book, he bluntly threw out the question.

Ah yes. It wasn't that he was too busy to look up from his work, but he just didn't want to meet my gaze. Just thinking about how much he disliked me sent shivers of pleasure up my spine.

"The case with Adra was quite the trouble, wasn't it?"

My brother's face frowned about as hard as it probably could.

I could almost hear the sound of his teeth begin to grind. He was going to need some false teeth soon if he kept it up like that, but that would be fun too, in its own way.

"...it was well beyond the point of calling it 'trouble.'"

"My, how rude of me. Well, even so, you knew we had our own circumstances here to worry about." Rolling my shoulders, I began to run my hands along the back of a nearby chair.

Of course, our main goal had been to get the inheritance that had been left there, if at all possible. The chance to use the inheritance to repair the El-Melloi family Crest was difficult to pass up, but the price was as steep as could be expected. And in the end, whatever inheritance was left ended up being confiscated by the Faculty of Law anyways.

"I heard you met Luviagelita Edelfelt there? And that you are going to be her private tutor, much like you are mine."

"She already submitted her applications for her preferred three Faculties..." My brother spoke, using one hand to hold his book while the other massaged his temple.

Normally, a student at the Clock Tower would spend four years in the Faculty of General Fundamentals (Mystile), and after that move into one of the other departments. However, it was also fairly normal for particularly talented students to take on multiple course loads, or switch faculties repeatedly as soon as possible. On top of that, my brother regularly gave lectures as somewhat of a guest for other departments, so his influence was by no means limited to the El-Melloi classroom or the Faculty of Modern Magecraft.

"My, my. As expected of the Edelfelts. So, what are you going to do?"

"She practices Jewel Magecraft, so I'll just have the Faculty of Mineralogy deal with the annoying parts. I think I'll write a letter of recommendation for her as well. Whether she cares enough to take it or not is a different matter, of course."

"That again, huh?"

I didn't know whether to be impressed or disappointed.

He was always helping out in some way or other. It always just caused him more suffering, but at the last minute he'd always put up for someone else. I had to wonder how much he understood what he was doing.

And to top it off,

"...but you didn't come here to gossip, did you?" my brother so kindly changed the subject for me. "Hurry up and spit it out. If you went far enough out of your way to come see me here, then whatever you want must be even more troublesome for me, right?"

"Oh, don't worry, it's easy this time," I said with a bitter smile.

Putting both my elbows on his desk, I shuffled closer to him. Ignoring the distrustful expression he was making, I expressed my most vital of requests.

"Can I borrow Gray for a few days?"

Maybe because the request was so far beyond his expectations, he took a few seconds to respond. After narrowing his eyes even further, he finally slapped his book shut and turned to face me properly.

"Why Gray?"

"Oh, you're actually willing to look at me now? Is your student so precious to you?"

"...Reines."

Mixed in with my brother's voice was something terribly serious. Well, that's the kind of person he was. Completely indifferent to anything that bothered him, but deathly serious whenever it came to one of his students.

"Even above and beyond our contract, I have no problems with helping you out when you ask me. But that doesn't extend to my students. If you have fallen under the impression that the students of the El-Melloi classroom are somehow under your authority, then I regret to inform you that you are terribly mistaken."

Oh dear.

I guess students like that would make a teacher like this. Or is it the other way

around? Either way, it was time I stopped fooling around with him. Dropping my shoulders, I got to the truth behind my request.

"The truth is, I've received an invitation to a social gathering."

"...a social gathering?"

"Yes, an invitation from the Trambelio faction. Normally I would decline out of hand, but after they helped us negotiate with Lord Norwich for that loan, I can't just ignore it, can I?"

"...the Trambelio faction?" I could practically feel the temperature drop as my brother's gaze changed.

...yes.

It felt like he had come back. This frigid feeling of tension. Not the unprecedented lightness of someone like Flat, but more like the true world of magecraft that I knew. Like Gray had asked about earlier, it was a world that you couldn't understand until you sipped from the shadows of London itself.

This was my home. This is the place I was brought up.

My brother spoke up in a quiet voice.

"What's the purpose of the gathering?"

"Before answering that, can I ask a question of you first, as my tutor?"

Without waiting for his reply, I immediately continued.

"I ask you, my teacher. What, pray tell, is beauty?"

Though there was no way he could interpret what I had said as anything other than randomly changing the subject, his face nevertheless took on a serious expression. Taking a deep breath, he reached his hand out towards his desk.

"If you're talking about beauty as it pertains to magecraft, then a simple example would be the golden ratio, I suppose."

As he spoke, he pulled out a set square and a compass and placed them on the top of the desk. Pulling some notepaper towards him, he used the set square to draw a

square with practiced precision, and then used the compass to draw a circle over one side of it.

In fact, the skills required to do this kind of drawing were indispensable in the field of drawing Magic Circles, so powerful magi often aimed at skills that would make them excellent surveyors. The theory that old magi had been involved in the beginning of Freemasonry were not far off the mark.

Extending the length of the sides of the square, using the points at which it intersected with the circle, he created a rectangle.

"This is the golden ratio. A binomial ratio that works alongside the Fibonacci Sequence - in short, a rectangle where if the short side is measured as one, the long side is measured as 1.618. Without regard to region or era, it's a ratio that humans have always found to bring out beauty. It was discovered and put to use by the architect Phidias in his work in Ancient Greece, and even two thousand years prior to him it was used in the construction of the pyramids by the Egyptian high priest Imhotep.

"Of course, there are many examples that show a harmonic beauty outside of the golden ratio. The wings of a dragon fly, the combs of a honeybee, the shell of the nautilus or a simple tornado, and even the distribution of stars in the Milky Way show a similarly spiralling structure. I think it's obvious at this point, but stabilizing things like magic circles and Workshops without paying attention to these harmonics beyond mere numbers is impossible. 'Beauty, thy name is math,' or something like that."

My brother explained methodically.

In an instant, his tone had changed to that of the lecturer within. No doubt it was his true life's calling. Would it really kill him to be a bit more grateful towards me, who gave him the opportunity to fulfill it?

"Aha, I think I remember Phidias. He was the one who introduced the symbol Φ to mathematics, correct?"

"That's a pretty incomplete way of remembering him. That Φ represents the golden ratio itself, after all. It's also used in Euler's totient function and wave motion functions."

My brother gave a boring-sounding reply.

"He was also the architect that oversaw the construction of the Parthenon. He's the one who created the statue of Zeus at Olympia, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. This is why one mistake can make you qualified to be a Heroic Spirit."

Using all of my strength, I ignored the last words my brother had muttered.

Well, that's why I couldn't help but have a lingering affection for him.

After a moment of silence, my brother pulled a cigar out from his chest pocket. Using his cigar cutter to cut off the tip, he struck a match and lit the end.

"...but of course, unlike these, there are also those things that are only beautiful in a given time and place. In other words, fashion."

Saying so, he pulled heavily on his cigar. Perhaps he had taken my tastes into account, but the cigar gave off a relatively faint odour.

"This 'fashion' doesn't just apply to clothes and music. It really applies to the vast majority of human culture."

"Oh? Isn't applying it that widely a bit over the top?"

"It's the truth," he replied with another puff on his cigar. "Things like 'the greatest piece of literature' or 'the greatest discovery' are a dime a dozen. That 'fashion' would be what we call the collective unconscious in Modern Magecraft - and though the terminology doesn't fit perfectly, you could also think of it like the alaya-vijnana in Eastern thought. Regardless, it's something that is fundamentally restricted to a particular time period. A good comparison might be the tip of an iceberg, only peeking out from the depths of the ocean once in a while."

With a finger, my brother spun the smoke lazily drifting in front of him.

That smoke was the ocean, and his finger poking through it was the tip of the iceberg. In a way, it just made me want to comment of how wishy-washy the collective unconscious of humanity was.

"In short, to put it simply, it's not just about people picking what they like and dislike. Our tastes are not decided by some purely innate function of our being, but

rather are shaped gradually by the influences of our environment. If you follow that line of logic, it even gives you an example of the inherent beauty of religion."

"Religion?"

"Yes. Religion acknowledges the beauty of that ideal, and so steep itself in it. That's why even something like Christianity, despite being so strict against idol worship, still has such a passion for artistic representations of Mary. The beauty of their ideals is made a set with the beauty of their art - it's a method many religions have used in the past to secure more followers."

Like that, my brother explained the beauty of religion.

At one time, a large number of people decided a particular thing was beautiful, so the religion spread from one person to an entire area, and in some cases, from that area to the entire world.

"As such, even religion is not completely unrelated to this idea of a time-limited 'fashion.' For example, Mithraism and Manichaeism both bore out of the same geographical region, and each repeatedly grew and declined in alternation with each other. It works out so perfectly it could lead you straight to positing some force like a limited collective unconscious to motivate the constant shift."

"Hold on a second. Are you trying to say that even the religion which people follow is just a matter of fashion?"

"Right."

With a nod, my brother confirmed a theory that would get one eliminated from the Holy Church in an instant.

"In short, the type of religion one might find appealing changes based on fashion. The difference with major religions is that they have multiple angles from which to attract believers, and so can simply switch methods as necessary to match the changing times. Buddhism has Mahayana and Hinayana. Christianity has Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. At first glance it might seem like they offer different viewpoints, but that's simply the result of the religion changing to match the fashion of the time."

"I see. This has been quite the magnificent conversation," I closed one of my eyes as I spoke. Maybe I got some smoke in it or something.

Just as clothing and fashion cycled out of vogue every ten or twenty years, even the appeal of a cultural institution like religion grew and declined in cycles if you widened your lens to hundreds or thousands of years.

It reminded me of a particular bit of history passed down within the Clock Tower.

Paradigm Shift.

An irreversible change, one that could never be taken back.

The Age of Gods had ended, the Age of Fairies had ended, and the Age of Man had arrived. And surely, beyond that, another new Age lay waiting beyond the horizon.

"Now, my lady, to which of these beauties were you referring?" Raising his cigar, my brother spoke up again.

His eyes were locked directly on me.

"I wonder."

"I think you aren't referring to something like passing fashions, or beauty as revealed by mathematics. No, you are probably talking about something else - something like, if a human being could personify beauty. Am I right?"

My brother struck right to the heart of the matter.

Maybe I gave out a few too many hints.

"Was that question too easy?" I replied with a chuckle, sticking my tongue out at him.

In this world, legends of beautiful women were nothing if not plentiful.

Cleopatra.

Yang Guifei.

Helen of Troy.

Even putting aside the Three Beauties of History, this definition of beauty was a well-worn one.

Depending on the time or era, there would always be people who found long necks, or long toes, or long hair to be beautiful. That was no doubt the 'fashion' my brother was talking about earlier. Not just what was popular at any given time, but also at any given place. That was the definition my brother had given 'fashion.'

But...what if there was something that could exist entirely independent from that?

Would True Magic be able to reach a place like that?

As the smoke from his cigar entwined itself around his long black hair, my brother quietly spoke again.

"...I see. That social gathering was about the reveal of the Gold and Silver Princesses, wasn't it?"

Chapter 1, Part 2

For a while, my brother was silent.

The afternoon light shone through the window, seeming to partake in the melancholy atmosphere of the room. The lingering smoke from his cigar floated clearly visible in the sun.

"I see. I guess it was about time the Golden and Silver Princesses of this era appeared," he spoke again.

A single finger tapped rhythmically on the note paper in front of him.

"Right. If that's the case, I would be rather discouraged if Trim was my only escort. However, I really don't have any clues as to who I could take as a bodyguard to this social gathering. And while you may be a great detective, asking you to come along as a bodyguard would be a bit much. So I figured I'd see if I could borrow Gray's strengths for a bit."

"In that case, just ask her yourself."

His completely unexpected answer caught me up for a second.

"As I mentioned earlier, don't think that just because they are my students you can use them whatever way you like. Actually, you and Gray are basically on the same level, since both of you are my students. If you want to ask something of her, just ask her yourself. There's no need to get me involved."

"So...you don't mind if I just go and ask her then?"

"That's what I said."

As I went quiet to think over what he said, my brother gave me a strange look.

"I've been thinking this for a while now..."

"Oh?"

Looking at me with my brows furrowed, he cut straight to the heart of it.

"You've never actually asked a friend for something before, have you? Wait, before that, do you even have friends?"

I accidentally let a short groan slip out in response to his question.

He had hit the bull's eye. If it was a formal request, I could handle it even if they demanded something like huge sums of money in return. But of course I knew there were requests that fell outside of that particular category. Oh, and of course I have friends, but I had never had a chance to practice such things before.

"Umm..."

The door opened.

Looking like her already petite body was starting to shrink even more, the grey-hooded girl stood in the doorway.

"...if you'd like, I don't mind going with you."

"Gray?"

My brother blinked in surprise.

As he did, Gray shrank back even more, dropping her head.

"...I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to listen or anything." As she spoke hesitantly, another voice rang out in the room.

"Ihiihihi! I happened to overhear you, and I just had to let her know! That's what it means to be a tattle-tale!" The mysterious voice called out from around Gray's right hand.

Softly, Gray's hood fluttered upwards. With a hard sound like a hook being released, a cage was revealed hanging by her right sleeve. Inside it was a mysterious box, with eyes and a face engraved onto it.

"...Add." Gritting his teeth, my brother muttered.

For the record, I already knew about Add. As far as Mystic Codes that had built-in personalities, even I had one in the form of Trimmiau. But Add was on an entirely different level.

I also happened to know about Gray and Add's little secret.

After a small sigh, my brother spoke again.

"Gray. Are you sure? Of course it's true of upper-class society in general, but especially in the Clock Tower a social gathering like this isn't just a pretty show."

"...I understand," the grey-cloaked girl nodded. "I feel like I need to learn a lot more about the Clock Tower."

"...I see." My brother's face somehow managed to look more conflicted than normal. I had to wonder what was going on inside his head, hearing those words coming from Gray herself.

Standing beside her, I took Gray's hand.

"So it's settled. Thank you, Gray."

Having her hand suddenly grabbed, Gray dropped her head as her face turned red. After a short while, she finally whispered a word of confirmation before speaking again.

"Um, who are the Gold and Silver Princesses?"

"Oh don't worry, we'll talk all about it on the way there," I responded, putting off the explanation until later. After all, she couldn't chicken out if she didn't know the details.

My brother glared at me as if to say I was talking like a con artist, but I had no apologies for him. If you wanted to worry about how clean your measures were, you could do it after you came home alive.

Still holding her hand, I turned around to say one last thing I had remembered.

"Oh yes, I had one request of you too, my beloved brother."

"It's not just a request at all, is it?" Without even trying to mask his displeasure, he countered.

"You haven't given up on being the Association's representative for the Fifth Holy Grail War, right?"

"...right."

I could feel Gray instantly react to those words. It seemed she had her own thoughts about the Holy Grail War.

"Well, I actually heard from the Trambelio family that the Association's representative has been all but decided already. It seems to be one of the current Sealing Designation Enforcers, a true professional by the name of Bazett Fraga McRemitz. Considering the reality of the Holy Grail War, she really does seem like the right person for the job. Also, there seems to be another position, but it seems pretty suspicious to me. Like it was given to some newcomer who happened to fill the right pockets."

After a few moments of silence, my brother just flipped his hair.

"Being the official representative of the Association isn't the only way to get in. At any rate, I've got a debt to you and the El-Melloi family I have to repay first."

The burnt tip of his cigar fell off into the ash tray below it. It looked a little bit like a person's head.

The debt he was talking about was no doubt a reference to the money and the Magic Crest. Neither of them was a thing that seemed possible to wrap up in only a few months.

"Even with such a short time left, you're still so hopeful. It's really quite moving. Well, you already put up your collateral, so I guess it's fine." With a shrug, I got to the heart of the matter. "In that case, my esteemed brother. If by some miracle you do make it in time, I'd like some insurance."

"Hm?"

"Before you die, would you do me the favour of having a child with me? Well, you could do it with Trim as well if that suits your tastes better."

At last.

Lord El-Melloi II sputtered violently at my request.

Ah, that was satisfying. There was so much force behind it, I really should have waited until he was eating or drinking something. Even Gray beside me froze solid.

I guess one might think it was the master's favoured disciple's duty to get wrapped up in a matter like this, but let's give up on that for now.

"What are you planning to do by wrapping my Magic Circuits up in your bloodline?" My brother covered his mouth with the back of his hand as he spoke, voice dripping with animosity.

"Oh, I have no intention of mixing it with my bloodline. Neither do I plan on passing the child the Magic Crest. But you do have quite the popularity and authority, and the way you use magecraft is certainly worth taking a look at. For better or worse, the El-Melloi family isn't so tight on its requirements, so I figured if I could get your child I could start a new branch family. Not a bad idea, right?"

"...L-lady..." Having finally recovered at least some measure of bearing, he glared at me as he spoke with a hoarse voice. "...that political way of thinking is something I truly detest, you know."

"Oh, looks like I hurt your feelings."

Seeing I was at a disadvantage, I turned back. Of course, I was still holding Gray's hand. Pulling her along, I gave her another wink.

"Well then, I'll be borrowing your student. Thanks for taking care of things while I'm gone."

As the door closed behind us, I heard my brother let out a sigh. And oh how heavy a sigh it was.

Chapter 1, Part 3

The next morning, we got on a train leaving London.

Though we had agreed to meet at the platform, I found Gray confused and stuck at the ticket gate. It seemed she was still not used to using trains. While she seemed to understand how tickets worked, once confronted with the new contactless IC Card readers at the turnstile, she had completely frozen up.

Her luggage was the same as always.

I also had nothing but a single suitcase. Trimmau naturally couldn't be allowed to be seen in town, so she was in storage. Of course, her mercury form had been altered with magecraft to be much lighter than normal.

"Sorry for making you come with me."

"D-don't mention it," Gray replied politely.

Sitting in a compartment for four people, we ended up sitting facing each other. Though it would be difficult enough with just two of us here, it would be even harder to avoid talking if we sat like this. Though saying that, there had been very few chances for Gray and I to talk alone since she came to London, so I was a little unsure of what kind of things to talk about.

(...I guess starting with food would be a good idea.)

Thinking that, I retrieved a small wooden box from my suitcase. Untying the red ribbon and lifting off the lid, the sweet smell of chocolate wafted out.

Lined up cutely inside was an assortment of flower-shaped chocolates. Along with the flower shaped chocolates were some real flowers, preserved with sugar, making it fun to look at right from the start.

Taking one of the chocolates in hand, I popped it into my mouth. The chocolate, with a melt-in-your-mouth sweetness, also held a faint bitter taste. The sweetness of what used to be flower petals came in layers, and before I knew it I had taken two or three of them. They were a product of a particularly favoured chocolatier in

London, and though I normally settled for their chocolate drinks, this kind of assortment couldn't be underestimated either.

"Mmm. They've made them a little bitter this month. Dammit, they're just trying to cram the calories in me, aren't they?"

Of course, there were any number of weight-loss medicines within magecraft, but I wasn't about to become a guinea pig for those kinds of experiments.

After thinking for a bit, I offered some to the girl across from me.

"Would you like one?"

"...t-thank you." As she had answered so politely, I handed one over.

As if she didn't have much experience with sweets, she let the flower-shaped chocolate sit in the palm of her hand for a moment, like she was unsure of what to do with it. Then, all at once she popped it into her mouth, after which she went wide-eyed and stiff for a few seconds.

"...it's delicious."

"Oh? Well then, would you like some more?"

My mean streak temporarily satisfied by her reaction, reminding me of a small animal, I reached into my suitcase once again.

"Tadah!" This time, I pulled out a bottle.

"...alcohol?"

"This chocolate is sold as a set with champagne, you know. This time I've replaced it with a non-alcoholic wine, though. Would you like to try a little?"

In England, as long as they had the permission of their parents, a child could begin drinking alcohol at home from five years old. As such there was a certain sentiment associated with non-alcoholic drinks like this, but there was still an appropriate time and place for them.

Taking out two portable glasses, I poured some for Gray and myself.

Take a bite of chocolate.

While that rich sweetness still lingered in your mouth, take a sip of wine. That sweetness, mixed with the refreshing flavour of the wine, created a satisfying combination you could feel all the way down your throat.

"Please, please, help yourself." Seeing Gray sipping on her wine alone, I offered her the box of chocolates again, still more than half full.

"Ah, thank you...but I've had enough."

"Oh? Quite the small appetite."

"...my master says that a lot, too." As if apologizing, the girl dropped her shoulders.

As if to prove that her compliments of the food had not been a lie, she held held on to the glass in her hands with a happy expression.

"By the way...umm..."

"Hm?"

Dropping her gaze, Gray spoke up in a reserved voice.

"Why are your eyes a different colour now?"

As Gray had pointed out, normally my eyes were a fiery red colour. Now, however, they probably looked more like a brilliant blue.

Gently touching the area around my eyes, I smiled.

"This is their natural colour, you know? Ah, now that you mention it, it's about that time isn't it?"

I took some of my eye medicine out from my coat. Holding my eyes shut, I waited for the medicine to soak in before opening them again.

"It's because of my particular kind of Mystic Eyes. When my eyes come into contact with magical energy, they start turning red as a side effect."

This was also a 'bonus' of being born into a lineage of magi. From the beginning, my family was just a branch family of the Archibald family, so such an incomplete

result was to be expected. In all honesty it was a hindrance to many people, but a situation like this afforded one certain status within the Clock Tower.

"It's not such an issue in the Clock Tower, where magical energy is everywhere, but having red eyes isn't really acceptable in the general public, is it? Considering the nature of magi, it stands out a little too much."

I laughed gently. In short, it was like dressing up to go out. Just like when you go to a funeral, you dress in black as much as possible. As a magus, you had to be very sensitive to the circumstances you found yourself in.

The scenery continued to pass by.

As we left London, the cityscape turned to fields and forests. I felt like my tension was melting away with the gentle rocking of the train. Once we arrived at our destination, there would be no escaping the tension, so it was better to let my mind rest now.

After a while, Gray suddenly lifted her face.

"...may I ask about what we're doing?"

"About the Gold and Silver Princesses, right?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Where to start?" Sinking into the seat, I thought for a while before answering.

"Well, there's a family that is dependent on Lord Valuayeta, the Lord of the Faculty of Creation. Most magi within the Faculty of Creation consider themselves artists in some sense. Of course, the varieties therein are countless, but the Iselma family has pursued the creation of 'the most beautiful person' for generations."

I ate another chocolate. This one was shaped like a lily. The combination of sweetness and bitterness gently filling my mouth spoke to the skill of the craftsman.

"...the most beautiful person?"

"Why is beauty a thing people recognize?" As if continuing the conversation earlier with my brother, I spoke. "Well, what people recognize is said to have a

large effect on magecraft. When new Gold and Silver Princesses have been decided to be created, it's become common practice to announce it. Though it's the first time I'll be seeing them myself."

"That's what the Gold and Silver Princesses are..." As if engraving it into her brain, she muttered those names over and over. After which, she spoke up again. "Do you think...something might happen?"

"What makes you think that?"

After turning back the unexpected question, Gray paused a moment before responding.

"...when we went to the Castle of Separation, it seemed like you also...predicted something might happen. So I thought, why would you ask me to come...if you didn't think something was going to happen again?"

"Wow. You've got quite the intuition, haven't you?" Saying so, I lightly slapped my own forehead.

I had never intended to take this girl lightly, but before I knew it she had become quite sensitive to the way other people thought. Or maybe it was better to say she had begun taking an interest in it. No doubt her desire to 'learn more about the Clock Tower,' much to my brother's chagrin, was coming from the same place.

"There's a rumour a Grand is going to respond to the announcement this time." I had no reason to hide it from her, so I gave her the honest answer.

"...Grand? That's the highest rank among magi, right?"

"Correct," I nodded.

Grand (Crown).

Brand (Colour).

Pride (Law).

Fes (Festival).

Cause (Open).

Count (Eldest Child).

Flame (Youngest Child).

Those are the different ranks the Clock Tower is divided into. Just like it appears, Grand is the highest rank, while Flame is the lowest.

"Realistically speaking, the top rank is Brand. The majority of Lords end up staying at that rank. My brother-in-law Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald also ended up getting stuck there...well, if he hadn't died so early, he might have had a chance at making it higher."

"My master's...predecessor?" Gray responded with a twitch to that name.

It seemed like she had her own thoughts about him. I wonder what they were?

Maybe it was just because she had seen her master suffer over the thought of him. The reason he insisted on being called Lord El-Melloi 'the second' was no doubt because of the guilt he felt towards his previous teacher. It was just a treat for me, though. However if it was something that even his favourite student was worrying over, maybe there was room for a bit more consideration on my part. Maybe.

...that just makes it more enticing though, doesn't it?

Regardless, I continued my explanation.

"That being the case, the number of people who actually reach the position of Grand is vanishingly small. Those who do make it that far tend not to spend much time fraternizing with other magi."

"...I see," Gray seemed to accept it easily. "...by the way, how is my master's standing, being a Fes?"

"There are some special circumstances behind that as well," I said, unconsciously giving a bitter smile.

Normally it would just be considered the fourth rank, but in his case it was given thanks to special considerations. To keep it short, rather than being given to him for an assessment as a magus as was normal, it was an honorary title given to him for his particular skills and achievements. Something like Tiferet, an element of Kabbalah's Sephirot - as long as it's beautiful, everything's fine.

"As long as it's beautiful...it's fine," Gray repeated.

To say that the connection between this and our current topic of the Golden Princess was a coincidence would be dishonest. It could be said that in general, the pursuit of beauty was a natural characteristic for magi. As with my brother's case, you could say that being able to measure the recognition of a person was a basic skill for magi.

"Thanks to that, the rank of Fes tends to carry a different meaning than the others."

As far as ability in magecraft, they displayed the whole spectrum from top to bottom. In some cases, there were even those ranked Fes who had abilities that exceeded even those of the Brands.

For example, God's Holder (Legend Carrier), the Enforcer who held a Mystic Code passed down since the Age of Gods.

For example, the Master of Restoration capable of easily regenerating a damaged Magic Crest.

Those who did not stop within the realm of ordinary magi, whose tremendous, unusual abilities inspired awe.

...or.

"...of course, in my brother's case, it's because of the assessment of his students," I said, fully aware of the mean-spirited smile that had risen to my face. "As a lecturer, such a glowing assessment of his students is nothing short of fantastic. However, you could say reaching the rank of Fes for such an assessment was completely unheard of for anyone who became a Lord, even if temporarily."

If it weren't for that assessment, it wouldn't be unusual if he were to fall into the rank of Cause or Count. As an aside, my personal assessment of his abilities put him considerably lower than a Cause. Certainly he was well above the level of the New Age students who had recently arrived in the Clock Tower, but his particular ability wasn't at a level worth talking about. Truly a mediocre person in a field of mediocre people.

Strictly speaking, the rank attributed to a family and to an individual was different, but the difference here was enough to be tragic. But that's a complicated matter, so let's leave it be for now.

"...s-sorry, I'm...a little confused." Gray's face held a somewhat suspicious expression. Maybe I had dumped too much information on her at once. With the way her eyes were spinning and she was massaging her temples, it seemed like she might break out in a fever any moment.

She thought she just wasn't very smart, but that wasn't really the case. She still probably wasn't used to having to deal with so much information all at once. She seemed like the type to try and take in everything at once. Trying to cram everything right before the test was not exactly recommended, though.

I kind of wanted to tease her for that too.

"Well, I'm sure you'll be fine just winging it," I said with a smile.



◆ Chapter 2 ◆

◆ 第二章 ◆

Chapter 2, Part 1

After riding the West Coast line out of London for about three and a half hours and changing trains at Oxenholme, we arrived at Windermere.

Lakeside country.

Known as one of the most prominent resorts in all of England, it was an area overflowing with natural beauty. Many people might recognize it if you mentioned that it was the home of Peter Rabbit. A place loved by the author Beatrix Potter, the picture books of those rabbits living in a meadow surrounded by the scenery of lakes and mountains was still read worldwide.

After leaving the station, we immediately came upon a single horse-drawn carriage. Upon seeing us, the man who was apparently its caretaker immediately took off his hat and greeted us.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance. You would be Lady Reines El-Melloi Archisorte, correct?" the man asked. "I have been sent by Byron. Please, get in."

"Why thank you."

As if unsure, Gray turned to look at me, so I gave her a nod. Turning down their offer here would be meaningless. Wasting no time, I climbed into the carriage with my single suitcase, with Gray not far behind me.

With the crack of a whip, the horse began to walk.

Naturally the flat land was no different, but even as the horse brought us up steep mountain paths, it did so with a refined grace. Even though we were being pulled along by an animal, the carriage barely swayed at all. No doubt some form of magecraft was responsible for that. Maybe it was something similar to the magecraft I had used to reduce the weight of my suitcase, or maybe something to make the carriage itself float slightly.

At long last,

"...it seems we've arrived," I said, resting my chin on the window frame.

Two towers stood on the shore of a lake.

By modern standards, they were by no means enormous structures. At most, they would be comparable to a four-story structure. However, both towers rose up leaning in a bizarre way.

"It seems these two towers are referred to as the Twin Towers. Or, with the name of the family responsible for overseeing this land, the Twin Towers of Iselma."

"The Twin Towers of Iselma..." Repeating my words, Gray muttered.

"The eastern tower is the Tower of the Sun, and the western one the Tower of the Moon." Whether he had heard our conversation or not, the driver called back to us.

The Tower of the Sun.

The Tower of the Moon.

Though in my personal opinion, the image of an antlion ready and waiting for its prey was stronger than that of celestial bodies.

As was natural for a Workshop, the territory had been developed to best suit the family of magi that lived here. In short, like any true stronghold, you never knew when a single handful of sand or a single breath of air would become your enemy. Before that extraordinary tension, I found my lips smiling of their own accord.

The carriage came to a stop beside the Tower of the Moon.

"We have arrived. Please enjoy yourselves," the handler said, bowing.

A few moments after we disembarked, the handler and the horse-drawn carriage...melted.

It was like a fairy tale. In their place remained only a small toy soldier and carriage.

"As expected of one of the main branch families of the Faculty of Creation. Their handiwork is truly something to witness." Without thinking, I let slip what was on

my mind.

"I am honoured to receive your praise."

The sound of a deep baritone reached us.

"Welcome, Princess of the El-Melloi family."

Standing in the doorway with a courteous bow was a moustached man in his mid-forties. With brown hair and a vermillion suit, he stood with the aid of a cane.

"My name is Byron Valuayeta Iselma. My deepest thanks for joining us so far away from home."

"You must be the head of the Iselma family. My apologies for arriving so late," I answered, as polite as possible.

Though I may have been a candidate to become one of the twelve Lords, I had for now relinquished that position to my brother. If one also considered that the Archisorte family was at the far end of the family, then speaking strictly from the positions of our families, he was a good four or six positions above me.

With a gentle smile and a nod, Lord Byron gestured to the entrance of the tower.

"Please, come inside. The banquet has already begun."

Chapter 2, Part 2

The high-ceilinged hall was filled with a solemn light.

The carpet was lush enough that it felt like you might sink in up to your ankles. Added to the cold air, it gave the room a pleasant feel. The boisterously laughing shadows of people gave the impression it was a scenery pulled from an illusion. Actually, since most of the people gathered here were in fact magi, this place was nothing other than a world of dreams.

Dance, dreams.

Dance if you would tell tales of the night.

"Trim, you have permission to act on your own judgement."

"Yes, Master."

My quick whisper was answered with a robotic voice. The mercury had already taken up form as a maid behind me once again, but I decided to give her freedom of action just in case something were to happen.

After doing so, she immediately looked around the room, and spoke with a blank expression.

"I didn't know they stacked shit that high."

With the way she puffed her chest out as she said it, I couldn't help but instinctively punch her. No doubt it was something Flat had taught her, making her watch some B rate movies or something. Luckily, no one else seemed to have heard her, but it seemed like Flat was going to have to die.

Though she was taken aback by Trim's sudden outburst, Gray began observing the people around the room intently. While she was certainly a concern to some degree, the chances she would have an outburst like Trimmaw was fairly slim, so that at least was a little relieving.

Flowery music was playing in the background. It made me think of the far, far off sea. The sound of trumpets came out strong, accompanying a delicate piano

melody supported by a heroic-sounding double bass. The light and easy music seemed like it was trying to draw its listeners into breaking out into a tap dance.

"So Lord Byron is into Jazz, is he? I had pegged him as more of a classical type, myself."

1930s, [In The Mood](#).

It was a legendary number from Carnegie Hall, but if I hadn't been exposed to the old-fashioned records in my brother's apartment, I probably wouldn't have known about it at all. Watching my brother gently lower the needle to the large black discs had drawn my interest.

But this time, the thing of interest was not the music, but the performers.

(...a mechanical band, huh?)

The trumpets, piano, and double bass were all being played by clockwork dolls half the height of a normal person. On the surface, the scene might paint the Faculty of Creation as similar to the Faculty of Modern Magecraft, but the main point of differentiation would be that while the Faculty of Modern Magecraft would use something like microchips and radio waves, these dolls moved using something like silk thread soaked in moonlight, or the bones of a phantasmal species mixed in with the gears. With the way the field of Human Imitation was in decline, the number of magi capable of producing a band of this size was certainly small.

As if to show they were not simply repeating a music track, but were actually "lifeforms" specially designed to play music, the clockwork dolls played with a certain pride, sweating from the exertion.

Unexpectedly, their attitude seemed to overlap fairly with ours.

No.

In reality, what was the difference between those dolls and ourselves?

After all, what were we but lifeforms built over hundreds of years, specially designed to perform magecraft? Though we liked to think we were superhumans that had separated from the earthly realm and gained transcendent wisdom, in the

end were we not the same as someone performing on a stage, following the plan laid by the spinning of gears within us?

(...this is bad. After spending so much time with my brother, his thinking is starting to rub off on me.)

Shaking my head slightly, I took a look around the room.

A large amount of people had gathered.

A few dozen people, all of them magi. Some were holding a deep red wine, others were enjoying the music, and everyone was partaking in gentle, friendly conversation.

...at first glance, at least.

"Miss Reines," a voice called as someone pulled at the hem of my skirt.

"Is something wrong, Gray?"

"No, I was just wondering what you were going to do. Do you have some acquaintances here to talk to?"

"Nope," I replied to her secretive whispers with a light laugh. "First comes 'observation.'"

Keeping my presence low-key, I began slowly circling my way around the hall.

By listening in on the various conversations happening around me, I began putting together a map in my head of how each of the guests related to each other, both in rank and social standing.

"Trambelio, Trambelio, Trambelio, Meluastea, Trambelio, Meluastea, Trambelio...the Trambelio faction is out in full force tonight, huh? Hardly anyone from the Barthomelloi, either. There should be a limit to how surrounded you can get."

Reminded somehow of China's history, I gave a mournful sigh.

Being a social gathering of magi, the most important thing to do first was get a handle on the ratio of attendees from different factions. Being my first time

attending a gathering in this territory, most of the guests were unknown to me, but I had been brought up in this culture. Looking at the way people held themselves, the way they stood and walked, I could confidently get a rough image as to which faction each of them belonged to. By the way, this was something my brother was absolutely terrible at. The tragedy of the newly blossoming New Age students was the sheer ignorance they held of the subtleties of a magus' standing.

"Hmm. Altogether, it looks like we have a ratio of about 6 Trambelio, 1 Barthomelloi, and 3 Meluastea."

"...those are the names of the different factions?"

"Sort of, yes. Trambelio represents those who want to run democratically. Barthomelloi represents those who want to run aristocratically. And the Meluastea don't care one way or the other, and just want to do their research in peace." In response to Gray's question, I gave as simple an answer as I could.

Right now, the Clock Tower was divided roughly into three factions.

The faction headed by Barthomelloi, of which the El-Melloi family was a part, which supported aristocratic rule.

The Trambelio faction, at whose center was the Valueleta family, who desired a democratic system.

And Meluastea, who represented the neutral faction.

If you cleaned it all up, you basically had those who thought the management of the Clock Tower should be handed to those nobility who had proven to have excellent bloodlines, and those who believed that bloodline should be disregarded and those with the talent should be in charge.

Well, it was just about magi, so in the end it didn't make much difference which one you picked. It was basically a decision as to whether you thought those who had been filtered to the top should be filtered again.

"...I think I understand. The El-Melloi family supports the aristocratic faction, right?"

"For now. But recently it's been getting to be more trouble than it's worth."

The El-Melloi family's support for the aristocratic faction stemmed from my late brother's - that is, the previous Lord El-Melloi's - family was prominent even among the nobility. However, unfortunate as it may be, the current state of the El-Melloi family did not carry the same respect or power as it once did.

Actually, as the New Age students began to come through the El-Melloi classroom in droves, in practice we were being driven closer and closer to the Trambelio faction's side. Even putting the El-Melloi family aside, with the way my brother was acting, neither leaning towards conservation nor reform, the Barthomelloi family at the top of the aristocratic faction was looking at us with bewilderment. 'You're one of us, aren't you? What are you even thinking?' That kind of situation.

Of course, if he did something careless enough to trip himself up, he'd be done for.

Nevermind their power as one of the Twelve Lords, the Barthomelloi family, greatest of the three great aristocratic families, was not just putting on airs. Forget being covert about it, they had the capability to overtly wipe out the El-Melloi family.

"Regardless, against someone like the Barthomelloi family who could swing the Faculty of Law against us at full force, we don't stand a chance."

"The Barthomelloi are the Faculty of Law?" Gray tilted her head to the side like a small bird.

"Right. Is something wrong with that?"

"No, just...I thought that since there were twelve Lords, they'd each be in charge of one of the twelve main faculties...and since I thought that the Faculty of Law was outside of those twelve..."

I see, I see. Is that how you understood it?

Actually, that was a pretty normal understanding of how things worked. I had thought it was something one would pick up naturally while going through the

Clock Tower, but this gap of understanding was probably just due to a lack of cultural exchange, as it were.

"It's a bit more complicated than that. While the Faculty of Modern Magecraft is certainly one of the twelve main faculties, it's only fairly recently that a Lord came to be associated with it..."

As I replied, my eyes turned sideways.

A dangerous voice had reached my ears.

"Oh? Someone with a lineage as shallow as yours thinks they have something to leave behind on the proud history of magecraft?"

"After you people have let the state of magecraft decline to this degree, do you honestly think you can save it yourselves? When will you wake up and realize that dream has long since become unreachable?"

"...well, that was quick," I muttered, pretending not to notice.

A craftier magus would have been able to keep a conversation like that going without drawing so much attention, but the younger folk unfortunately couldn't be expected to do the same. The fact that both of them were well into the alcohol didn't help matters either. It seemed that thanks to the way we had gathered here, the demographic of this gathering was leaning towards the younger side.

"You think the Clock Tower could survive without the New Agers?"

"Hahaha! The Clock Tower was set up for the sake of the Lords (Aristocrats) in the first place. Do you really think you can make something out of the scraps we've left for you?"

Centering around the two who were arguing, the tensions of those of all factions was slowly starting to mount.

They weren't stupid enough to let it degrade into combat like the idiots from the El-Melloi classroom, but even so that atmosphere of the room was quickly starting to turn dangerous.

"Ow! Owowowowowow! Sorry, sorry!"

As if to cut the conversation short, someone drunkenly stumbled between the two.

All sides were taken off-guard by the sudden interloper. While the magi were still stunned at his entrance, he spread his arms wide and spun around, throwing his wine glass into the air in the process.

"Uh..."

Gray muttered, giving voice to my inner monologue.

The young man fell, sprawling out on the ground.

Along with a long, alcohol-drenched burp, the man's slightly unbearable body odour wafted out, filling the area. I had thought the banquet had just begun. How much had this guy drunk in that short time?

"Sho-sh-sh-shorry! I musht apolog..." Unable to even pronounce his words properly, he crawled along the ground like a caterpillar, pressing a hand to his mouth as he belched again.

Like that, the crowd began to disperse. With a glance at each other and a long sigh, the two arguing magi went their separate ways. As if they were fleeing from the world's most disgusting piece of garbage, the fallen man was left alone to nurse his now ailing stomach.

I let a small sigh slip out in admiration.

"Umm..."

A voice called to me from behind.

Gray was holding the wine glass the man had thrown.

Not even a drop had been spilled - of course there was no way I could know that, but regardless there was still a considerable amount of drink left in the glass. Even without Add's influence, this girl's reflexes were something else.

"Perfect." Taking the glass from her, I held it out to the young man now stumbling to his feet. "Here you are."

"T-thank you," he replied, his expression pale and his fingers shaking. Gripping the glass so he was sure it wouldn't fall, he took it from me.

As the spectators had already scattered, I leaned in and whispered as I handed over the glass.

"Not at all. That was a pretty effective way of putting an end to that fight."

The young man gave a soft groan. "...did it seem like it was on purpose?"

"No, not at all. Most magi are too proud, after all. Doing something shameful like that on purpose is beyond their ability to imagine. It was a little hammy, but this is the perfect stage for such a thing."

Unconsciously, I began to smile.

Maybe because using a method that was beyond the comprehension of an ordinary magus reminded me of a certain someone.

"Besides, you actually are drunk, aren't you? How did you manage that?"

"...this medicine will get you drunk in an instant," he said, pulling a small tablet out from inside the chest of his suit. "And this put's an end to it." Between his index and middle fingers was another tablet.

With a gulp of the wine in his hand he downed the tablet. Not even ten seconds later, the odour of alcohol that had been coming off him in waves was halted.

"...that's pretty impressive." As I spoke, the boy lightly slapped his own cheeks.

"I'm kind of a pharmacist, after all."

"I see. Yumina (Faculty of Botany)?"

"Nope." After coughing into his sleeve, the young man grinned. " Brishisan (Faculty of Lore). Maio Brishisan Clynelles."

"Oh, Brishisan?" They were a pretty high-ranking family.

Of course they didn't have authority on the level of someone like the Barthomelloi, but they wouldn't fall behind if it came to history or research. They were a stereotypical example of a neutral family. And while the nature of the magecraft of

those within the Faculty of Lore was quite varied, they were recognized as the holders of the rarest literature in the entire Clock Tower.

The fact that Brishisan was only his middle name meant he wasn't actually a member of the family itself, but simply under their care. Likely he was a member of some branch family of theirs, but the fact that anyone of the Brishisan faction had shown up at the Twin Towers was a big indication of how much attention the event was getting.

(...or is he also here to see the Grand?)

The young man was now staring past me.

"That Mystic Code...would that happen to belong to the El-Melloi?"

Once I realized he was pointing at Trimmer, an unexpected feeling began to well up inside me.

"Oh, you know about it?"

"Y-yes!" The boy who had called himself Maio nodded vigorously. "The one perfected by Lord El-Melloi, Volumen Hydrargyrum! A beautiful display of Fluid Manipulation! To think I'd come across it here of all places! I'm sorry, but would you perhaps let me touch it?"

"...I don't mind, I guess..."

Immediately Maio began running a finger across the maid's body, gasping like a child dropped in front of an array of fascinating new toys.

"Amazing...rather than attempting to work within the declining Conceptual power of Homunculus Creation, you've combined Fluid Manipulation with Personality Endowment. It just happens to be taking the most appropriate shape. Having the contents held outside the container is a little paradoxical, but for magecraft it seems about right. It's even got a full-body circulation system set up to bring the maintenance costs down to the absolute limit. Is this your work?"

"...uhh, yes. I had some advice from my brother, though."

"Your Brother! Then you must be-!"

As he was in the middle of gushing, another voice cut in.

"Maio," the kind voice spoke. "It's fine to be passionate about someone's work, but you should be a bit more careful when touching someone else's Mystic Code. It would be your own fault if you got yourself killed."

Maio turned around to face the new speaker.

It was a woman, wearing glasses. She had a gentle air, and seemed to be from the Far East. I had to wonder if she was Japanese. Though there were other organizations and other types of magecraft with roots in the Far East, there were a fair number of Japanese people at the Clock Tower. Maybe it had something to do with England also being an island nation.

"Ah, sorry, Miss Aozaki."

"Not at all. That was quite the performance earlier, by the way."

At that, she turned to me.

"Pleasure to meet you. My name is Touko Aozaki."

The woman had dark red hair. It was a pretty rare colour to see on someone from the Far East, but I didn't get the impression that it was dyed. Though it was certainly different from my eyes, her hair colour seemed somehow to fit well with her overall nature.

That probably wasn't something I should ever mention to her, though.

But wait. Before that.

Just from hearing her name, I felt a shudder go through me.

"...Touko...Aozaki...?!"

My voice was disgracefully hoarse.

I'm sure my face was also holding an expression I would love to wipe clean from the record.

"You're the Sealing Designated..."

"Sealing Designated?" As Gray tilted her head to the side in confusion, I continued to stand frozen like a scarecrow.

A title given by edict of the Association itself, to those magi who possessed special talents. Magecraft that couldn't be acquired by simple study or research. Magecraft that was only possible for one possessing that blood, that physical makeup. It was an order sent out by the Association that they might personally see to its eternal preservation. As such a Sealing Designation was at once both the greatest honour a magus could receive, and a death sentence.

After all, if its being preserved, there's no chance at continuing research. For magi who were designated to be sealed, even putting aside the issue of their lives, giving up on continuing their research was an impossible request. And so the vast majority of those who received Sealing Designations either abandoned their post and went into hiding, or holed themselves up in their own territory where they could defend themselves.

As for Touko Aozaki, though...

"Oh don't worry, the Sealing Designation was lifted years ago," she whispered with a gentle smile.

She spoke as if she was cutting off my potential scream, anticipating perfectly the timing it would take for my body's actions to catch up with my mind. If she had been some sort of assassin, she would have been able to set my head rolling effortlessly.

I took a deep breath.

Though it was an action that wasn't really suitable in public, it at last helped me to calm down.

"...I see. So you're the one, then."

In reality, once a sealing designation had been given, it was irrevocable.

However, a few years ago, a very unusual event took place in the oldest classroom of the Clock Tower, from which the sealing designations came.

Kalion Observatory, the Secret Judgment Division. At the end of the century, they delivered an incredible shock - even greater than the one caused by my brother, Lord El-Melloi's death - to the entire Clock Tower as multiple sealing designations were revoked.

The woman in front of me now was one of those revocations.

"Gray. This is the Grand I was talking about earlier."

Suddenly, the grey-coloured girl jumped, startled.

Yes. This woman was one who had received a sealing designation, that illusive Grand.

I had intended to take things slow and gauge the lay of the land first, but I seemed to have suddenly came face to face with the Last Boss, who had been prowling around the area. If it had been my brother, he no doubt would have thrown the controller away yelling something like 'What the hell, you piece of crap game!'

"Pleasure to meet you. My name is Reines El-Melloi Archisorte," I greeted her, suppressing the shaking that had overcome me.

In response, she gave a faint smile. "I've heard of you. I did some work for the previous head of the El-Melloi family, after all."

"Previous? Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald?"

"Yes." Opting out of giving any more detailed information, she put a finger to her lips.

Come to think of it, that made me wonder just how old she was. From her outward appearance she looked like no more than her mid-twenties, but considering the time that had passed since her sealing designation, that couldn't have been right. Of course, trying to guess a magus' age from their appearance was a losing battle to start with, and in the criteria for qualifying for Grand or a sealing designation, time was a far-off problem.

However, as the name of the previous head of the El-Melloi family came up, I couldn't help but feel a small pang of regret.

If only I could have been there to see the pained faces he would have no doubt made upon meeting her.

"Oh?" Touko said, turning her gaze to Gray.

"...?"

"That's an interesting face you've got there." Staring intently at her, she reached her hand out to touch her-

-as suddenly a loud voice called out from the center of the room.

"...it seems the Golden Princess has arrived."

Touko also turned around.

In the center of the room, a spiral staircase reached up to a second level. Standing on the second level, jutting out over the room like a balcony, were two maids that appeared to be twins. Their form and appearance were so identical, it almost gave off the impression that these two were the Gold and Silver Princesses.

Pinching their skirts and taking a curtsy, the maids turned behind them and called out.

"Lady Diadra,"

"Lady Estella,"

"Please come inside." The two ended together, their voices in sync.

From the shadows of the balcony, a purple dress slowly emerged.



Time ground to a halt.

In that instant, all of the five senses were lost. No, such a base word as 'instant' was long gone from our minds.

Her eyes looking down at us were like jewels of myth. The ideal form that was her nose was no doubt the result of one of heaven's own sculptors, who had risked his own soul to perfect it. Her lips, which could have been flower petals taken from the forever lost Garden of Eden, held an unfading brilliance of youth. Each of these expressions seemed like foolish failures at description when faced by the image of her. She was, by virtue of only being herself, _____.

Something that lingered after all other adjectives had fallen away.

Anyone who even played at being a magus would know not to use the expression lightly, and yet it was the inevitable ground to which any attempt at description would lead.

She was 「 」 .

"Inheritor of the name of Princess of Gold, my name is Diadra Valueleta Iselma."

Even hearing her speak, it was a few minutes before the arrayed magi returned to their senses.

Several of the guests had dropped their glasses, spilling wine and staining their shoes, but not one of them noticed. Some had forgotten to breathe to the point of collapsing, while others had fallen to their knees, tears streaming from their eyes.

If this was some sort of mental attack using magecraft, then not a single person could resist it. Especially so if those gathered here, magi who had all been taught from the beginning to first armour their minds, were falling victim to it. Simply before her pure _____, their greatest mental defenses were less useful than paper.

As embarrassing as it was, I was no exception.

I had been so taken in, I might as well have been unconscious.

"Inheritor of the name of Princess of Silver, my name is Estella Valueleta Iselma."

In all honesty, I hadn't even noticed the second woman.

Her face was covered with a veil, but even without it we didn't have the strength of mind to notice anything beyond the first woman.

If one were to look around, one would have seen that almost no one had recovered yet. Surely, believers witnessing the Second Coming would react in much the same way. Several magi had begun pressing in on their eyes, as if to gouge them out that her visage might be the last thing they ever saw. No doubt the one thing that kept them from acting out that impulse was the desire to see that _____ once again.

"...I see."

Hearing the voice coming from beside me, I was finally brought back to the present.

"So that's the Princess of Gold. I'd heard the rumours, but the fact they've reached that point makes the Iselma family more than deserving of praise." Touko whispered.

In less than an instant her tone had completely changed. Doubting what I was hearing, I glanced at her only to see her face had changed as well. Holding her glasses in her hands, she had cast her gaze downwards.

"Even I was a little shocked, so you'll have to forgive me for switching."

"Switching?"

"Just a little personality change," she explained after she had returned her glasses to their proper place on her face.

Once she had done so, her previous air had returned. There were many magi who intentionally brought about personality changes for the sake of their research. There was a certain kind of personality that was more apt for gaining results from certain methods, after all. Figuring it was another instance of that, I paid it no more mind.

"Sorry, but I have to take off for a bit. Maio?"

"U--umm...okay."

While the atmosphere of the room was still locked in a dumbfounded state, Touko and the pharmacist took off.

Paying careful attention not to look back at the Princess, I took the time to shake Gray out of her stupor.

A dry applause filled the room.

"...incredible, Lord Byron."

The one clapping was a deeply wrinkled old woman, likely well into her seventies.

Her hair was a noble silver, reminiscent of a wolf. Dressed in a smart green dress, and her posture straight and proper, she gave a pleasant applause. Coupled with her strong manner, the friendly sound managed to draw the lost magi from their stupor.

"Lord Valueleta," a voice spoke.

As the name was spoken, the Princesses turned to their maids and retreated back into the shadows of the balcony. A chorus of groans rose from the gathered magi, as if begging time to stop before they could escape. I had to wonder just how many people were wishing for death at this point.

The music once again picked up. [Moonlight Serenade](#).

Turning on her heel, the old woman from earlier approached us.

"I had the feeling my stupid apprentice was standing here just a bit ago," she said with a meaningful smile, swirling the whiskey playfully in her glass.

This was another opponent I couldn't speak with without correcting my own posture.

"It's been too long, Lord Valueleta. I never thought that even you would be here."

"Hey now, this is an important day for one my own branch families. No matter how busy I am, there's no way I couldn't come," she spoke with a light laugh. (1)

Even as her laugh deepened the ever-present wrinkles, even they seemed to do little more than add more vitality to her face. A person of her age being so

energetic was quite rare. Downing her glass of whiskey in a single gulp, she replaced it with a fresh glass brought immediately by one of the attendant homunculi, once again swirling it playfully around her glass.

"...Lord Valueleta? Then, the Lord of the Faculty of Creation...?" Gray tentatively offered the question.

Now that I thought of it, I guess this was her first time meeting a Lord other than my brother.

"Correct. Just like my brother, this is one of the twelve people at the top of the Clock Tower. Lord of the Faculty of Creation."

"It's certainly been a while since I've seen you take any servants besides Trimmer," the woman spoke, showing interest in Gray.

"Inorai Valueleta Atroholm. Pleasure to meet you," she said, offering her right hand.

Hesitantly, the grey-coloured girl took it.

"My name is Gray. I'm a gravekeeper." With the slight bob of her hood, she nodded in greeting.

Though it was far from proper etiquette, Inorai didn't seem to mind, so I added some more details.

"She's an apprentice of my brother's."

"Oh? You must be quite impressive then."

"U-umm...well...I'm not really a magus..." Gray began making excuses, but seeing as explaining any further would be a nuisance, I ignored them. Thankfully, Inorai didn't poke any further, responding only with a big nod.

Returning her gaze to me,

"So? Have you decided to change affiliations?" Though she spoke with a pleasant laugh, it felt like she had reached out and took my heart in her hand.

As I had explained earlier, the El-Melloi family technically belonged to the aristocratic faction. The Valueleta family was a member of the democratic Trambelio faction, so any sign of considering her offer would spell instant destruction for the El-Melloi family.

"Unfortunately, I'll have to decline. Small fry like us are fully occupied just keeping our heads above water."

"Of course if I'm willing to offer, we're prepared to offer you the appropriate protection. And if you were willing to give us preferential access to that Lord El-Melloi II's classes, we'd even consider parting with one or two classrooms of our own."

I was struck speechless.

They were extraordinary conditions. Certainly having authority over an extra classroom or two was no big deal, but the classrooms held by the Valueleta family were each among the best spiritual land in the entire Clock Tower. Giving any of those away to us would be like handing us a plate of prestige.

"...unfortunately, we don't really have the capacity to make good use of such high quality land," I replied.

Though it did take me a few seconds to do so.

"How unfortunate."

"I am thankful for your offer. However I must ask, what makes you so interested in my brother?"

"That's a rich question, coming from you. Of course his prowess as a teacher is first rate, but after looking at the El-Melloi classroom, it's quite clear that you are responsible for putting him in the position of Lord."

"Half of that kind of happened of its own accord," I answered Inorai's words with a bitter smile.

It was difficult to explain the situation clearly. Really, I would be more comfortable if she underestimated us like the others in the Aristocratic faction did.

"Umm..." A timid voice butted into the conversation.

Seeing Gray was about to ask a question, Inorai turned to her.

"Hm? What is it?"

"...why isn't the Valueleta family part of the Aristocratic faction?"

In response to Gray's question I could feel my mouth drop open.

In a way, she was even worse at reading the atmosphere than Trimmer. It was as if she was poking a finger deeper into an open wound.

"G-Gray..."

"I heard most of the magi in the Faculty of Creation were artists. Isn't art typically tied strongly with aristocracy?"

It was such a simple question. A simple, lethal question, like a spear coated in poison. Like someone had carefully built a tower of wooden blocks, and she had struck it in the one place that would destroy the whole thing.

But Inorai only laughed wholeheartedly.

"You're good! It's been decades since anyone's asked me a question like that!" Her laughter was so spirited it began to draw the attention of the nearby magi, many of them turning to watch us.

As expected of the famed Amazon of the Clock Tower. When it came to Lord Valueleta, anyone would stare.

Paying no heed to the surrounding magi all watching her, Inorai replied.

"Because art is fundamentally something to shake the hearts of the people of a given age."

"People of a given age?"

"Exactly. Many people say true art is that which survives the test of time. But at that point, it's not art anymore. It's history. Of course history has value, and is more than worth pursuing, and as such the aristocracy are quite pleased with it. But it's not what we are chasing after."

The old woman narrowed her eyes.

It was clear that she understood from her voice that the value she spoke of was not just something that depended on the present or recorded history, but also on the pursuit of a far off ideal.

"Beauty itself is fantastic. Even if it's only for an instant, the fact that it existed at all gives it value. For us, pursuing something outside of that moment just isn't up our alley. And besides, it's our belief that the people today should be able to operate and run things regardless of whatever history their bloodline might have."

As expected, her clear speech was overflowing with a pride appropriate to a magus at the head of one of the factions leading the Clock Tower.

"...I see...somewhat," Gray nodded.

Though the 'somewhat' added a layer of ambiguity to it, her expression clearly showed that she was thinking over the answer seriously.

"Happy to hear it. If you're one of that El-Melloi II's apprentices, you can feel free to come to us for help anytime, alright?"

Though Inorai spoke with a sunny disposition, my eyes were much more serious.

Especially knowing her personality, there was no way to tell what angle she would try to attack you from. I couldn't help but feel my previous nervousness come back to me.

(...ugh...)

Getting myself wrapped up in situations like this, I could hardly laugh at the struggles I was putting my brother through.

Just as I was thinking of curling up into a ball and dying, another person appeared.

Walking on fast feet despite his use of a cane, it was the gentleman from earlier.

Byron Valueleta Iselma.

"Here you are, Lady Inorai."

"Ah, Byron. Thanks for having me."

Putting his face closer to hers as she finished her glass of whiskey in a single gulp again, he whispered.

"I have something we need to discuss."

"Oh?"

Listening to the rest of what he had to say, Inorai's expression began to shift.

"Well then, I guess this is goodbye for now. I look forward to seeing you again, Princess and Apprentice of El-Melloi."

Showing a mouth full of white teeth, the old woman laughed.

Chapter 2, Part 3

After that, following the usual courtesies of greeting everyone of import, the gathering came to an end.

I had thought that they might have brought the Princesses of Gold and Silver down to introduce them to everyone, but in the end it never happened. After all, being that close to someone who was so _____ may have cost the gathered magi to lose their minds for good.

Many of the magi who had come went on their way after the gathering was finished, but since my train back home wasn't until tomorrow, I instead went across to the Tower of the Sun. It seemed like the Tower of the Moon was for members of the family, and the Tower of the Sun was reserved for guests.

As expected of such a family, the beds there were of phenomenal quality. Just lying down on it felt like you were in a space with no gravity. On the other hand, that feeling of weightlessness made the weight I felt within myself seem all that much heavier, and I unconsciously ended up sighing.

"...my my."

Gently I brought my fingers to my eyelids.

My eyes were burning. Thanks to this particular trait of mine, I wasn't particularly fond of social gatherings like this one. Since the wavelengths of each of the gathered magi's energy was different, my eyes had overheated trying to match to each of them. Times like this made me feel like my skills and quality as a magus were lacking, but my brother told me it was the kind of thing that calmed down as you got older. Personally though, the one thing I liked about these Mystic Eyes was the tiny bit of jealousy my brother exhibited in regard to them.

(...however.)

Covering my face, I sighed again.

"Not just a Grand, but a Lord as well?"

As expected, the event was too much.

Not just my eyes, it felt like my brain was overheating as well. I thought I had predicted the general scope of the event beforehand, but I had been too naive. Not just that it was Lord Valueleta of all people, but the rumoured Grand was Touko Aozaki.

I had so many things I needed to think about, I had no idea where to even start.

"...but I'm glad no one decided to attack us." Suddenly, a voice came out from beside me.

Not yet lying on her bed, it came from Gray, still sitting on a nearby sofa.

Maybe because she had been high-strung for so long, it seemed like she hadn't been able to calm down yet as she sat fidgeting on the sofa. As she moved her interlaced fingers back and forth, her movements reminded me of some sort of Buddhist hand seals, or maybe some African form of Cat's Cradle. Come to think of it, I remembered hearing in my brother's lectures that similar games to Cat's Cradle were used among the Maori by storytellers for telling myths, and the Inuit related it to Curses...yes, the fact I was making connections like this at all was proof of just how tired I was.

In short, my control over my own thoughts was lacking.

"Though there were a few people who looked like they wanted to start something. For the most part, it seems like people kept their malice in check for today's debut. Something like that is a kind of weapon in itself."

"...I wonder why they went so far as to create a person that beautiful," Gray spoke, voicing a deep thought.

It seemed as if being such an unsophisticated person as she was, the Princess of Gold had left a deep impression on her. Though I fully understood that feeling.

"My brother said so as well, but that is within the scope of magecraft too." After applying some eyedrops, I replied.

Though it was faint, I could feel the heat in my eyes soften a little. Once my eyes had calmed down, I could be sure the rest of my body would follow suit. Well, my

nature as a magus aside, that was the kind of process and time it took for me to do so.

"You mean, beauty is?"

"Of course. Like he said, the beauty inherent in mathematics is necessary for the construction of things like Magic Circles and Workshops, but for families like Iselma and Valueleta, it's an even more fundamental part, and as such is highly valued."

The shock of that experience had also reminded me of something I had almost forgotten. "Do you know what it is that magi are aiming for?"

After a moment of blankness, Gray replied with a difficult expression. "Umm...I heard about it in class. What was it...the Spiral of Origin?"

"Right. The Spiral of Origin, or more simply the Root. Sometimes it's referred to as 「 』 , the thing for which there can be no reference. It is the source of everything, the 'zero' from which all matter and phenomena flow. Ah, but now that I'm trying to put it into words, I'm realizing that's not a good idea. After all, even the idea of 'zero' has baggage that makes it unsuitable as a comparison."

As I played around with my words, I narrowed my eyes.

"Regardless, the goal of magi is to eventually reach that place. Of course, there are also those who simply derive pleasure from touching the supernatural, or from being superhuman. Because we are weak, we fall to that diversion. But in the end, that's not our ultimate goal."

For modern magi, most understood that reaching the root was something that just wasn't possible for them. After all, even though magecraft itself had been in a state of continuing decline since the Age of Gods, there were no reports of anyone facing that past and trying to return to it. Likely, the appearance in the Far East of the fifth - and often called the last - Magician was the same as the gate to the Root being all but closed to everyone else.

Even so, we didn't give up.

Anyone who would give up in a situation like this would never have become a magus to begin with.

"In order to reach that place, the Valueleta family chose 'beauty' as their path."

"...path."

"Right. Maybe you've heard of it before, that recognition of beauty was originally a function in humans used to perpetuate their survival." Putting a finger to my temple, I tried to remember the contents of my brother's previous lectures on the topic. It was a skill most lecturers probably had themselves, that just by remembering the beginning of the material, the following information would come pouring out of its own accord.

"Similar to how our sense of smell and taste developed to detect poisons, and our vision and hearing were honed to avoid physical danger. But even apart from those five senses, before humanity had developed to the point of conscious thought, beauty existed as an internal drive to 'seek pleasure.'"

For example, the cave paintings of Lascaux, France.

For example, the naked stone figurines excavated from the ruins of Willendorf.

These works, known as primeval art, were clear proof that the concept of beauty was insuperable from humanity.

"As far as using beauty as their path, magi thought something along these lines: 'if one looks upon beauty, one becomes more beautiful.'"

"...you become more beautiful yourself?" As expected, the explanation seemed to have gone a bit over Gray's head, as she furrowed her brow.

"Heh, what a strange story, right? But even those magazines over there will tell you that art and literature are the food of the soul."

"...Ah, I see. In that case..."

"Fundamentally it's the same thing. According to my brother, beauty is like a type of sympathetic curse. As we appreciate the beauty of art, our souls and spirits are purified - that is the true nature of the feeling we express with the term 'beauty.'"

After nodding in a way that reminded me of a small animal, Gray pondered my words for a moment before speaking.

"Then, if we were able to witness something of extreme beauty..."

"...then we might be able to push our soul up into a higher plane of being all at once. What do you think? Feel like you've become a better person? Well, I guess you already have quite the pretty face."

"...please, don't talk about my face."

For a small moment, there was a strange pause in her speech. It looked like I might have stepped on a landmine.

Dragging that story out of her seemed like it would be a nuisance, so I decided to let it be for now.

"...well, once you start talking about beauty in this context, you get a result like 'her.'"

I was really quite impressed.

It was like hearing a single poem from a single book read aloud, and having your entire life changed because of it. Even the most famous of works read by the most skilled of performers could hardly hope to produce such an effect, but if you could produce that effect on demand - that was doubtless magecraft. In a way, it wasn't exaggerating to say it was within the realm of True Magic.

"...I see." Gray sighed deeply. "Is everyone in the Faculty of Creation like that? It feels like they are on a terribly long journey..."

"The Iselma family, and the greater Valueleta family that they are a part of are some of the most distinguished bloodlines in the Clock Tower after all. Enough to be numbered one of the Great Three Noble Families at least."

Barthomelloi.

Trambellio.

Valueleta.

These were the Three Great Noble Families of the Clock Tower.

This is a bit of a digression, but there is a distinction between what are called the 'big' and 'small' Lords of the Clock Tower. The 'big' sense, referring to the Twelve Lords, probably doesn't need explaining anymore. There was also the 'small' sense, however, referred to as the lords (nobles), most of whom belonged to the Three Great Families.

Of course, the second sense was an entirely unofficial one.

It was a custom developed before the power of the Twelve Lords had been solidified, but paying respect to the old was a natural instinct for magi. As such, the power struggles and underlying animosities that supported that system still survived rather robustly to the present day. It really would be better if magi just died off as soon as possible, wouldn't it?

By the way, the name Lord El-Melloi originally held that meaning as well, but that was something of the distant past now.

"...I feel like my head is going to split open," Gray confessed, pressing her fingers into her temples.

"Oh, did I try and pile a little too much in?" With a small laugh, I stroked the blanket.

As I did so, Gray's cloak began to stir near her right hand.

"More like she's been cooped up for so long, she completely misjudged the Golden Princess or whatever!"

With a small noise, the hook holding Gray's cloak came undone, and out popped a small bird-cage looking object. From the inside of that cage, Add slipped his opinion in with a smug expression.

"That lady is scary, right? Even though I was properly hidden and everything, it was the first time I came so close to being found out!"

The eyes and mouth engraved on the box inside worked busily.

It was a bit of a recurring thought, but seeing Add move like that reminded me of the CG you see in movies. The expression morphing bewilderingly on his face was

so overly detailed it was like it was trying to express a different opinion than Add's itself.

"Touko Aozaki?"

"Yeah, that one. The hell is she, some kind of monster?"

"In that case, the fact you weren't found is actually quite the feat."

Probably because Add's concealment was done entirely without the aid of magecraft. That might lead one to ask why such a paper-thin defense was set up to keep him hidden, but both Add and Gray were silent on that front.

"...I was interested in her, too."

"What?! In that four-eyes?!"

"Yes. Why did someone like Touko Aozaki decide to show up here-"

As I made to explain further, I suddenly felt a presence beside me.

"Trim?"

Though I had thought she had already returned to her place in my suitcase, she was now beside me staring intently at the door.

"I have detected two unknown persons within the vicinity."

Both Gray and I were suddenly overflowing with tension.

About ten seconds later, a knock came at the door.

Meeting Gray's eyes for an instant, I swallowed before nodding.

In short order, she took hold of the cage sitting on the table and returned it to its place tucked away in her cloak. No matter how many times I saw her do it, it still felt like I was watching the cage get sucked into an alternate dimension, but for now my most urgent concern was on the other side of the door.

As I reached my hand to the remaining Mystic Codes in my suit case,

"May I come in?" A voice called out from the other side of the door.

"It's open," I replied.

I could hardly hope to trust the lock on a door in someone else's house, so it was all the same to me if it was left open. As long as I was in someone else's territory, it was little different from being locked in a labyrinth strewn with traps.

The thread-like gap in the doorframe slowly widened, exposing the hallway outside.

Standing there was one of the maids who had been attending the Gold and Silver Princesses.

"My name is Caleena," she greeted us, the lantern in her hand forcing her curtsy into an informal style.

"How polite. Reines El-Melloi Archisorte. May I help you?"

At my frank response, the maid turned to look behind her. It seemed as if there was another person behind her. Her twin, perhaps?

"Please, come forward."

At the maid's invitation, another figure appeared beside her.

I literally couldn't believe my eyes.

At times, one's awareness surpassed even the laws of physics. With an acuteness that rivalled magecraft itself, I could feel the nerves connected to my eyes and the part of my brain that governed them exploding all at once.

"Princess of...Gold...!"



Honestly, I thought I had gone crazy.

Even if we were both women, her beauty was one that transcended the limits of gender. My mind was so completely overwhelmed that it needed a few seconds just

to start working again. Her beauty felt so removed from reality that if someone had told me the place I had been standing had been swapped into a different world, I probably would have believed them.

"Pleased to meet you," a voice spoke.

Even just the sound of her voice felt like it was directly shaking my brain.

"...y-yes," I managed to squeeze out.

As expected of the second meeting, it lacked the extreme impact that the first had had, but if it hadn't, I might have just passed out on the spot. At that moment I learned that beauty was violence.

"Lady Diadra has said she wishes to speak to you," the maid who had called herself Caleena spoke up again.

"To us?"

"No. Would it be acceptable to ask your attendant to take her leave?" she asked, the lantern in her hand illuminating the still-hooded Gray.

"...Umm..."

"She is a trustworthy person," I immediately spoke. The reason I had brought a bodyguard was exactly for moments like this. Having her step out would certainly be inconvenient. I had no confidence that Trimmaw herself would be capable of handling the job, after all.

Diadra, who had been quietly watching until now, finally opened her mouth.

"...in that case, it will be enough if you step out alone, Caleena."

"As you wish." With a quick nod, Caleena dutifully stepped out of the room and was gone. As if it was her duty as a mere attendant, the sense of her presence had completely vanished.

Only the two of us and Diadra were left.

"My apologies for impinging on you so suddenly."

"...not at all." Even as her voice alone threatened me with a dizzy spell, I managed to reply.

Though, now that I was this close, I was able to discover something.

"...by any chance, would you happen to be deaf?"

"So you have noticed." With a faint smile, the Princess of Gold - Diadra pressed her hands to her ears. "Yes, hearing loss is a hereditary problem in our family. However, I am still able to manage most conversations by reading lips, and through magecraft learning how to speak myself was no major obstacle."

"...Ah, I see."

Though it was still trailing in the dust of modern science, there were still some areas where magecraft had the distinct advantage. What the Princess of Gold was speaking of now - the use of magecraft to teach a deaf person the proper way to pronounce spoken language - was certainly an example. In short, it was like directly pounding the information of how to pronounce each utterance directly into the brain of the recipient. This made it a rather high class act of magecraft, but if you brought along someone who was capable of telepathy, most of the problems could be resolved. Even if they were only part of the Valueleta family temporarily, arranging something like that would have been trivial.

Though to be honest, if you gave it another ten or twenty years, modern science would likely be able to manage something of a similar effect as well.

For a moment, I stopped to take a breath. Then, switching my head around, I spoke as my ordinary self.

"Thank you for the entertainment tonight. To have you come here in person as well is such an honour I feel I may faint." I wasn't exaggerating.

Diadra gave a faint smile. It felt more flower-like than a real flower.

"Thank you. I've been told about the El-Melloi family from my father. He says the entire Clock Tower has eyes on him, thanks to his creation of new magecraft. It seems like to the New Agers, he is something of a saviour."

Of course the conversation would go back to my brother.

It wasn't a boring topic by any means, but I had certainly gotten fed up with it. For someone from a family as renowned as the Valueleta family, even bringing up the New Agers was a way of saying that the two of us had nothing to do with each other.

This time, however, it was different.

"I would like to make a request," Diadra spoke.

"Oh? For someone of your beauty, I would be elated to do anything within my meagre abilities."

"You are too kind," the Princess of Gold said with a nod before continuing. "...I would like to request asylum."

"A...asylum?" Unconsciously, my eyes went wide.

"Yes. We would like to seek shelter with the El-Melloi faction."

For a moment, I stood speechless.

A defection.

Requesting asylum was a lot more accurate a term than it might have seemed at first. Even setting aside the El-Melloi family itself, the Aristocratic faction that the El-Melloi family was associated with had the resources and combat strength to qualify as a small country. Of course, that meant the Democratic faction that the Valueleta family was associated with had a similar amount of strength at their disposal.

Knowing all this, I could do little more than swallow loudly in response to her request. While Gray, having no idea what the implications of her request were, simply stood staring at us blankly, that may have been to her benefit.

"...may I first ask the reason?"

"I want to protect my sister - the Princess of Silver, Estella - I want to protect the two of us." Diadra spoke clearly and plainly.

"Protect? But surely Lord Byron thinks of the two of you as most precious, does he not?"

For a short time, Diadra was silent. Not that she was obstinately refusing to answer, but more like something of overwhelming gravity was keeping the beautiful woman's mouth shut. For a while, Gray and I joined her in her silence. Without pressing, we waited for her to get past that weight on her own.

Finally, she spoke.

"...I've become a little tired," she whispered. Putting a hand over the chest of her beautifully embroidered violet dress, she continued. "Though he was the one who created our bodies, surely you can imagine what kind of pain he has put us through."

When it came to bodily modification through magecraft, there was one particular school of thought that remained fundamental. Hard training from a young age, the transplanting of a Magic Crest, and the administration of a variety of drugs were all common, but even tampering with the brain and internal organs wasn't all that rare. There were even rumours of some magi that had dozens, if not hundreds, of magically crafted insects that lived within their bodies.

Naturally, the Princesses of Gold and Silver must have followed the same path.

To achieve this level of results, no matter what level of pain it must have caused to the recipients, no magus would have difficulty accepting that cost. No matter how dazzling they may have looked, the Iselma family were disciples of magecraft. The driving force that pushed them to such extremes was none other than that they were a family of magi.

However, not everyone was willing to martyr themselves for the sake of their family's policy.

"Please don't misunderstand. We are of course magi. We have resolved ourselves to the offering up of our bodies. However, our father's methods have presently become inefficient...no, it would be more accurate to say the stage at which his methods were effective has already passed. As such, we have decided we have an obligation to defend ourselves."

Once again it was our turn to be speechless.

What she was talking about was something quite rare. The point where, after progressing to a certain point, the methodology that brought you there suddenly

becomes useless. There were stories of families with centuries of history being brought to an end by a misjudgement of that kind.

"In short, Lord Byron's methods have become dangerous enough that you feel the need to defend yourselves from them - and he isn't willing to listen to your thoughts on the matter?"

"Correct." Diadra emphatically confirmed my summary. "If the current situation remains as it is, sooner or later one of us is sure to die."

It made me want to scream.

If one were to do something as blasphemous as try to rank art itself, these two would handily take the top spot. Were that the case, the runner up would be so overwhelmingly below them that they may as well be swimming in the Earth's mantle. Nevermind just being a loss for humanity at large, the number of people who would rather the complete destruction of the British Museum to the loss of these two could not be small.

With a sigh, I spoke again.

"In that case, would it not be more proper to seek help from Lord Valueleta?"

"Lady Inorai is certainly a kind person, but the head of the magi of the Faculty of Creation is no different. As head of the Iselma family, Father has no small amount of clout, and I find it hard to believe she would be willing to overrule him."

It was exactly as she said.

No matter what one's individual personality was, as long as they were a magus, it made no difference. There was no way someone who was capable of becoming the leader of an entire faction within the Clock Tower would have been able to maintain a humane way of life. In the same vein, one who had made it to such a leadership position would never be capable of robbing the results of another's work.

"However, you are members of the Barthomelloi faction. As long as it provides an advantage to you, neither Father's nor Lord Valueleta's intentions are of consequence. We believe we can be such an advantage for you."

In response to Diadra's words, I could do nothing but nod.

Whether one was a magus or not, but perhaps even more if they were, one such as her would be rabidly sought after. In a word, these two were the pride of the Faculty of Creation.

"If that's what you believe, then you can't expect that our side will treat you any more gently, can you? It's not like I can provide you any guarantee your life with us would be any more bearable than your life here."

"...however, there is the possibility of making an...exchange," the Princess of Gold stated plainly.

We can still stipulate conditions, can we not?

Like a terrorist, offering cooperation and information in a plea bargain.

"...I see." For a moment, it seemed I had run out of things to say.

Take her lightly and you'll regret it. Of course, she had gathered together the resolve necessary just to come and talk to me. Beyond knowing just how outrageous what she was saying was, she also knew she would have to pluck the necessary fruit from the tree while she was at it.

A deep breath.

Switching my consciousness, I designated my opponent as a piece on the board.

Of course, I was yet another. On the chessboard known as the Clock Tower, there were countless pawns. After all, the factional dispute in the Clock Tower was nothing more than the positioning of pieces on this board. Given the proper time and circumstances, pieces could even change allegiance. Perhaps rather than chess, the Shogi of the far east was a more apt metaphor.

"But as you know, I am only at the extremes of the Aristocratic faction. Even if they were to accept a request from me, there is no way I could guarantee you anything."

"That is acceptable. If the famous El-Melloi family were to take us in, then none would be able to ignore us."

I see. So you're first going to praise my brother.

She's got me there, I thought to myself.

Diadra had certainly put her own pieces in order before embarking on this game. Under the guise of pleasantries that were beyond ordinary, she swiftly crushed my hiding place. Of course it was the basics of the basics when it came to negotiations, but from someone this beautiful even the basics were many times more potent.

I keenly felt the weight of the words.

"Well, I did say I would exhaust what meagre abilities I had."

Making a careless promise here would no doubt spell destruction.

"However, if that is the case, then I must speak with the Princess of Silver - with Estella. Maintaining order in the world of magecraft is our goal as well. Though we are certainly on opposite sides from Valueleta, that is even more reason for us to step carefully around an issue that could provoke an all-out war."

Gently, I rejected Diadra's request. However, upon hearing my reply, she showed one more card she had had up her sleeve.

"...perhaps, a sufficient amount of compensation could be arranged?"

"Compensation?"

After parroting her words, Diadra nodded, slowly rising from her seat. Even that was enough for her golden brilliance to steal the eyes of everyone in the room.

Diadra spoke one last time.

"...early tomorrow morning, please come to my room. I will open the rear entrance, and the room is guarded with a Mystic Lock, so there is no fear of others interfering. We may speak concerning the Princess of Silver at that time as well."

With that, Diadra left the room.

As embarrassing as it was, I almost reached out to stop her. Even more so thanks to the dim light of the room, parting from her was painful.

With desperate strength, I suppressed the impulse that tried to move my hands. Once she had departed, I allowed myself a sigh.

"...Reines," Gray spoke out. After remaining silent for our entire exchange, she finally raised her voice. Turning to look at her, I saw her sitting on her bed as she asked. "What do you intend to do?"

"I wonder," I replied to her question with a shrug.

To be completely honest, all I wanted to do now was fall over. Though the ordinary fatigue of the Assembly was sufficient to provoke that response, now I had this whole matter to deal with as well. If I had asked her to just go ahead and kill me, would anyone have been able to blame me?

"...do you think she's serious about defecting?"

"It's kind of odd, isn't it?"

Normally, this is where one would laugh. However, it seemed to me that her feelings were sincere. If there was one thing that had helped me survive in this world, then insight was the thing I could brag about. As imperfect as it may have been, my ability to handle the affairs of the El-Melloi family from my time in primary school was founded upon my ability to see to the heart of a person.

Probably because I had such a terrible personality.

Because I couldn't very well be vocal about how much I enjoyed watching people suffer, my ability to ascertain what and how people were thinking at a psychological level became rather refined. Skill comes from passion. Being that most magi are far too straightforward in their desires, there was no shortage of live cases for me to practice on.

"Or rather, she was quite meticulous in her pursuit, wasn't she?" I said with a snort.

Even if I were to plainly refuse her request here, no doubt she would seek help from elsewhere in the Barthomelloi faction at the very next opportunity. If her request were to be accepted at a later date, no doubt I wouldn't get off cleanly for rejecting her the first time.

On the other hand, our position here at Lord Byron's unveiling was far too weak. All it would take is the spreading of a rumour that the El-Melloi family had deceived the Princess of Gold and led her astray to cause serious danger for the family.

In the end, if I wanted to turn down her request, my only option was to pretend I had never heard her knock in the first place.

"What a pain. Trim?"

"Yes?" the quicksilver maid turned at my voice.

"Enter idle mode. Stand by in high alert status."

"Understood."

At my command, Trimmau disappeared into her suitcase. In this mode, her consumption of magical energy was effectively zero. She had already been set to consume the minimum amount of magical energy possible, but if I was going to be sleeping in another family's residence, I wanted to make sure everything was covered. Exhausted as I was, I didn't even want to think about having to negotiate with that woman again.

"...at the very least, I'll have to wait and see what compensation she plans to offer." Saying that, I at last closed my eyes.

As if sinking through mud, I felt my consciousness slip away into the soft bed.

Chapter 2, Part 4

-At the same time.

The wind blowing off the lake had a soft humidity to it. As if the darkness of the night were itself wet, the nearby forest and plain were gripped by a white fog. Perhaps because of the high humidity and extreme changes in temperature, this place had become famous for the thick fogs that it created. Thanks to that, starting with Muncaster Castle, stories of haunted houses became plentiful.

There was no need to mention the obvious fact that the English loved their ghosts. Nevermind the fan circles and the ghost spotting tours, any house rumoured to have ghost sightings in it would sell for a high price as a haunted mansion.

Thus.

The voice laughing boisterously by the tower may have been one such phantom.

"Yes, my thanks for this night, Lord Byron!" the bespectacled woman said.

The scarlet-haired Touko Aozaki chatted amicably at the entrance of the Tower of the Moon.

Her company was Lord Byron. The father of the Princesses of Gold and Silver, and the head of the Iselma family.

Of course, the pharmacist Maio was also standing alongside them.

"Please allow me to escort you, Miss Aozaki."

"No thank you, Maio. You've had quite a bit to drink, after all, haven't you?" Gracefully turning down Maio's offer, Touko turned around. Outside the tower, a melancholic fog hung in the air.

As with the other guests, Touko's room was in the Tower of the Sun. The reason Maio was staying in the Tower of the Moon, reserved for the Iselma family themselves, was because from the start he had been hired on as their personal pharmacist.

As if she was wandering lost in the fog, she let herself enjoy the sensation of stepping into the flowers.

As she did, she suddenly narrowed her eyes behind her glasses.

The appearance of a sudden movement in the sand under her feet brought her to a halt. It was a strange sensation, like a compass trying to determine her location.

In short order, a vague silhouette appeared before her.

"So this is where my idiot student has run off to," her wrinkled face twisting, the white-haired old woman spoke as she appeared out of the night fog.

"...ah, Lady Inorai." Lowering her voice, Touko gave a slight bow. She then motioned to the device in the old woman's ears. "Music?"

"iPods are nice, aren't they?" she replied with a wink, removing the earphones. The gadget she pulled out from her dress was the latest model of music playback devices. While many modern magi spurned the advances of modern science, to the point where many didn't even have electricity in their own homes, on the opposite end stood the head of the Faculty of Creation, always riding the cutting edge of modern science for her own enjoyment.

"What are you listening to?"

"Rock, of course." As if in a good mood, she traced the rhythm of the song with a hand.

With a face like she was biting back a smile, Touko grumbled. "You haven't changed a bit...you weren't by any chance waiting for me, were you?"

"Of course. I had to get out of that Social Assembly, after all."

"So it was a coincidence," Touko deftly answered her teacher's words. How many years had it been since the two of them had met like this?

The sound of leaves rustling filled the silence between them.

Wrapped in mist, it brought back memories from the long ago days when she studied at the Clock Tower. It was a time that rarely surfaced back into her thoughts, but even so it remained like a deep scar somewhere in her brain. The

Tendai monk, who pursued his studies with a hellish determination, and the red-coated, painfully talkative magus. Images of the two of them coiled around her like shadows.

While their areas of study didn't intersect, for the time she was studying Rune magecraft, they were her study partners.

At the same time, they were both shadows attempting to conquer death.

Taking a few seconds to drive out the rising sentiments, she spoke again to her teacher.

"Seems you've been doing well for yourself, reaching the position of Lord."

"Oh, give up with the flattery," the old woman replied, flashing her teeth. "I heard that your Sealing Designation had been revoked, but I never imagined I'd see you at Iselma's demonstration," she said with a chuckle. "Weren't you planning on living out your life as a hermit?"

"I'm not sure you are one to talk," Touko said, one eye closed. "I've been doing that up until now. Unfortunately, due to a lack of talent, I've been unable to separate myself from this earthly life."

"In the far east, they've lumped together the talent and destiny of being a sage into the phrase having a sage's bones or something, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, it looks like both of us are lacking in talent. I had no desire to get such a strict, formal position like Lord. I'd rather have become a painter, making art pieces that couldn't even be sold on the street." As Inorai mimed the motion of a paintbrush in the empty air, Touko's face took on a colourful expression.

"Please, if nothing else, spare me your pictures." Saying that, she reached into the inside pocket of her coat.

Before she could find what she was looking for, a box of cheap looking cigarettes was thrust before her. The crumpled box had the picture of a Yin Yang on it.

"If you're going to smoke, go for it."

"...I'm impressed that you'd have something like this."

The reason Touko spoke with such reservation was because the box of cigarettes Inorai offered her was exactly the brand she preferred. They were made in Taiwan by a guy who did it for fun, making only one box at a time, making them rare enough that Touko had all but given up on finding them ever again.

"They're some that you left behind in the lab. I put a bit of a spell on them to protect them from the humidity, so feel free to thank me."

"Is that so?"

As Touko reached to take the box, Inorai snapped it back with a laugh.

"One cigarette finder's fee."

"...for you, I guess I can handle that." Nodding, she took the box from Inorai and pulled a zippo from her coat pocket. Lighting a cigarette and taking a puff, her eyebrows knit faintly.

"That's a nostalgic flavour."

"Don't mind if I do, then," Inorai said as she retrieved a cigarette from the box, putting it in her mouth and drawing her face closer to Touko. Touching the end of her cigarette to Touko's, she held it there until the flame took, then slowly pulled away. After taking a deep drag on the cigarette, she spat the smoke out. "What the hell, these are disgusting. What is this, torture?"

"I think I mentioned that."

"I thought that was just modesty, or you trying to keep your favourite things to yourself." Despite her complaints, Inorai continued pulling on the cigarette, eyes following the smoke that came off it.

A sight never seen in the city, the scenery around them was as dark as if someone had painted over it. Yet for the two women, a trivial level of Strengthening in the eyes was all it took to see clearly in the blackness. For that reason, magi had taken a liking to the night since ages long past.

After spending some time just enjoying the tobacco, the older woman spoke up.

"I have to say, I'm a little bit curious. Why did you end up coming out here?"

"Oh, no reason, really."

"Don't try and hide it, Touko."

"Please, stop with the old names," Touko replied with a shy laugh. Contemplating the meaning of her smile, any person would shudder. Even more so for one who knew her during her Clock Tower days.

Those who knew her "Colour."

"Besides that, it's been done a little strange, hasn't it? This kind of lakefront property is rare enough as it is in this country. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"...yes. If something were to go wrong here, there's a good chance it might be connected."

'Connected to what?' The question didn't even need to be asked.

There was only one thing that all magi spent their lives striving for. No matter how diluted the wish may become, centuries, millenia of time were dedicated to the pursuit of that goal. Especially since the end of the Age of Gods, besides a vanishingly small number of exceptions, all magi pursued that goal fruitlessly. Even so, not one of them gave up on their path.

Raising an eyebrow, Inorai shrugged. "Sounds almost like you have a problem with that."

"Not especially. However..." Leaving a small pause, Touko continued. "If the possibility exists, it wouldn't be strange if some undesirable was targeting the Princess of Gold, don't you think?"

"...as always, you like to talk about the disturbing stuff, huh?" Inorai exhaled a large cloud of smoke before pressing the remainder of her cigarette into the portable ash tray Touko offered her. "I thought for sure you'd be here after that rumoured treasure."

"What treasure would that be?" Touko asked, as if her curiosity had been piqued by that statement.

"Oh? I'm surprised you don't already know. Not too long ago, something interesting popped up in a black market auction. The story making the rounds is that the Iselma family bought it up. Something holding traces of the blood of a certain Phantasmal Species."

"...I see. That's quite high grade." Listening to Inorai's words, Touko nodded.

"I thought you'd be a lot more into it than that. You must have changed a lot since the last time we met."

"Oh not really. I just thought it might be best to hold myself back for now. If necessary, I can always just pull out some money from the Clock Tower in my sister's name. It's just this time it doesn't happen to strike my curiosity all that hard."

Inorai snorted. "Well, I guess that's artists for you."

Offering only a shrug in reply, Touko turned a question back on her teacher.

"It seems Lord Byron has called you out with this Social Assembly."

"...so you noticed too, huh?" Inorai said, clicking her tongue. The way she did it made her look like a young girl. As mysterious as it was, it seemed fitting that the passing of months and years didn't seem to reflect in her nature at all. "It's nothing much. That aside, there's one other big fish I was hoping to see at the Assembly, but it looks like that's not going to happen."

"And who would that be?"

"The Lord of the Faculty of Modern Magecraft." With that, she waved a hand. With that, she disappeared into the night fog.

"...well then," Touko spoke to herself. Taking off her glasses, she massaged her temples. "What does that mean? As expected, this won't be easy to get into."

After that, she added one last thing to herself.

"...I'm not forgetting anything, am I?"

Chapter 2, Part 5

Early in the morning, it was just chilly enough outside the tower to make one shiver.

The temperature change between day and night was rather intense thanks to being in the lakeside. In October, midday could see temperatures as high as twenty degrees while at night it would drop to zero.

As the night's mist was slowly being pushed out by the sunlight, bizarre shadows and faint rainbows could be seen here and there in the fog. Among the diffusion of the rainbows, large human-shaped shadows were cast against the fog, a phenomenon known as the Brocken Spectre - so named for the Brocken Mountains in Germany where it could often be seen. The fact that this phenomenon could be seen at such a low altitude made it seem appropriate as a dwelling place for magi. No doubt long ago people had feared the place as being full of ghosts.

Behind me, I heard someone's breath catch.

"Something wrong?"

"...no, umm..." Gray couldn't find the words. Adjusting her hood to hide her face further, she dropped her gaze as if embarrassed.

"Ihihihi! Probably just her usual phobia!" From around her right hand, Add went ahead and put his mouth to work.

(Ah, that's right. She has a thing against ghosts, doesn't she?)

Last night there hadn't been any fog, so it hadn't come up, but this kind of scenery might have been a bit difficult for her...perhaps it was best to keep hidden how much I enjoyed her troubled face. No need to share my hobbies with the world.

Getting from one tower to the other took about ten minutes.

As if the party the night before had never happened, the Tower of the Moon stood in silence. Seeing the thorny bushes wrapped around it and the cracks that ran

through the walls, it looked like an entirely different building than the one we had visited the night before.

Following the instructions we were given, we entered through the rear door. As we had been told, the door was unlocked, and we were easily able to gain entry. As quietly as we could manage, we slipped through the hallways of the tower.

Clearly showing the whims of Lord Byron, the inside of the tower was filled with pictures that smacked of the Faculty of Creation. If this had been a ghost story, then surely the hideously laughing portraits would have cast a curse on me. Actually, the slight burning in my eyes told me that they actually were almost certainly enchanted in some way.

(My my...)

My constitution was quite the bother. If I couldn't control them at this level, rather than getting a cool name like Mystic Eyes, I was more likely to be accused of hay fever. The main source of hay fever here in England was grass, so the season peaked in June and July. According to my brother, hay fever was dealt with in the Far East by wearing masks, which put a somewhat strange picture in my head.

Continuing on, we ascended a spiral staircase at the rear of the building.

The Princess of Gold's room was on the third floor, which was lined with doors. Approaching the door we had been instructed to, I knocked.

"Miss Diadra, are you in?" I asked, keeping my voice low.

There was no reply.

No, from the start, there was no sense of a person being inside. Unlike the door earlier, this one was locked, so no matter how I pushed or pulled, it stayed shut.

I suddenly had a very bad feeling.

"Trimm, break it down!"

"Yes, Master."

Slipping out of the suitcase in my hand, the pool of mercury took on the form of a maid. Her right hand then turned into a battle hammer, allowing her to smash the door apart with little effort.

Careful not to step on the broken fragments of door, I hurried into the room.

The room within was quite tidy. Besides a four-poster bed, the other furniture in the room was also of high quality. Was that jellyfish-like lamp a piece by Émile Gallé? The most surprising thing was the complete lack of mirrors. Of course a woman's room with no mirror was an unthinkable concept, but there may have been a reason tied to their magecraft why one was so conspicuously absent.

However, my thinking had already come to a complete halt.

Because of a certain red that had entered my vision.

On the bed. The red on those pristinely white sheets looked like a rose. As expected of an artist's family, the position of the red on white was enough to evoke inspiration. Even in this state, everything around her was just so ____.

Within the red was the Princess of Gold.

She looked like a flower. It is said that flowers originally developed as a way to entice insects. The widely spreading petals, the way they scattered in a moment, all these were for the purpose of catching the hearts of animals.

So. So. So. So.

...ah.

So, how on earth could one describe what she was like now?

I had completely lost my words. My brain cells had completely ceased functioning. At the very least, something at the bottom of my heart deeply wished that were the case, rather than the scene before me. As much as it could be perceived by human consciousness, it was just too ____.

"Miss...Diadra..."

Even Gray's halting voice was beyond my awareness.

Her eyes were closed.

Her lips were closed.

Her breath had stopped.

From the neck down, her body wasn't connected at all.

The rest of her body torn to pieces; the severed head of the Princess of Gold rested on the soft sheets.

◆ 第三章 ◆

◆ Chapter 3 ◆

Chapter 3, Part 1

The news of the Princess of Gold's death spread through the twin towers like wildfire.

In order to preserve the scene, I stayed in the room and sent Gray off to spread the news. The situation being what it was, it was no time at all before people began gathering in her room to see for themselves what had happened.

Her body was just too hard to take.

While it had its own beauty to it, it rather inspired dread. Whether dead or alive, her expression was still as always. If I hadn't thought to send Gray away to contact the others, I might have stared stunned at her remains for an entire day.

At any rate, within thirty minutes, the entire group of those who had stayed behind after the Social Assembly had gathered.

"...Miss Reines..."

First, Maio came in gasping for air, staring at the scene with wide eyes. His expression had given away that he was weak to this kinds of scenes, and at first it appeared as if he might faint. However, as if thinking now wasn't the time for such things, he seemed to harden up.

Next,

"Well, this has certainly taken a turn for the annoying," a dark skinned man said, scratching his head.

"And you are?"

"Mick Grajilie. Working for the Faculty of Curses (Jig)."

The Faculty of Curses (Jigmarie) was part of the Neutralist faction with the Meluastea family.

With his hair cut short and his muscular frame, he looked like some sort of athlete.

Of course, even my brother could lift someone like Flat into the air one-handed once Reinforcement was taken into account, but it went without saying that such reinforcement would be many times more effective if the base level was higher.

"Ha! Ahahahaha! What even is this?"

The third person to enter the room did so with a dry laugh before sinking down to the floor.

"Unbelievable...to think someone would do something so horrible to the clothes that I made..."

The one now lamenting on the floor was a man with outrageous hair. I believed it was called a "blaze," his tremendous amount of hair tied into three wide braids. While it was a style popular among female black singers, his was even more complex, making it look less like hair and more like some sort of plant.

It seemed from his comments that he was more worried about the dress than the person who had been wearing it.

"And you are?"

"Islo...Sebunan. I am the one who made the dresses for the Princesses of Gold and Silver."

Later, I found out these were the first three to arrive because they had the shortest distance to walk to get here. Apparently they had intended to invite the Princesses to breakfast before returning home from the Assembly, so they had been lounging around tower.

The one thing they all had in common was belonging to the Neutralist faction.

Unlike the Aristocratic and Democratic factions, the Neutralist faction had no collective position when it came to the political disputes of the Clock Tower. Rather than vying for power, they instead focused their efforts on their research, and just like that a sizeable number of families had gathered under them. The strongest force within the Neutralist faction would be the Meluastea faction, but internal conflicts within the faction were plentiful.

The sound of wood striking the stone floor filled the room. As if the world itself had died, a mournful cry filled the room.

"But...how could...Diadra..."

"...sister..."

Their shaking voices made one think we were watching the performance of a tragedy.

In this room drenched in blood, the most cruel thing might have been showing it to these two.

"...Lord Byron, Princess of Silver..."

Similar to our first meeting with the Princess of Silver, her face was covered by a veil. Behind that thin veil was a face reminiscent of the Princess of Gold's, but her expression was invisible.

However, it seemed she was transfixed at the sight of the severed head, and the slowly growing pool of blood on the white sheets beneath it.

If that veil truly hid a face comparable to that of the Princess of Gold's, this place would be like a scene not even visible in heaven. In reality, despite the situation we were currently in, something in the back of my head started to heat up at the thought.

Then,

"I see. This is quite the issue," another voice called out.

Now, she wasn't wearing her glasses. Holding back her scarlet hair with a hand, her face had changed completely. With a cold voice, she spoke as she swept her gaze across the room.

"Oh dear," she shook her head. "That makes those of us left here the suspects, doesn't it?"

"Miss Aozaki!"

Paying no mind to Maio's chastising tone, Touko continued without breaking her smile.

"I don't dislike detective novels...though I had never imagined I would be a suspect in one. Really, I expected myself to be more of a victim type," she said her shoulders shaking with a faint chuckle.

After seeing the severed head of the Princess of Gold and inspecting the inside of the room for only a few seconds, she was already laughing, becoming more and more relaxed. I couldn't think of it as much more than incriminating behaviour.

"Now that I think about it, it is amazing. What on earth were they thinking, doing something like this in a place full of magi? It's enough to make you laugh."

"...what is?" Gray asked without hesitating.

"Think about it. I heard the story on my way here, but before you forced your way into the room, the door was locked, right? I've been here for a little while, so I heard about the locks on these doors. The doors to the Princesses' rooms are sealed by a Mystic Lock. It's a type tied to the wavelength of magical energy of the user, so any random person wouldn't be able to open it. They are used pretty commonly to seal treasure vaults in the Clock Tower as well. In short, no one except the Princess of Gold could have opened this door."

A Mystic Lock.

I had been told the same thing by Diadra. There were a number of different types of Mystic Locks, but in general they were a type of Mystic Code that used particular wavelengths of magical energy as a key. They had a number of disadvantages, from their high price, to the fact only magi could open them, to the nuisance it caused trying to switch who was capable of opening them. Even so, those disadvantages added a heightened level of security which made them popular in a variety of places.

And one of those locks was on the Princess of Gold's door.

Regardless of the fact the Princess of Gold was dead, the lock had been set. Which meant...

"...which means, this was a Closed Room."

For a moment, the room was filled with silence.

Because everyone had already reached that same conclusion. Even in the world of magi, it was an unreal situation - just like she said, we could only wonder what meaning such a state of affairs held.

"Well, when it comes to magi like us, killing someone in a Closed Room without entering it ourselves isn't something all that difficult. For example, your Volumen Hydrargyrum would be able to accomplish something like that with ease, wouldn't it?" Speaking carefully, Touko shifted her gaze to the silver maid standing at my side. "It's a common rule to suspect the one who first discovered the body, but...you were also the last ones to see her, weren't you?"

My heart suddenly jumped. I'd like it if you appreciated my ability here not to let my feelings show on my face. Suppressing the sound of the loudly racing heart in my chest, my voice came out perfectly even and naturally as I responded.

"Is that so?"

"Lord Byron?"

At Touko's request, the gentleman nodded his head. Stiffening his body, he shifted his cane to his wrist and snapped his fingers. At that sound, two more people entered the room - the twin maids of the Princesses of Gold and Silver.

"Caleena, was it?" Calling to the maid that had been the Princess of Gold's personal servant, Touko asked her question. "What was it that Diadra and the El-Melloi princess spoke about last night?"

"I-I...wasn't present during their discussion, so..." Caleena hung her head, giving nothing away.

But there was no way Touko would let that pass. Unburdened by her glasses, Touko's cold and stubborn personality pressed the young maid for more.

"Yes, you weren't there, I am well aware. But surely you must have had some intuition as to what they were speaking about?"

For a while, Caleena remained silent, staring at the floor.

"Caleena."

This time Byron called the maid's name. As if unable to disobey the orders from her master, Caleena finally responded.

"Lady Diadra was...asking for asylum with the El-Melloi family."

Besides Caleena and Touko, the maid's confession earned a surprised gasp from all present.

(Dammit...!)

I bit my lip in frustration.

We were completely trapped. There was no way we could just pass this off by saying that we had no intention of granting that asylum. On top of that, being that we were the only ones here representing the Barthomelloi faction, we had no back up either.

"Caleena...why...?"

"Rejina..."

The remaining maid called her sister's name. Caleena and Rejina, was it?

Either way, her words were nothing if not lethal.

"...this is...something I can't overlook." With a dramatic tone, Lord Byron turned his attention to me.

Of course, there was no way I could be so brash as to say this was the first I had heard of it. Having been driven so thoroughly into this corner meant, at the very least, I had a good grasp on what had happened in the time since the Princess' death was discovered.

"I would appreciate an explanation, Princess El-Melloi."

"Yes...I had in fact received such a request from Lady Diadra." With the barest hesitation, I answered. If I were to remain silent here, it would be the same as confirming everything they had said. If I was going to come up with some kind of refutation, I was going to have to think of it while I was talking.

"However, I give you my word I never laid a hand on her. After all, what would be the point in killing someone who had come to me to ask for asylum?"

"A fight ensued after negotiations broke down...doesn't sound so far-fetched to me," the dark skinned man who had been listening quietly until now - Mick spoke out.

Before I could even grind my teeth at his unsolicited opinion, I felt the gazes of every magus in the room snap to my hands and feet. If I were to do anything careless, I would be dead in the blink of an eye, and the few assets that remained with the El-Melloi family would be thoroughly seized.

Enemies on all sides.

After all, it was none other than I who had attended the Assembly.

"...Reines," Gray whispered. She was already in combat mode, her right hand hidden beneath her cloak.

"...no, Gray," I told her to stand down.

"But..."

"Yes, if you use that, we might be able to get out of here. But doing so would deal a fatal blow to the El-Melloi family. That is a much more severe problem than just my life."

Though I couldn't keep the bitterness from my voice, I explained our situation.

Ah, it was truly unfortunate, that my values were aligned so.

If it had been my brother, he probably would have had no issue running away. 'The people living now are more important than politics or the family,' he would no doubt say. 'That's why your only second-rate,' is how I would no doubt reply.

But I was not my brother.

Just a little, I felt some regret at that.

Lord Byron took a single step into the blood-drenched room before speaking again.

"In any case, it seems a more detailed investigation will be required."

"So it appears," I nodded. Remaining as calm as possible, I turned my hands palm up. "Until then, I'll be relying on your hospitality. I especially hope we can arrange some good tea and scones for breakfast. My stomach really won't settle for anything else. And we wouldn't want to put our new-found cooperation at risk now, would we?"

"Cooperation? What are you trying to say, Reines El-Melloi Archisorte?"

"It should be clear, shouldn't it?" In response to Byron's invocation of my full name, I replied in a voice feigning surprise. "I'm going to smoke out the culprit behind this incident. On the honour of El-Melloi family itself."

Chapter 3, Part 2

In response to my words, the room broke out into a variety of responses.

The three magi from the Meluastea faction blinked dumbly, and the twin maids held their silence as if they had no permission to speak.

The Princess of Silver...her reaction was still hidden behind her veil. And finally, "Ahahahaha!"

Touko Aozaki burst out laughing.

"Very good. That's the El-Melloi princess for you. To tell the truth, I was worried this Assembly was going to be a rather boring affair, but now it's become kind of interesting, hasn't it? What do you think, Lord Byron? It seems to me there's a little truth there, at least."

"...I'll acknowledge that," Byron spoke heavily. No matter that the dead body of his daughter was in front of him, the head of the Iselma family's bearing as a gentleman was unbroken. In a way, speaking from the perspective of a magus, one could say his behaviour as a father was worthy of pride.

"But I cannot allow you to simply wander around freely. You are still a suspect, after all."

"What about me, then?" Touko put her hand on her chest. "How about I take care of keeping them under observation?"

"Unfortunately, Miss Aozaki, that will not do. Have you forgotten that you are also a suspect here?"

"...I see. Well that is a problem." Shrugging, the scarlet-haired woman easily dropped her apparent interest.

Knowing what we did of her, there may have been nothing more to it than that. At the very least, it seemed like she didn't plan on using her title of Grand to bulldoze her way through everything.

"Then what about me?"

The sound of footsteps.

Of course. There was still one person who had yet to show up. One woman who at this gruesome scene held an unquestionable authority over everyone else.

"Sorry for being late. I heard the gist of things, but if it's come to this, there should be no problem if I keep watch, right?"

"...Lord Valueleta..."

Inorai Valueleta Atroholm.

One of the corners that made up the triangle of the Three Great Families. The old woman at the very peak of the Valueleta faction.

Of course, if you were to look for someone more trustworthy in this situation, you wouldn't find someone above her. Even if the Clock Tower were to do an official investigation afterwards, almost no one would doubt her testimony.

"No objections, ladies and gentlemen?" she spoke calmly, sweeping her gaze across those gathered.

The Princess of Silver and her maid, Rejina. The father, Lord Byron. The three magi of the Meluastea faction, here by coincidence. Touko Aozaki, the Grand. And of course, Gray and I.

Even the Princess of Gold, reduced to nothing but a severed head.

Nodding in satisfaction, the old woman clapped her hands together.

"Alright, everyone is dismissed. From now on, it's the detective's turn."



Effectively, the only ones left were Inorai and myself.

As expected, none of the other magi dared to oppose Lord Valueleta's word, and quickly retreated from the room.

Perhaps because I had been halfway paralyzed by nerves if I hadn't noticed it before, but the cloying smell of blood was enough to make me want to vomit. Thanks to my classes on Black Magic (Witchcraft), I had become somewhat used to such things, but I wasn't certain anyone could get used to the smell of an entire human being's worth of blood.

I had yet to touch any of it, yet even so I felt the rusty iron smell filling me from my mouth down to the bottom of my stomach.

"So, where do we start?"

"...if possible, from the layout of the room and the body," I replied, pushing a hand into my chest to hold down my nausea.

"I see. Well, go ahead," she said with the jerk of her chin. Though she made no objection, it was still a bit unpleasant.

No, I was of course grateful for her cooperation. However, my compatibility with her was just too low. Responding to frankness with vaguery, and vaguery with frankness was my usual style, but I couldn't see her having any problems seeing right through it all. Less an issue of the difference of age between us, it felt like we were just incompatible from the start.

Actually, if we had been the same age, there was a good chance we might have been friends.

Either way, as far as I could manage, I began to inspect the room with the utmost focus.

The size of the room itself was similar to that of a small cafe. The main pieces of furniture were the large canopied bed, and the desk with the jellyfish-looking lamp. Numerous impressionist paintings. On a rather modest looking bookshelf were arrayed a number of low level grimoires. Though they were all luxurious enough as to match the name of the Princess of Gold itself, as far as the contents they seemed to be the barest of basics.

There was one window and one door. For the record there was also a ceiling, but that wasn't really something a human being could use to enter through. If we were going to include that in the list, then we might as well turn to thinking about magecraft allowing you to pass through walls.

"...they were rather thorough, weren't they?" Looking at how completely the body had been torn apart, I muttered to myself.

The body and limbs had been cleanly cut into pieces, revealing a cross section that repelled the eyes. There were no signs of resistance - looking at the way she was cut, it seemed like she was killed before she had a chance to offer any. A magus skilled in Necromancy would be able to discern the cause of death even with a body in this state, but that was an area of magecraft I had no connection with.

...the reason I was used to dead bodies was from a completely unrelated incident.

"Trim, do you think you can gather up the parts?"

"Understood." At my words, Trimmau quickly jumped into motion.

Seeing that, Inorai slightly narrowed her eyes.

"I see...with the body this scattered, we can't even tell what the murder weapon was."

To begin with, the fact that magecraft was a possible weapon in the scenario meant that the cause of death could be more or less anything. As Touko had suggested, Trimmau itself was capable of imitating more or less any physical weapon. Just as having a Closed Room was more or less meaningless, the idea of a specific murder weapon was similar.

"...that being said, if we can find out why they set up a Closed Room, it might lead us to something."

"I see," Inorai nodded. "In short, you're looking at things as if the sealing of the Closed Room was an accident."

"Precisely. In detective novels, the main reason the culprit creates the Closed Room is to eliminate evidence of their involvement. Logically speaking, if it was a murder that no human could have done, then the culprit can never be caught - that

is the underlying assumption. However, when the suspects are all magi, that assumption doesn't hold water."

Really, they could make as many Closed Rooms as they'd like. Even limiting yourself to long-distance curses, there were a number of varieties available. For example, things like manipulating the water in the blood to force a stroke, or overloading the victim with fire elemental energy to cause a heart attack were not difficult. Of course, in this situation the victim was experienced in magecraft as well, so such basic curses could be all but ruled out, but the idea of 'impossibility' that a Closed Room was supposed to bring about was easily dismissed.

As such, it was my supposition that the creation of the Closed Room had been an accident.

It wasn't that they intended to create a Closed Room, only that it became one by chance.

Following that train of thought, it was possible investigating the situation of the room could lead to a clue...

"...nothing, huh?"

But I couldn't think of anything at all.

I wasn't really cut out for this kind of cramped thinking anyways. I was more of the type to read a detective novel starting at the back, lording my knowledge of the future over the characters as they struggled to discern the culprit.

However, there was something else that had caught my eye. Something that would be present in any woman's room that was conspicuously missing.

"...why are there no mirrors?"

In response to my muttering, Inorai spoke. "Maybe she had grown sick of her own face?"

"If you were that beautiful, wouldn't you be more likely to develop into a narcissist?"

To be honest, it was beyond criticism. Art that had been developed to such a level wasn't something you could simply get tired of. If you gathered together the people

who would be happy just looking at that face until they died, it would be a long line indeed. Some of them might even call that line a stairway to heaven.

Though maybe a stairway to hell would be more appropriate.

"Ahahaha. I understand the logic, but I guess that's the pride of youth. Once you get to my age, you won't be interested in looking at mirrors anymore. It just makes you think you should have pursued plastic surgery more zealously when you were younger."

"...Lord Valueleta," I spoke on reflex, earning a satisfied grin from the old woman.

"Kidding, of course. Actually, would you believe that even now I'm enchanted by my mirror for at least thirty minutes a day? Sorry sorry, I just suddenly had the urge to tease a bit."

Being so thoroughly on the opposite side of my usual exchanges, I felt totally out of my element.

Actually, it was a little bit exciting, but I decided to put a lid on that for now lest it led somewhere inappropriate.

"By the way, do you mind if I ask another question?"

"By all means. I'm not the kind of person who would be capable of refusing Lord Valueleta of all people, after all."

"Glad to hear it," she continued without reservation, her wrinkled features twisting into a smile. She spoke as if it was any ordinary conversation, despite the undeniable substance to her question. "Are you really that interested in reviving the El-Melloi family?"

"I'm not really all that attached to the El-Melloi family itself, no. This is just the way things turned out," I replied. "From the start, the El-Melloi faction was at the bottom of the pile. By the time things had rolled around to me, all the high ranking families had already either been estranged or distanced themselves. After that, among the younger generation who were related by blood and hadn't received a Magic Crest yet, I happened to have a particularly high compatibility with the Source Crest...something like that. Well, Crest Splitting was a pretty common

practice within the El-Melloi faction to begin with, so having a high compatibility was to be expected."

Crest Splitting - the practice of taking a small portion of the Magic Crest from a magus of the main family and transplanting it into someone else.

Originally, the first generation of a Magic Crest was developed by implanting a fragment of some lost Phantasmal Species or Mystic Code, called a 'core,' into the body. Of course, since you were implanting a completely foreign object into the body, the rejection response was far stronger than what one would see when receiving a Crest from a parent. By suffering through those rejections for generations, the core would slowly become saturated with the hosts' magecraft, and thus the Magic Crest would be complete.

However, magi that used this method to produce Magic Crests were all but extinct in modern times.

While there weren't that many from outside previously established magecraft families that decided to pursue it, those that did typically received a Crest Split from a much more historied family. Of course, since it was a transplant from a stranger, the intended function of the Magic Crest - to act as a crystallized mystery - was all but lost. Even so, it was a method that would produce results many generations faster than starting from scratch, and it was much easier to control the development of a Crest made in such a way.

This method did damage the original parent Crest, but with the help of a Tuner such a level of damage could normally be repaired within a few months to a year. In exchange, they could expect a tremendous loyalty from the recipients. As such, it became common place for families involved in factional struggles to create such branch families, and the original family from which they were derived would come to refer to their Magic Crest as a Source Crest.

(...though apparently, if the head of the Source Crest's family dies, that loyalty doesn't mean all that much.)

It was often mentioned that the late Lord El-Melloi's death in the fourth Holy Grail War was a result of recklessness caused by his youth, but he really had gone there treating it like some sort of game. Or perhaps, he had just been trying to show off his talent to a certain someone.

"I see. But if you aren't attached to the El-Melloi family itself, shouldn't you be satisfied by now? You and your brother have done more than enough. You should be able to fetch quite a price by selling off the family, don't you think? It's not like there is anyone who could buy it that would be problematic."

"...ahh." Of course, I would be lying if I said the idea hadn't occurred to me.

To be frank, the faction warfare within the Clock Tower was a load of crap. Putting aside the Meluastea faction who focused entirely on their research, the Aristocratic and Democratic factions continually sharpening their swords for each other just made me want to yell at them to grow up. If they keep saying they are so far above earthly things, why are they still squabbling over political power?

However,

"There is an enemy in front of me, and I have the means with which to fight it. Therefore, I can find no reason not to do so," I replied.

Well, sorry. Unfortunately, I was no better than they were. My brother might have been able to come up with a better reason, but not me.

"I see. You're a hardcore fighter then." Rather than sounding like praise, it was more like she was just parsing the data. Then, as if it had been nothing more than a topic for gossip, she switched to a new one. "Is it true that the Princess of Gold had been looking for asylum?"

"Unfortunately, that is the case," I answered honestly.

Lying carelessly while the truth was still uncertain would do little more than make my situation worse. Though it had been a common enough occurrence in the old El-Melloi family.

"Hmm. Why is that?"

"Apparently, Lord Byron's methods of improving on the Princesses had become inefficient. She had also said that they were seeking asylum out of their obligation to protect themselves."

Yes. An obligation, she had said.

Not a right.

In other words, she had already thought of her own body as nothing more than a means to reach the Spiral of Origin - she had fully adopted the mindset of a magus.

"...I see. Sounds reasonable, doesn't it?" Inorai said with a nod. "From my perspective, it seemed to me that the Princess of Gold had obviously reached completion. It's not that strange for a previous methodology to fail when reaching a new level. And I can't really say Lord Byron is open-minded, either."

As if she had struck upon an idea, the silver-haired old woman made a knocking gesture on her temple.

"In that case, there's a possibility the Princess of Silver knows something."

"Interested in helping gather some information then?"

"Unfortunately, that would be a bit of a conflict of interest. My job is just to keep an eye on you this time," she flatly refused.

Her tone and attitude were rather frank, but her ability to keep matters divided seemed appropriate for a Lord. Well, if that hadn't been the case, there was no way she would have risen to the top of one of the major factions. Completely different from the smallest, weakest El-Melloi faction.

"...when did this all start?" Suddenly, Gray whispered behind me.

"When did what start?"

"...oh, just...about the Princess of Gold. Of course, she may have been pretty since she was a child, but can you really change someone's face that much just by how you raise them?"

Something in her words made me pause. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, so instead I changed the subject.

"Gray."

"Yes?"

"When you were at Adra, did my brother say anything about his attitude when investigating the incident? Like, 'it's meaningless for a magus to think like that,' or something."

"Ah...yes," the grey-hooded girl replied with a nod, speaking haltingly.

"Umm...something like...there was no meaning to asking whodunnit or howdunnit in an incident involving magi..."

Of course, I remembered that detective novel vocabulary.

Whodunnit - who committed the crime.

Howdunnit - how did they commit the crime.

Certainly, when it came to magi, those two things would be far too flimsy to rely on. On top of not being able to confidently say what type of magecraft was even used, when everything from faerie rings to slip through walls and curses to kill from a distance were in play, the possibilities were almost limitless.

"But...the whydunnit was an exception...I think."

"...ahh, that makes sense."

Even if they were some kinds of superbeing that could cheat the laws of physics, magi could never deceive thought itself.

In a way, it could be said that they were creatures that existed for that purpose. In order to reach the unreachable 「 」, they were existences that had gathered together the full sum of their will. Gathered together all manners of Concepts.

...though no matter how I talked about it, I was one of them too.

"Master," Trimmaw's emotionless voice called out. "I have finished arranging the pieces."

As she had said, resting upon the bedsheets was now what had once the Princess of Gold reproduced. As if inspired by a jigsaw puzzle, the body looked like it had been cut into close to twenty pieces using an electric saw. Its beauty was enough to make one forget that it was dead, inspiring a whole new kind of nausea.

"The parts have all been...gathered, then..."

Depending on the person, gathering the parts of the body together was useful for a number of schools of magecraft.

For instance, as I had mentioned earlier, Necromancy. In the West, most were influenced by astrology, and so arranging the parts according to the twelve constellations and ascribing them each a meaning made them available for use as catalysts for a variety of types of magecraft.

Even in the incident at Adra, the twelve constellations and 72 angelic names came up, and certain body parts of each magus were being stolen - though it had all been a front for stealing their Magic Crests in the end.

"It seems like she had no Magic Crest from the beginning. Well, the Princesses are more like the results of their magecraft, so Lord Byron, as the user of that magecraft, is probably the one who has the Crest."

"...I see."

In that case, commitment to the family's magecraft meant dedicating themselves to their father, did it?

Resisting the twin tortures of the feeling of nausea caused by the smell of blood and the intoxication caused by her beauty, I took some time to observe the parts of the corpse. The thing that seemed most dangerous was the artistic nature of it, like a devil's hand reaching for my soul. It could be said that was because I was a magus, but the almost blasphemous attractiveness of it could never be confused as coming from God.

Suddenly, I felt a faint pain in my eyes.

It was coming from the edge of the broken door.

Using my fingers to lift one of the wooden fragments from the stone floor, something fell out from it.

(...sand? No...is this ash?)

The fact that it was making my eyes hurt meant that there was some level of magical energy in it. Considering this was the living place of a magus, that wasn't all that odd.

"...Miss Reines?"

"Did you find something?"

At the same time, Gray and Inorai called out to me.

"...no." Wrapping it in my handkerchief, I hid it in my coat's inner pocket.

Putting my hand over my eyes, which had begun overheating, I gave a small smile.

"...anyways, I need to get my thoughts together, so I'll be returning to my room."

Chapter 3, Part 3

The morning sun burned the stark image of the tower's shadow into the ground. The southern autumn wind gently brushed over the grass, and it waved in return. Had it not been for the circumstances, one might be expected to draw the connection between the idyllic scenery and the creation of the Princesses.

However, there were in fact such circumstances.

Thanks to my building exhaustion, I felt like I might melt like a vampire under the sunlight. In reality, the stereotypical weakness to sunlight of vampires and other bloodsucking species was not so universal, but nonetheless I had given the morning sun a healthy dose of resentment when I made my way back to the Tower of the Sun.

In order to relieve even a small fraction of my exhaustion if possible, I returned Trimmaw to her suitcase, and after the application of my usual eyedrops I plopped unceremoniously onto the foot of my bed.

The cold walls of my room felt entirely different from the day before.

That wasn't entirely unexpected. This was the living place of a magus, after all. More than just the fact that friendly relations had broken down, it was more like the environment itself had become a formidable opponent of its own, and the result was a formless pressure weighing down on me. The room held a veritable chill, as if it had been transformed into the organ of some sort of giant.

It was sort of like the phenomenon of seeing faces in the stains and spots of an ordinary wall.

Scientifically speaking, the human brain perceives triangular shapes as faces - this so-called Simulacrum Phenomenon was even put to use by modern digital cameras to recognize faces, but magecraft could also exploit such weaknesses of the mind. Using the bare minimum of magical energy to produce the absolute maximum effect, wrenching open an otherwise guarded mind with mundane psychology. It was said to be the fundamental technique of magecraft such as Curses.

In the same vein, similar techniques of self-suggestion to transform oneself into a "system that creates mysteries" were foundational to magecraft in general. As such, it was common for a magus' Workshop to include features to trigger such phenomena.

(...letting my mind wander off all on its own again...)

Gently, I shook my head.

My thoughts wandering every which way was a sure sign of the tiredness I felt. I didn't even have the energy to maintain focus on the task at hand.

"...Miss Reines, what will you do now?"

"Hmm. Well, I've taken some measures for insurance already. As for us..."

As I started to speak, I was interrupted by a cute growling sound. I looked up to see Gray embarrassedly pressing down on her own stomach, reminding me that we had yet to even eat breakfast.

"...well for starters, I suppose we should eat something, no?"

"...r-right. But we can't really accept breakfast from Iselma at a time like this, can we?"

"Though I did ask for some tea and scones already. Well, if you want to refrain from eating their food, how about this?"

Saying that, I pulled a number of bottles out from my suitcase. I then spread some liver pâté on top of an emergency ration biscuit, added a few pickles, and finished it off with another biscuit on top. The trick was to spread the pâté just a bit thicker than was reasonable. Even if it was somewhat unsightly, as long as the quality of the pâté was good, it could be relied on to be delicious.

In addition,

"Trim."

"Yes, Master."

At the same time, I had the Mercury Maid prepare some tea. Using the mineral water we had brought with us, she transformed one of her hands into the shape of a teapot, and set the water within it to boiling. Yes, it was quite convenient. As an aside, simulating heat energy with magic circuits like mine was somewhat challenging, so Trimmiau's teapot hand also included the fuel of an alcohol lamp to heat the water.

After adding some leaves to the boiling water, the room quickly filled with the pleasant scent of tea.

"Miss Reines, do you always have something like this ready...?"

"Most of the time, I guess."

Before ascending to the place of El-Melloi, everyday life had actually been a flight from death for me. As such, carrying around the bare minimum of emergency food supplies had become somewhat of a habit. I can't say I had imagined it would be useful in a situation like this, however.

As Trimmiau poured out the tea, I arranged the pâté sandwiches on some napkins.

"There you are. Please, go ahead."

"...ah. Thank you. Thank you for today's blessings."

Cutting the shape of a cross in the air, Gray quickly set into the sandwiches. Despite the biscuits not being all that large in the first place, she took her time eating them, as if to enjoy every moment of flavour. I also began to sip from the tea Trimmiau had prepared.

The fragrance of the tea pushed right through the exhaustion that filled my head. After having finished half of the drink, I added a healthy dose of milk and sugar. Normally I would drink the entire first cup straight, but right now my brain was desperate for the energy.

Closing my eyes, I waited for the food to slowly settle in the bottom of my stomach.

As my heart regained its calm, I felt my thoughts return to their normal form.

"Now, as for the Princess of Gold..."

As I reached for a biscuit of my own, a shrill voice suddenly filled the room.

"Ihiihihihi! Looks like another murder mystery, huh? It's almost like you're possessed or something! Well, of course you're possessed. As the finest of gravekeepers in all of England, it's inevitable that you'd end up cursed by all the magi around you!"

In response to the ill omen spoken by an equally unpleasant voice, I felt a smile rise to my face as I nodded to Gray.

"...Miss Reines."

"Go ahead, Gray."

After hearing my permission, with the sharp sound of a hook being released, a bird cage like object dropped into view at Gray's right hand. The strange looking box within the cage, marked with clear eyes and a mouth, quickly snapped its gaze between Gray and I.

"Huh? Wait...Gray, there's no way...Wait please calm down I'm sorry stop Reines I'm sorry!"

"...stop talking so much."

Though delivered without expression, there was only one action that could follow Gray's words. Holding the cage in one hand, she violently shook the cage up and down.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

The scream, like the lament of a sinner rising up from Hell, filled the room. In truth, it wasn't really enough to satisfy the urges I felt, but it would have to do.

After listening to that scream for a good while, I nodded, and Gray stopped her hand. Inside the cage, the strange box-shaped contraption was left with its eyes spinning.

"...uurrgh...you monster..."

That resentful voice was a good partner to the flavour of the pâté.

From there, I dropped my gaze. From inside Trimmaw's suitcase was coming a knocking sound, a warning sound I had prepared beforehand.

"Thank you for gracing us with your invaluable opinion. Anyways, Gray. I'd like to continue our conversation from earlier, but it appears that we have a guest."

"...okay."

With a single smooth motion, the caged face disappeared into Gray's cloak, just as the door to the room swung open.

"Mind if I come in?"

"Can't say I'm a fan of your impoliteness," I replied, narrowing my eyes slightly.

Close-cut hair, along with a well-muscled body. Taking another sip of tea, I tried to remember the man's name.

"Mick Grajilie, was it?"

"Indeed!" With a one-eyed regard, the dark-skinned man confirmed his identity as one of the three remaining Meluastea magi.

"And how might we help you?"

"You guys didn't hear some bizarre screaming a second ago, did you? It sounded like a stray cat being thrown around in a cage or something."

"Sounds like you're imagining things."

I threw Gray a calm look, telling her to stand down. Believe it or not, Gray was the first to adopt an aggressive stance in situations like these. To say she was raised in an environment that rivalled even the Clock Tower in its harshness was no exaggeration. In that sense, I sometimes got the impression that Gray was like a long lost little sister of mine, the two of us separated while still young. Not that I had asked to find out which of us was actually older.

"Really?" the man said, stretching a hand out to his side and drawing some sort of symbol in the air. It seemed suspiciously familiar to something I had seen in a lecture on Tantric Buddhism.

"ओप (Let it be so)"

A coarse sound rang out through the room, and with it I felt magical energy hang over the room like a veil. While it certainly didn't seem to be harmful, I wasn't about to let someone just throw magecraft out in front of me like that.

"And what exactly are you doing?"

"Gotta at least set up a bounded field, right? You can never tell who's listening in."

Nodding to himself, he made an exaggerated bow.

"As you can see, my magecraft is a self taught form of Tantric Yoga. I have a pretty bad family line, so there's a lot mixed into it. Now, I've shown my hand a little bit, so could you at least show me a little bit of trust too?"

"...so in short, you have something to talk about you don't want other people to hear?"

"Haha, well yeah, something like that," he replied with a smirk.

It was a smile that I had learned to hate, something I had seen countless times since I was young - something that had changed into something quite different recently - a smile that didn't reach below the surface.

Placing a finger on his lips, he whispered. "Actually, I'm kind of a spy."

"...what?"

Hearing it said so bluntly, I could feel my expression freeze midway. Without dropping his smile, Mick continued.

"From the beginning, the reason I came to this gathering was to check things out at the request of a certain bigshot."

Well, that wasn't so farfetched.

The political struggle within the Clock Tower was endlessly complicated. The existence of double and even triple agents wasn't that out of the ordinary. It was the natural result of Source Crest families going through painstaking effort to reduce the chances of betrayal by their branch families as much as possible.

"So, what business does Mr. Spy have with me?"

"I want to offer you a deal, as Princess of the El-Melloi."

"With me? And now, of all times?" I replied, showing as much caution as I could muster. After all, for a faction as weak as the current El-Melloi, carelessly getting wrapped up in a deal with a single spy was enough to blow us completely out of the water.

However, what followed next was far from what I had predicted.

"Will you help us finish off the Iselma family?"



His droll voice, coupled with the undeniably serious message, echoed throughout the room.

The destruction of Iselma.

It was nothing less than a declaration of war on Valueleta, one of the three great families.

Together with the death of the Princess of Gold, it was a single move likely to ensnare the entire Clock Tower in a morass of war. And as he said it, that preposterous proposal was uttered by a man who said the whole thing laughing like a fool.

"...Miss Reines..."

Behind me, even Gray's voice held a faint tremble. Even she, who couldn't really be called a magus, instantly grasped the madness that lay behind those words. The girl gulped, as if she had just heard someone casually utter the words of a curse meant to bring the whole world to its knees.

Pulling Trimmaw's suitcase over to myself, I gave a cautious reply.

"...what are you talking about?"

"Just what it says on the tin," Mick replied with a shrug.

Completely lacking any sort of shyness or reservation, the man who had casually announced himself as a spy locked his eyes on me. Within that expression rich with humour, his eyes alone held no laughter - eyes like a scientist watching a guinea pig mid-experiment.

Meeting his gaze, I replied.

"So are you admitting to the crime, then?"

"Oh, no no no," he shook his head with another laugh. "That was all just coincidence. Really, I swear. I never expected the Princess of Gold to meet such a...gruesome end."

Hanging his head as if the words depressed him, he nonetheless continued.

"However, once the coincidence has occurred, necessity slips in. The fact that the Princess of Gold has died is a simple fact now. Any future action has to take that premise into account. Like, for example. For example, I mean, what if the aristocratic El-Melloi faction wanted to see Valueleta weakened?"

With that, Mick's words had stepped too far.

Speaking so frankly of something that would normally have to be subtly sniffed out without words. Was he looking down on me since I was so young? Or was this just brute force levelled against a faction of a much lower standing? Probably both.

In the back of my mind, a number of thoughts had arisen. With a small sigh, I replied.

"What is your goal, exactly?"

"My goal? I just said it, didn't I?"

In response to Mick's puzzled stare, I responded straight and clear.

"The Meluastea faction is supposedly neutral. It shouldn't matter one way or the other to you whether the Valueleta family finds itself weakened. In which case, it's perfectly ordinary to think that your objective lies somewhere else."

"...hahaha, I guess there's no fooling you after all," Mick said, clearing his throat in a forced way.

Really, there was no air of him trying to fool anybody. He was just trying to get us to repeat his conclusion. After all, humans had a habit of putting unreasonable trust in conclusions they had reached themselves. Whether or not he was trying to deceive us, it was clear he was trying to move the conversation along smoothly by making that premise clearly defined.

As such, his earlier statement about destroying the Iselma family was more about getting us to think clearly about it - to wring out our reaction to that choice. Whether it was saying absurd things like he was a spy, or his unbelievably laid back personality, it all made sense within the logic of this particular line of thought.

As if he had made certain of my own thinking, he spoke again with a satisfied smile.

"Actually, there's a certain Talisman I'd like to get my hands on."

Talisman, amulet, fetish. There were any number of names for it, but effectively it was a catalyst or object that held magical energy. Particularly powerful objects were used as Mystic Codes, or as the core of a ritual, and would determine the overall nature of it. However, due to the overall degradation of Mystery in the modern era, not only were the quality of such Talismans that one could obtain rather low, it was not uncommon for those that retained some sense of power to be valued at astronomical levels.

The Mystic Code that served as the core of Trimmaw, the Volumen Hydrargyrum (Moon Spirit's Spinal Fluid), was such a Talisman. It could even be said that the amount of influence a given faction could bring to bear was equal to their ability to collect such high quality Talismans.

"So it's mixed with the blood of a certain Phantasmal Species..."

"I'm afraid I'll have to refuse," I said curtly.

Mick began waving his arms around in an exaggerated, pleading manner.

"Hey hey hey, shouldn't you at least hear me out a bit first? At the very least it'll be some good information for you, right?"

"I believe I've already heard enough to determine that I don't want to be involved."

"Haha, how prudent of you," he replied, scratching his hair with a bitter smile. "In that case, fine. It's not like I plan on twisting your arm or anything. I doubt you'll be spreading the news about my identity anyway."

"...because if we do, no doubt you'll 'discover' that we were the culprits here after all, am I right?"

From the start, it was hard to believe anyone would take me seriously if I just said that 'he told us he was a spy.' On top of that, we were already suspects in a murder investigation. Rather than 'innocent until proven guilty,' 'mutually assured destruction' was the best we could really hope for at this point.

"Glad you see it my way. See you around, then."

With an attitude as if to say, 'I'll get a different answer out of you next time,' Mick made his way out of the room.

A short while after that arrogant presence had vanished, I fell sideways on to the bed.

With both hands, I covered my face. My eyes were burning, and my eyelids were heavy. If I could just sink into the bed here and be buried alive, oh how happy I would be...

"...Miss Reines?"

"Hm?"

"Umm...if you dig your nails in like that, you're going to leave marks."

"...huh?"

Before I had realized it, my eyes were closed. Had I fallen asleep just by putting my hands over my face like that? I already felt completely settled in, and was covered in a cold sweat.

Judging by the angle of the sun peaking in through the window, it was still afternoon. It seemed like I had dozed off for about two hours. With a deep breath, I began massaging my cheeks.

"Marks, huh..."

I wasn't old enough to be truly concerned about it, but the day when I would have to start looking for magecraft to stave off the signs of ageing came was only a matter of time. The skills of those like Maio who we had met earlier, were often in great demand as long as they could put out results, so anti-aging had become a rather significant source of income for the Faculty of Botany (Yumina).

Thinking of that, I realized something.

Sitting up in bed, I began to mutter to myself.

"Miss Reines?"

"I just thought of something. If it's here, it might not be too late."

"Here?"

"Yes."

With a small nod, I felt my lips begin to curve into a smile.

"At the very least, we need to find some sort of clue."

Chapter 3, Part 4

Immediately, we made our way back to the Tower of the Moon.

Without entering the building, we made careful observations of the ground around the tower. Careful not to disturb the plant life ourselves, we looked for signs of those who had been less cautious in their walking.

And finally,

"Bingo," I muttered to myself.

On the ground, clear enough that even I could pick it up, were the unmistakable shapes of footprints. Since we were well out of the city, it was particularly unlikely that much of anyone would stick to the beaten paths. As such, it should have been possible to look for and follow the footprints left behind after the Assembly had concluded - that was the thought Gray's words had sparked in my head.

"Trim, can you follow these?"

"Understood."

At once, Trimmiau laid a hand on one of the footprints. After a few seconds, she spoke again in confirmation.

"Footprints of ten individual persons detected. Among them, the Princess of Gold's can be distinguished."

"Good!"

Without thinking, I pumped my fist in celebration. While perhaps a little shameful, I'll have to ask you to forgive me. Despite the deadlock we had found ourselves in, there was finally a spark of hope.

"Please follow it."

"Understood." With a hand still on the footprint, the Mercury Maid melted from the hands and flowed downward onto the ground.

This kind of statistical analysis and pattern recognition was exactly where Trimmau was strongest. While following footprints was a sort of old fashioned method of investigation, the fact I had so cleanly overlooked it meant it might have been a blind spot for the culprit as well. For magi that were often wrapped up in more supernatural matters, the very concept of examining the ground they had been walking on was, plainly put, outside their field of view.

"Gray, come with me."

Having returned to its original shape as Volumen Hydrargyrum, Gray and I had to start running to pursue Trimmau as she slipped through the thick foliage.

Unfortunately, Trimmau and myself had not reached the point of having linked senses. That was of course because there was no bond of familiar and master between us. After all, Volumen Hydrargyrum was a Mystic Code rare enough even in the history of the Clock Tower. All I had accomplished was adding a personality and a human-like form on top of the foundation that was already there.

As such, there was nothing for us to do but follow after her. That being said, I wasn't really equipped for a trek through the forest. Shrubs and branches were constantly getting caught in my dress, so the independently acting Trimmau was easily able to outpace us through the greenery.

The scent of damp earth reached my nose.

In the depths of the forest, beyond where people went, there were all sorts of smells.

The smothering greenery. The rotting leaves and broken branches on the forest floor, mixed with the leavings of numerous nameless animals. From the start, the kind of forest that a magus might like was one rich with spiritual energy, home to numerous poisonous herbs and beasts of prey.

One could even say the Mystery of these untouched forests, and the slow process of taming those wilds, was the history of the West from the far past up until the Middle Ages. It was no wonder so many legends of old witches began in the depths of the forest.

As we doggedly pursued Trimmau through the forest, the air began to fill with white.

(...fog?)

Of course, the fact that we were close to a lake meant fog wasn't that uncommon. Even when we had first arrived we had been greeted by fog. The fact that for the majority of the year fog blanketed the countryside here was no doubt the reason why it overflowed with romantic legends of all sorts.

Even so, my heart began to race.

An incredibly unpleasant feeling. A baseless fear, like a child wary of the darkness of a back alley. Who was it that said such an intuition was rare among magi?

"Eh?"

Suddenly, I lost sight of the form of Trimmau ahead of us.

More than that, I felt the flow of mana between us get cut completely.

"...a Boundary Field?"

Similar to the one Mick had placed earlier - but this was on a much larger scale.

In an effort to determine the nature of the Bounded Field, I began to focus on my now overheating eyes. As I did so, the bizarreness of the situation took a completely different form.

Among the sound of loudly rustling leaves, a blade leapt through the air.

"...Miss, Reines-!"

Behind me, I heard a scream.

A solid sound rang out from above my head.

The shadow above my head where the sound originated split into two, one of which becoming the hooded form of a young girl.

"Gray...!"

In the girl's hands was a scythe.

Who would have thought that Add could transform into such a shape? At that girl's command, the foul-mouthed little square could transform into a tool for exterminating the supernatural.

In that case, what was it that had met that scythe in the air?

An ominous shape was wavering in the fog before Gray.

"Hahahahahaha! What even is that?! What an energetic guy you've run into this time! Hanging around with you guys is never boring, you know that?" Even Add's cheerful voice echoed hollow within the fog.

On the ends of the enemy's bizarrely long arms were not hands with fingers, but instead blades.

Its legs were at such an angle that they looked as if the joints were backwards, and as such its upper body was huddled close to the ground.

It was...some sort of strange puppet.

"What is...?" Gray's eyes opened wide.

"An autonomous puppet?!" Even my voice suddenly leaked out.

Weren't Automata capable of fighting independently already a lost art? Cases like Trimmaw, where the core was really something entirely different were one thing, but the Concept of Homunculus creation was steeply in decline. As knowledge of the human body deepened and spread throughout humanity, from the point humanity accepted that there were no Mysteries to be found within their own bodies, it had lost the grounds to be a field of Magecraft.

No, even if we accepted my brother's theory that the human body still was as a black box, and the Mystery within it was not yet entirely erased, the fact that modern magi in the field couldn't compare to even antiques from hundreds of years ago was an undeniable fact.

In that case, this was-

(Antiques? No, it looks far too new for that...)

As I assessed the situation, I felt my back teeth grinding.

Without Trimmaw, most of my combat magecraft was gone. My magecraft was more geared towards laboratory work.

(Dammit, this is why I had asked my brother if my balance of classes was good!)

Whether it was best to allot my classes in a way to learn the secrets of the El-Melloi family first or not, he had stubbornly refused to tell me. Of course, I was doing it mostly to dig at his sense of inferiority towards his predecessor, but he still was dragging it out for too long!

"...Miss Reines, please step back!" Gray said as she leapt forward.

Despite how difficult it must have been to swing that large scythe about in the crowded terrain of the forest, her small frame was able to bring it around swiftly. As if to lend credence to the claim she had trained with it since she was but a little girl, the girl and scythe moved together like clockwork.

Three times the girl's scythe and the puppet's blades met.

The scythe's arcing swings met the Automata's straight slashes with an incredible speed. In contrast to the majority of magi, it was not a simple strengthening of the body, but its marriage to precise technique that made up Gray's terrifying combat ability.

(...but...)

Gray's specialty was combat against spirits.

Her fear of ghosts and her incredible abilities were both born of her time at one of the foremost graveyards of the British Empire.

Even in the Castle of Separation, against a number of spirits sufficient to be called an army, she wasn't driven back a single step. In a way, those same skills should have been applicable to a fight against another magus, but against an Automata one had to wonder how much of her strength could be brought to bear.

Without a word, the Automata sank closer to the ground.

Had Gray realized that this wasn't an opponent she could defeat without serious effort? If so, it wasn't beyond reason that she was considering one further transformation.

The Automata's limbs opened, showing yet more blades.

More than just two arms and legs.

Even its expertly crafted face opened to reveal yet more eyes.

"Wha-!"

The idea of a three-faced six-elbowed man was, more practically, the idea of a divinity that could see all things and reach all things. Was that the goal of this Automata's creator, to recreate that image? If that was the case, it seemed less like a nod to orientalism and more like something far more modern.

The puppet jumped.

It could no longer be said to have the shape of a person. Like some sort of spider, or praying mantis, its six blades reached out to meet the scythe.

Three times.

Eight times.

-in one breath, seventeen times.

The increased field of view and number of arms gave the Automata a distinct advantage, and this time Gray was beginning to lose ground. While one might have praised Gray for managing to hold out against six blades with only one of her own, even I could tell that the girl's movements were starting to fall behind, and that she had switched into a totally defensive stance.

With the intensity of their struggle, even the trees around them were set to trembling, causing leaves to start dancing down around them.

And in short order, those falling leaves were cut to pieces by the same glittering arcs leaving scars in the fog.

"Hey, Gray?!" As Add cried out, a blade crossed her right arm, and blood began to stream down it.

Perhaps because of the sudden pain, Gray flinched back, and in that opening the Automata closed the gap between them. A monster, which could be described as

little more than a storm of blades. The eyes on the surface of Gray's scythe turned to glare at the puppet, but as if it was completely unaware, the cold blades continued their spin in a diagonal descent.

But.

A moment before the blades made contact, a light struck the puppet.

The strike broke the puppet's posture for a moment, time enough for Gray to knock it away with a one-handed swing.

"...Miss Reines..."

"I can at least do this much," I replied with a sniff, one arm still pointing towards the puppet.

Though saying that, the magecraft I had used was nothing to be spoken of. It was nothing more than a bundle of magical energy given shape, enough to create a physical impact. If it had got out that a Lord, even one in my circumstances, had relied on such a basic piece of magecraft, the shame would surely never end. For someone like the rumoured Luviagelita, it was possible to refine that skill to the point of becoming a widely renowned curse, but as I was now that was beyond possibility.

Taking a few yards of distance, the puppet slowly swung its head side to side. As expected, it was completely uninjured.

As it continued to watch us, as if it was enjoying our fear, Gray whispered.

"...Add."

As she spoke, it felt like a sudden chill descended on us.

Around Gray, something like an invisible whirlpool whipped up as the girl and her scythe began to absorb the latent magical energy in their surroundings. Against spirits that had no physical body, that was enough to deliver a fatal blow. Such was the ability of a Gravekeeper. However, against an enemy like the Automata in front of them, it would do no more than enhance Gray's own abilities.

Even so, she felt it necessary.

The Automata's face curled into a smile.

Three faces laughed as one.

And then ran.

Once again, blades met.

The puppet's blades once again slammed into the girl's scythe. Using the point of contact as a fulcrum, Gray leapt into the air, elegantly somersaulting over the puppet. As she did so, her scythe whirled again in a crescent arc. Though it seemed like nothing more than acrobatic flair at first glance, it was actually a strong counter, combining the strength of her whole body with her downward momentum for one crushing strike.

A sharp, metallic sound rang out as the blade that was meant to receive the strike snapped.

"Ihiihiihiihihi! If it's a brute force contest you want, we ain't losing!"

"...once more!"

In timing with Add's shout, Gray brought the scythe around for another strike.

However, this time it was her turn to be stopped dead. The puppet, which was supposed to have been knocked out, instead split apart wide at the mouth - and from within the puppet's gut, a spear-like weapon shot out.

No matter what historical battle you looked at, there was no great warrior you could find that could have answered that sudden surprise attack. So Gray's smooth dodge around it must have been more than just the previous strengthening. Perhaps she had a natural resilience, or perhaps some sort of magical support I was unaware of was at work.

Backflipping away, Gray opened the space between them again with a startled grunt.

The Automata, however, did not pursue. Instead, as she leapt backwards, it leapt as well - up into the trees, landing on a large branch. Faster than I could track with my eyes, it leapt from branch to branch deeper into the fog.

"It ran away?"

"...so it appears," Gray responded in a small voice, returning Add to his original form.

Maybe her timid voice was due to the fact she had let her guard down. Though as far as I was concerned, I was just impressed that we had got through the encounter practically unscathed. More importantly, if I hadn't brought Gray along, then this would have been the end for me in every sense of the word. I took the opportunity to give a small prayer of thanks to my overly cautious, past self.

"So, as for Trim," I wondered. It seemed she had disappeared somewhere. After a moment of thought, I pulled a chain out from my bag. The chain, which had an amethyst set in its end, was a tool used for dousing - searching for things like underground water or ore veins. Thanks to Gray's absorption of the surrounding magical energy earlier, the Boundary Field was beginning to thin. It appeared like I would be able to push through it with the tools I had available.

Fastening the chain around my wrist, I let the amethyst on the end hang directly down.

"Adjust."

The chain immediately began to waver.

Shifting my eyes to look in the direction the chain was moving, I poured more magical energy into my already warm mystic eyes before giving the chain a strong flick.

"Now, show your presence! (Thou, betray thy sign!)"

The fog shook.

Though it didn't completely clear, it thinned greatly, opening our field of view far enough that we could see the forest ahead of us.

"Let's go!" With that one warning, I took off into the forest.

As expected, we arrived at our objective shortly.

The forest opened up, and we were then standing on the edge of a natural spring.

Within a forest choked with greenery and foliage, this place alone seemed special. Considering the lively gushing of the spring before us, that may have been the case. In both Eastern and Western folklore, springs like this naturally coincided with portals used by spirits to enter our world. In the West especially, the gushing forth of springs was often the work of the gods, and it appeared among the miraculous works of many a saint.

But.

"...Trim?"

Trimmau stood before us, unmoving.

The maid's Mercury skin reflected the autumn sunlight as she quietly stood, staring at the ground by her feet. Was she even seeing anything? As a non-living construct that was just imitating the shape of a human, her eyes didn't actually function as sense organs.

In any case, I needed to restore the mana link between us-

"-----!"

My breathing stopped.

"No...way..."

Gray's moan behind me thawed the tension in the atmosphere.

It was something that shouldn't have been possible. Trimmau's hand was coated with a thick red. But more than the dizzying colour on Trimmau's hand, my attention was rapt on the thing I saw in the spring itself.

That was, more than anything else, a fatal blow.

"...Caleena..."

Or was it Rejina?

Of the twin maids that served the Princesses of Gold and Silver, one was now floating lifeless in the water before us.

Chapter 3, Part 5

"...Miss, Reines."

Stiffly, Trimmau turned towards me.

The red dripping from her mercury skin looked strangely appropriate. Despite the wind and outside air, the thick scent of blood in the air seemed little different from when it was cooped up in the Princess of Gold's room earlier.

"You..."

As I groaned, a new voice called out from behind me.

"Hold on there. I'm gonna have to ask you not to move. In this kind of case, we have to preserve the scene, right? Or is this more like, catching the culprit red-handed?"

That voice was none other than the one who had volunteered to keep an eye on us. Standing ominously amongst the leaves falling in the forest, the old woman in the green dress was staring directly at us.

"Lord Valueleta...why are you here?"

"Same goes for you. I noticed an odd bit of magical energy earlier, you see."

It must have been that barrier. Just as we were trapped within the barrier in the forest, Inorai must have noticed it from the outside. And as we wasted time dealing with the puppet and searching for Trimmau, she had managed to catch up to us.

"...I presume you will be wanting an explanation?"

"Of course. However..."

"...Miss...Reines..." Trimmau began to move on her own. No doubt, she was trying to restore the connection to my magic circuits that sustained her.

"...I can't let that happen." So saying, Lord Valueleta reached for a small bag tied at her hip. Pulling something out, she muttered a short spell before throwing it. The

moment the sand reached the ground, the usually formless Trimmer was completely bound up.

(Sandpainting?!)

As if drawing a mandala of sand, the coloured sand she threw faithfully reformed in Trimmer's shape.

This was Lord Valueleta's magecraft.

As the old woman gave a backwards glance to the now bound Trimmer, another presence appeared behind us.

"...Caleena," the remaining of the twin maids moaned.

(...Ahh)

Just as I had first guessed, it was in fact Caleena that had been killed.

As expected, the approaching footsteps in the warm earth contained another pair as well.

"Would you mind explaining this, Princess El-Melloi?" Grinding his walking stick into the ground, Lord Byron spoke out.

The fact that he was here along with the maid at this timing meant he must have noticed the Boundary Field as well. Alternatively, he may have come with Lord Valueleta, but the distinction was meaningless at this point.

"As far as I can see, it looks pretty clear that your Mercury Maid killed her, and attempted to dispose of the body in that spring. Is that about right? Were you so intent on stacking up your crimes?"

Honestly.

Considering how impossible this situation looked, I didn't expect the truth to have much persuasive power. Had I been on the other side, I doubt I would have been able to see it any other way either.

"Of course I have something to say for myself, but if you want the full explanation you'll have to release Trimmer."

"Is anyone here stupid enough to give a bomb to the murderer, I wonder?"

Of course, once again I could only admit that was the obvious answer.

We were completely surrounded.

At this point, I couldn't think of anything that might recover our position. It was just too obvious - Trimmer standing out in the open with the blood still on her hands, and me unable to offer any explanation, it was almost too obvious.

Do I bring up the Boundary Field and the Automata?

No, if I couldn't match up my theory with any evidence, I would only be laughed out. After all, the people I had to convince were not neutral police or suspects, but the leaders of a rival faction that would look for any opening to bring me down.

In short, their goal wasn't to find a resolution to this incident. Instead, if they were able to find a convenient enemy to pin the crime on, they were more than happy to take the opportunity to strike out against a hostile faction.

Lord Byron approached another two steps.

"What's wrong, Princess El-Melloi? Have you resigned yourself to your fate?"

"...please, you jest," I tried to answer light-heartedly. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to take.

From my end, it felt like being buried alive in a muddy swamp. No, it was more like I was already buried up to my head, and I was just pretending not to notice, wasn't it?

"Miss Reines..."

While I was at it, I pretended not to hear Gray's voice.

The only option that was left for me was to try and delay my surrender.

It wasn't even like I was trying to buy time for something. I just had that small trace of stubbornness lurking in my gut, urging me not to give in no matter what.

But that was only the faintest trace.

It was like a button, sewn on just slightly wrong.

After all, I was so thoroughly cornered. There weren't even any stupid options left for me to take. It seemed like there was nothing left for me to do but count up my sins before I headed to the other side, and yet...

And yet...

"What on earth are you doing, Lady?"

From the opposite side as Lord Valueleta's group, a tall shadow stretched across the ground.

Without thinking, I span around to look.

In his mouth was a small cigar. Both his long hair and coat were jet black. There was a red scarf wrapped around his shoulders, and his eyebrows pinched together in a miserable expression. What at first glance appeared to be an overbearing arrogance was, I knew, nothing more than a front to hide his overwhelming lack of self confidence. As if what he was missing was so large, he couldn't help but go overboard in decorating himself as a real magus.

That's why he was a figure so blindingly bright to me.

"...Brother..."

"I take my eyes off you for a second, and look what happens. Can't you rein your recklessness in at least a little bit?"

Without a word inquiring as to my well-being, he just threw his usual lines with a miserable expression like he always did.

...and just like that, my will to fight returned.

"No matter how you look at it, aren't you a little early? Don't tell me you've gone crazy over your adorable little sister or something?"



"M-master?" Gray blinked dumbly, totally stunned by her teacher's sudden appearance.

Before eating, I said I had taken out some insurance.

Just in case, once I had heard the Princess of Gold's plea for asylum, I had made a phone call. Being within a historied Workshop, any magical means of communication were naturally cut off. Fortunately, for the same reason, there was little risk of any interference with more modern solutions, and in that regard the Iselma did not disappoint.

Though to be honest, I hadn't really expected him to come here personally by the afternoon of the very next day.

"You think I'd put someone else through dealing with your problems? I had Shardan take care of the classroom for me."

Shardan was a veteran professor of the El-Melloi classroom. Convinced by my brother back when he had been only a third grade lecturer himself, pulling him out of retirement must have been no small task at his age.

As if ignoring the dreadful situation that was occurring around us, he scowled in his usual way as he complained.

"I got on the West Coast Line, which took me to at least Windermere Station. Of course, thanks to there being a Boundary Field set up here, I couldn't rely on local people to get me any farther, so I had to do the rest of the walking myself. Do you have any idea how dirty my boots have gotten because of this?"

"It's not like anyone but Gray takes care of them anyways."

"Can you please reflect a little bit on the problems you're causing other people?"

I wasn't all that interested in how much he had hurried to get here. Nor was I about to thank him for getting his new boots all dirty for me. With the body of the maid still floating in the water, and Trimmaw still frozen stiff with blood on her hands, even the fact that he didn't doubt us even slightly couldn't move me.

And so.

Without changing his expression in the slightest - the one bit of acting my brother was good at - he turned to face the woman who held the most authority in this situation.

"I'll take care of things from here. No objections I presume, Lord Valueleta?"

"Oh, you're going to say that to me, are you?" Inorai replied, a faint smile betraying her humour.

"I will. While practical ability may be another issue, as Lords we are on equal footing."

Did he think he was hiding the way his legs were slightly trembling? Where did he think he got the right to face off directly with Valueleta, one of the Three Great Families even among the Lords of the Clock Tower? It was an undeniably foolish thing to do. They were on such different levels, I'd place better odds on an ant facing off against an elephant.

But, after all, I left the El-Melloi name to him because he was like that in the first place.

"Shall I repeat it for you?" My brother spoke, not backing down a single step.

Clicking his heels, he waved a gloved hand in front of his face as if to clear the air, before declaring.

"As Lord El-Melloi II, I shall take over the investigation of this case.

◆ 第四章 ◆

◆ Chapter 4 ◆



Chapter 4, Part 1

"As Lord El-Melloi II, I shall take over the investigation of this case."

Those words were like a declaration of war.

Coming in out of nowhere, covering for one's sibling by declaring you would settle everything yourself - what else could it be taken as?

In reality,

"Of course I can't agree to that," Lord Byron rejected his request. It appeared that his willingness to sit in the sidelines and leave everything to Lord Valueleta was gone now that my brother had shown up. "The suspicion on your sister is beyond extraordinary. Even if you are a Lord, it is not a case we can so simply hand off to you."

Somewhere far away, a bird was singing.

Deep within the forest, the hostility directed at us from the gathered magi seemed unbearable.

Turning to face the head of the Iselma family, for a moment my brother dropped his gaze.

And then,

"Of course, you weren't planning on hiding the Princess of Gold's formula, were you?"

"...what? What are you talking about?"

Seeing Lord Byron's breath catch, my brother continued.

"Tower of the Sun, Tower of the Moon. Princess of Gold, Princess of Silver. Naturally, it's clear enough to see that the formulas of the Sun and Moon are patterned after gold and silver. On top of that, the foundation of the magecraft seems to have an alchemical motif. The use of the Sun and Moon in metaphor is a

common pattern in Western Alchemy. From the beginning, the objective of Alchemy was to turn Fool's Gold into actual gold - following that metaphor, it is an Ars Magna (Great Craft) intended to transform the lowly human into a being capable of being compared with God. In short, the Princesses of Gold and Silver and their unspeakable beauty are a result of that process."

Smoothly, as if reading it out of a textbook, my brother summarily shattered the mystery behind the Princess of Gold.

No, in this case, that might literally have been true.

Lord Byron, whose expression had gone dark from my brother's first words and had only continued to worsen from there, seemed to be ample evidence of that.

"However, when I actually saw the Towers of the Sun and Moon, I was truly impressed. In actualizing the form of the Princess of Gold, you've internalized the motion of the planet into the human body. Certainly, correspondence between the Microcosm and the Macrocosm is a fundamental of magecraft, but rather than incorporating that into your living space, you've incorporated the motion of the planet directly into a human's life. Even if it's an idea proposed often enough, those who are able to actually accomplish it are vanishingly few.

I imagine your meal times, sleeping schedules, even your bathroom breaks are strictly regulated for time. As it was once said, 'you are what you eat.' The things you put into your body are what make up your physical structure. For example, as a certain emperor attempted in his quest for immortality, the imbibing of mercury isn't actually wrong per se, but if it isn't done with a body built the same way as the stars, then it will just become poison. Understanding that, not just your food and lifestyle, even your environment was made to unify with your physical bodies. Even the leylines in the ground here are the same. Like the styles of magecraft unique to places in the east like Tibet, drawing magical energy forcefully from the earth was probably a daily habit for you.

The Sun and the Moon are the forces of the heavens. Food and lifestyle are the forces of earth. In short, the Princesses of Gold and Silver could be better described as manifestations of the land itself. In addition, if your bloodline has continued to stack up this behaviour over the generations, then-

"Stop!"

A sudden shout interrupted him.

Lord Byron glared at my brother with obvious enmity.

It was understandable. Having one's magecraft so thoroughly explained right in front of your eyes was like watching your own soul get pillaged. On top of that, having it happen in front of so many high ranking magi, even if it wasn't something so simple to copy, the chances of their carefully concealed magecraft being stolen away was quite high.

The trade secrets and patents of magi within each faction were akin to a lifeline to those magi that owned them.

"Right. Then let's stop here." Without missing a beat, my brother nodded.

The heavy silence felt like a gathering of dark clouds. Lord Byron continued to glare at my brother like a vengeful ghost, as if he had just watched his family's treasured heirlooms be pilfered right in front of him.

"I see. So this is the infamous Lord El-Melloi," Lord Byron finally managed to spit out.

"'The Second,' if you please. I don't really live up to the original name."

In response to that, Lord Byron nodded with a bitter smile. Seeing that, my brother gave a deep bow.

"...and thus, taking advantage of your great generosity, I would like to request permission to open my investigation."

"...very well." Grudgingly, Lord Byron acquiesced.

Refusing him now would prompt him to continue his earlier explanation. The needle my brother had so expertly inserted had cleanly sealed off Lord Byron's options.

After mulling over the situation for a few moments, grinding the weeds of the forest under his shoes, Lord Byron spoke again.

"However, I will of course have to put a time restraint on it. There's no way we can allow the current situation to go unresolved for even a few days. Yes, I shall quietly allow you to continue until tomorrow night."

"Understood."

"...is that really okay, esteemed brother?" I tried to get my brother's attention for a bit, but after giving me a signal with his eyes, he continued to face Lord Byron.

In the thick atmosphere of the forest, the smell of rusting iron reached deep into my nose.

Of course, it was but an illusion. But even knowing that, seeing the two face off against each other made that sensation grow ever more intense. If that atmosphere could be converted to magical energy and put to work, there was no doubt it could fuel any number of magecraft. Certainly, it would be enough to obliterate either of the two facing off here.

Which magus was the stronger in this situation was decided long ago. Even so, the weaker's gaze did not waver.

"...tch."

Lord Byron clicked his tongue quietly. As he did so, his gaze flickered over to Trimmau, still standing frozen on the bank of the spring.

"One more thing. We will not be returning your Volumen Hydrargyrum. There is a possibility that it is the murder weapon, after all."

"Indeed. There is nothing to argue there." Once again, my brother simply nodded.

However, as he did so, he pulled a slip of paper out from his coat pocket, before continuing bluntly.

"In exchange, I'd like to have you sign an official contract of custody."

"...heheheh. You're really something else when magecraft isn't an option." Inorai gave a bitter smile along with her commentary.

Even besides the Geis Scroll, there were any number of ways to make deals between magi move smoothly. But considering my brother's ability, trying to force

a poorly made spell like one of those was suicidal. As such, the method he chose - the Contract of Custody - was a terribly primitive method.

With an annoyed expression, Lord Byron returned the signed paper and began making his way back. Reluctantly, the maid beside him turned to follow.

Then,

"This has been quite a show, Lord El-Melloi II. Good day."

Once more, Inorai put a hand on the bag at her hip, and sand poured out of it to pick up the still-bound Trimmer.

In principle, it was the same sort of magecraft as Trimmer herself was, but even if the sand was the same sort of catalyst, the chances that it was a Mystic Code on the level of Volumen Hydrargyrum were slim to none. Rather, considering the enormous cost and ability required to operate in that manner, it was more just a demonstration of her position as head of one of the Three Great Families.

As the three of them left us, it was all I could do to not collapse on the spot. If I collapsed here, I felt like I might not be able to get back up again. But more importantly, that was a side of me I definitely didn't want to show the guy who had just shown up.

"...my goodness. Your arrival was certainly quick and flashy, wasn't it?" I fixed him with a slightly disapproving look. Honestly, more than the relief I felt, I was more lamenting what he had just done. "Honestly, exposing someone's magecraft like that. I'm not even sure you were doing it on purpose."

"...I don't do it by accident that often." As if he was seriously upset by that, the ever-present wrinkle in his brow grew slightly deeper.

Even if he was going to say something like that, after his exchange with Lord Byron, that was pretty hard to believe. For someone who was so troubled by violence, he was awfully violent himself. Speaking of which, it was him that decided to selfishly steal his predecessor's relic for the Fourth Holy Grail War.

"...as expected, completely unconsciously."

"This time was special," he replied, shifting his gaze away. Oh, that was a brand new reaction. It seemed there was still new ground to break. Even after knowing someone for ten years, there was still more to discover.

"Well, I'll just chalk it up to you being overly zealous to protect your little sister. Yes, at least in that regard I'll give you my thanks."

"Why is it that your appreciation always comes out at the end of something like that? It's no wonder you don't have any friends."

"Hey! My friendships are none of your business, thank you very much!"

"Even if not by blood, as your older brother I have some responsibility to take care of you. Having literally zero friends is really not good for you."

"...are you sure you want to go there, though? Dearest brother, I believe that's a blade that may quite easily be turned against you."

My brother stopped dead.

"Oh, excuse me, I completely forgot. You have an excellent friend, don't you? Someone so special that you left your most important collateral in their possession."

"That is completely unrelated!"

"...Master..." Finally released from the overwhelming tension from earlier, we had smoothly slipped into our normal routine. Gray, however, was quick to pull us out of it. "Someone else is coming."

The two of us turned to face the shadows in the forest that had taken Gray's attention.

In exchange for the two that had visited us earlier, this time it was a woman with dark scarlet hair.

"My my. After being in such a rush to take a look, isn't this an interesting guest?"

Seeing her, my brother's eyes went wide.

"You..." Looking long and hard at her features, he muttered as if short on breath.
"...are completely unchanged."

"Hey hey, that's the first thing you have to say to me? Please, stop before you make me want to kill you, Lord," Touko replied with an undeniable ferocity.

From there, she pulled a pair of glasses out from her pocket. After putting them on, she smiled softly.

"A pleasure to meet you, Lord El-Melloi II. It truly is an honour. Introducing myself as Aozaki should be enough, I trust."

"Touko Aozaki..."

In the exchange between my brother and Touko, I was able to detect the hidden message.

Though I hadn't considered it earlier, the problem was her age. I didn't remember it exactly, but at the very least Touko's promotion to the rank of Grand was some decades ago. Even so, she unequivocally had the appearance of a woman in her twenties.

Please don't misunderstand.

This wasn't simply a matter of her putting on false appearances. Sure, in magecraft, there were any number of ways to slow down aging. One could even say that eternal longevity was the driving force that permitted the advance of magecraft as a whole. But her appearance wasn't even close to that level.

She was perfectly, exactly unchanged from her youth.

And not just her face. Her entire body seemed perfectly unchanging. True it was just an impression, but giving off such a first impression threatened all sorts of implications.

Of course, there were those who would take the opposite implications from that as well...

"Lord Byron explained the situation to me as I passed him on my way here,"
Touko smoothly shifted the topic of the conversation. "So you will be taking over this investigation?"

"That is my intention. I may be of small talent, but I will endeavour to expend all efforts I can."

"Ah yes. That defiant attitude indeed is so like Lord El-Melloi."

"...I believe this is the first time we've met, though."

"Ah, not you. I had some dealings with your predecessor. Long ago, I made a prosthetic arm for him, you see."

Gray's expression shifted.

"That was...in the Fourth Holy Grail War..."

"Ah, so you know already?" Touko said, momentarily surprised, earning a choked response from Gray.

"...you were involved in that War too?"

"Ah, no, please don't misunderstand. I didn't participate in the War directly at all. As he mentioned before, this is the first time I've met the current El-Melloi head face to face. Though I did have him pay for the work."

"...I see."

My brother cleared his throat, a hollow sound in the empty forest.

"I heard that your Sealing Designation was put on hold."

As expected, my brother had heard of Touko's change in status. Well, as part of the Clock Tower's leadership, him being familiar with the news around one of the few existing Grand's wasn't particularly surprising.

In contrast, Touko responded with an uninterested smile.

"For the time being, the Clock Tower (you) and I have come to an agreement. I wonder how many years that will last for."

She spoke as if it was an issue completely unrelated to her.

It seemed to her that the idea of a Sealing Designation, both feared and idolized by countless magi the world over, was nothing more than a boring news story to her.

Was that the perspective of someone who had reached the pinnacle, a true Grand?
Or was it a perspective uniquely hers?

"At any rate, I'm glad to have had the opportunity to meet you. I have high expectations of you, Lord El-Melloi II."

With a wave and a smile, Touko took her leave.

Chapter 4, Part 2

-This time, for sure.

Once all the others had left, my brother began examining the body.

Unexpectedly, he didn't seem all that bothered by the corpse. At least as far as the examination was concerned, he seemed pretty well composed. Just because a magus never shied away from battles that risked his life, that didn't necessarily mean he was comfortable around dead bodies.

So, if we think about where he got over the innate human fear of dead bodies...there was, of course, only one answer we could draw. There really was no separating this man's character and that Holy Grail War.

Retrieving the body from the spring, he laid it on the ground and began inspecting its injuries.

"...cause of death, a single stab to the heart, huh?" he muttered quietly.

No matter how powerful a Magic Crest one may have possessed, if the heart is destroyed that's the end. This maid may have had some manner of familiarity with magecraft, but evidently it hadn't done much to help her. Conversely, we could say the culprit had absolutely no hesitation in their intent to kill.

"What's this?"

From under her clothes, he pulled out an ornament of some kind.

A necklace, made of a string threaded around a broken stone. The stone itself had a whirl engraved on it, meaning it likely had some sort of magical significance.

"...looks like a Celtic protective charm. Unfortunately, doesn't look like it did much good."

With a pained expression passing over his face for just a moment, he closed the corpses eyes.

"Let's make arrangements for the funeral tomorrow."

And after that, we returned to the tower so he could inspect the corpse of the Princess of Gold.

As we had requested, the scene of the crime had been preserved. Upon seeing the Princess of Gold's beauty, even in death, for the first time, my brother gulped. After giving the room a once over, we once again returned outside.

The place he chose next was the grass outside, where we could look at both towers. Feeling the warm wind brushing over us, he found a suitably sized rock and took a seat, as if to say he was done with walking.

After muttering something about how we couldn't talk about important matters in the living space of another magus, my brother had decided we couldn't stay in the towers. Within the territory of an old magus family, even each pebble would be carefully monitored and controlled, but compared to being inside their Workshop this was much better.

Sitting on the rock, after a short while he hung his head, rubbing his face.

"...I honestly thought I was going to die," he said, as if spitting it out from the deepest reaches of his stomach.

"Could you not sound so weak right after investigating so quickly?"

"I barely slept at all last night, you know. I couldn't sleep on the train, and since Windermere Station I was basically running to get here. And now it's just investigation after investigation! Can you please acknowledge my effort a little bit here?!"

For a moment, I wondered how appropriate it was for a Lord of the Clock Tower to be complaining like a greenhorn Salaryman. Though, I'm not sure any company would take in someone who said things like 'please acknowledge my effort.'

As if he needed it to stave off a headache, my brother pulled a cigar out from his pocket. Clipping the end with a knife, he lit it up before taking a deep pull.

"...for now, let's see if we can sort out this situation so far," he said in a puff of thickly scented smoke.

"For the incident? I gave you the gist of it in the text I sent you."

"No, what I want to get a handle on is how the Princesses managed to become so beautiful."

At that, I couldn't help but scowl.

"Wait a minute. Esteemed brother, did you not come here to find the killer and rescue your little sister?"

"...Master..." Even Gray's tone held a reproachful air.

"Hold on, this is important. For the investigation."

"...really now?" Surprisingly, it was Gray that elected to push back on him. No doubt it was because she knew that when it came to magi, this man had a particular penchant for getting caught up in the unnecessary details. Compared to his considerably lacking talent for magecraft itself, that was really a much more magus-like part of him.

"Alright, for now I'll take your word for it," I said. "What about the Princesses magic are you interested in?"

"Hold on, if you sound that bored by the subject, I'm going to get worried. Isn't the desire to become more beautiful something held by pretty much all women?"

"Not me, apparently."

Hearing my honest reply, he gave a deep sigh.

"You are either deceiving yourself, or living a far too brutal existence. Even among the actresses in Hollywood, there are huge numbers of people who look for plastic surgery. Especially today, there are all kinds of methods available. There are ways now that don't even need a scalpel."

"...really?"

Timidly, Gray spoke up.

Oh my. That is not where I expected her to get stuck. Yet it was hard not to hear just a little bit of gloom mixed into her voice. As I made a mental note to get some cosmetics for her once we returned to the Clock Tower, my brother nodded.

"Make up was originally magecraft, after all," he said, stroking his own cheeks.

"From what we can tell, the earliest cosmetics existed before we were even the humans we recognize today - tens of thousands of years ago. Afraid that things like insects, demons, or evil spirits could enter the body through the eyes, nose, ears, or mouth, they were painted with brilliant colours. Even today you can see cultures mimicking this, from the tribes in the depths of New Guinea to the Amazon Rainforest. In contrast to stopping evils, there were also cosmetics designed to invite in benevolent spirits or gods, something that has continued in the practices of Mediums even today.

While it was first used to ward off evil and insects, around the time of Ancient Egypt it changed drastically. In a famous example, there was the princess Nefertiti in the 14th Century BC. It seems she crushed lapis lazuli into a powder and used it as an eyeliner. Of course many cases involved the use of materials that were quite toxic, but it seems more than that they were recognized for the beauty they brought. Even despite knowledge of their toxicity getting out, the fact that such cosmetics became so widespread and were used for such a long time speaks volumes of the value that had been attributed to beauty even then."

As my brother continued going on and on, I couldn't help but feel that he was stranger and stranger. The bizarre feeling of the juxtaposition of a man who looked like he couldn't care less about the appearance of women giving a lecture on the history of cosmetics was hard to shake.

Perhaps because he recognized that himself, he cleared his throat before continuing.

"If you consider plastic surgeries that did involve knives, the oldest techniques can be traced back to ancient India. At that time, there was a punishment practiced where the nose was chopped off, but there were also techniques that involved transplanting of skin to different places in order to improve the shape of the face. There were also techniques for piercing and extending the earlobes, all located in the *Suśruta-saṃhitā*, a medical text from the time. Well, the pursuit of beauty performed by the Iselma here is well above the examples we can see in history. According to the records, just the research they have done in this location exceeds ten generations of work - in other words, a length of time measurable in centuries."

At that point, my brother's speech briefly stopped.

As if to say he had no plan on moving on for a while, he silently shifted his gaze to me. His intention was so clear I couldn't help but snort.

"As long winded as always, I see, but in short what you want to say is the fact that their research suddenly bore fruit after all this time has to have some sort of catch to it. Am I right?"

"Precisely," he nodded.

Slowly, he spun a finger in the air, a habit he had brought with him from the classroom. Holding his cigar in two fingers, he continued.

"In regards to that, a number of suspicious rumours have started springing up. Apparently, Iselma came into the possession of a considerable treasure last month."

"Treasure?"

Seeing my frown, he shrugged.

"It apparently came from a black market auction, so the details are beyond me. It was something in the sights of a number of magi, however Iselma apparently focused all of their resources on obtaining it."

At my brother's words, Gray spoke up in a curious voice. "Is the Iselma family that rich?"

"Not according to my knowledge, at least," he replied.

As such, it would not be strange if the Iselma had thrown themselves considerably into debt. Magecraft was already a cost-intensive profession. Pretty notions like 'equivalent exchange' were nothing more than window dressing. To produce even a single gram of gold, an equivalent value to a whole pool of it needed to be spent. That was the nature of magecraft.

After all, there existed such things that could only be achieved with such lavish waste.

"Speaking of which, we did hear a similar story before, didn't we? Something about a Talisman that he wanted so badly." I decided to leave out the fact that 'he' in this case was a self proclaimed spy.

Mick Grajilie. The man who had casually requested our help in destroying the Iselma family. It was such a bizarre request I had kind of forgotten it, but thanks to that we did have confirmation that this treasure really did exist.

"I see. So you are saying that this treasure must have been used to complete the Princess of Gold?"

"...well, that's what I thought at first, at least." Speaking somewhat haltingly, he scratched his head. "But no matter how I look at it, the time frame just doesn't add up."

"The time frame?"

"Right. I said it before, but the spell for the Princesses revolved around the Sun and the Moon. In short, whatever treasure they might have obtained, they would have needed to wait for that timing...but the movements of the moon have been all wrong for that. If it was just about the Moon, sure they could have just waited for it to move into the right position. But if you also are involving the Sun, then things aren't so simple."

Hearing that much, I finally understood something. "...I see. Being my brother, you are pretty bad with people, after all."

"What do you mean?"

Seeing Gray was also confused, I continued with a bitter smile.

"In short, your little show for Lord Byron, exposing the magecraft behind the Princesses, was really about determining whether it was the Sun and Moon behind it, no?"

"...ah." As if something had finally clicked in her head, the hooded girl's eyes went wide.

"I thought that it was a bit hard to believe that anger was all just an act. My, you have become quite settled in to your surroundings at the Clock Tower, haven't you?"

"...in order to avoid discovery by other magi, they will often give things intentionally misleading names. In that case, it still has to be somewhat close, or else the strength of the symbolism is lost."

I'll have to ask you to forgive me for enjoying your mumbled excuses so much. In exchange, I'll avoid pressing you too much farther on the subject.

"Though, considering the scenery here, there was really no need to hold such doubts."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

At my question, he narrowed his eyes at me, as if to say he was fed up with students like me.

"Oh come, there's no need to be like that. If you've realized something, surely you can tell your cute little sister?"

"Stop swapping places between student and sister to suit your whims. Anyways, take a look at those two towers."

As I was told, I turned to look at the towers. Just like when we had first arrived, the bizarrely leaning towers had the look of an antlion's nest. But from this angle, the angle of the sun put it in our field of view, matching its brilliance with long shadows.

(...hm? Shadows?)

As soon as I noticed that, I understood what my brother was trying to say.

"...ah!"

"...Miss Reines?" While Gray was inquiring quizzically, I was just holding my head. How could I have overlooked something like that? I couldn't even be angry at my brother for jabbing at me for missing it.

Pulling his cigar from his mouth, he puffed out a cloud of smoke as he spoke.

"They're a sundial and a moondial. Though with how grand their architecture is, it's normal to miss it."

"Ah-" At that, Gray nodded deeply.

The Tower of the Sun was actually an enormous sundial. I thought its lean was suspicious, but I never considered it had that sort of meaning behind it.

"...then, a moondial is..."

"In short, the same thing as a sundial. But a moondial only works when the moon is full. To add to that, really, they don't have the correct slant on their own, but that's likely a correction to account for the tilt of the land itself. Do you understand now, Lady?"

"Yes. With a construction of this magnitude, there's no way the towers are unrelated to the Iselma magecraft - and thus, to the Princesses themselves," I answered, hanging my head. This was really making me feel pathetic. There was really no excuse for missing something this big.

"Then, when you said the formulas for the Sun and Moon didn't match up, you were talking about this clock."

"Right. The moondial of course would only be accurate once a month, but even the sundial has a similar level of error baked into it. The orbit of the Earth around the Sun is an ellipse, thus the necessity of calculating a more precise solar time becomes hard to avoid. As such, those who use spells involving the motions of the Sun and Moon together tend to rely on the precise solar time as it coincides with the full moon...but if they included the usage of their recently acquired treasure, the timing just doesn't add up."

"The timing?"

"Right. In reality, if you are using a spell that takes into account the motions of the Sun and Moon, the best time is a solar eclipse exactly at noon. Of course, that's because the Sun and Moon are then at the same location. The next best time after that would be at noon while the moon is full, an option creating a straight line directly through the Sun, the Earth, and the Moon. Technically in Astrology it's a bad omen, but in other fields of magecraft it's considered good circumstances."

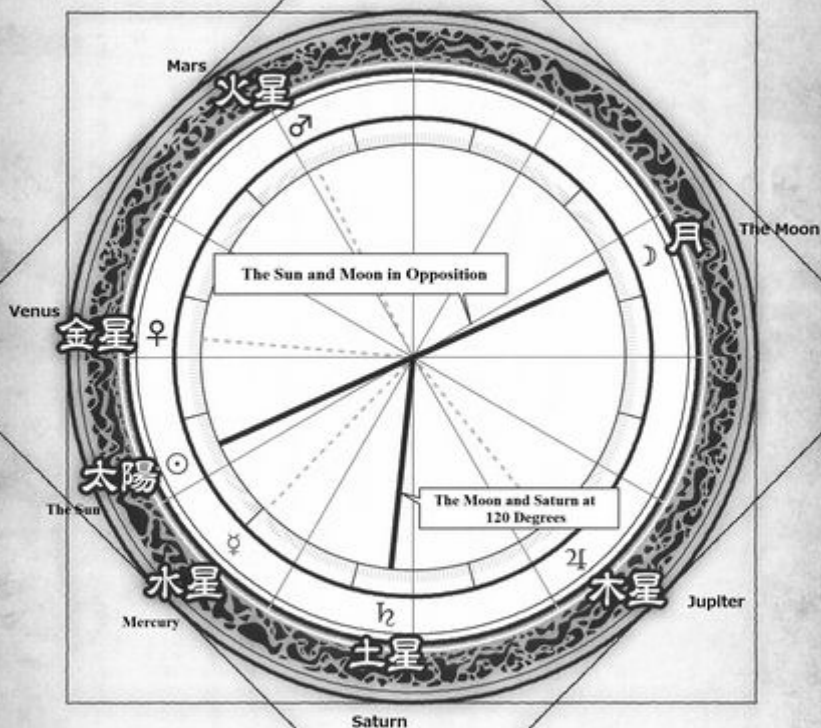
Picking up a nearby stick, he began drawing a circle and pattern into the ground.

While I couldn't help being amused at the fact his habits as a lecturer didn't leave him even in these circumstances, after seeing what he was drawing, I blinked surprised.

"What, a horoscope?"

Effectively, it was a map of heavenly bodies.

The Ideal Positioning of Celestial Bodies According to Lord El-Melloi II



Even if you weren't a magus, it was a pretty common sight in things like fortune-telling magazines. My brother continued drawing in the map, including the positions of the planets and the constellations.

"Right. Even if you aren't in the Faculty of Celestials (Animusphere), this is at the absolute basic level. Anyways, for this option, you have at least one point a month, but there's a reason it's called the second best. On top of just being a bad omen, you also have to deal with interference from the positions of the other planets. The fundamental points are having the Sun and Moon in either the same or exactly opposite positions, but the relevant planets also need to be within the Trigon. In this case, since it's magecraft related to the Princesses, Saturn - the planet governing art and creation - needs to be within the 120-degree mark. With the positions of the planets in this past month, that's impossible. Oh, and we're working within Classical parameters, so Neptune and Pluto aren't taken into account."

Writing down the positions of the planets, he pointed out the position of Saturn at 120 degrees from the intersecting line of the Sun and Moon.

"I see...so the full moon at noon isn't enough to produce the ideal conditions. Come to think of it, I feel like a similar thing came up in my Clock Tower classes."

"It's vital information if you use any magecraft involving celestial bodies. Though if you aren't interested in the Sun and Moon specifically, you don't need to worry about the time of day."

After a brief moment of thought, I spoke again.

"So basically, this treasure may not have been used on the Princess of Gold?"

"...quite possibly."

As he began to mumble, my brother started tapping his temple. He had a very effeminate way of mulling over his personal theories...in short, like someone who was used to being poor, he never wanted to let any of his hypotheses go to waste. As such, his essays tended to push his ideas as much as they could. He was a man whose preferences and talents had unfortunately little in common.

After a moment,

"...And then, the fact that Touko Aozaki is here completely changes the line of thought we need to follow." The sigh that followed was even gloomier than before.

In a way, her presence here was a far more important mystery than discovering who the true culprit behind the murders was. It appeared that despite our respective silence, my feelings were communicated quite clearly.

"It seems you've given that some thought, Lady."

"Yes, of course I understand," I nodded, letting my frustration leak out in my voice.

"Was the Princess of Gold that died even the real one?"

Ever since the presence of the Grand known as Touko Aozaki was discovered, it was a question that had been scratching incessantly at the back of my mind.

My brother pushed the question one step further.

"And on top of that, doesn't it make you wonder if one of the two Princesses is a puppet in the first place?"

"...eh?" Gray blurted out with a stunned expression.

As if her whole world had just turned ashen, she looked between the two of us.

"...a puppet...but the Princess of Gold we saw was human..."

"Right. She couldn't have been anything but human. But the moment Touko Aozaki is in the picture, you have to throw out all your preconceptions." Saying that, I raised two fingers. "The services she provides for the Clock Tower are varied, but there are two that she's famous for."

Yes, two things. I said that she was famous for them rather lightly, but in the Clock Tower, where the most elite magi of the world are gathered, there was rarely any research that deserved attention from outsiders. At a basic level magecraft was a discipline that focused on the past, but more than that the highly individualistic nature of magi meant they had little time to concern themselves with the research of anyone but themselves. As such, for something to get the attention of others, it needed to be powerful enough to completely overwhelm each observer's own individual research.

For magi that had spent a considerable amount of time in the Clock Tower, their own individual purposes and principles is generally what drove them into one of the long-standing factions. The Clock Tower was broadly speaking the best environment a studying magus could hope for, but those who truly wished to cooperate in search of the deepest Mysteries, prising free the secrets of the already entrenched factions were a precondition to even trying.

However, from what my sources told me, after wandering through a number of the Faculty of Creation's (Value's) classrooms, she ended up not aligning herself with any particular faction.

In any case, her work lined up as-

"First, the reconstruction of foundational runes that had fallen into decline," I said, dropping one of my fingers. "Rune magecraft itself is quite famous, and a certain portion of magi today have been using and researching it for a tremendous amount of time. However, most of them have been lost to time. Despite that, she was able to recover and reconstruct a large portion of those lost Runes. If the rumours are to be believed, even beyond recovering the 24 Runes of the Futhark alphabet that undergirds the magecraft as a whole, she also managed to parse out a number of Primeval Runes that were supposedly lost back in the Age of Gods. The rights to the former were sold throughout the Clock Tower, while the latter were apparently sealed away for safe keeping in case of her Sealing Designation being fulfilled."

The Clock Tower really pulled no punches.

Comparatively useful or low level formulas were regulated by way of patents, but the high level spells - the kind that could serve as the backbone for an entire faction, were sealed away in a treasure trove somewhere under the pretext of keeping forbidden magecrafts in check. Would that regulated knowledge ever find its way out to be used by someone? As far as Runes were concerned, the originals supposedly existed with the Thule Society, but it seemed to me like they were happy to hoard them away until the magical foundation of Runes declined to nothing anyways. Magi truly had an astonishing penchant for holding onto their secrets.

"The other is for her abilities as a peerless puppet maker," I lowered my second finger.

Gray responded by tilting her head. "...I thought...the Concept of Human Imitation was...?"

Of course, that was the same thing I had thought when the Automata first attacked us.

"Right. The circumstances are a little different than they were with Rune Magecraft, but the Concept of Human Imitation is certainly in decline. Which means, she has somehow managed to resurrect two strains of magecraft that were thought to be defunct."

Though Gray remained silent, I nodded strongly.

That's right. It was ridiculous. To bring two lost forms of magecraft back from the dead, even if imperfectly, felt more like a comedy. It was akin to bringing someone back from the dead, reaching into the realm of blasphemy. Who did she think she was, trying to play God like that?

But that was of course why she was a Grand.

The ultimate peak of the Clock Tower, above even the highest realistic rank of Brand.

As if Gray had just realized something, she suddenly looked up.

"Then, that Automata was-!"

"Naturally, one would think it was a creation of Touko Aozaki..." I could feel my speech beginning to degrade.

Until now, I wasn't very confident. Of course, there were no other magi that could make such an Automata. If you looked at the whole Clock Tower, besides her...you'd be lucky to find one or two.

However, if that were the case, would she use an Automata like that for a crime against another magus? It was like leaving her nametag at the crime scene before leaving. She couldn't be that foolish, could she? Or perhaps, she had prepared another trap to corner us further should we attempt to expose her?

From the start, it didn't seem like there was much intention of trying to find the true culprit. If this was all a ruse to get at me as a member of the Barthomelloi faction, then that was certainly a possibility, but...

"...but there are plenty of other possibilities," my brother, who had been quietly listening, spoke up. "For example, an Automata made before the field collapsed could be refurbished to look new. Basically, the opposite of trying to make a counterfeit antique.

"...ah, I see."

That kind of crisp, clear jump to a new train of thought was very much like my brother.

The wind howled, as if taunting us. 'Only I know the truth behind this mystery.'

"...following that logic, would that mean the dead body was a creation of Touko's, and the real Princess of Gold is still alive?

"That's how it looks, doesn't it?"

"Then, the culprit's motive is?"

In response to Gray's simple question, my brother pressed his chin in thought.

"...at first, I considered it might have been a ploy by Iselma to strike a blow against us, but the risk doesn't appropriately match the reward. If their plan was to attack the El-Melloi, they'd need to do it at the lowest cost possible in order to strike a profit, as it were. As it is, they are far too deep in the game. Even if we are taken down, if it looks like an obvious trap, there's no way Barthomeloi will just sit back quietly and watch."

"...ah," I nodded.

"If their goal was to mire the Clock Tower in an all out war, then that's different, but the difference in strength between Trambelio and Barthomeloi isn't that extreme. It would just devolve into a bloody swamp where no one wins. Well, the Church would probably be happy with that, at least."

The Holy Church, who leaned towards the annihilation of Mystery, and the Magic Association, who leaned towards its preservation, were like water and oil. Well,

from the start, it was foolish to think that an organization that existed to worship God and an organization that sought to discern the nature of magecraft would get along well in the first place.

According to my brother, many Western forms of magecraft operated under the presupposition of God's existence, but they viewed God more as a means to an end. To those who held a true faith in God, that was all the more unforgivable.

For a while after that, with the topic exhausted, silence settled over us.

"Oh, right." Suddenly remembering, I pulled a handkerchief out from my pocket.

Or to be more accurate, I pulled out the thing wrapped in that handkerchief.

"Dearest brother. Would you mind taking a look at this powder?"

It was the powder I had picked up at the scene of the Princess of Gold's death. I knew that it had a certain amount of magical energy in it, but beyond that I couldn't discover any more.

"Hmm...hold on a minute." From a small bag, my brother pulled out a magnifying glass.

An alchemist - or maybe more appropriately, a police investigator from a hundred years prior. He gave off that kind of impression, but somehow it felt appropriate for him. He was the type that just wouldn't get along with the magi of the Clock Tower.

"...is this some sort of ash?"

"I thought so as well, but beyond that I've got nothing."

My brother was oblivious to my shrug. For a while, he stared at the ash as if entranced. After staring through the magnifying glass for a while, he removed it and looked at it with his bare eyes. Then, he took a small bit in his fingers, and threw it in his mouth.

"Hey! Are you mad?!"

Without answering, he played with it in his mouth for a bit before spitting it back into his hand. After looking at it in his hand for a bit, he whispered.

"...ah, I think I know what this is."

"Oh? I thought your previous life as a dog was resurfacing or something."

"That's a pretty Eastern idea, if you're talking about reincarnation. But...Perrault? Basile? Or perhaps the Venus de Milo, all the way back from Greece?"

With his head bent down, he humbled for a while. It almost felt like he had forgotten I was there.

"...hey, you in there?"

"Please, let me think for a bit," he said, as if groaning.

Chapter 4, Part 3

At the highest level of the Tower of the Moon was a Workshop.

Many magi preferred to have their workshops either underground or at the highest possible point. It was a difference on whether you wanted to channel the power of the Earth or the power of the Heavens. The particular unique situation of England meant that traditionally the power of Earth was strong, to the point even the Clock Tower held a plethora of underground Workshops, but Iselma was an exception.

The cramped space was overflowing with books, test tubes, stills and flasks. Perhaps in keeping with the principles of the Faculty of Creation (Value), even a number of exceptionally beautiful paintings and statues were mixed in with the clutter. In the corner of the room was a canvas, whose reek of turpentine lead to the belief that perhaps even the owner of the Workshop, Lord Byron, was often wont to take up the brush himself.

Now, the sharp smell of smoke filled the room.

The scent of a meerschaum pipe.

Though he no longer did so in front of others, the chance stop for a moment and enjoy the pipe was a rare pleasure for him.

Today, however, the taste of that special tobacco offered him no comfort.

'-What you are trying to do is internalize the motion of the planet within the human body.'

Byron mulled over those words.

How close had he come? Of course, it wasn't like the formula of the Princesses was particularly concealed in the construction of their environment here, but it was the first time someone had struck so close to the heart of it at a first glance

Of course, his speculation so far reached no further than an outline. The original idea that gave birth to their research was not something to be guarded so carefully anymore, and even if he managed to encroach slightly on it, there was no way he could reach the territory they now occupied.

But.

Something about him sparked caution. Something about him made Byron think - if he is left to his own devices, who knows how far he'll intrude. And the fact that those words had been heard by Lord Valueleta and the Grand Touko Aozaki, both geniuses of execution, who knew how much they'd be able to recreate of it.

"...dammit."

Grinding his teeth, Byron bit down hard on the mouthpiece of his pipe.

He couldn't shake the fear that the path they had been walking for hundreds of years was being intruded on. As far as history was concerned, even the old head family of the El-Melloi, the Archibalds, couldn't match Iselma, yet even so they just couldn't seem to pull ahead. 'To recreate the ultimate beauty within the human body.' After electing that path, they had begun their long, tireless tread down it.

However, in his own generation, with the current iteration of the Princesses of Gold and Silver, they had finally begun to approach that far off ideal.

(...only a little more.)

Just a little more, and they could reach it.

The fact that Lord Valueleta of all people had spread the word could be taken as high praise, could it not? Not to mention the arrival of the Grand girl from the far east. Even a Grand couldn't afford to ignore his progress.

That's why Byron was so desperately struggling. Use every method conceivable, even if it meant acknowledging that girl, if it meant advancing even a few steps forward.

"And yet, every single one of you..." As he began to clench his teeth on his pipe once again,

"-Lord Byron," his name was called.

"Ah, you've arrived." Turning to view the entrance of the Workshop, he saw two men and a maid.

Islo Sebulan.

Maio Brishisan Clynelles.

And Rejina.

"On top of the fact the Princess of Silver - Estella is still with us, the loss of the Princess of Gold is not certain," Byron said slowly.

That was the truth. The impact of the incident was indeed severe, but they still had room to turn things around. The purpose of the Iselma bloodline creating a Princess of Gold and Silver also considered the necessity for a spare. Just because one of them was lost did not mean they were finished.

Still holding the pipe in his mouth, Byron turned his attention to the magus with the tied up hair.

"However, how is your dress?"

"...my dress...is perfect..." Islo responded, barely muttering.

His long fingers held long needles and thread.

In the west, legends of witches or goddesses that involved the making of clothes were plentiful. Stories such as the beauty cursed to die by a witch when she pricked her finger on a spindle in a sleeping forest, or the three goddesses of Greek mythology who spun, managed, and cut the threads of fate.

The dresses he made were built upon that traditional foundation.

Byron then turned to the remaining magus.

"And your medicine?"

"My med- ow!" As if he bit his tongue, he pressed a hand to his mouth before starting again. "My medicine is also perfect. I am fully prepared to help Lady Estella ascend to the place of Princess of Silver, just as I helped with Lady Diadra."

These two were absolutely invaluable magi when it came to the Princesses.

That was why, despite being from different factions, Byron still invited them into his Workshop. They had overcome the obstacle that was the Clock Tower's factional warfare, and for the sake of Iselma's goal - 'the creation of a human that possesses the ultimate beauty' - their bloodlines had cooperated since times of old.

"There should be no problems with the preparations if Caleena is gone, correct?"

"...I believe so," Rejina responded, bowing her head.

The mouldy atmosphere settled into silence.

"Very well," Byron said, the sound of his cane striking resounding throughout the Workshop. "I don't know what sort of answers that self-styled detective of a Lord will turn up, but it is irrelevant to us. The solemn pursuit of beauty is all that remains for us. Depending on the circumstances, we can just have the El-Melloi take responsibility. They've lost quite a bit since the death of the previous head, but I'm sure there is still some value to be found in them."

When it came to the El-Melloi classroom, the New Agers were their star of hope, or so it was said. While it wasn't something that could be easily turned into liquid currency, for a family as old as theirs, the rights to it could have their uses. No matter how weak they may have been, they were technically the head of the Faculty of Modern Magecraft (Norwich). For a family that wasn't part of the Clock Tower's Twelve, that was a spoil of inestimable value.

A roiling ambition deep in his gut pushed him to move.

Even the death of his own daughter wasn't enough of an obstacle to stop him now. From the beginning, the Princesses themselves were not magi, but materials for the experiment. He would still need to make a son that could receive his Magic Crest, but that would sort itself out in time, he was sure.

"-Oh, Lord Byron," Maio interjected. "Is there really no need to find the culprit?"

From his perspective, that was a completely natural question.

Even if the spare that was the Princess of Silver existed, even if it was just to take the opportunity to exploit the El-Melloi while they could, they couldn't just stand around and let the killer of the Princess of Gold get away with it. As long as the incident remained unsolved, who knew which of them would be the next target?

For a magus that was used to battle, more than any sense of justice, they would feel the need to settle the case out of self preservation. For Maio and Islo though, that wasn't the case. They may have had some sort of trump card up their sleeves, but they weren't the type you would expect to come out on top of a violent confrontation. In that way, they were completely different from those magi that had gathered at the Castle of Separation.

"In short, you want to say you don't think that Reines girl is the true culprit?"

"...n-no, I wouldn't go that far..." Maio faltered. However, his natural timidity prevented him from saying anything further.

"There is no need for you two to be concerned."

"But..."

"I said, there is no need," Byron immediately shut down Maio's attempt at arguing.

"...understood." Bowing his head deeply, Maio made his way out of the Workshop, followed by the other two.

Watching them go, Byron did not lift his gaze from the door after it shut behind them, whispering softly to himself.

"...but, there may be one more trick at play here..."



Touko Aozaki's room was located in the Tower of the Moon.

While most other guests' rooms were in the Tower of the Sun, she had been located here because she arrived before the Assembly. Invited from time to time, she would give half-hearted advice on magecraft, but really it was more like she was a simple house guest.

Perhaps because she had been there so long, her room had begun to reflect her tastes well. An old fashioned globe, an assortment of gossip magazines mixed in

with philosophy and magecraft related texts, and large numbers of springs and tin plates that seemed indiscernible from garbage occupied the space.

Now on her desk was a well used reel-type projector.

"As expected of Iselma. Using an antique that looks to be almost a hundred years old, despite having more modern ones easily available," she muttered, scrutinizing the machine with fascination.

In her case, of course there were magical properties to it, but she was more interested in the history of the device itself. Just as a jewel carried by many different people over a long time began to be stained with their thoughts, making it easier to using in production related to magecraft, a tool like this touched by the feelings of many people would also begin to develop its own kind of Mystery. While for most objects that Mystery stayed concealed forever, in some rare cases it would bloom forth, like the [Tsukumogami](#) of her home country.

"What have you shown, I wonder? What do you want to show in the future? Though the last kid was still missing something, so I left her to her own devices at the Reien Girls' Academy."

Touko spoke to the machine.

Her narrowed eyes and fingers ran across it, as if to directly prise the machine's history from its frame. As her hand still moved,

"-Yes, like that. Come out soon," she continued to speak.

There was no one to be seen in the room besides her. Despite being buried in her own personal things, in this large room she seemed to stand out.

By the door, a certain figure had appeared.

"-What, it's you? I didn't think you'd show up now of all times," Touko said, removing her glasses.

For her, these glasses were like a switch that changed her response to the outside world.

Of course, if one's perspective changes their reactions will change as well, or so she thought. If you tried to perceive the world as a single person, there were all manners of things you would miss.

To say it in another way, when humanity looked down to discover the atom, or up to discover the universe, the world had certainly expanded for them. Of course, whether that was a good thing or not was debatable. The idea that moving from a small room into a luxurious mansion didn't necessitate happiness was a universal.

"You aren't the culprit? Well, that's not really important. I'm not really all that interested in that incident. That goes for most people here, don't you think?"

Everyone here was that kind of magus (monster), no?

The reality here was just as Reines had thought.

While calling it a murder case, the focus wasn't on the search for the true culprit. Rather, this was a war by proxy between the Clock Tower's disparate factions. The culprit who killed the Princess of Gold and her maid was no more than a single card in that game. While it was a truly important card, without some matter of definitive proof it was no more than that.

What held more significance was what kind of ripples this incident would create.

In the current situation, the Aristocratic faction headed by Barthomelloi and the Democratic faction headed by Trambelio were at odds.

However, if El-Melloi were to be crushed here, the scales would no doubt tip in Trambelio's favour. Considering the influence of the El-Melloi, it would by no means be a fatal blow, but it was enough to make a significant impact on the Clock Tower as a whole. And as ripples gave birth to more ripples, an all out war between magi being the end result couldn't be ruled out.

From a Cold War to an intense battle.

Of course, Lord Valueleta and Lord Byron were fully aware of that. The reason they allowed Lord El-Melloi II to intervene was that he was, in the end, a better catch than his sister. No matter how famous he had become, by attaching the responsibility of this case to his name as Lord, the stakes had become many times greater.

For example, it was within the possibility that El-Melloi could end up switching sides to the Trambelio faction.

"Inorai seems pretty attached to him, too. Geez, magi never change, do they?" Touko muttered.

If one had known her past self - for example, if Inorai had heard that, she may have even frowned in concern.

It sounds like you've been in contact with a very un-magus (monster) like point of view recently, or something.

"So? Are you afraid about the fact that he showed up? While he might be mediocre as a magus, as a researcher he's first rate...and on top of that, you could even say he's well beyond first rate when it comes to seeing through the magecraft of others."

The visitor threw back a number of words.

"Are you really that worried?" As if surprised, Touko turned.

The visitor's words and conditions had been beyond her expectations.

"Ah. No need to explain the situation. That fee will be more than enough," Touko replied, with a light nod.

"If those are the terms, then I guess it looks like Lord El-Melloi II is my enemy now."



Despite being the middle of the day, in the forest it was quite dark.

Far from the place the incident earlier had taken place, this was the forest east of the Tower of the Sun.

From the depths of the darkness, where overflowing greenery and a thick canopy strived to keep out the sun, a hoarse voice called out.

"So, what will you do? You heard how Lord El-Melloi II was talking. Half of it is already exposed. At this rate, there's no telling how tomorrow will unfold."

An old woman, leaning on one of the trees, responded in a playful voice.

It was Lord Valueleta.

"And if he finds the true culprit...so what?" An answer came back from another corner of the darkness. "Neither you nor I are interested in smoking out the culprit here. Logically speaking, it's no more than a single card in this game."

"That card might have feelings of its own, you know," the old woman said, suppressing a laugh.

"Then, are we going to call for him?"

"Sure. I mean, I already have your cooperation-" he replied, rubbing his close-shaved hair. "-in any case, he's my employer, after all."

With a satisfied smile, the self-styled spy - Mick Grajilie laughed.

Chapter 4, Part 4

After that, a few hours passed.

The sun had set considerably, and the Tower of the Sun's shadow had stretched out to match it.

Unfortunately, it was hard to say that we had come to a satisfactory conclusion. All we had managed to accomplish was filling my brother's notebook with theories and hypotheses, and then crossing them all out as unacceptable.

"Thinking of the Sun as a stand-in for Helios in the formula is no good. On the other hand, using Selena or Nanna in place of the Moon and utilizing the attributes of the Sacred Beast strays too far from the starting point. The Towers are too large of a factor, leaving them as just a superficial cover doesn't make any sense."

"...Master?"

"No...the Sun and Moon aren't part of it after all...is that treasure really not part of this?"

My brother's honest monologue continued. To think that this pathetic expression came from the same man who had so gallantly intervened, facing down the head of one of the Three Great Families, was a strain on the imagination.

"Hey hey, are you getting stuck on that again? Are you going to finish within Lord Byron's time limit if you keep going around in circles like this?"

From the start, clearing up the mystery and solving the incident was only a single card in the game. In order to clear the doubt around me, and release the captured Trimmau, a much more powerful move would be necessary. That was why Lord Byron had only allowed us to move within a certain time limit.

Getting tripped up at this stage was not helping.

"Yes. Well. Perhaps as far as this is concerned, we'd be better off waiting."

"Just waiting?"

"Well..." he mumbled back. His voice seemed to hold a terrible melancholy. It was the kind of voice he used when grappling with a very personal problem.

However, as his gaze wandered across the damp ground, his expression slightly wrinkled.

"Oh."

Suddenly, I felt a faint pain in my eyes.

The reason for that was immediately apparent.

From the trees a short distance away, the shadows began to grow. While it was certainly nearing evening, the direction the shadows were cast was entirely different than that of the Tower of the Sun, even discounting their unnatural length. On top of that, though the shadows stretched across the gently swaying grasses, they were motionless on top of them.

Silently, my brother removed the cigar from his mouth.

Whispering a small spell, the flame at the tip of the cigar grew. Laying that flame near the grass, he placed it in the unnatural shadow-

"Ow! Owowowowowowow!"

The shadow screamed.

Leaping up from the darkness was a golden haired, blue eyed boy. Desperately trying to extinguish the flame on the seat of his pants, he continued his crying as he turned to us.

"Ah, I was discovered!"

"...what are you doing here, Flat?"

"I did it, professor! In Japanese it's like, how do you do? Japan's greetings are pretty deep, kind of gives off a Buddhist feel don't you think?"

With a simple-minded innocence, the blonde boy spoke vigorously.

Most likely, what we had just seen was Illusion magecraft. Using shadows to hide one's own body was a popular style in Germany, if I recalled correctly. I didn't

know where he had picked it up, but his ability to see and reproduce magecraft from a number of different disciplines spoke to his considerable skill.

And then.

"-Flat!" An angry voice called out from the road. The new arrival, another young man with pleasant features, ran up already in the process of chastising the first.

"I told you to hurry on ahead and tell them I was going to be late!"

"Ah, it's Le Chien!"

"Don't call me that! Sorry for keeping you waiting, Professor!"

Similarly blonde haired and blue eyed, the new arrivals more masculine, rugged features made a good contrast. You could say he was like a hunting dog. A delicate wildness peaked out from his sharp eyes, and his bow of greeting was done with professional elegance.

Svin Glascheit. The oldest student in the Faculty of Modern Magecraft (Norwich). Paired with Flat Escardos, they were peerless as students.

...but of course, that only lasted a few moments before the situation collapsed again.

"Gray!"

Earning a jump from the trembling Gray, Svin immediately leapt to her side, sniffing at her like a dog.

"Oh, Gray, Gray, Gray! So sweet, and grey, and sharp, like a smell that will tear me up inside!"

"...p-please, stop!"

As if he couldn't hear Gray's resistance, another voice called out to distract him as he attempted to get his fill of her scent.

"Svin."

"...r-right!" At my brother's cold voice, Svin suddenly snapped to attention. "M-my apologies! It was the first time in a while I have been within 20 meters of Gray, so I kind of lost control!"

"You guys..." Giving the deepest sigh since he had arrived at this place, my brother covered his face with one hand.

Realizing something, I also turned to him.

"By the way, didn't you say you weren't going to be using your students like this?"

"That's what happens when you leave them to their own devices. I came across them getting their personal rooms in order...however, I believe I told you to message me your results, and that I specifically told you not to come to the actual scene. Am I right?"

"But Professor! Reines is in big trouble, right?! There's no way we could miss such an exciting event!"

...an exciting event, huh? Well then, he was going to have to die. After he helped us, I guess.

"There's no way I could let Flat come out here unsupervised."

In contrast, Svin's response came across like a true honour student.

Well, let's forget what happened between him and Gray just a moment ago. Pay no mind to the girl hiding behind me.

There wasn't even a shred of tension left. Rather, you could say things just got right back to normal. We were in the territory of a magus we couldn't call friendly, burdened with the suspicion of murder, having lost Trimmaw, and were operating under a tight time constraint. Even so, somehow a breath of normalcy had entered the situation.

This was likely the 'power' that my brother had worked for years to cultivate in the Clock Tower. I don't know where he had picked it up, but for my brother who was so much like a true magus - he sure had a way of being very un-magus-like. Though he'd probably just come back with an excuse like "a magus always treasures his pupils," or something.

After things calmed down a bit, my brother turned to Svin.

"How did the investigation go?"

"Here you are." While his gaze flickered over to Gray repeatedly, he pulled out a piece of paper and handed it over.

"...I see," my brother said, nodding as he read the paper.

"What's this? The key to reversing our fortunes?"

"That's right. Though we are still missing a few pieces. We'll have to make our move now regardless, though."

Pressing a hand to his temple, he slowly stood.

His jet black coat waved in the breeze.

His red muffler fluttering behind him, he set out with bold steps, his pupils in tow.

"Now, shall we start preparing for the coming battle?"

Chapter 4, Part 5

For a moment, let's change the stage.

A fair distance from the Twin Towers, in the State Room of a hotel near Windermere Station.

In the stunningly resplendent room, the newest model of cell phone was being held up.

Not by the person using it. A maidservant, skin bedecked in all manner of gems, held it aloft, as the young man that owned it spoke in a listless voice.

"Then, everything is in order, Lord Valueleta?"

The man had a darkly tanned complexion. His blonde hair reached down to his chest, and beautiful golden rings hung about his neck.

"That's right. As far as this incident is concerned, your intervention is strictly unnecessary."

A brief moment after the response, the tanned young man signalled the girl to cut the call.

"...good," he gently squeezed his hand into a fist.

As far as he was concerned, the only enemy he feared was that Lord Valueleta. He had no concern for the rest of the riffraff, but in the end he could not afford to ignore a head of one of the Three Great Families. While the fact that she was old was enough of an obstacle, the years also had something to say about her magecraft.

But now, that obstacle was gone. There was no longer any object worthy of fear within the Twin Towers. Neither was there a need to get involved in that stupid murder investigation. All that was left was to go in with brute force and take what he wanted.

"Shall we move on to the harvest, then? If we're going to win, we'll need a method, after all. It's time to make Iselma regret refusing to work with us."

Looking around at the serving women arrayed around him, the man laughed. At the same time, one of them whispered into his ear.

"Then, you will go in person?"

"Yes. Doing it myself will ensure everything is done thoroughly, no? I have no intention of just joining in on the game, like that Lord El-Melloi." His lips curling into a sneer, as he declared it with pride. "That's not how Atram Galiasta works, is it?"



Afterword

- by Makoto Sanda

It was the ultimate beauty.

Beyond where any could encroach, untouchable by any threat.

Perched atop a mountain no human could ever climb, and yet a concept none but a human could conceive.

One of the strengths of writing novels is the ability to express 'a beauty beyond pictures.' The essence of something that could never exist in real life can easily be written down on a page. That is almost magecraft in itself. This is why I thought it was an appropriate theme for the 'Lord El-Melloi II Case Files.' Please join us again in the latter half of this magical mystery play of the twin princesses.

Now, it seems my goal of 'one book per year' that I wrote about in the afterword of the first volume of this series has already been broken. Let me replay a conversation I had at the beginning of this year to hopefully explain why that is.

"By the way, Mr. Sanda, could you release the next volume by this summer?"

"Um, Mr. Nasu, we already wrote that it was going to be one a year, remember?"

"Don't worry, I believe in you."

"Um, I kind of have the Chaos Dragon anime coming up this summer..."

"Don't worry, I believe in you."

"Well...If I try to make it one book it'll be quite thick...maybe if I split it in two and just release the first half?"

And with that, it was announced very quickly, but I wonder if any of you were surprised at some of the newly arrived characters?

Every time I wrote the names of these new characters, or the secret parts of the Clock Tower, I felt an extraordinary nervousness in spelling them out. I hope that with Lord El-Melloi II, I've managed to produce an attractive view of the rich world set out by Type Moon.

Finally, I'd like to express my thanks to Mineji Sakamoto for cooperating with my unrealistic requests for illustrations and accompanying me on this battlefield, to Kiyomune Miwa for always helping me in the difficult research of magecraft, to Ryougo Narita for helping with writing the lines for Flat Escardos, and to everyone at Type Moon.

The latter half of this story is planned for release this winter.

July 2017

Currently reading Hideyuki Kikuchi's "Twin Oni."