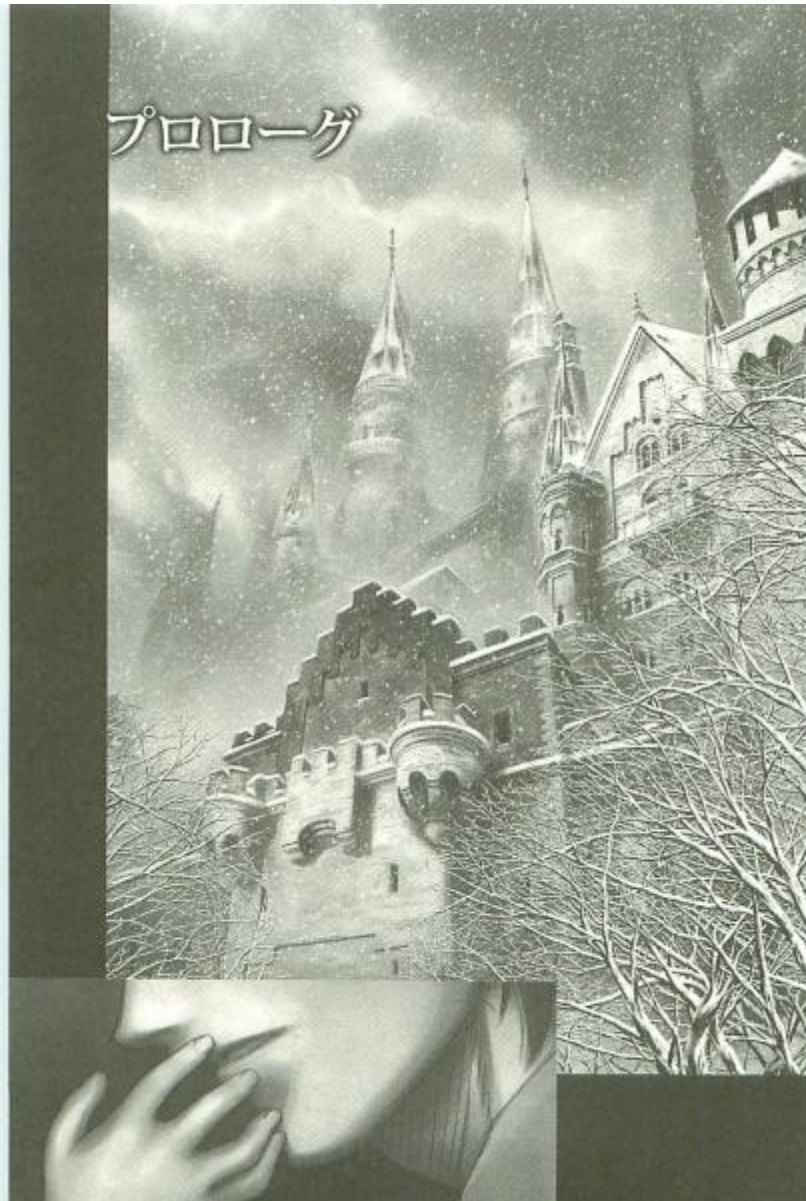


Prologue



8 years ago

Let us tell the story of a certain man.

The tale of a man who, more than anyone else, believed in his ideals, and was driven to despair by them.

The dream of that man was pure.

His wish was for everyone in this world to be happy, that was all that he asked for.

It is a childish ideal that all young boys grow attached to at least once, one that they abandon when they grow accustomed to the mercilessness of reality.

Any happiness requires a sacrifice, something all children learn when they become adults.

But, that man was different.

Maybe he was just the most foolish of all. Maybe he was broken somewhere. Or maybe, he might have been of the kind we call 'Saints', entrusted with God's will. One that common people cannot understand.

He knew that for any existence in this world, the only two alternatives are sacrifice or salvation...

After understanding that, he would never be able to empty the scale plates...

From that day on, he set his mind to work on being the one to tip the scale.

To abate the grief in this world, there was no other, more efficient way.

To save even one life on one side, he had to forsake one life on the other side.

That is, to let the majority of people survive, he had to kill a minority of people.

Therefore, rather than saving people for the sake of saving them, he excelled at the art of killing people.

Again and again, he kept painting his hands the color of blood, but the man never flinched.

Never questioning the righteousness of his acts, nor ever doubting his goal, he forced himself to only faultlessly tip the scale.

Never ever misjudging the value of a life.

With no regard to the humility of one existence, and with no regard to its age, all lives were weighed evenly.

With no discrimination, the man saved lives, and, with no discrimination, he killed.

But, unfortunately, he realized that too late.

To value everything in equal fairness, that would be the same as not loving anyone uniquely.

Had he carved that inviolable rule into his spirit sooner, he would have attained salvation.

Freezing his young heart into necrosis, achieving his self as a measuring machine with neither blood nor tears, he kept leading a life of sorting those that were to die, and those that were to live. There probably wasn't any suffering for him.

But that man was wrong.

Anyone's delighted smile would fill his chest with pride, and anyone's wailing voice would shake his heart.

Anger was added to his resentment and he became full of regrets as his tears of loneliness longed for hands reaching out to him.

Even though he was pursuing an ideal beyond reason of the world of men — he too, was human.

How many times was the man punished for that contradiction?

He did know friendship. He did know love.

Even when putting that one beloved life, and the countless number of perfect strangers, on the left and right of the scale—

He definitely never made a mistake.

More than loving someone, to judge that life equally to that of the others, he had to value it impartially, and impartially forfeit it.

Even when he was with someone precious to him, he would always seem to be mourning.

And now, the man is being inflicted with the greatest punishment.

Outside the window, a snow storm has frozen everything. A mid-winter night is congealing the ground of a forest.

The room is in an old castle built on the frozen soil, but it is protected by a gentle flame burning in the fireplace.

In the warmth of that shelter, the man was holding one new existence in his arms.

It was a really small one — a body so tiny, it could be ephemeral, and no weight that could tell it was ready.

A delicate response can be dangerous, as with the first snow scooped by hand, which would crumble with a mere jolt.

In frail eagerness, the child preserves her body temperature by sleeping, breathing leniently. That is all that the modest throbbing of the chest can do at the moment.

"Don't worry, she's sleeping."

As he lifts the baby in his arms, the mother, resting her body on the couch, smiles upon them.

From the haggard look of the child, she isn't fine yet, and her complexion isn't perfect, but even so, her beautiful face reminiscent of a jewel doesn't decline in any way.

Above all, the color of bliss brightens her smile and erases the exhaustion that should wear out her gentle look.

"She would always be difficult and cry, even with the nurses she should have gotten accustomed to. It's the first time she's let herself be held so quietly... She understands, doesn't she? That it is fine because you are a good man."

"..."

Without answering, dumbfounded, the man compares the mother on the bed with the child in his arms. Had Irisviel's smile ever looked that dazzling?

She originally was a woman of little happiness. Nobody would have thought of giving her that feeling called happiness. She wasn't a creation of Gods, she was created at the hands of men... As a homunculus, such a treatment was normal for that woman. Irisviel had never had any wish.

Created as a puppet, brought up as a puppet, maybe she never even understood the meaning of happiness to begin with.

And, now — she is beaming.

"I'm really glad I had this child."

Quietly bringing forth her love, Irisviel von Einsbern spoke, watching over the sleeping child.

"From now on, she will be first and foremost an imitation of a human. It may be tough, and she might hate the mother who gave her such a painful life. But, despite that, I am happy. This child is lovely; she is splendid."

Her appearance is nothing unusual, and, looking at her, she is a lovely baby, yet —

While inside the mother's womb, a number of magical treatments were conducted on the unborn body, to rearrange it so that, even more than her mother, she was different from humans. Although it was born, its usefulness was restricted, so that it would be a body that is a mere cluster of magic circuits. This was the true nature of Irisviel's beloved daughter.

Despite such a cruel birth, Irisviel still says, "Fine." Giving birth to such a thing, being born as such a thing, she loves this existence, finds pride in it, and smiles.

The reason for that strength, that bracing heart, was that she was, without a doubt, a "Mother".

The girl who could just be a puppet found love and became a woman, and found an unswayable strength as a mother. That must have had the look of a "happiness" that nobody could invade. Right then, the bedroom of the mother and child protected by the warmth of the fireplace was indifferent to all despair and sorrow.

But — the man knew better. That to the world he was part of, the snowstorm outside the window was the most appropriate.

"Iri, I — "

By firing one single word, the man's chest felt like it was pierced through by a blade. That blade was the peaceful, sleeping face of the baby, and the dazzling smile of the mother.

"I will be, someday, the plight that will kill you."

As he felt like vomiting blood, Irisviel nodded with a peaceful expression to his declaration.

"I understand. Of course. That is the earnest wish of the Einsberns. That is what I am for."

That was the future that was already decided.

After 6 years had passed, the man took his wife to her dying place. As the one victim to save the world, Irisviel had become the sacrifice devoted to his ideal.

That was a matter that had been discussed several times between the two, and on which they had come to an agreement.

The man had already cried his heart out at that decision, cursed himself for it, and each time, Irisviel had forgiven him, and encouraged him.

"I know your ideals, and I grew attached to your prayers; that is why I am here now. You guided me. You gave me a life that wasn't that of a puppet."

For the same ideal, she sacrificed herself. She had become a part of him like that. So was the shape that took the love of the woman Irisviel. Because it was her, the man was able to permit it.

"You don't need to grieve over me. I am already part of you. Enduring only the pain of your own sundering is enough."

"... So, what about her?"

The infant's body was light as a plumage, yet a weight of a different dimension made the man's legs shiver.

He couldn't understand yet, nor was prepared to, what he would do when placing that child against the ideal he carried.

Don't judge or forgive such a man's way of life. There isn't the power for that yet.

But, even with such a pure life, his ideal is merciless.

With no regard to the humility of one life, and no regard to age, all regarded evenly —

"I am...not suited to hold her."

The man squeezed out his voice, despite his sweetness being likely to be crushed in insanity.

One tear drop fell on the plump, cherry colored cheek of the baby in his arms.

Sobbing silently, the man bent on one knee.

To overthrow the heartlessness in the world, he aspired to a greater heartlessness... And, yet, to the man who still had people he loved, that was being finally inflicted the greatest punishment.

His most loved one in this world.

Even if it meant the ruin of the world, he wanted to protect that.

But, the man understood. The time would come when the justice he believed in would demand the sacrifice of such a clean life — what kind of decision would the man called Emiya Kiritsugu make?

Kiritsugu cried, scared of that day that might come, frightened by that one in a thousand chance.

Holding his chest tighter in the warmth of his arms, Irisviel raised her upper body from the bed, and gently placed her hand on the shoulder of her husband who burst into tears.

"Never forget. Wasn't it your dream? A world where nobody would need to cry like that. Eight more years... And your battle will be over. We will carry out this ideal. I'm sure the grail will save you."

His wife, fully understanding his agony, caught Kiritsugu's tears as kindly as possible.

"After that day, you must hold that child, Ilyasviel, once more. Stick out your chest as a normal father."

3 years ago

When we speak about occultism, theories on dimensions say that there is a 'power' from outside this world.

Pinpoint the beginning of all things. That is the dearest wish of all magi, the 'root', ... The place of God, Akashic Records the beginning and the end of all things that records everything, that creates everything in this world.

200 years ago, there were those who put into execution experiments on that place 'outside of this world'.

Einsbern, Makiri, Tōsaka. Called the 3 families of the beginning, what they designed is the reproduction of the 'Holy Grail', the subject of many traditions. Expecting that the summoning of the Grail would realize any wish, the three families of magi offered their secret art to finally manifest the 'omnipotent container'.

... However, that Grail could only grant the wish of one person. As soon as that truth was known, the bonds of cooperation were washed in blood by conflicts.

That is the beginning of the 'War of the Holy Grail', 'Heaven's Feel'.

Henceforth, once every 60 years, the Grail is summoned again in the far-East land of 'Fuyuki'.

Then, the Grail selects 7 magi who have the power to take it, and divides a huge amount of prana distributed among them, to render possible the summoning of Heroic Spirits called 'Servants'. The conclusion of a battle to the death decides which of the seven is most suitable to receive the Grail.

— To put it simply, that's what Kotomine Kirei was undergoing.

"The pattern that has appeared on your right hand is called the 'Command Seals'. It is the proof that you are chosen by the Grail, and the holy mark that grants you the right to control a Servant."

The person with the smooth but carrying voice who explained this was Tōsaka Tokiomi.

In the room of an elegant villa built atop a small hill in the neatest district in the south of Turin, Italy, 3 men sat on a lounge chair. Kirei and Tokiomi, and the Father who introduced them and mediated the conversation, Kotomine Risei... Kirei's actual father.

For the friend of a Father who would soon reach 80, that Tōsaka was an eccentric Japanese. He did seem to be around the same age as Kirei, settled and with the presence of an expert. From the lineage of an old distinguished family even by Japanese standards, this villa was his secondary residence, as he said. But the most interesting was that he would casually declare himself as a 'magus'.

Being a magus isn't such a strange thing as it may sound. Kirei was, as his father, a clergyman, yet the duty of the father and son greatly differed from what ordinary people know of a 'Father.'

The 'Holy Church' that people like Kirei belonged to had a doctrine that was outside the bounds of miracles and divine mysteries, but would bear the role of exterminating the stigma of heresy, and burying it into oblivion. That would be, taking a standpoint from where they could supervise a blasphemy such as magecraft.

Magi conspire with magi only, and are organized in a self-preserving group that calls itself the 'Association', which presents a threat as a rival to the Holy Church. At the present time, they have both agreed to preserve a temporary tranquility; but even so, a state of affairs where a Father from the Holy Church and a magus would gather in the same building for a lecture would be unthinkable.

As for the case of Risei, the father, the Tōsaka family was one to which the Church already has old connections, despite being a house of magi.

It was the previous night that Kirei had discovered the surfacing pattern shaped in three marks. He had then consulted his father, and Risei had immediately taken his son to Turin the next morning to meet that young magus.

From then, after a hurried greeting, the explanations Tokiomi had given to Kirei in this secret meeting were concerning the same war, 'Heaven's Feel'. The meaning behind the mark that had appeared on Kirei's hand... That is, the product of Kirei acquiring the privilege to dispute the chance of getting his desire for a miracle in the fourth recreation of the Holy Grail that was to happen three years later.

Not that he would refuse to fight. Kirei's duty in the Holy Church was, in essence, direct removal of heresy, meaning he was a fully fledged combatant. You could say that it was his very duty to wager a life-and-death bet against a magus. Rather, the problem was the contradiction that it required Kirei, a clergyman, to participate as a 'magus' in the Heaven's Feel that was a dispute between magi.

"The thing about the Heaven's Feel is that it is a battle that uses Servants as familiar. So, to keep on going forward, the elementary magecraft for the summoning itself becomes required. ...Essentially, the seven persons who are selected as Masters of the Servants have to be magi. It must be exceptional for someone like you, who doesn't make a living out of magecraft, to be recognized by the Grail at such an early stage."

"Does the Grail have preferred people to select?"

Tokiomi nods to the yet-unconvinced Kirei.

"I mentioned the '3 families of the beginning' — for the granting will favor the magi related to the Makiri, who have now changed their name to Matō, the Einsbern, or the Tōsaka houses. In other words..."

Tokiomi lifted his right hand to show the threefold pattern.

"As the current head of the Tōsaka family, I will participate in the next battle."

Then was this man planning to cross arms with Kirei after having kindly guided him so thoroughly? Although Kirei couldn't comprehend that, he carried on with his numerous questions.

"I wonder about the Servants you mentioned earlier. Heroic Spirits summoned and used as familiars, you said..."

"It may be hard to believe, but that is the fact. That could be the one wonder of this Grail."

The legends of great men, super humans who have left their name in history and folklore. They are those who remained in the permanent memory of men after their death, and were taken out of the category of mankind, promoted even in the spiritual realm; they are 'Heroic Spirits'. Those are on a whole different status from the vengeful spirits or common evil spirits from nature that the magi usually summon as familiars. So to speak, it is an existence with the spiritual status of a god. Although a part of that power can be brought out and borrowed, it is unthinkable that they would be used as familiars in the present world.

"If you consider that making this impossibility possible is the power of the Grail, you understand how outrageous a treasure it is. In the end, even the summoning of a Servant is but a mere fragment of the power of the Grail."

As if to say that he himself was dumbfounded by what he was saying, Tōsaka Tokiomi sighed deeply and shook his head.

"Heroic Spirits from between the ancient age of gods up to at best a century ago can be summoned. Seven Heroic Spirits follow seven Masters, each protecting their own Master and exterminating the enemy Masters. Heroes from any era and country are summoned into the present era, and would meet in a deadly competition for supremacy. That is the Holy Grail War of Fuyuki, Heaven's Feel."

"... Such a monstrosity? In a place where thousands of citizens live?"

All magi follow the common idea of hiding themselves. It's the one obvious way to go in this era that believes science to be the sole universal truth. Revealing their existence is definitely impossible when we take the Holy Church into consideration as well.

But you have to conceal a power that can bring a catastrophic disaster with Heroic Spirits. Using seven Servants in a conflict between humans in the present era and have them clash together... It is practically the same as ordering a slaughter of massive calibre in a war.

"— Of course, it is implicit that the confrontation must be held in secret. You need a well prepared supervision to make sure of that."

Having remained silent until then, Kirei's father, the priest Risei, came forward and voiced his part.

"The Heaven's Feel happens every 60 years, and this time will be the fourth. The civilizing of Japan had already begun when the second War occurred. Even in the most remote places, we cannot ignore people witnessing the spreading of serious damages.

Then, since the third Heaven's Feel, an agreement has been made so that we at the Holy Church would dispatch a supervisor. To reduce the disasters from the War to a minimum, we must conceal its existence and have the magi comply to keeping the feud secret."

"Does the Church serve as a referee in a conflict between magi?"

"Precisely because it is a conflict between magi. There is no one in the Magi's Association who is fit as a referee because of political implications. There simply wasn't any way other than having recourse to an external authority such as the Church.

In addition, it was just not possible for our Holy Church to let the name of the Holy Grail be used lightly to begin with. We can't ignore the possibility that it really is the cup that received the blood of the son of God, either."

Both Kirei and Risei, father and son, have a place in the section called the Assembly of the 8th Sacrament. A duty of that group in the Holy Church is to recover control of holy relics. The treasure called the Holy Grail appears in many tales and legends, and the importance of the 'Grail' in the doctrine of the Church is particularly large.

"Under such conditions, last time, in the chaos of the World War, a meeting was held at a suitable time of the third Heaven's Feel and I, then a youngster, was appointed an important task. For the next battle, I would proceed to the land of Fuyuki to watch over your fight."

At the words of his father, Kirei could but tilt his head.

"Please wait. Isn't the chosen Church supervisor expected to be fair? It is a problem if a participant is a blood relative... "

"There, there. You would think this is a blind spot of the rules?"

The unusual smile of the stubborn father was implying something that Kirei could not read.

"Kotomine-san, you shouldn't trouble your son. Let's move on to the real question."

Tōsaka Tokiomi explicitly urged the old priest to the point.

"Hm, right. — Kirei, all we have explained was only about the 'outward aspects' of the Grail War. There is another reason I had you meet Mr. Tōsaka today."

"... Which is?"

"To tell the truth, we have had a positive proof since long ago that the Grail that appeared in Fuyuki was a different one from the holy relic of the 'son of God.' In the end, the battle in the Heaven's Feel of Fuyuki is only fought for a treasure that is a mere copy of the omnipotent container, one that opens a way to a utopia. It is in no way related to our Church."

That's how it is. Otherwise, the Holy Church just would not be content with the role of a silent supervisor. If the Grail turned out to be an actual 'Holy Relic', the Church would bypass the cease-fire agreement and plunder it out of the hands of the magi.

"If the final goal of a chalice is only a mean used to reach the Akashic Records, it is none of our Holy Church's concern. Afterall, the craving of magi to find the 'Akasha', the origin, does not necessarily conflict with our doctrine.

— Though, to allow ourselves to leave it alone, we need to pass it to a strong person. If an unwelcome fellow got around it, we don't know what kind of accident might be caused."

"Then, if we eliminate it as a heresy —"

"That is still difficult. The magi who confront for the Grail have an uncommon tenacity. If we were to conduct a frontal trial, a conflict with the Magi's Association would be inevitable. And that would create too many victims.

Rather, as the second best plan, there would be nothing more interesting than finding a way to entrust it to a 'desired person'."

"... I see."

Kirei was gradually catching up to the true motive of this interview. Since his father was intermingling with Tōsaka Tokiomi, a magus.

"Since they have been oppressed by the faith of their native land, the Tōsaka family has followed the same doctrine as ours. Knowing Tokiomi-kun's character, he himself is guaranteed to qualify for the use of the Grail."

Tōsaka Tokiomi nodded, then resumed speaking.

"Reaching 'Akasha'. There is no greater purpose than this to us Tōsaka. But, sadly, the Einsberns and Matōs, who once shared the same motive, have lost track of it to more worldly matters, and have now totally forgotten their original intention. I won't even mention how they have invited four Masters from the outside, as well. They want the Grail for their despicable lust and nothing else."

That would mean that the Holy Church would approve of no one else but Tōsaka Tokiomi as the bearer of the Grail. So Kirei understood more about his assignment.

"So you would like me to participate in the next Grail war to let Mr. Tōsaka Tokiomi win?"

"That's it."

Finally, Tōsaka Tokiomi showed the first sign of a smile.

"Of course, we will join forces under the surface against the five remaining Masters, and annihilate them. To increase the chances of victory."

At Tokiomi's words, Father Risei gives an austere nod. The neutrality of the Holy Church as a referee was already turning to a farce. This Heaven's Feel must be interesting concerning the original expectations of the Church.

As for that, it was neither good nor wrong to Kirei. If the intentions of the Church were clear, there was only the fulfilling of his task as one devoted executor.

"Kirei-kun, you will be transferred from the Holy Church to the Magi's Association, and you will become my apprentice."

Without a break and with a practical tone, Tōsaka Tokiomi hastened his explanations.

"A — transfer ?"

"The exchange has already been made formal, Kirei."

Saying this, Father Risei took out a letter. It was a notification with the joint signatures of both the Holy Church and the Magi's Association, and was addressed to Kotomine Kirei. Kirei was more than surprised at the merit of the performance: from the day before to today, the letter had been taken care of immediately.

In the end, there really was no real purpose of acting up in the matter for Kirei, nor had he any particular reason for taking offense at the discussion. For Kirei had no purpose at all.

"The important thing will be to have you do nothing but practice magecraft in my house in Japan. The next Heaven's Feel is in 3 years.

By then, you must have a Servant that obeys you, and become a magus who will participate in the battle as a Master."

"But — is it alright? If I openly study under you, won't there be doubts that we work together?"

Tokiomi gave a cold-hearted smile and shook his head.

"You don't know about magi. If their interests collide, a conflict between a teacher and his student ending in a battle to the death is a common occurrence in our world."

"Aah, I see."

Though Kirei didn't mean to understand about magi, he had a good grasp of the tendencies of the race called magi. He had had countless occasions to compete with 'heretical' magi as an executor. The numbers of people he brought down with his own hands isn't in the tens or twenties.

"So, do you have other questions?"

As Tokiomi requested for a conclusion, Kirei asked the question he had had since the beginning.

"Only one — The Grail that selects the Masters, just what is its purpose?"

Apparently that was really not a question Tokiomi expected. The magus' eyebrows gathered in a wrinkle for a short while, then he gave a relaxed reply.

"The Grail will... Of course, it will preferably select Masters who sincerely need it.

As I said earlier, us Tōsaka will be included at the top of that list as one of the original 3 families."

"So, all of the Masters have a reason to want the Grail?"

"It isn't limited to that. The Grail requires 7 persons to show up. If not enough people turn up at the present time, irregular people who would normally not be chosen can carry Command Seals. There might have been such a case in the past, but — Aah, I see."

While speaking, Tokiomi seemed to realize what Kirei was suspicious of.

"Kirei-kun, you think you shouldn't have been selected, don't you?"

Kirei nodded. No matter how hard you would search, there was no reason for a wishing machine to notice him.

"Hm, certainly, it is odd. The only thing that would link you to the Grail would be your father, who was appointed as supervisor, but... No, you could think that's the very reason."

"... Which, means?"

"The Grail might have already anticipated that the Holy Church would support the Tōsaka family. So an executor of the Church who would acquire command Seals would back up the Tōsaka."

Saying this, Tokiomi, feeling satisfied, to end the discussion, added.

"In other words, the Grail is giving me, a Tōsaka, two shares of command Seals, and for that, it chose you as a Master.

... How about it? Does this explanation satisfy you?"

So, he gave his conclusion with such a daring tone.

"..."

This arrogant confidence seems to suit the man called Tōsaka Tokiomi. This man holds a dignity that just borders sarcasm.

Certainly, as a magus, he was a man of excellence. And he must have had the self-confidence that came with that excellency. That's why he probably would never doubt his own judgement.

That meant that you would never get any other answer from Tokiomi here and now — That was Kirei's conclusion.

"When do we go to Japan?"

Hiding his inner discouragement, Kirei changed the subject.

"I will visit Great Britain for a bit. I have a small task to do at the Clock Tower.

You will go to Japan a step ahead. I will tell my family."

"Understood. Then, I will go at once."

"Kirei, go ahead first. I need to discuss something with Mr. Tōsaka."

Nodding to his father's words, Kirei stood up from his seat and, after a silent bow, left the room alone.

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Remaining in the room, Tōsaka Tokiomi and Father Risei silently watched Kotomine Kirei off.

"That's a reliable son you have, Kotomine-san."

"His strength as an 'Executor' is guaranteed. None of his colleagues are more studious than him during training. I'm the one you should doubt."

"Ho... Is that the exemplary attitude of a defender of the faith?"

"Oh, it shames me to say it, but this Kirei is the only pride of a senile old fool like me."

The old Father was known for his rigor, but, feeling at ease with Tokiomi, he smiled. As his eyes turned to his only son, his trust and love clearly showed up.

"As I still didn't have a child past 50, I had given up on a heir... But now, I am amazed at how far my son has gone."

"Though, he agreed more easily than I thought, hasn't he."

"My son would jump in a fire if that was the will of the Church. That's how far he would go for his faith."

Though Tokiomi didn't mean to doubt the words of the old Father, the impression he had had of Father Risei's son wasn't quite such a 'passionate faith'. The quiet appearance of the man called Kirei felt more nihilistic to him.

"To be honest, that was a disappointment. However I look at him, it seems he was just involved in something that is of no concern to him."

"No... That might really be salvation for him."

Speaking ambiguously, Father Risei started muttering gloomily.

"It is a private matter, but his wife died a few days ago. They hadn't been married for even two years."

"Oh, I—"

Tokiomi was at loss of words under the unexpected circumstances.

"Though it doesn't show, he seems to endure it fairly well. ... He has too many memories in Italy. Maybe, right now, for Kirei, returning to his old fatherland for a new mission could help heal his wounds."

Risei sighed in his speech. Tokiomi kept gazing straight at him.

"Tokiomi-kun, doesn't one's true worth show as hardship increases?"

Tokiomi deeply bowed at the old priest's words.

"I am obliged. My debt toward the Holy Church and both generations of the Kotomine family will be carved as a family precept."

"Not at all, I am only fulfilling my oath for the future generation of Tōsaka. — The rest will be only praying for God's protection until your journey takes you to the 'Root'."

"Yes. My grandfather's regrets, the dearest wish of the Tōsaka, this is what my whole life has ever been for."

Hiding how much his self-confidence was suffocated by the weight of his responsibilities, Tokiomi nodded resolutely.

"This year, I will reach the Grail. I will make sure of that."

At Tokiomi's dignity, Father Risei blessed the memory of his late friend.

'My friend... You too got a good heir.'

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With the wind of the Mediterranean sea rustling his hair, Kotomine Kirei returned from the villa atop the hill, alone and silent, on the narrow, winding path.

Finally, Kirei put in order the many impressions he had had of the man called Tōsaka Tokiomi, whom he had met just then.

Perhaps he had led a hard life. As if pride was proportionally converted to the experienced hardship, he was a man endowed with a firm dignity he could rightfully boast about.

He understands that sort of personality quite well. Kirei's very father was of the same kind as that Tōsaka Tokiomi.

Men who have defined the meaning behind their birth, behind their own existence, and followed it without doubt. They definitely would never waver, never hesitate.

Forging it into an iron will of acting with a clear objective, vectorized only by the fulfillment of 'something' that was identified as their lifelong goal, in any aspects of their life.

The 'form of this conviction' can be, in the case of Kirei's father, a pious faith; and in Tōsaka Tokiomi's case, perhaps it was the self-confidence of one who was chosen — a privilege not for the plebeians, and the self-consciousness of someone with a responsibility to shoulder. He was one of those remaining 'genuine aristocrats' you would rarely find nowadays.

From then on, the existence of Tōsaka Tokiomi would probably hold important implications for Kirei... But even so, he was of a type that was incompatible with Kirei's kind. That was just the same as saying that he was similar to his father.

Those who see only their ideals can never understand the pain of those unable to have one. People like Tokiomi had a 'sense of purpose' as the base of their convictions, but that was totally absent of Kotomine Kirei's mind. Not once, in over 20 years, had he ever felt such a sensation.

By judging so, he couldn't consider the most noble idea, have comfort in any quest, or find rest in any pleasure. Such a man couldn't have any such thing as a sense of purpose in the first place.

He couldn't even understand how he was so far removed from the sense of values the ordinary world held. Kirei couldn't even figure out a passion to throw himself in about anything.

He still believed there was a God. That there was a supreme existence, although he didn't have the maturity to perceive it.

He lived believing that one day, the holiest word of God would lead him to the supreme truth and save him. Betting on that hope, clinging to it.

But in the depth of his heart, he already knew. That salvation would no longer come from the love of God for a man like him.

Being confronted to such anger and despair drove him to masochism. Under the pretense of penance for moral training, he simply kept wounding himself repeatedly. But those tortures forged Kirei's body like iron, and when he realized, he had risen to the top of the elite of the Holy Church, as an 'Executor', where nobody had followed him.

Everyone called that 'glory.' Kotomine Kirei's self-control and devotion were praised as a model for the clergy. His father Risei was no exception.

Kirei understood very well why Kotomine Risei had so much faith and admiration for his son, but that was a misunderstanding so far off the point; for in reality, his heart was shameful. A whole lifetime's worth would probably not be enough to amend that misunderstanding.

Till this day, there is no one who has come to understand how much Kirei lacked.

Yes, even the only one woman he was to love —

"..."

Feeling a sense of lightheadedness, Kirei loosened his pace and put his hand to his forehead.

When he tried to remember the wife he had lost, he lost his diffuse thoughts in a rising mist. It felt like standing in a fog before a precipice. An instinct for survival told him to not take even one step forward.

When he realized, he had arrived at the bottom of the hill. Kirei stopped and looked back to the faraway villa at the top.

Finally, he still hadn't reached a satisfactory conclusion on his interview with Tōsaka Tokiomi... That was the important problem that concerned Kirei the most.

Why had a miraculous power such as the 'Grail' chosen Kotomine Kirei?

Tokiomi's explanation was a desperate one. If the Grail wanted a supporter to Tokiomi, there must have had as many a capable person as you wanted who would be friends with him; not Kirei.

There must have been a reason to his selection for the next Grail's appearance.

Yet... The more he thought about it, the more Kirei found the inconsistency worrying.

He essentially didn't have any 'sense of purpose.' Nor any ideal or aspiration. However you would look at it, he had no reason to be the bearer of a miracle such as an 'almighty wish machine.'

With a gloomy face, Kirei looked at the three symbols that had appeared on the back of his right hand.

They say the Command Seals are a holy mark.

Would he find a pledge to carry, three years from now?

1 year ago

He immediately recognized the woman he was looking for.

In the early holiday afternoon, you can see children playing on the lawn bathed in the peaceful sunlight of the early autumn with their parents watching over them, smiling. The plaza around the fountain of the park was overcrowded with the townspeople who brought their family for relaxation.

Even in such a crowd, he didn't lose his track.

No matter how crowded, no matter how far, he was certain he could find her effortlessly. Even though he didn't know if he could even meet her once a month, even though she already had a partner.

Only when he walked up to her did the woman in the shades of the trees notice his arrival.

"— Hey, long time no see."

"Oh — Kariya-kun."

Showing a modest, courteous smile, she lifted her eyes from the book she was reading.

Worn out — Seeing her like that, Kariya felt seized with a helpless anxiety. Something seemed to be tormenting her.

He immediately wanted to ask about the cause of that trouble, to exert himself to find a solution to this 'something' — but Kariya couldn't bring it up even if driven with that impulse. He wasn't so close that he could devote such an unreserved kindness; that wasn't his place.

"It's been 3 months. This trip has been pretty long this time."

"Ah... Eh, yes."

In his sweet dreams, her smile surely appears. But he doesn't have the courage to face her when he is really in front of her. It has been so for the past 8 years, and Kariya will probably never be able to face that smile forever after.

Because she makes him so nervous, he never knows what to talk about after greeting each other, and a subtle blank appears. That too happens everytime.

To break the awkward silence, Kariya looked for the one he can easily talk to.

— There. Playing in the middle of the other kids on the grass, the twin pony tails happily dancing about. Though very young, the girl already shows signs of the beautiful face she has inherited from her mother.

"Rin-chan."

Kariya called, waving a hand. As soon as she notices, the girl he called Rin rushes toward him with a bright smile.

"Welcome back, uncle Kariya! Did you bring me another present?"

"Now, Rin, watch your manners..."

The young girl seems to be oblivious to the voice of her embarrassed mother. Rin's eyes shine with expectation, and Kariya, responding with the same smile, holds out one of the two presents he carries behind his back.

"Waah, beautiful..."

An elaborate brooch made of glass beads of various sizes captures the heart of the girl at the first glance. Though it might seem a bit much for a girl her age, Kariya is well aware that Rin has precocious tastes.

"Uncle, thank you as always. I will take care of it."

"Ha ha, if you like it, uncle is happy too."

Gently stroking Rin's head, Kariya looks for the intended recipient of the other present he brought.

For some reason, she is nowhere to be found in the park..

"Say, so where's Sakura-chan?"

Hearing Kariya's question, Rin's smile immediately vanished.

Her face looked as if she had stopped thinking at all, the face of a resigned child forced to mindlessly accept reality.

"Sakura, she's, already gone."

With a blank look, Rin gave a monotonous reply, then as if avoiding Kariya's questions, she ran back to the kids she was playing with earlier.

"..."

Bewildered by Rin's incomprehensible words, Kariya looked at Rin's mother questioningly with sudden realization. She turned her eyes away to an empty spot with a gloomy look.

"What's that mean...?"

"Sakura is neither my daughter, nor Rin's sister, anymore."

Her tone was dry, but more courageous than her daughter Rin's.

"That child, has gone to the Matō family."

Ma - tō —

The name, sounding deeply familiar yet abominable, violently ripped out Kariya's heart.

"That can't... What the hell does it mean, Aoi-san!?"

"You shouldn't even need to ask, right? Especially you, Kariya-kun."

Crushing Kariya's heart, Rin's mother — Tōsaka Aoi gave a harsh, cold-hearted reply, never looking at him, as if indifferent.

"Of course you of all people should know why the Matōs need a child with magi ancestry to succeed them, don't you?"

"How, could you, accept that?"

"That is what he decided. This is the decision of the head of the Tōsaka family, acceding to a request from the old sworn friends, the Matōs. ... My opinion doesn't matter."

For that reason, mother and child, older sister and younger sister, were separated.

Of course she wouldn't agree. But both Aoi and even the young Rin know well why they cannot but accept it. That is because this is what it is to live as a magus. Kariya knew that cruel fate all too well.

"... Are you fine with it?"

Aoi replies with a feeble, bitter smile to Kariya's rock hard voice.

"I was prepared for something like that when I decided to marry into the Tōsaka family, when I decided to become the wife of a magus. When you enter the bloodline of a magus, it is a mistake to seek for the normal happiness of a family."

And, facing Kariya who tried to speak again, the magus's wife gently, but clearly, stopped him —

"This is a matter between the Tōsakas and the Matōs. This is of no concern to you, who turned your back to the world of the magi."

She finished with a slight nod.

With this, Kariya couldn't move anymore. As if he had turned into one of the trees of the park, his chest felt choking from weakness and helplessness.

Since long ago when she was a girl, then when she became a wife, and even after she had two children, Aoi's attitude toward Kariya never changed. Three years older than him, friend since infancy, she always attended to Kariya, kindly and without constraint, like a real sister to a brother.

This was the first time that she so clearly pointed out their respective position.

"If you are ever able to see Sakura, please treat her kindly. She has always been fond of you, Kariya-kun."

With Aoi watching over her, Rin was playing brightly, full of energy, as if to chase her grief away.

As if Rin's very behavior was the reply that pushed back the speechless Kariya beside her, Tōsaka Aoi showed him only the profile of a peaceful mother in the holidays.

But Kariya still didn't miss it. There was no way he could miss it.

The firm, serene Tōsaka Aoi who accepted her fate.

She couldn't even completely conceal the tears gathering at the corner of her eyes.

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Kariya hastened through the scenery of the hometown he thought he would never see again.

Every time he came back to the city of Fuyuki, he would never cross the bridge to Miyama.

That must have been 10 years. Unlike the Shinto area where business went on everyday, nothing had changed in this neighborhood where time seemed to have stopped.

Quiet streets filled with memories. But not a single pleasant one would come back if he stopped to have a look. Ignoring such a worthless nostalgia, Kariya thought about his dialogue with Aoi an hour ago.

"... Are you fine with it?"

The thoughtless reprieve Aoi threw at him while turning her eyes away. He hadn't used such a sharp tone in several years.

Don't raise your eyes, don't be a bother... That's how he had lived. Anger, hatred, Kariya had left it all in the desolate streets of Miyama. After throwing away his hometown, Kariya had never made a fuss over anything. Even the foulest, the ugliest matters were nothing compared to what he had hated in this land.

That's why — yeah. It must have been 8 years since his voice last held such feelings.

That time, wasn't it with the same woman Kariya had used the same tone, the same words?

"Are you fine with it?" — He had shot the same question that time. Turning toward his senior childhood friend the night before she received the name of Tōsaka.

He never forgot. The expression she had at that time.

She had given a small nod, as if she was sorry, as if apologizing, yet still blushing with shyness. Kariya had been defeated by the quiet smile.

"... I was prepared... It is a mistake to seek for the normal happiness of a family..."

Such words were a lie.

That day, 8 years ago, when she was proposed to by the young magus, her smile definitely showed her faith in happiness.

And so, Kariya fully accepted his defeat because he trusted that smile.

Maybe, the man who was marrying Aoi, that man was the only one who could make her happy.

But that was a mistake.

More than anyone else, Kariya should have realized that it was a fatal mistake.

Because he had fully realized how despicable magecraft was, hadn't Kariya rejected his fate and left his family?

Nevertheless, he could forgive that.

Even with him who had turned his back in fear, well aware of how abominable magecraft was... His most important woman had surrendered, of all people, to the man who was the most alike a magus.

What now burns Kariya's chest is, regret.

Not once, but twice, he had chosen the wrong words.

He shouldn't have asked "are you fine with it?", but he should have concluded "you must not do that".

And 8 years ago, if he had restrained Aoi — maybe there could have been a future different from today. If she hadn't bound herself to Tōsaka that day, she would have been out of the cursed doom of a magus, and she could have led a normal life.

And today, this early afternoon in the park, if he had reacted differently to the decision between the Tōsakas and the Matōs, — maybe it would have shocked her. She could have rejected the nonsense of an outsider.

But even so, she couldn't blame only herself like that. She didn't have to completely suppress her tears.

Kariya could absolutely not forgive this. He who repeated the fault twice. For his punishment, he returned to the place of the days he had left behind.

Certainly, there was, there, a way to atonement. The world he once turned his back to. The fate he had poorly escaped.

But now, he could confront that.

If he thought of the only one woman in the world he didn't want to grieve for —

Under the sky where the twilight was nearing, he stopped in front of a towering, luxuriant western-styled house.

From a warp of 10 years, Matō Kariya stood before the gate of his home again

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Starting at the front door, the small but risky dispute soon carried out inside the Matō residence where Kariya settled down on a sofa of the drawing room.

"I thought I told you never to show your face in front of me again."

Sitting facing Kariya, the small, old man who spat the detestable words is Matō Zōken, head of the family. He was so withered that his bald head and limbs looked like he was mummified, yet the light deep in his eyes filled his spirit; both his appearance and personality made him an uncommon, mysterious person.

To tell the truth, even Kariya couldn't determine the exact age of the old man. The aberrant entry in the family register said he was the brother of Kariya's father. But even at his great-grandfather, his ancestor at the third generation, there were records of the old man named Zōken in the family tree. There was no way to figure out for how many generations this man came to reign over the Matō family.

Speaking of repulsive deeds, he was a magus who could be called immortal, stretching and stretching his age. A person at the root of the Matō bloodline with little direct connection with Kariya. He was a genuine specter surviving in the current era.

"I got wind of something inexcusable. About how the Matō house is carrying out some outrageous disgrace."

Kariya had manifold admitted that the magus he was now facing was powerful with an unequalled cruelty. A man who was the personification of everything Kariya had come to hate, despise, scorn throughout his existence. Even if that man were to kill him, Kariya would definitely, severely hate him until the end. With the confrontation 10 years ago, Kariya had faced that strong spirit, and escaped the Matōs, managing to earn his freedom.

"I heard you took in the second daughter of the Tōsakas. Do you want to preserve the Matō lineage of magi that much?"

Zōken scowled at the provoking tone of Kariya's cross-examination.

"Do you want to talk about it? Nothing else? Just who do you think is responsible for the downfall of the Matōs?"

In the end, the son this Byakuya finally got turned up to be void of Magic Circuits. The pure-blooded Matō line has collapsed with this generation. But, more than your big brother Byakuya, you are the one who has realized the basis of a magus, Kariya. If you had obediently received your inheritance and accessed the secrets of the Matōs, we wouldn't be pressed by the circumstances. And this is all yours..."

But Kariya, with a snort, deflected the threatening attitude of the old man who was heating up with foam on his mouth.

"Stop your comedy, vampire. What's with the fuss over having the Matō line persist? Don't make me laugh. There's nothing wrong for you even if no new Matō generation is produced. The discussion is over since you yourself will continue living for two hundred years or a thousand years, eh?"

As Kariya guessed right, Zōken gave a leery smile, as if the anger up to now was a lie. That was the smile of a monster that doesn't even consider human emotions as splinters.

"As usual, you are a loveless fellow. You speak and behave frankly."

"Whatever, that's how you trained me. I'm not one to beat around the bush."

A wet sound came out of the depth of the old man's throat, as if he was pleasantly laughing.

"That's right. You might probably outlive me in a distant future, more than Byakuya's son.

But even then, it is only a question of how long I can preserve this body from its daily rotting. Even if a Matō heir is unneeded, a Matō magus is required. To gain the Grail, that is."

"... So in the end, that's what your goal is?"

That went well with Kariya's guess. It was immortality that this old magus was firmly chasing after.

The wishing-machine called the "Grail" could fulfill it once completed... What was choking this monster that wouldn't die after centuries was the hope placed in this miracle.

"The return of the 60-year-cycle is for the next year. But for the fourth Holy Grail War, the fourth Heaven's Feel, there will be no player from the Matōs.

Byakuya doesn't have the prana level for a Servant. He really doesn't even have the Command Seals.

But even if we must desist for this battle, there is a chance for the next one in 60 years. There is no doubt that an excellent user can be born from the daughter of the Tōsaka. I have high expectations for this as a good vessel."

The face of Tōsaka Sakura popped out behind Kariya's eyelids.

A late bloomer always behind her sister Rin, a frail-looking girl.

A child way too young to bear the cruel fate of a magus.

Swallowing his seething rage, Kariya feigns a calm attitude.

Right here and now, he is here to negotiate with Zōken. There is nothing to gain from being emotional.

"— If that's what it's about, if you want the Grail, then there's no need for Tōsaka Sakura, right?"

Zōken's eyes narrow down, suspicious of the hidden meaning in Kariya's words.

"You, what trick do you have in mind?"

"A deal, Matō Zōken. I'll bring the Matō name to the next Heaven's Feel. In exchange, you'll release Tōsaka Sakura."

Taken aback only for the time of one breath, Zōken then sniggered scornfully.

"Kha, don't be stupid. A failure who never studied anything would be the Master of a Servant in one year?"

"You have the secret for making that possible, don't you. With your worm-using skills you're so proud of, old man."

Kariya jumps straight to the point, staring in the eyes of the old magus head-on.

"Plant your 'Crest worms' in me. You can do that, in the flesh and blood of the filthy Matōs. The compatibility should be far better than with the daughter of another house."

Zōken's face changes back from that of a human to that of a magus, all expression vanishing.

"Kariya — Do you want to die?"

"Don't tell me you're worried? 'Uncle'."

Zōken seemed to realize Kariya was serious. Coldly, the magus evaluated Kariya, gazing at him, then took a deep breath.

"I must say I wish more of you than of Byakuya. After expanding your Magic Circuits with the Crest worms, if we can train you thoroughly for one year, maybe the Grail will end up selecting you.

... Even then, I cannot understand. Why would you go so far for one little girl?"

"Just let the Matō tenacity be taken care of by the hands of the Matōs. Don't involve unrelated outsiders."

"Again with your admirable dedication."

As if he was enjoying this, Zōken showed a complacent smile, full of his evil disposition.

"But, Kariya, if your purpose is to not have anybody involved, aren't you a little late?

Do you know how many days it has been since the daughter of Tōsaka came to our family?"

Despair, rushing in, crushed Kariya's chest.

"Old man, you mean —"

"There were terrible cries for the first three days, but by the fourth day, she was silent. Today, she was thrown at dawn in the worm storage to test how well she would last, but, ho ho, she

endured it for half a day and is still breathing. What do you know, the Tōsaka material isn't defective."

Kariya's shoulders shivered with a murderous intent beyond hatred.

He wanted to seize this evil magus by the neck, strangle him with all his strength, break it off, right this instant —

— That was the impulse that was raging mad inside Kariya.

But Kariya accepted it. Even though he was getting thin to the point of withering, Zōken was a magus. Kariya couldn't even try to kill him off right here. He didn't even have a fragment of the power required for that.

To save Sakura, there was no other way than negotiating.

Seeing through the conflict inside Kariya, Zōken let out a satisfied, gloomy chuckle.

"So, what will you do? The little girl is already broken, filled by the worms from head to toes.

But if you still think you want to save her, well, I won't think about it twice."

"... No objection. Let's just do it."

Kariya replied with a chilling voice. Of course he had no other choice.

"Excellent, excellent. Well, we can still train you as much as possible. But, know that I will go on with Sakura's training as long as you don't show any result."

Cackling, the good humor of the old magus was making a fool of Kariya and his rage and despair.

"Rather than reinstating a failure who already betrayed us, the success rate of getting a child from this is far higher. I favor getting the best out of each opportunity one at a time. I am giving up on the Heaven's Feel this time, since I already consider it a lost battle.

But, if in one in a million chance, you could get the Grail — I agree. If that happens, naturally I won't have any business with the daughter of Tōsaka. I would be finished with the one thing I am training her for."

"... You're not double-dealing, are you? Matō Zōken."

"Kariya, if you think you need to be five-faced to speak to me, try enduring the Crest worms first.

Yes, try to be the nursery for the worms for a week first. If you haven't died of insanity by then, I will take it you are indeed serious."

Leaning on his cane, straightening his back with difficulty, Zōken turned toward Kariya with an alien smile that fully showed his wickedness.

"Then, Let's begin the preparations without delay. We will finish the treatment immediately. If you want to reconsider, do it right now."

Simply nodding silently, Kariya threw away his last hesitation.

He will be Zōken's puppet once he lets the worms inside his body. With that, there will be no way to rebel against the old magus. If he can even get qualified as a magus, Kariya and his Matō blood will definitely receive the Command Seals.

Heaven's Feel. The only chance of salvation for Tōsaka Sakura. The choice he would never be able to reach with this flesh and blood.

Kariya may lose his life in exchange. Even if he wasn't shot down by the other Masters, Kariya's flesh would be devoured by the worms by bringing up the Crest worms for a time as short as a year, and his life expectancy would not be longer than only a few years.

But that doesn't matter.

Kariya's decision was too slow. Aoi's child would have lived peacefully with her mother if he had had the same determination 10 years ago. The fate he had refused had been passed around, and had fallen onto a blameless girl.

There is no redemption for that. If there was a path to atonement, it would be none other than give back her normal life to the girl.

In addition, if he had to completely wipe out the remaining six Masters to reach the Grail...

Amongst those who brought tragedy to the girl named Sakura, there was at least one person he could bring a requiem to.

"Tōsaka, Tokiomi..."

As the head of one of the 3 families of the beginning, there is no doubt he would bear the Command Seals.

Different from his sense of crime toward Aoi, and from his hatred toward Zōken, there was a dwelling hatred that had piled up until this day.

A dark feeling of vengeance had quietly started to burn in the depth of Matō Kariya's heart like a banked fire.