

UNHOLY GRAIL WAR

“A bow, a sword, a reason: the armamentarium.” – Thrian Ríoga

— A *Fate/Stay Night* and *Bionicle* crossover by shoottheglitch

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Episode One: Witching (Thrian) Chapter One: Fate

Waking up, I stretch hard and yawning wide. I slap myself off the floor. I need practice my Drafting spell. The vase on the counter, perhaps?

A floral patterned vase, light lilac with purple... petunias, it seems. I focus hard. I drag energy out of my own body and shape it into a clone vase with my brain. My mind is a forge of unlimited weapons. I throw the vase across the room. It shatters like a normal vase, then the energy it was made of returns to a plasma state and soaks back into the scar in the palm of my right hand. Sealed or not, that old wound I got from a demon still lets me cast my spells.

My spellset. A series of spells I am able to use. Most magus only ever learn two, but I can perform about four.

"Well," I say to nobody in particular, "That's enough of that. My joints work and so does my magic. Hopefully today won't be another day of helping around the town, but I've got to get money to stock up for my next journey... It sure is tiring, trying to act normal."

I step outside the nice house that I'm borrowing from a friend. Nobody really knows I live here, so it's mostly quiet. And yet, today I seem to have a visitor. On my lawn, a young, cloaked woman stands. She's rather pretty. A white hood covers most of her face and is draped over armour. Armour. Why's that? I don't want to fight a woman. She better not be here to challenge me or some similar balderdash. I gulp for some reason. I can feel magical energy emanating from this young woman. It's almost like. . . like she's the same as me.

I am a Servant who survived the Holy Grail War. I'm essentially magical energy with sentience. It's not like I can shapeshift and morph—there's spells for that I've never had interest in, though. It's just my appearance which is strange. The people of the island, I am bound to them. My armour changes based on public opinion of me. Currently, I must seem like a dark avenger, because that's my armour's present look.

Of course, she can't be a Servant. The Servants are dead, I made sure I was the last one. I cursed the other remaining one to die. By now, his magical energy has been sapped and has travelled through the air to me. We didn't merge consciousness, just power. And yet, here's a girl in armour like his, standing in my lawn, staring at a large, ovular stone.

"Excuse me, lady." I speak up. "Can I help you? Are you lost or looking for someone? Something?"

The woman with the white and rusty-orange armour doesn't move a muscle. She just continues staring dumbfoundedly at the stone. Her mouth is slightly ajar and her eyes are focused, but not narrowed. "Hmm..."

She's amazed, not wary. But why? To my knowledge, that's just a normal stone. I move around to where she stands, and look to where she looks. I find myself muttering something in response...

".... What on Onius?"

Scrawled onto the stone – or perhaps 'burnt' would be more applicable – is a small drawing. It features a woman in a hood and a taller dark figure alongside her. He stares dead ahead and she casts her eyes low. I look at the sky, and sigh with a defeated smile. In doing so, relenting to

whatever *this will become*, I'm letting the fairy tale begin. If any deity is up there... if I survive this, I'll have words with you afterward. Typical of me, too. Just when you think you know everything about the World, it summons a hand to sucker punch you, and goes invisible before you can retaliate.

"So, looks like you've come to the right place, huh?"

"... So it would seem," the young woman replies. "I'm going to be a bother to you from now on."

"Yeah," I sagely nod. "You probably will. So, which are you?"

"I don't know," She replies. This girl is clearly a Servant. It's clear, I think I felt it begin. An awakening. More magical energy in my veins. "I don't know. I just woke up this morning weak as a runt who lost its mother. Isn't that what a Servant with no Master is?"

— Helpless.

"Perhaps," I reply. "Well then. We can talk more inside my house. But first-- I will be your Master. My name is Archer. Yes, like the Servant class."

"That would be confusing if we ran into the Servant Archer," the girl tells me. If another Holy Grail War had begun, then indeed, there is another Servant Archer begun to run amok.

"We'll burn that bridge when we come to it," I say.

"Cynical, aren't you?"

"Quick mouthed, aren't you? Come. Let's talk inside."

Once inside, we go over the rules of the Holy Grail War to ensure we're on the same page.

— Seven Masters, each owning a Servant. The Masters are all mages. They have three 'Command Spells' tattooed on their body, most often on the left hand or torso. These are three almost irrefutable orders the Master can give a Servant. A regular order, a Servant can disobey, but it weighs on them mentally and is exhausting. Rebelling is illogical— until the three Command Spells are used, and then rebelling *any* order is fine.

Killing a Master means taking out the Servant's power supply and removing it, too. It's not instant: Servants have a while to find a new Master. My Servant... hm, she'll need a name... well, at any rate, she's clearly been bereaved of her former Master. Were it to be the other way around, her Master, when robbed of their Servant, can give up their right to win the war and be safe, taken care of by the Church.

All in all, the verbal contract between Servant and Master is one that binds you to fate. You're the best and win, the worst and die, or the middle, and survive with harrowing trauma; mental and physical.

"A name," I say, coming out of a trance as I mentally recap the events of the past few minutes.

"You'll need a name of some sort."

"I suppose I will," she says. Her voice is... soft, and she exhales a lot of air in each word. She's really low on energy. "Anything will do, right?"

"Mm-hm," I nod, biting my lip in thought. Who is she? What Heroic Spirit? White and dark-orange armour. A strange, vented mask. A pretty girl. There should be some legend that would fit the bill.

"Spring," she says suddenly.

"Mm?" I make some half-bothered sound as I think. *The Wanderess*? No. Then, perhaps the heroine of *Talia's Tale*? No...

"Where I was born, there was no such thing as Spring. It's one thing I longed for forever, to see flowers in bloom. Where I came from, it was always winter... Hm, looks like I remembered *something*, at least. It's a start, right?" She giggles girlishly. Indeed, she's a girl. A girl, and a heroic spirit.

"I suppose it is," I smile, trying to focus back in on the conversation and giving up on her identity for now. It'll either come naturally later, or we'll never figure it out. "Spring it is then. Spring, I'm Archer. Although I want you to call me something else, since there may be another Servant Archer which we run into. That's what you'd prefer, I'm assuming?"

"Yes, Archer."

"Then let me go by... my real name, for I am Heroic Spirit Thrian."

"Thrian," she repeats. Spring smiles sweetly after a moment. "It's a nice name."

"I always thought it was like a black bogrose. It's pretty, but certainly prickly too."

"... Geez," She sighs, turning her head away a little. "I said you were cynical, but you're also charming, and then you're just plain depressing again."

"On the battlefield, I'm infamous for my vainglorious ego. You'll wish for this private lack of self-confidence when you see me verbally compensate on the fields o' war, whereby I apply the 'fake it 'til you make it' rule."

In the end, I had her take the bed I had taken in town as payment for a job. A nomad like myself could never become used to it, but I'm sure she'll enjoy it. She'll sleep a lot, as the tired Servant she is. For now, I've left her alone (although I set up some sentry familiars to guard her as she rests) to patrol the Night.

During a Grail War, we refer to the conditions a battle can take place as the 'Night'. Ordinary people cannot know of the War, so all spectating is prohibited by the Church, who oversees it—albeit slightly corruptly, so I do not deal with them. During the Grail War in which I was Servant Archer, the church actually worked against me. So fool me once, I say. Due to the rules, the battles mostly take place outside of daylight areas or in empty spaces. While a Grail War is on-going, people do not leave their houses at night. Why, I have never known, but it some magus scholars of old speculated it to be a side effect of a high concentration of magical energy in the city. I doubt its relevance, in any case.

I patrol this Night when I see an armoured figure in the park. Servants cannot be damaged by normal people, generally. Nor Masters without use of their magic. I'm an exception as a pseudo-Servant, having served my purpose and granted life through this shell of magical energy, I am vulnerable to normal attacks as well as Servants'. That means that whoever this armoured figure is, I'll have to deal with carefully. I call into the night tersely.

"Excuse me—"

And then, it's gone. The figure, which was cloaked in black and had piercing green eyes, skinny and tall with light armour, was gone.

"Hm," I muse. The sound escaped my mouth. Suddenly, the hair rise on the back of my neck. I feel a premonition of a storm. "Who's ther—"

I whirl around and dodge by the skin of my teeth a mighty punch. It's not the figure I saw. I bound backward to get a better look at my opponent. It's a woman. Her armour is white and orange. A lighter shade than my Servant's, but it certainly resembles hers.

“Archer!” She addresses me in a loud voice. Despite her pose—her fists raised ready to shoot out or block an attack – she doesn’t lose femininity. She’s definitely taller than Spring. My brain focuses on the strangest of things. “I’ve come here for answers!”

“I’ve long-learned that one’s fists are a poor way of getting them from the sensible man.”

“I’ve long-heard you’re not exactly a sensible man,” she replies.

“... No-one alive knows me well enough to say that with any hint of certainty. Why are you so confident I’m not ‘sensible’, think of me you insane?”

“I do—for my father told me so.”

— White and orange armour. Piercing blue eyes. A fist that glows an alien orange like a sallow sun. A father who knows that there was a time I wasn’t sane. If this is the child of Him, I’d better start answering her questions.

“It’s true. I was once fully insane, when I suffered a great loss. I’m also a hypocrite, because my heroic ideals are selfish: I have a hero complex due to shortcomings in my early life. I mended my own sanity in solitude. The One who went insane preceded Archer, and He has long been lost. Left in His wake is a terrifying mutant; I, Archer. Is that what you want?”

“Not quite,” She says. Her stance is excellent. She’s an interesting fighter. Self-taught... and not half-bad either. I should be worried. “My father, you killed him.”

“I’ve killed a lot of men with families. Some were bandits and some were actually bad people. But with the exception of the fellow insane, I believe that no man turns evil for the sake of being evil.”

“Legends from the isle of my birth tell that every kill you wrack up brings you pain. If this is true; why did you kill my father?”

I lower my fists, slacken my stance and drop my guard entirely. The track my ego loops upon resumes seamlessly and my head is raised again high. I put a hand on my hip, and make a wry face like recalling a painful memory. I suppose I am.

“I killed Wreax Havoc because he killed the woman of my friend. Isn’t that who your father was? I didn’t want to outright slay him; so I put a curse on him that’d eventually kill him. When I found out he was an immortal being that controlled the tides of order and chaos, I realized he also decided those who knew the ‘truth’. About the big things; governments and propaganda. About the little things; who your wife was sleeping with and why your neighbour was annoyed at you this morning. I have my own ideals. I couldn’t allow that. The curse I put upon Wreax that made him fall terminally ill anchored him to our World. I’m sorry for your loss, but I can’t regret what I did. Hate me for it if you wish, I’ve said my piece.”

She – after a moment of consideration – sniffs before speaking. The Night is cold. “I’m Vraievel Havoc. Did my sister come to you? She had the same motivations as me.”

“I’ve had many a challenger. But not many women, I find them hard to deal with. If she had a name, I’d remember it—like I’ll remember yours.”

“That a fact,” she murmurs. I didn’t notice, but she reverted from her fighting stance to a normal one. The march of the beast has halted for the time being. “Her name is Ordra, Ordra Havoc.”

“... No, I know no girl by that name.”

“Tsk...” Vraievel Havoc clicks her tongue in annoyance. “Archer, I’ll let you go for now. I’ll be watching you every night during the Grail War. I’m a Master myself, but if you’re dead, my sister won’t be searching for you.”

"Keep me alive as bait?"

"Quite," she answers plainly.

"You play hardball," I reply with a smile. I don't dislike this woman, this righteous answer seeker.

"I do," she smiles back a little.

It's a quick personality turnaround, but I can't exactly complain. I don't see any reason for her to fool me into think she wasn't hostile. Though, we already *have* established that she plays hardball. My mental guard shouldn't let up.

"Well, Vraievel," I start, "I'm truly sorry for the trouble I've caused you. I promise you one thing, as forward and pragmatic and terrible as this will sound: I won't harm you."

"Archer—I just told you that I'm a Master of the Holy Grail War. I'm hardly your ally here. Don't make a girl a promise you can't keep."

"For now, it seems to be in your best interest to keep me alive, doesn't it?"

"Archer..." She wryly crinkles her brow and forms a displeased pout. I laugh a little as I walk off, back into the night. The sun will rise soon, so nothing can be done but return home and report this back to my frail Servant, 'Spring', the girl who doesn't even know who she is. But... for now, I really should ask about that apparition I saw before she turned up.

"Oh, yes, Vraievel?"

"What is it?" she asks. She hasn't moved.

"You... well, never mind."

I give up before getting it out. I might still be a little schizophrenic, to be completely honest with myself. I healed my mind enough to look normal to others, but on my inside my thought processes are erratic, my ways of thinking are... *numb* and I'm not as focused as I used to be. I'm a bad fighter. And I shouldn't bother a lady just because I'm stupid and crazy. I shake my head, angry with myself, and turn around again to continue walking away, when—

"Archer," I hear.

"Hm?" I calmly spin back towards her.

"I've heard that saying something vague that seems meaningful is the first step in seducing a woman."

"... I'm sure you've heard a lot of things," I reply, slinking apathetically back into the night.

When I come home, I'm indescribably tired and sleep on the floor, as usual. I awaken many times during the night as dreams of my sins tear at my already fragile mind. Scars like this don't heal. I don't expect them too. They start closing up and are ripped right back open again. I dream of what I thought was gone.

— The Holy Grail War. Seven Servants. Seven Masters. I am one of the Masters. My Spring is one of the Servants. In the worst case scenario, we both die. In the best, we kill everyone else and take their victory for ourselves. I'm not even a legitimate Master. Spring's Master was dead and I took her in. She was so out of energy that she received some sort of brain damage and now she doesn't remember anything. Servants live and heal on Magical Energy, so as long as I have a supply going from her to me, it should be fine.

... I need to rest. I'm a Servant too. I need to stop staring at the ceiling and get some sleep already.

My head hits the ground and suddenly I feel an awakening and it is my own.

“Sleep is for the weak, anyway...”

It’s long past dawn. Me sleeping this late, it’s strange.

“Awawawawa!”

A noise just came from the kitchen. It’s a room I don’t really use, because I don’t live on normal Terran food. But it was the noise of a sheepish girl being surprised. I stand up and shake my head. That noise was terrifyingly cute. If I get too attached to this girl, it’ll be a problem.

Wait, why? Why will it be a problem? Usually these kind of thoughts are some sort of divine premonition, given to me from the world. Or perhaps, perhaps I am not yet sane.

“Hey! The hell’s going on?”

— I Draft my Noble Phantasm, Calad Bolg.

Right – hah – I should *probably* explain. A Noble Phantasm—a Servant’s mobile Deus Ex Machina. It’s not necessarily single use, but it takes a lot of magical energy to summon or use. I once knew of a woman whose main Noble Phantasm (some Servants can have up to three smaller ones) was the Bloodfort Andromeda, a giant dome that drained the magical energy of all who entered it—a dome of vampirism.

No reply from Spring. I tighten my grip on Calad Bolg. It’s a long and thin blade, a cross between a lance and a rapier. It’s... stupid to use this inside, but... No, it’s stupid to use this to resolve all of my problems. I drop the sword and it regresses its state to potential energy and is drawn to the demon wound in my wrist. Instead I ball up my fist. Not much of a substitute, but whatever. I storm into the kitchen. Spring is staring at the front door.

“Somebody is outside, I can feel it.”

“Must be a Servant... Although... Can’t be. I’d have sensed it myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought I told you this. I’m a veteran. I was Servant Archer and survived the last Grail War—no, I won it. I used my one wish to grant me a new life.”

“*Did* you tell me that?” She asks hands on her hips and giving me a doubting stare.

“Damn it, woman! This is no time for anything like this!”

I shake my head and push past her, and open the door. I grab the person behind it by the neck.

“What do you want?” I ask them. I don’t recognize them at all. But I know who they are.

“Aren’t you the one they call Archer?” The clergyman asks me.

“I am,” I reply with a nod. “They call me Archer. Have you come to end me? Where is your familiar?”

Familiar is a better way of saying Servant—at least during the sunlit hours.

“Archer, we only wish to ensure you participate in the coming Grail War. We still have nobody to contact if you fall in battle.”

“I *won’t*,” I reply firmly. The priest is dressed in normal Xth Crusade armour. And off-duty, too... he could well be a Master. I let go of him and push him away a foot. “So, who are you?”

“May I come in to—?”

“No, you may not. Who are you? Quickly, or I’ll resort to *making* you tell me.”

“I am Father Crissoul. I am not a Master and wish to form an alliance with you for the duration of the

Grail War.”

I needn’t think about it. “Leave. And don’t come back. Or I’ll slay you dead.”

I slam the door on this man and his opportunity.

“You will regret this, Archer of Aoiki.”

I clench my right fist so hard the capillaries almost burst.

“Thrian...” Poor Spring doesn’t know how to react at all.

“It’s not your fault. Don’t think too hard about it. It just took every shred of sense in me to not summon my relic knife to kill him.”

“Your... knife?”

“Oh, don’t worry. You’ve seen me Draft, right? It’s a unique spell. Nobody else can do it. But since I’m made of gigantic supply of magical energy and Drafting takes up magical energy, using it constantly shortens my lifespan. I don’t worry about it too much though.”

“How do you not?”

I Draft my small knife, the Mileduithe – blade of a thousand cuts. It’s faster than any other blade and is forged of strong steel. But other than that, it seems to be normal. It was stolen from a Servant of the Holy Grail War.

“I just don’t worry about it,” I laugh. I let the knife disappear. “I have other things to worry about, after all.”

“Like what?”

“Like taking care of you, now.”

“How do you mean?” She asks me. “Doesn’t the Servant take care of the Master? Isn’t that why the names are this way?”

“Ahh...” I begin. I mean... “Listen, I don’t think I’ve seen you fight, but, and while I don’t mean to be, well, mean, I *did* win a Holy Grail War. And I haven’t seen you lift a sword yet.”

“Ah...?” She cocks her head sideways a little. It’s kind of cute, so I find myself smiling. Yeah, you do *not* seem like the fighting type. There must be some mistake. The World, which summons the Servants... is rather stupid.

“Ahaha,” I laugh. “Well, it doesn’t matter. Lost your memory, didn’t you? So you’d have lost your techniques at fighting, too, right? It only makes sense.”

Well, actually, it doesn’t. The parts of the brain associated with memory and actions are completely separate. Bumping one’s head and becoming a little amnesiac doesn’t mean you’ll stop being the best cook in the world, provided you already them. Nevertheless, I seem to have fooled Spring.

“I guess. Although it’s strange—I feel like I could fight like normal.”

“Well,” I say, now washing the kitchenware with her help, “It’s probably like how Servants naturally find it, ah, what’s the word... oppressive? To go against the orders of their Master. Like, if I told you to... never mind.”

“What?” She asks, looking toward me. I refuse to meet her eyes and tense up a little, but hopefully she’s not astute enough to notice.

“I was a Servant myself. I’m conscious of anything I say that’s like an order,” I admit.

“Hah, hahahaha!” She laughs. “And here I was assuming you were some edgy loner from our first meeting,” she giggles.

“Ouch,” I say, “That surely hurts. Pass me that, there.”

"Oh, this? Here you go."
"Ah, c'mere, you're cleaning that wrong."
"Wrong? Isn't it getting cleaned?"
"Ah, sure, but if you do it like this... then you get this effect."
"It's too shiny now, though."
"That a fact?" I find myself laughing.
"Mm-hm... when I do it like this... it seems more homely, right?"
"Homely? Aren't you well settled in?" I ask.
"Should I not stay here?" She asks.
"Ah, well, that's not really what I mean either..."

I don't mind this girl. She's rather fun, for a being whose sole purpose is to kill all others like her.
"I'd like you to stay close to me for a tactical advantage. Otherwise I'd have to summon you with usage of a Command Spell if I got into trouble any time."
"Oh, they appeared on your hand? Can I see them?"
"Not yet," I say, covering the back of my left hand with the palm of my other. "Can you guess what it is, vaguely?"
"Hm..." Spring thinks for a moment. "No, I can't."
"Odd, I knew mine before I saw it on my Master's hand."
"May I see mine, or rather, yours?"
"Of course..."

I show it to her. It's a simple design, a rather eloquent one, at that. It's fairly simple; a circle with two rings around it.
"Ah, it's pretty."
"It'll make for a good tattoo when this is all over, hm?"
"Are you that confident that we'll win, Thrian?"
"Of course," I reply.

(Arick) Chapter Two: Into The Night

"Honestly," I say to myself, fiddling around the leather pack at my waist. "Why did I even agree I'd run to Aoiki for Kjelle..."

Yeah. I'm a sucker alright. Kjellen Whitehart and I have been friends for as long as we can remember, and recently we became a couple. But due to circumstances of the harvest season and the new activity of wraiths and ghouls outside the city of Blackthrone, Kjelle, a knight like me, had to stay behind and man the city's walls and sentry posts. I'm to visit some herb store, since she sells herbs at a... slightly inflated price back home. It's always been her dream, so I offered to make her restock run for her. I don't know what it is about this city... I've just entered its gates, but I feel like I've been here before. I'm sure I haven't, though.

Well, at any rate, this is a very nice city, so I don't mind. It's pleasant, the roads are well done, and I'm sure I can find a place to stay a night or two while I get ready to journey back to Blackthrone.

I make my way down to the market. Weird, I had to give up my weapons on the way in. For a town this far north, I guess it's to be expected. Well, at any rate I'm sure my mace doesn't care much. I

hear people talk about regular things as I pass by. Dusk begins to fall, and people seem to abruptly end any and all conversation to get inside.

I'm just about don't sightseeing at this stage, so I asked around and ended up finding out there's no room rental services here, but home rental, since there is surplus housing in Aoiki, and it's a holiday zone. Fair enough, I said, and bought a nice little house for the week. I won't be staying here for long though.

In the middle of the night, I awake to a terrible shriek. I get up and move quickly across the room. I peek through the curtains and see a red light outside the window. I don't see what it actually is at first, but it seems to be some kind of magical object. I stand up and open the door to get a better look.

Sadly for me, it's a large being that looks angry. I feel the hairs on my arms stand up suddenly and gulp audibly. I have no weapons. The red light was the monster's glowing eyes. No, he's not a monster, really. He's a knight.

"Damnit! Doesn't the Night forbid bystanders from seeing Servants?"

The hostile knight paces towards me slowly, like this is a task he will reluctantly do. He'll purge me, albeit reluctantly. I'll die. He's closer now. If he gets to me, I'll die. I've frozen. I feel my knees weaken and stagger backward, and realize that's the way I should go. I inhale sharply and it sounds pathetic. I think I focus on *everything* except surviving. I half fall, half walk backwards, closing the door behind me desperately. I keep staggering backward and further back into the house, to rooms I didn't even bother looking in. I find myself in a bedroom and head to the door at the back of it. It's a secondary bathroom. I take refuge in a cupboard.

The knight's clanking armour races towards where I went. I hide like a rat in the closet, or whatever it is, holding my breath. I hear him pass right by. I hear the sound of metal being grabbed, the door rattling. A sword punctures it and stabs me in the side. I open my mouth to scream as my vision clouds with red and I lurch forward, hitting my head off the closet's door, and I react in pain backward, moving myself while mounted on the sword, and I writhe a few more times and the knight before the door lets me. I'm killing myself on my own spasms of pain. The sword is released and the door opens. The knight goes to grab me by the throat and I try to kick out one of his legs. I largely fail, knocking him only slightly off balance, but that's all I get, so that's all I can use, but now I've gotten a slight leg-up, I have to use it! If he grabs me, I'll die! So I headbutt him hard and then successfully kick out his leg, causing him to fall forward, into the cabinet—toward me. I duck and around him, feeling a great pain tearing at my side, a fresh wound ripping further and further with each movement, but I have to run, so I double back on the way I came in as the knight roars in pain.

I fly out of the room as fast as my failing body can carry me. I feel my shoulder go dead from something. Loss of blood, in an area where I'm not even losing blood? Perhaps. Then my whole right arm goes dead and my right hand hurts like it is being branded. I fall and knock over a book case. And I find there's a red, pentagram-type symbol glowing on the floor. And I see my right hand glow the same red. It is being branded. I watch a terrible symbol made of a square and two square rings around it being pushed up on the back of my hand. I scream in immense pain as some bizarre chain reaction occurs in my body and it changes. And I look back to the red on the floor, and there stands a knight in black and yellow armour and a cloak, with green eyes and magic crests on each arm. A

similarly green area on his chest where his heart should be. The man with the eyes of a king of seven hells speaks to me.

"I am Archer, your Servant. I come in response to your summons. I ask of you: Are you my Master?"

My voice was stuck in my throat. Maybe it was out of confusion over the insanity around me.

No, that wasn't it.

I was struck speechless by the overwhelming... malevolence of this black knight who had appeared before my eyes.

"I ask you again, and I'd reply spritely if I was you. I sense a terrible presence nearby. Are you my Master?"

"... Yes," I reply, suppressing a shrug to accompany it.

"Hahahaha!" The evil knight laughs, casting up a horrid, cursed sword shaped like an enlarged needle. "Master, I shall be your knight of bow, Servant Archer. But tonight, Calad Bolg shall have blood!" Archer throws the demonic sword upward, it spinning a few times, and he catches it as the red knight comes in through the doorway, his sword bloodied with my bodily fluid dripping from his hand.

"You were the Seventh?!" He asks me or Archer incredulously.

"He was! En garde, or flee!" Archer poises to attack with his rapier ready. The red knight goes to gash at his side and Archer summons a small knife to block it, smirking all the while. "Now, an eye for an eye!" He stabs the rapier he calls Calad Bolg through the red knight, and I see him weaken because the red glare of his eyes darkens slightly. "And, let us take an eye anyway! For Master!" Archer uses his small knife expertly to flick back the red knight's sword. The red knight is still screaming in agony over his side as Archer quickly stabs and brings back his small knife, and he kicks the red knight backward and through the cheap wall to the outside. He's laughing now, and pleads the knight, as he tries to bet up, "Ohahahaha, come back, you forgot something! Here—Ahaha—I'll throw it to you!" He removes the red-iris eyeball from the tip of his knife and throws it after the red knight as he runs off into the night, bleeding blood that instantly vaporizes as he runs. Archer calms down and turns to me.

"Nice kid, nice kid, c'mon, nice kid, wasn't he?" I realize his rapier and dagger have disappeared, so instead he summons a katana. "A swift blade like this can finish the job. I'll track him. Rats go home to rat nests, after all. There are always more rats," He says with a sudden anger. Not a passionate one, but one in a low, calm but tense and confident voice.

"Please don't... I need help, or I'll die."

"Oh... are you truly badly hurt?" Archer turns to me, suddenly growing serious and concerned.

"Alright. Let me take you elsewhere," He says as he slings me over his shoulder. "It's no longer safe here. I died far in the future in another time, but I'm sure my secondary residence is still vacant." I pass out while he keeps spouting ridiculous things.

And I awaken slowly in a foreign, old room, eastern styled. Archer looks over at me. He was sitting on the couch with his arms around it wide, relaxing with his eyes closed and one leg crossed over the other at the ankle and knee.

"Hello, Master," he says. "I'm Archer. And I'm evil."

"You saved me just fine," I say, attempting to get up. My side still hurts, so I wince and sit back down.

"Only because you're my Master," Archer smiles back. "So don't go assuming things about people."

I'm deceptively charming, ahaha." He laughs at himself, or his own jokes.

"No," I insist, wishing I could claw at my itching wound behind the blood-stained bandages. "I can feel it, Archer. You've a heart of gold." I tell him with a nod. I'm sure of it, somehow. Archer raises an eyebrow.

"The Unholy Grail War!" He begins with a start of energy. "The antithesis of that which is known as a Holy Grail War, where seven or more Heroic Spirits of legends and lore come to life under various classes, such as Archer, Saber, Lancer, Assassin, Rider, Caster and Berserker to name but a few. In a Holy Grail War, these Heroic Spirits battle alongside their faithful Master who command them with three single-use spells, shown by the tattoo-looking marks on your right hand, to win the Holy Grail! Or so one is told. In actuality, you are granted a wish from it, one for the Master and one for the Servant. If we win, then we get anything or everything you desire! You've been dragged into a deadly battle of magus Masters and warrior Servants! The medieval hierarchies shall unsettle and the lords wet their beds while the Servants whet blades!"

"But you're evil, you tell me," I interject his mad rant, which was punctuated by throwings of his arms as if playing several invisible instruments.

"Astute observation, my dear Master!"

"Oh," I begin, "I should tell you my name. I'm—"

"Not really. I don't think it matters. You're my Master, so let's not waste time."

"But—"

"This *isn't* a Holy Grail War! This is an UNHOLY Grail War! Think of the wonderfully daft idiots who named it so! But indeed, here Heroic Spirits do not fight, but Villainous Spirits take their positions. So, you have I, Archer. Let me tell you who I am, Master. My real name, my identity...

"I am Villainous Spirit ARCHER. Once, I was a hero to the people of this very island. And once, I fell from grace. I did nothing wrong, but was convinced – and still am, by virtue of this persona – that I had done many wrongs, created with these hands... forged terrible swords that cut down great men. I killed and murdered and went insane because of it, so I killed and murdered again when I couldn't control myself... I'm a villain in my own eyes... so I'm Villainous Spirit ARCHER."

"But there is a man named Archer who's regarded as a hero now," I inform Servant Archer. "He's in this city."

"Oh," Villainous Spirit ARCHER says, leaning in with a toothy grin, "Is he now? Has he not fallen from grace?"

"No, he mostly keeps to himself," I tell Archer. "He's a hero. Nobody can deny that."

"My existence... disproves that. I don't know if he's the real Archer. Or if I am. Maybe I'm him, an imitation of the real Archer, but that's simply confusing and he's likely not our problem anyway."

"Right," I nod because I only have a basic grasp on the situation. "What are the odds of him becoming a Servant and a Master in two different bodies and forms."

"Exactly," Archer affirms. "So, Master. I've done you wrong already, and you'll know I'm evil. Check your hands."

I look at my hands and see that both my right and left hands are covered with tattoos. Or... not tattoos, but they resemble them. "Command Spells, you called them?"

"I did? I don't think I referred to them as so. It's our connection, telling you that. Our minds are somewhat linked. I hunted the Servant who hurt you, the red knight. We should focus on killing the Masters."

"But aren't the Masters just normal people?" I ask, sitting up suddenly.

"I suppose," Archer shrugs. "People who'd draw upon evil spirits to achieve their own means. It's extremely unlikely that another Master would simply stumble upon their Servant's casting spot like you did. Obviously, another magus had set that spot up to summon me. But the World had me called to you. Well, as they say, that's Fate for you. So... I know my wish. It's to be regarded as a Heroic Spirit again. Yours I can only picture as being good-natured, too. So, Master... Let us destroy all of those who would bring doom upon the world, those crazed enough to summon Villainous Spirits as means to meet their ends."

"Okay!" I reply quickly, riled up by his speech.

"Ahahaha! Excellent!" Archer laughs and stands up. I just realized how tall he is. "Well then, I must scout. I shall return soon Master, but there's one particular Servant I just have to find!"

Archer bounds on out of the room before I can stop him and I am left alone to soak everything in.

— So, I'll be killing people now. But it sounds like I have no choice. So for now, I'll just play along, do as the Aoikians do.

(Thrian) Chapter Three: Zodiac

I watch the windows very carefully. It's only been four days since I met Spring, and two since the first Servant, Rider, apparently died, according to my familiars. I shrug off the cold of the chilly day. And a setback has already befallen my small Servant and I. Spring is ill.

She lays in the bed beside me. She speaks every now and then, but she's low on energy.

"I didn't ask, are you feeling any better today?"

Spring sniffs. "Maybe a little," she offers as a token response.

I shrug again. "Don't worry about it," I say. "This is just a minor annoyance."

"I didn't ask," She curtly replies.

"Don't worry about it, just an annoyance," I correct myself. She laughs at that. "At any rate, I'll probably have to get back to it as soon as you've healed up. We don't want any Masters forging alliances, now. Then we'd enter the danger zone." I expect a Servant to agree, but am surprised when—

"I want to get some action myself," she replies. Suddenly, her gaze grows darker but she looks more tired. "I'll kill everything... I'll kill every person I see who isn't you... If I don't, I'm not going to be able to stay insane..."

I look deep into her face. Was she joking? I don't see it, but maybe it was some strange sarcasm? It's tough to call when she falls asleep right after. I move into the kitchen-style room. Can't really call it a kitchen if I never use it, I think.

I begin to grind a few herbs from the cupboard. They're old and a little dusty already, but they should do. Yesterday, I was taking care of Spring and she did something weird. She showed symptoms of aphasia. Which worries me, because if Spring and I can't communicate when the time to fight comes, then it will all be over very fast. I rub my head with my hands in anxiety. This Holy Grail War will give me a heart attack. But even if it does. I won't let it take me.

I grind the herbs more aggressively. Man, I must look really stupid right now. It was strange, though. Her aphasiac outburst. I asked her what her favourite animal was. Innocent question, it had come up in conversation. The answer I received?

“Ah, well, because wolves don’t often get down from trees I have to go left at the junction.” An answer that made no sense at all. I was too caught off-guard to press her on it. I shudder again, thinking back on it. In fact, I’ve known an aphasiac or two and they all kind of talk along those lines.

I feel a chill down my spine and almost drop the small bowl of ground herbs. I close my eyes and feel something just outside the magical barrier I have set up outside the house. A Servant is going to try to get it.

I run outside, casting myself a lance. It’s dark outside now, and nobody is here but me and whatever is attacking my house. I climb up the side quickly and on to the roof. I see across from the house a warrior clad in tan armour, like a man of the desert.

“Hello,” I call out. “I am Thrian.”

The warrior steps plainly through my barrier and leaps onto the top of my house without a word so far. I hold my lance, ready to strike at him. “Who are you that you can penetrate my magical barrier?”

“I am Servant Stalker,” the Servant replies. He brandishes a lance like my own so I let go of mine and draft a bow instead. It’ll be more useful and I’ll be able to keep my distance better.

“I am Gasai, and I’ve come on behalf of my Master, Sir Faust.”

“Sir Faust is a Master?!”

“To kill the Archer!!”

“No, I’m not the one you want!”

But I have to draft a shield to deflect his lance’s mighty blow. A blow so strong it destroys the shield. The illusion is shattered and the magical energy disperses. I’m in trouble.

“I’m not Servant Archer, ‘Archer’ is just an alias!”

“Then explain our confrontation last night!”

I Draft a sword. This man is delusional. “You’re insane! I’ve never even heard of a Heroic Spirit named Gasai!” The lance approaches me but stops.

“Eh? What did you say?”

I roll backward and summon a sword and shield. “I said I’ve never heard of a Heroic Spirit named Gasai! Not even in legend!”

“Oh, I see,” Gasai nods. “You truly aren’t the one I fought last night then. Your eyes are different, indeed. Thrian, you are then... well, let me tell you, Thrian. This is no Holy Grail War.”

“Excuse me?”

“This is a battle of Villainous Spirits, and Unholy Grail War.”

I shudder. “No,” I reply. “That’s not possible.

— So maybe I don’t know my Servant’s name, sure. But there’s NO WAY that she, Spring, is a Villainous Spirit.

“So that’s why the Servant classes are different?” I ask myself.

“Which are you?”

"It's a long story, but I'm a Master. From the sounds of it, Stalker, not the one you were meant to kill. Please... my Servant is ill. If you have honor, you'll be on your way."

"... On the condition you let me see your Servant, because you have the aura of a Servant yourself, Thrian."

"I would," I reply. "I won the last Holy Grail War and wished to be alive again, Stalker."

He takes a sharp step back. "You're the one Sir Faust told me to beware of? *You*? One so pitiful, so below me as the one called Thrian? You're not even worth the effort of cleaning my lance after I killed you."

I grit my teeth and hold myself back. "Just go." I tell him. Later, I will kill him. But Stalker doesn't move. "What? Do you wish to forge an alliance?"

"Hahahaha," the Stalker laughs, turning away. "I pity your poor Servant."

Damn him. I shake my head. I need to check Spring. Stalker could have been a distraction. I let myself fall down and slide down my roof, doing a flip and summoning a lance to stick to the ground. I spring off of it and stick the landing perfectly. Breaking a bone now would be the end of this...

'Unholy Grail War'. I open my door and summon back my small dagger.

"Spring?" I shout for her. And the reply I get—

"Oh? Has the Master come to protect his Servant?"

I spring into action. I Draft my battle armour onto my robes. Yellow and black plating covers me as I ready myself for the dry, grating voice that challenges me.

"Who are you?" I ask. I turn the corner of the hallway, dagger in hand, and confront the one who had entered my house.

He's in yellow armour, like me. He's very big and has a giant axe. He'd be unable to swing it here.

"I am Servant Reaver, and I've come to kill your Servant."

"Like hell," I reply quickly, brandishing my small knife.

"Hahahaha!" The enemy Servant – Reaver – laughs at it. "What a tiny blade!"

"The flame that burns twice as bright lasts half as long." I spin the smallish knife to face Reaver.

"Conversely, the blade half as heavy cuts twice as fast. Get out of my damn house."

"Not another word, or I'll kill you just like your Servant."

"... Fool," I smile. "I can just use my Command Spell and have her come to my side right now."

— More than likely, Reaver hasn't seen her yet. Reaver is also likely to be partnered with Stalker, who is nearby. But neither knows that Spring is ill, presuming he hadn't gotten far enough into the house to find her. Furthermore, neither know that I have to know what class my Servant is to use a Command Spell. So—time to bluff my way out of this mess. This Reaver—I see no reason in killing him if it will serve to aggravate Stalker, because that would do the opposite of *serve* me... For loathe as I am to admit it, I doubt I can face Stalker as I am now.

"That a fact?" Reaver asks. "Can you back up those words, Master of...?"

"You don't know what class my Servant is, huh? So you only *sensed* her presence."

"*Her*? Ohohoho..."

— That. That laugh. I feel uneasy. I feel like I should kill this slimy Servant.

“Ah, alright then,” Reaver shrugs. “I’ll leave in peace. Stalker said only to do a little recon, but now we knows where ye lives! Harharhar!”

Reaver passes me by and shoves me out of the way.

“Hahaha!” I laugh, thinking I’ve won. “Aren’t you a good little dog, then?”

— Reaver stops moving, the chains that were attached to him stopping their seemingly incessant clanking.

“What did you call me?”

“Tsk... Me and my big, egotistical mouth, huh? Heeheehee! The chase is on!”

I summon a great golden shield and bash through the wall of my house, the weak tree-bark the walls were made from giving way to my desperate and quick push. I stumble and roll back upright, taking off into the night. Okay— so I was right.

It took a lot of thinking, but I figured out which Villainous Spirit this Servant was on my first try. Honestly, with a Servant classification like ‘Reaver’, not many could fit the bill. Indeed, the tale of the Fe-Matoran-cum-Toa-cum-Dark Hunter that was Phantom.

“Ah, let me guess,” I bark backwards at the Servant chasing me, “You were Toa Phantom?”

“I was!!” He catches up to me and swings his great axe right under me in a sudden burst of speed and strength. I jump up as the axe sweeps under my and bounce on it, using my heightened agility to spring upwards and onto the roofs of the houses. The maddened Servant Reaver – Phantom – follows me all the while.

“Indeed! When your village of Matoran of the Iron clan was to be attacked by the Makuta, your village elders suggested to make an artificial hero – a Toa. But to make a Toa, you need a Toa Stone to give the Matoran a Toa’s power. They didn’t have one, so they built you a new body, Frankenstein’d you up good, didn’t they?”

“Get down HERE!”

Reaver swings at a streetlamp I hopped over and it comes crashing down. I jump to another rooftop and continue retelling his woeful tale. While I make sure he follows me, I will drive him away from the resting Spring, and eventually lose him. My Servant and I will relocate soon afterwards. I just need to distract him, blind him by his rage, until I can lead him to some sort of area with many diverging paths. Yes, that’ll do.

“But then they didn’t want you! They said they were ashamed of what they’d created with *you*, Phantom, when you volunteered as the tribute! Their Franken-Toa, a terrible thing indeed, and they rejected you! And then they banished you, too, for good measure! Arguably the real villains are those cowards, but yet in this play the antagonist was you! Unable to understand, you asked of them where to go! And then one of them said it—”

“DON’T SAY IT!”

“They replied, *For all I care, you can go die like a dog.*”

“Bastard!!”

I bring up some terrible memories for Phantom.

— Indeed, just imagine.

“You had delusions of grandeur. You wanted to bring the fight to those who’d already killed so many of your clan, the Makuta. And you were promised that basic right, as well as the means to do it.”

“The right was mine!” The maddened Phantom cuts at me as I jump back down to street level, running out of airspace above. Damn, that was a close swing, too... I need to get away *now*.

“I believe so too! Believe you me! And then when you were rejected and told to go flag yourself? You joined up with a mercenary company called the Dark Hunters who promised you revenge on both Makuta and Matoran! And I get it entirely!”

“No you *don’t*,” he yells. He cuts again, and this time I feel my lower back get gashed by it.

I go flying. Like I’m being hurled into the abyss by a great titan. A swell of black. I’m thrown into a literal and metaphorical nightmare.

I hit a wall some feet away from Reaver. I try to Draft a lance, but it disappears instantly.

“Aha... I didn’t realize I was so exhausted... Give me a moment to catch my breath?” I ask Reaver.

Reaver does not hear me. Reaver’s body has been overtaken by hunger. A bloody hunger. I know that mode of thought. The hunger is the all of it, and all of it is hunger. He runs over to me, his axe leaving a blazing line of sparks like a ring of angels behind him. Indeed, for I see Death, and he’s running toward me now. I cover my eyes, unable to Draft anything. I’m too exhausted.

— Man, what a pathetic way to die. Die like a dog? What hypocrisy. I guess this is what I’ll get for biting off more than I could chew. Yeah, it was only ever going to end one way, this second Grail War. Lucky enough I won the first one through a series of random events beyond my control. All I did was change Arick to be a real fighter, and then we won, reset time. Of course the Grail War was going to continue. I should have been prepared. This is what I get; this is the only path I can walk now. And there’s only one more step to take. Or lack thereof. I’m too tired to move right now. It’s... over.

— And then an image my Servant flashes onto the forefront of my mind. A projection of my failure. Don’t look for me. Don’t follow me. I beg you, Spring. *Find somebody else*. Somebody that can help you win. Somebody unlike me—a bastard in hero’s clothing.

And then – I feel a sudden chill from behind. But it’s not something I should be thinking about, right now.

-- Clank.

Ah, what the hell. I’m definitely not dead. Who’s gone and done it now? And here I thought my life would be wrapped up nice and early.

I open my eyes and I’m shocked beyond belief.

“S-Spring? Where did you get that lance?”

Blocking Reaver’s great axe is my lance, Gáe Gorm. And holding it is my Servant, Spring.

“Who are *you*?” Reaver asks.

“I am... Thrian’s Servant!”

“... You’ll do,” Reaver says, bring his axe back.

“Like hell she will!” I announce.

I struggle upwards, push the lance aside and tackle Reaver down to the ground. “Spring!” I yell. “Here!” She throws the lance at me. I’m dizzy and miss it, and it sails over my head. I catch a quick glimpse of Spring. She’s suddenly cowering in terror, realizing where she is. Damnit! It’s now or never! I swing my fists feebly at Phantom – Reaver.

“Enough of this!” Reaver socks me one quick hit to the jaw and I go flying as he hits me again.

I spring back to my feet and summon the most powerful Phantasm under my control—a great sword, the Sword of Denvor. I swing it backwards and over my head, the huge and heavy sword rising slowly like a giant pendulum. While it’s over my head, I charge forward and put huge force into the acceleration of the swing. It comes down hard, but Reaver dodged out of the way. Damnit.

I sidestep a gash of his axe by the skin of my teeth. I draft a long katana and swing it fast and hard, over and over again, but the blade is too brittle to break through Reaver’s heavy steel armour.

“Huahahahahaha!” Reaver laughs from his belly in a taunting manner that grinds my gears.

“Die!” I command him. I summon a copy of the real lance that Spring carries and I have him at an advantage, finally.

-- Just at that moment, the thought crosses my mind that Spring still has the real one.

I aim it like a rapier and strike at Reaver. But there is no lance. The illusion shatters. I remembered it wasn’t real. The illusion was broke. It’s the simple rule of the Drafting spell.

“Damnit!” I yell. Reaver throws me aside.

I’m done for now. “Go find another Master! Don’t let them take you!” I shout my lungs out, looking at the cowering Spring. And then her eyes change as she sees Reaver close in on me.

“I’m going to take you apart... One limb at a time,” Reaver tells me.

“You’ve got a real radio voice, you know that?” I ask him, laughing madly. “H-hold on...”

I stand up straight. If I can have it my way, I’m not going to die like a dog. I’ll die standing up straight.

“What’s this? Fighting back?”

“I’ll fight tooth and nail for her,” I say, nodding to Spring. “For any friend... Gods know I can’t seem to keep them... So I’d pin myself to a tree with my lance before I died on my ass and see her hurt. So—I’m warning you... get out of my way.”

I try to take a step forward, beat senseless and barely lucid. The floor melts away. No, my boot just hasn’t reached the ground yet, that’s all.

“Th-Thrian!” The petrified Spring calls.

“Ah, I’m just glad I get to hear your voice,” I mumble.

I stumble. I fall on one knee. “Damnit!” I yell.

An axe is brought down near me. It scratches my left shoulder and cuts me fairly deep.

“You... won’t break me... I’ve already broken too many times.”

“Hahahaa! You need only break once more!”

“*You won’t!*” Spring yells.

Ah, I’ve lost my vision. I need to feel my way to... to a tree... Yeah, I need a tree... And if all else fails, maybe I can take a leak next to it—since I’m dying like a dog now, anyway.

"What on Onius?" I hear Reaver ask. Yeah, distract him, Spring...

"I said," an enraged voice yells in a sharp and powerful tone, "you won't take my Master!"

I hear the clanking of another set of armour... but that's not possible. I can't think about it, anyway. I need to find a tree.

"Ohohoho... hahahaha! Hahahahaha! So the wolf in sheep's clothing is showing her true colours! Tell me, where has this black armour come from all of a sudden? Hm? Hiding it under your skirt, now, were we? Hahahaha!"

"Don't say stupid things. You should fear me."

"... Wait," Reaver replies, suddenly hesitant. "Are you...? The Seventh? That means... you're..."

She's...

— *"Ah, well, because wolves don't often get down from trees I have to go left at the junction." An answer that made no sense at all. I was too caught off-guard to press her on it. I shudder again, thinking back on it. I've known an aphasiac or two; they all talk kind of like that.*

— Ah, that wasn't aphasia. That was word salad, a symptom of schizophrenia. My sight returns. I look over at my Servant.

Is that even my Servant? Ah, it is, it is Spring. But it hardly looks like it. She grew about a foot and a half, and looks terrifyingly imposing. She's coated in layers of thick, black armour like a physical form of darkness. She has a large sword made of orange-glowing energy. It looks like it was cut from a giant's sword, and is one half of it. I'm terrified of it. Her wrath... I can feel it emanating from her very body.

"You'll pay for harming my Master!" She tells Reaver, and she charges at him.

Man... she's captivating. I watch her as I struggle over to the tree. She's got no technique. She's all rage. Flailing that sword about, once Reaver – that idiot Phantom – figures out you're all flash, he'll cut you down. Which means... I have to get up.

I force my unwilling joints to rise. C'mon... get up... just a little more, and then you can rest.

"... Berserker," I smile to myself as I get up, watching 'Spring'. Ah, Vraievel—I believe I've found your sister, Ordra. "Ordra," I repeat. It's just a hunch, but now it's falling into place. Spring has powers like Wreax, and Vraievel, his older daughter, was missing her younger sister. Their armour makes sense now. "Ordra," I say again, walking over to the tree.

I look over my shoulder. She's taking hits from Reaver now. She's not doing much damage, but when she hits, she hits hard. His shoulder plate has cracked and fallen away entirely. His chestplate is heavily dented. His knee is broken. She's just as badly wounded, though.

I move towards the tree. "The promises I make," I tell myself as I Draft the lance. This time, there are no thoughts in my head to break the illusion. I inhale and make sure I won't bite my tongue. I cannot stand up straight, so this will have to do. I stab myself deep and hard, clean through. That's this lance's power—Gáe Gorm will never be blocked by anything. I breathe more sharply and erratically. I take ten seconds to calm down. And then, while focusing on keeping Gáe Gorm there, I Draft my bow, Eclipse, and a long, sharp and spiky arrow. My chest heaves. Every breath makes me move a

little and hurts me. The hole in my body feels... terribly chilly. I take aim and pull back on the bowstring.

"Now you'll see, my Servant, why I call myself... Archer."

I release it and it flies through the air, as if on some invisible zipline. I gulp as it hits my target. Reaver's head explodes in a guttural pop. "Hahahahaha!" I laugh.

"Hahahaha!" Ordra laughs.

More importantly, Reaver doesn't. The Nynrah Ghost Mutant is dead.

"But so am I, practically..."

I see Spring collapse.

"N-no!" I exclaim. "No! No! Ordra! Spring! Wake up! Help me!"

A Command Spell vanishes from my arm. Spring wakes up. She looks at me. She reaches out and faints again.

"No..." I gasp. Gáe Gorm and the bow in my hand both disappear. "No!" I defiantly scream, "NO! It... it can't end this way!"

Spring fades away. I presume she's just going to rest by going into Spirit Form, even though we'd never practiced it... damnit! "I'm not standing now!!" I yell into the night. I claw at the ground and begin to move myself over to Reaver... maybe I can, hell, I don't know... eat him? Replenish energy that way?

I claw over to him, but then he disappears. As Servants always do. Damnit! I hit the ground with my fist. And then I hear footsteps. My vision blurs again... But I know the footsteps... I've heard them before. And... it's two sets of them, too. I recognize them both. And then the footsteps begin to speak, as my vision dies altogether.

"Ah, so you see, Arick? This is why I don't appear on the frontlines very much. I could get absolutely crushed, like this poor man here."

"C'mere," I mouth out slowly, grabbing the ankle of whoever produces sound.

"Ah!" The other one shouts. "Are you like this too? Fighting to the bitter end?"

"No, I learned to let go, and became all the more evil for it," the first one replies. That voice... it's so... uncanny. "Heeheeheeheehee! Just look at him... so obsessed with honor that he stabbed himself to a tree. Heeheeheeheehee!"

"Y-you..!"

I claw, digging my nails in, towards that voice, and my vision flashes back and I see a mirror of myself.

"Ah!" I involuntarily let out my surprise before my vision goes black again. No... can't be? "How can you value yourself as a warrior if you have no honor?" I ask in a hoarse voice.

"I'm a mercenary. You say you can't put a value on honor...? Well maybe the bounty was too *low*."

"Are you going to... help?"

"Heeheeheehee! Only if you stand up straight and bow! But that'd be hard for somebody as broken as you now, wouldn't it?"

"... Even if I could..."

I pass out; letting the abyss of sleep take me, wash me away like a seashell on the tides of time. I awake briefly only once during my sleep, to the sound of Vraiveil's voice, and that of another.

“Saber, pick up that man.”

“Yes, Master.”

I was picked up by a strong Servant Saber, on command of Vraievel.

“Where will we take him?”

“Well... we saw his house all messed up... we can only take him to our place.”

“*Our place*, Master? Isn’t that terribly risky?”

“Only if Archer here plans to live there for longer than he needs to recover.”

“Archer? He’s a Servant?”

“No, he’s not. Don’t worry. It’s just an alias. I’ll tell you about him as we move towards the house.”

“Understood, Master.”

And as I’m carried through the streets, I whispered to the winds,

“I will refuse... to bow...”

Episode Two: The Red River
(Thrian) Chapter Four: Silence Without Light

I gasp and sit up straight. I observe what's around me very quickly. I'm alone in a room. I'm covered in bandages. I'm awake. I'm aware. I'm scared. Where is Spring—Ordra? I'm in a small room. I Draft the Mileduithe. I inhale again. A black gauntlet appears from nowhere and forces my hand downward. I look to my right and see another Servant.

"Who are you?"

"Calm down, Archer."

"Damnit, I will not calm down! Where is Spring?" Why do people always say to calm down? It's only going to tick me off much more!

"Spring?"

"My Servant!"

"You had a Servant with you, Archer?"

That's going to go nowhere. "Your Master—where is Vraievel Havoc?"

"I saved you," the black and red armoured knight says with a slow nod of his head, levelling with me. "Can you spare me until I at least show *some* intention of attacking you?"

"Oh—right. My apologies, ah...?"

"*Saber*." The Servant replies, releasing my wrist.

I rub it. Damn, that hurt.

"Saber? Hm."

"What?" The red knight asks. I shrug.

"Thought you'd be taller," I say. Sabers are put on a pedestal. I've never known a recorded Grail War where Saber wasn't the uncontested strongest Servant. In the Grail War in which I originated from, Heroic Spirit Sigurd was Saber, and that was the closest I've ever come to dying until Reaver. It must be true that evil is the fastest route to becoming powerful – and as a Heroic Spirit, I'm not a suitable match for the Unholy Grail War's Villainous Spirits. Reaver may have been the weakest. I should *not* mess around with Saber here. My realisation makes me gulp, but thankfully Saber was too busy reeling from my sharp dig to notice. Where was this quick-mouthed guile when trying to call off Servant Reaver?

"How about some respect for the person who saved your life?" Saber asks me, waking me from my spacey trance.

"That probably is in order," I smile. Frag me, I'm scared. "So—your Master ordered you to bring me here then?"

"That's correct," Saber nods.

Saber wears gothic, spiky black armour, reminiscent of Arick's, when I knew him in another time. Indeed, I had to modify Arick's appearance, for various reasons, and he ended up replacing his scratched and worn yellow armour with crimson and black plating. Saber looks a little like that, but Arick was mad at the time and mute. So I can conclude—this Saber's identity is *not*, at least, the Arick which I once befriended. "So, your Master," I repeat myself.

"You won't be seeing her," Saber replies. "She's made an alliance and decided not to assist you in the least, Archer."

"This is a real nightmare," I say, shaking my head. "How long was I out?"

"Not long. Your healing is clearly magically accelerated."

"I am a Servant who won the Holy Grail War and was granted life. Of course I heal quickly. By species, I'm still a Servant, probably."

"Oh, I see now," Saber replies. "So then, you must have a name—"

"Thrian," I say.

"You gave that up quickly," Saber remarks, flabbergasted.

"Nothing to give up when you're not hiding anything," I reply swiftly, giving a tug to a boot that felt a little loose at the ankle. "Tell Vraievel I won't be hostile to her, no matter what."

"That won't prevent her from ordering me to attack," Saber replies. "Know that."

"I'll chalk your survival rate down to the odds of Vraievel doing so then," I laugh.

"You might," Saber laughs back. Honestly, I don't think I mind this Servant. Then again, seeing as Reaver proved Stalker's thesis on this being an Unholy Grail War to be correct, that would mean that Saber is a Villainous Spirit and I should keep my distance. And, since I've a knack for it, figure out who the hell he is.

"So, what, are you taking care of me, Saber?"

"Sorry. Next time we meet, we'll probably be enemies, Thrian."

"Ah, wait, Saber—... ah, he's gone."

Saber faded into Spirit Form. Servants can do that, returning to a form of raw magical energy or something. Honestly, I don't know how it works. When I had a Master, it was easy, but since I became independent, I haven't ever been able to replicate the action. Ah, it just hit me, too—

"Where am I?" I ask the air. Time to talk to myself. When I'm doing detective work and contracts like hunting wraiths and rahkghouls outside the city walls, I talk to myself for a few reasons. It draws creatures towards me, and I retain information more when I say it aloud. "Ah, okay. Let's begin... So I'm in a house that's not my own. And I seem to be alone. I need to find my Servant, Ordra, too. Let's not panic... hopefully, I can establish whose home this is, and figure out my next course of action."

While I have the time, I need to use my surroundings to ensure I make no mistakes. Any time wasted is time I won't get back." I gaze around the room.

"I'm in a room with two beds, and some ornamental things. Man, I really hope this isn't a rental room. If it is, or worse, just some random house Vraievel had me dropped off in, then this investigation will be no help."

I crack my knuckles, my shoulders, my back and my neck. I roll up my sleeves.

"In addition to the general lack of abstract looking things, there appears to be nothing in the room to indicate it has any emotional or sentimental value. There's nary a picture upon the wall, or a flower in a vase – indeed the vases here all contain withered and dead flowers. Such a shame, too."

I move into the hallway.

"Oh, this is tiny," I remark. "The door is about two meters away. The only room that's connected is a large and entirely unused sitting room."

I reach my conclusion rather quickly.

"This is Vraievel's room that she rented or bought when she came to Aoiki city. No doubt about it."

Yeah, it's not like I know Vraievel very well or anything. I mean, I killed her father, so that's something. But even then – only the daughter of Wreax Havoc himself could be as impassive as to not at all decorate a room she was living in for a decent chunk of time.

"Hahahaha..."

I end up chuckling at that. Wreax and I were once friends and we got on well. I knew he was evil in his heart... and at the time, thinking I knew who and what I was, I related to that. I see you juvenile and twisted that was. If I could go back to the Thrian from back then, slapping him hard in the face would be the most satisfying thing ever. *Smack*. Just like that. Ah, I smile just thinking about it. Stupid, stupid – and speaking of stupid, I'm here in Vraievel's room. Bad idea.

"Nothing more to see here, it seems. I need to get my behind in gear and find my Servant. Without me..." I shudder. "Perish the thought."

Strange, though. As I left that small residence in Aoiki, that place of Vraievel's, I felt a light wink of lingering magical energy. I couldn't pin my finger on what it was, though. I guess I'll never know.

I walk outside and the sun is dipping low in the sky. But I have plenty of time to search. I feel another pulsation of magical energy. I've cooperated with the church on a murder case or two. The Church's vaunted Executioners are top tier. Father Crissoul—he's one of them. And while I turned down his proposition earlier on, I do wonder how he's getting on in this Grail War. I look down and to my left. There's a note imbued with magical energy, as I expected. A discrete message left just for me. Of course, Father Crissoul is the writer of this note.

"Archer. It is I, Crissoul. My Servant attacked you without warrant. Please understand that I regret this. I lost my place in the War because of it. I've stepped down from the War. Archer, we know you are no friend of ours. But for the

sake this city we ask that you do not get yourself killed. If you could use me for anything, I would help you and even learn from you. I will be waiting at the Church By Rubble for the end of the Grail War, of your call."

I curse aloud—"Damn." At the end of the note is a smudge in the shape of a fingerprint. It seems as though somebody's ahead of me in reading this note. Look... I hate the Church. And Crissoul probably set that Servant after me. But even if that's true... I don't have the luxury of ignoring help. Even if I end up killing Crissoul myself, it might be worth it to cover him at the church, if he's even still alive.

My Servant is missing, and my body isn't even well at the moment. I can fight, but not for long. I have to go inspect the church. And so I found myself on my way to Jart Street. I find myself running as the night gets darker and the true Night begins. The Servants will be out on the prowl soon. I'm panting for breath, feeling my lungs burn. What's this sudden rush, this sense of urgency? I can't stop moving out of fear that I will die. Do I subconsciously sense that somebody is running after me? I look over my shoulder to see nobody. And yet I feel as if I run down the fool's road. And I'm running so fast I might just trip.

I round the deserted and ghastly street corner to see the church at last. But that's not all I see. I see Stalker again. He's attacking the church. I can handle Stalker, though. He's imposing but I can hope that it's just bravado without backing.

"Stalker!" I shout into the night, taking care my posture is perfect and I summon my sword at my side. "Draft, on." Calad Bolg forms in a yellow glow. "Will you allow me to pass?"

"Why?" Stalker asks me, holding his lance exactly like how I hold my sword. "So you can die with the fools locked up inside? Tell me, was it the victor of the previous Grail War who advised them so?"

"... Who's in there?"

"Servant Assassin, Master of Assassin, and the Master of Reaver."

"Tell you what, Stalker. I killed Reaver. I made your job easier. So letting me out might be a different thing... but will you bid me go inside the church peacefully? I have no wish to fight you until I know where my Servant is."

"... If you say you killed that brutish, eldritch troglodyte, then you may proceed to the church. As you anticipated, leaving will be different. Be warned, victor."

I stroll past him, Calad Bolg in hand, into the church. I took note of my surroundings before entering. This is a totally indefensible position. There's forestry surrounding the east and south walls, and the north and west are totally perceptible to head-on assault. If I am to meet my end, it will be at this church, I'm sure of it. I enter the church and see three figures within it. I bar the door behind me. Weapons rise behind my back. I shake my head.

"Quite an extravagant show of good faith," I laugh.

"Archer won't hurt us," Crissoul say tells the other person.

"Archer?" The 'other person' says. I recognize that voice. "He's a Servant, too? Another one you're supposedly *allied* with?"

"No, no, this is the real hero 'Archer'."

"My *name*," I say, "is Thrion. You will refer to me as such."

I turn and face the facts. That voice I heard indeed belonged person I thought it did. Kjellen Whitehart. The partner of Arick, my old friend. I was her Servant at the start of the last Grail War, and we used our wishes to make it so Arick could be with her. She died in the Holy Grail War. I can't let her die in this one.

"Kjellen Whitehart," I say with a smile. "Believe it or not, there was another Holy Grail War before this 'Unholy' one. And in that one, Arick and I reset the world with our wishes when he won it. We had to do that because you died."

"What?" Kjellen asks.

"Kjelle, I was your Servant. And even when Arick and I reset the world to ensure you and him could be together, I kept my memories, unlike him. You are the reason I took the moniker of 'Archer' after my rebirth."

Father Crissoul nods solemnly.

"So the rumours were true. You were indeed once a Servant."

"Look at this," I say, summoning two copies of the already unwieldy sword, Calad Bolg. "These are my Noble Phantasms. I still am a Servant. So I know how to play this game. Allow me to help you escape from this church, in return for your loyalty in the coming war. If we take a side, then we can kill the true Villainous Spirits who plot only for themselves. Afterward, we may fight. But until then, why do we not help each other?"

Silence meets my remark. Then, the white and blue female warrior, presumable Servant Assassin, speaks up. "Does this Thrion person precede the initiation of the Unholy Grail War?"

"Thrion has been around for the past three hundred years," Crissoul informs her. "So, yes, Assassin, he is no Servant of the Unholy Grail War, but a Servant who won his freedom like a gladiator."

"Indeed. I'm a veteran," I reply.

"We'll do it," Kjellen says. "Maybe you're putting memories in my head, but I feel like I do remember you in some weird way. You deliver me... a vivid sense of cloudy nostalgia. You're presence is paradoxical."

"You're telling me. I saw you die, Kjelle."

After I caught Kjellen Whitehart up to speed, she told me that Arick had visited the city, and I knew then that he was a Master in the war. It terrified me but had to be true. Once the thought was in my head, it was like I could feel it. My friend was a Master and my enemy. Plainly speaking, Arick was probably already dead. But I couldn't – can't – accept that.

"So who's your Servant?" I ask.

"I'm going to the toilet," Crissoul says and leaves.

"Alright, pal," I say, giving the eccentric priest a strange look as he heads into a back room.

"This is Assassin," Kjelle says, indicating at her Servant. "Introduce your true name, Assassin."

Assassin steps towards me. "I recognize you," I say with narrowed eyes. She has armour like Saber's.

"I am Serthyk, the Toa Hagah of Lightning assigned to Makuta Netrux. I became a Villainous Spirit when people thought I was betraying my fellow Toa when the opposite was true."

"The Toa possessed by the Makuta betrayed their brethren, according to the legends," I remark. "So, considering your armour looks like Saber's... he must be Caius, Toa Hagah of Iron."

"My brother is Servant Saber?" She asks, suddenly interested. Electric current flares from the charged spine on her back. "May I talk to him?"

"Who knows?" I reply, looking around for the priest. "Might not get the chance, considering that the priest has gone AWOL. I don't sense his presence in this building..."

"Crissoul is outside?" Kjellen stands up straight. "Assassin, we need to help him. He's done a lot for us."

"Hey—when I was your Servant, the church didn't do a whole lot for us," I roundly interrupt.

"That's wonderfully irrelevant if such a thing occurred in a time which never existed thanks to my boyfriend and you, Thrion!"

"... You're right, I guess. If you're going to fight, I'm going to help you."

Even if Stalker is outside. I don't care. I'll die trying to kill them all to protect my friend's woman.

(ARCHER) Chapter Five: Broken Phantasm

"ARCHER!" Arick, my Master, chases after me. "You've been acting rash today! Where are you running?"

I've done something unforgivable, that's why. I've broken the rules of the Grail War and I, a Servant, have taken on a Servant of my own.

It's an absolute sin. I feel dirty for doing it. But I had to. I had no other choice—no, even if there was, I knew the risks, wouldn't have dared to choose any other path. So now because I am a magus, I could take on a Servant. And my Servant is helpless. I've lost her but feel she went this way. I got Arick back his mace. We made good progress. But today I killed a Master before finding out who their Servant was and it was a terrible mistake. Now I have a responsibility which I wouldn't trade for anything. And I realize that if the other version of me exists—the one who still calls himself Thrion—he must be eliminated immediately. My biggest threat. And because of my Servant, I cannot lose this Unholy Grail War. For their sake.

I round the corner, having reached the church. "Flare, on."

— — — I know what I did. I gave up my humanity and became 'ARCHER'. In return, I grew fully insane and more powerful than I could have ever imagined. So I learned the spell 'Flare' which lets me use all of my abilities excessively in return to be unconscious for the entire day tomorrow. But if I don't end this war during this Night, then there will be no tomorrow to sleep through.

"Archer!" Arick calls my name again and I stop. He catches up to me.

"Hide," I demand of my Master. "Please, Arick. You and I will die if you do not make yourself scarce. I will end this Unholy Grail War at once." I summon my two daggers, Warden and Faithful. I inhale. Arick runs away like I ordered. The hairs on my arms raise. "I am prepared. Stalker! Saber! Control the exits!"

"At once," Stalker replies.

"For now," Saber barks back.

Out of the shadows of the forest before me a man exits, totally unarmed.

"Master of Reaver," I slowly say.

"My Servant is deceased. But I will not let you harm the Master of Berserker nor the Master of Assassin. I have sworn fealty."

"You are at odds, Father. You and your allies will perish here tonight. If your god had been real, he could have watched."

"This church may crumble, but my days as a crusader will never be erased. You are a fellow knight. You will battle me?"

"I will," I reply.

Father Crissoul holds his position. I take a step forward, and then another, and then another. Why is he unarmed? I stop moving. What's his plan? This man was a crusader, a professional. He will not just lie down and die. A sudden and mighty wind blows from the east. That means Saber has entered battle. His sword is active, at least.

I move another step forward. Crissoul doesn't budge. And I see his heartlight begin to glow.

"Nice try," I laugh, about to turn away. And then—

"Archer?" I hear my Servant's voice. Such a dainty, defenceless and frail voice.

"Shielder?!" I look and see her running towards me, from behind Crissoul. Before I can move an inch, Crissoul finishes his charge up.

There's a brief moment in which there's total silence without light. Darkness engulfs the land. And then there's a flash of horrible, holy, cleansing light.

——— I *hate* the church and now I'm being reminded why. Crissoul used his Nova Blast and just killed my Servant. It hits me. Hard. I fall to my knees, my scorched and searing armour sticking to my skin. I bang my fists on the ground. "SHIELDER! SHIELDER!!"

"Damnit!" I feel the wave of anger wash over me. I feel the magic crests on my arms light ablaze in green flame. Green, the colour of my magic crests when full of negative emotions such as anger born of envy. I am about to kill everything inside and out of the church and level this entire place and win the Grail and wish my Servant back to life.

(Thrian) Chapter Six: The Warden and Faithful

"Sister!!" Caius shouts at the top of his breath. "Do not ally yourself with the Master of Berserker! It shall doom you! Sister, I have saved you before!"

I step forward. "How do you know who my Servant is? Berserker... if you saw her... then does Vraievel not recognize her?!"

Caius takes a stride toward me. "My Master hasn't seen your Servant, but our allied Master, Arick, said your Servant was a Berserker."

"Your Master—" I am cut off by Serthyk.

"Caius, brother..." Serthyk charges up the bolts of rabid, erratic electrical impulses emanating from her hand. "I see you've kept your delusion well-fed."

"Sister, don't make me..."

I step back. "Thrian?" Kjellen calls my name.

"Get behind me," I demand. "Get behind me right now. If anything happens to Serthyk, *run*."

"Thrian..."

"Kjelle—Arick will be destroyed without you by his side." Her eyes widen at my mentioning of his name. "Just get to the church if anything happens." My voice laden with conviction, Kjelle can do nothing but nod. I exhale a short and heavy breath, a weight lifted from my shoulders. "Saber!" I call from the back, forming Eclipse in my hands and drawing it lightning fast. I must protect Serthyk.

"Thrian," Saber replies. He projects Acclaim, his legendary scythe. "Do not come between the dragon and his wrath."

"You have not slain dragons like I have," I reply to him. "I am the knight who protects the people of Aoiki. My blades will slay fiends who will lead to them peril. My ideals cannot be blunted. My heart was forged by tribulation and refined by battling countless enemies. Shattered is the glass of thy heart—for I am the bone of thy sword."

I let loose a light-filled arrow. Saber summons his Hagah shield and it shatters.

"What?!" He exclaims.

"Eclipse's special power. The bow was named so because it's ironic: Eclipse's arrows have a tiny surface area, no matter how large the projectile. All the mass of an arrow and its velocity... all focused on one truly miniscule point? *Nothing* can withstand a shot from Eclipse, the Bow of Shattering which belonged to... me, Heroic Spirit Thrian."

Caius takes a quick step back. "I... I don't want this," he informs me. I narrow my eyes in response.

"I know," I reply. "Neither do I."

"Thrian, he's not able to say no," Serthyk informs me. As if I don't already know that, too.

"Caius... If you wish to live..." I focus on him, my eyes getting even sharper. "Make it so."

I pull Eclipse again. Caius draws upon his magical energy supply to bring back his Hagah shield. Serthyk's hands flare again. "Please," I hear her whisper under her breath. But this is a Grail War. The fact that both of you were fated to fight was most unfortunate. But that's just—how it is. I remember a sombre stanza of a poem which reminds me of this predicament. Vraievel, his Master, has clearly ordered him to attack us. I whisper my own incantation under my breath to heighten my senses...

"Draft, on."

"Fine," Saber relents. "I understand how it is..."

I sigh with relief and my bow disappears.

"... Sister."

My eyes open wide. It's like trying to stop a predestined event— by the time I reached for Kjelle, it was too late. Caius' hand had already reached forward. And Acclaim in his other hand, he swung it around as he used his iron powers to pull Serthyk – before I could grab her – by the armour over to him and she was sliced in half—

— — — and she was just sliced in half. Just like that. A snap of the fingers. That's all it took, and my ally was again gone. Just like how I knew when Crissoul disappeared that it'd be the last I'd ever see of him.

I can't do anything but stare blankly at Saber. If I charge at him in rage, I'll die just like her. He'll kill me—shred me with impunity. If I stay still, I could die just as easily. There's no other option but to talk. I do wonder, though, where Stalker is? I ignore that thought. Where is Kjelle? I push that aside too. Are those fighting noises from Kjelle or from Crissoul? They all get flushed from my mind. I calm down during this pause and find out I was breathing with my mouth through gritted teeth. I straighten myself up.

I scratch my chin. "Haven't you done enough? Or do you want to fight me?"

Saber calls upon his sword and spins it, pointing it at me like a rapier. It's as good enough an answer as any, so I guess I'll attempt to stall him. If I fail, I'll have to rework my plans.

"You still serve the Servant Archer, then..." I shake my head and he takes a step towards me.

“Summon your weapon!” He demands in his gruff voice. This knight is far too honourable for what he is. What he really is.

I ask of him: “You *are* Caius, the Toa Hagah or Iron, aren’t you?”

Saber’s arm goes a little limp. “So we’re talking now?” He asks me.

“Honestly, I’m just waiting for you to pull some trick on me when I have my guard down, like legends tell you would have. You were known for your dishonourable ways. So, what is it? That sword of yours, do you turn the hilt and does its blade spring from its base to fly at me?”

“You say it in a tone of jest but you know exactly how the weapon works, Archer.”

“I am not Archer,” I tell him. “I’m Thrian. So, Saber. Why this pretence of honor?”

“I died not knowing, myself. But indeed, while I’m regarded as a hero, my dishonourable means led to me being treated in death as a Villainous Spirit. But perhaps... perhaps I can redeem myself, fighting for the Servant Archer.”

I wince, recoil, step backward all in one move. “What is it? I do not point my spring-propelled blade at you.” I gulp.

Did he say he...?

— — — He did. He said he wished to redeem himself. “Y-you...” I stammer on the words. How do I even put this? It’s hard enough to even conceptualize. “You show a capacity to remove your status as a Villainous Spirit?!” I manage to get those unexpected words out.

“Of course,” Saber nods firmly. “We all do. I know you’re a good man, Thrian, and you weren’t summoned in this War, that’s for sure. You’re certainly doing all of this to protect your Servant.” Saber brings his sword back up. “So drop your weapons and the Servant Archer will have mercy on you.”

I summon my lancelike rapier, Calad Bold. “Why should he, if he tries to kill young women?”

“Because, Thrian—Servant Archer is just like you. He’s enlisted our help to fight with him, true. And he’s certainly classed as a Villainous Spirit. But *no one* if fighting *for* him.”

Saber’s sword spins twice and vanishes, appearing in his other hand. He passes it over and back between his two hands, tossing it like a juggling ball. He knows his own sword’s weight well, but I feel confident that I know several of my Potential Phantasms better. I feel a chill. The Night is cold.

“Saber! If we’re the same, help *me*! Archer’s motivations cannot be as pure as mine!”

A blue flame stretches down from my magic crest up the entire length of my lance. “My Servant— I just want this girl to have a chance at life! She was robbed of hers when she was young! So tell me Archer’s is more right than that!”

“It is,” Saber says, firing off the blade of his spring-loaded sword. He throws the hilt in a trajectory to the right, jumping high all the while.

It's a simple strategy. Saber threw the hilt to stun me with a hit if I dodged to my left of the sword blade. That hilt is extremely likely to be rigged with some sort of explosives. If I hesitate, the sword blade will take me out. If I dodge to the right of the sword, Saber will fall down from high up and summon another sword to take me down. It's a *great* strategy. Saber is an opponent who will give me severe difficulty. Vraievel, you'd do well to treat this man to a date. Gods know that if nobody else, you will win this War.

There's nothing I can do. I'm totally cornered. I can't outrun that blade. I won't be able to raise my arm fast enough to block Saber's next, death-from-above style attack. That hilt is definitely armed with something that will kill me. I feel that grim coldness again. Suddenly, I find my mind is racing. Everything around me has turned to slow-motion, except for my thoughts. But it's the other way around, I know. I decide my game plan. It's cold—hopefully it's cold enough for this stupid plan to work and for me to not die.

I roll to my left and try to Draft a shield in case the sword blade gets me before I can dodge. As I foresaw, the blade cuts me a gash in my side as the shield struggles to materialize. To think this was the shield of the hero Nuparu. I feel my body stretch in a terrible way as I try to both roll from the flying blade and my body naturally reacts to getting stung by a sword. My heart aches and feels like it's being pulled from two diagonal angles. I raise the shield to block the hilt coming toward me. It collides with the golden, circular shield's rim and flies a few feet backwards before exploding in a much smaller radius than I initially thought it would. A wind blows suddenly.

The Night is cold enough to neuter the effectiveness of explosive reactions, thankfully. Next, I hold my position for a split second and then dodge when Saber flies down, striking the pavement with a newly cast sword. I bash him as hard as I can with the shield and roll back and back away.

"So you're able to alter your course of flight mid-air, is it? ... No, it's not that... That wind a moment ago was made by you!"

"Astute observation," Saber remarks, running his armoured gloves off of his fine silver sword and making a terrible sound. "Thrian, this is your last chance. Just tell me when you wish to surrender..."

Saber walks towards me through a thick, black fog gathering behind him. "But it's not the wind which you control..." I continue to decode his powers. "It's the air itself, through a series of spells, isn't it? That's why you're upping the toxicity levels of the air around you, why you can jump so high and why you can intimidate your foes by making the air around them unsettlingly chilly..."

I put my hand to my side and with my other throw the shield at him, which he violently deflects into the distance with a sharp swipe of his sword, and Saber begins to chant a spell while rubbing the sword with some oil. "Arise and bid me strike a match, and strike another till time catch... Should the conflagration catch, run till all the sages know. Bid me strike a match—" Saber's sword is lit ablaze in a huge orange fire— "AND BLOW!!"

And a mighty wind begins to blow at his back. I reDraft my sword Calad Bolg and prepare to fight. I know that there's only one way to win this fight. A spell I could never master. But if desperation calls for it, I'll have to manage it, I have to try to control it... Here goes everything. For Spring.

"Flare, on."

My whole body creaks all of a sudden. It's as if screws are being driven into my veins and arteries. It's like a wyvern egg has hatched inside my heart and is pulling at it, plucking and biting. I feel my muscles break down and reform. I almost fall down with the pain. My magic crest feels like it somehow bends within my arm. My nerves flay about, hurting me like a cat-o-nine-tails. And then it crawls up my spine — it's like a hot iron rod is being inserted into the core of my spine. I feel myself become nigh indestructible at the cost of my mind. I feel myself step through my old, vulnerable self. And come out the other side—and I activate my true Noble Phantasm: *The Knight's Nightmare*. "Haah, huuuh..." I breathe in and out loudly. Maybe it's the only sound I can manage to make. I feel my hand reach up to cover one of my eyes. My right eye... I can feel it. I am all powerful.

"Your eye is green... it's as if you're half-way to becoming him," Saber says, muttering something I don't understand and much less care about. He readies his devious sword. "Well, at least in this state. I can still respect you as a warrior, at least! Very well, come on, this is the end!"

At his blessing, I begin by Drafting a huge sword, the legendary Great Knife of Denvor. It's double my body length. My hand can barely wrap around the hilt. I let out an animalistic, savage grunt. I do not mind. I am an instrument of destruction at this time, a tsunami no flood measures can hinder. I swing at Caius and he blocks it with his Hagah shield. He hits me with his flaming sword.

It clangs off of my reinforced body and I am pushed aside, and tumble back upright.

"What on Onius?!"

"Onius?" I mutter in a dark voice unbecoming of me. "*Nothing* on this planet can save *you*."

I jump at him, summoning Calad Bolg. He deflects it and the illusion shatters into energy. I jump backwards and summon Eclipse, loosing a powerful bolt at him mid-air, shattering his Hagah shield again, and then moving in with a new sword.

We begin anew. I restart my unending conquest. I summon some ungodly sword. I swing it at him. I chip at his armour. I manage to gash his knee. He carries on but with a strong limp. I wither Saber down. His flaming sword may be strong but I *am* infinite swords. It's going to break and kill me and I feel pain with every movement but I will kill him before I die. I feel my vision blur. I lose sight entirely. I flash back to Reaver. I'm reminded of Gáe Gorm and summon it. It goes through Saber's chest. I felt where he was and aimed for that which he was powered by and killed him like I flicked off a light switch in his body, as if Gáe Gorm had reached in and pushed it down. Saber vanishes into thin air and I roar with dark laughter. I turn my attention to the other battle noises.

I run to them. I feel myself dying, shredding, the nerves exploding, telling me to stop. I can't. I can't. I can't stop. I have to stop them. I have to. Ordra is out there somewhere and she needs my help. I find the noises and see Stalker shrug Kjellen off of his lance. She was engaged trying to get back into the church. Now she's dead at its door. My shoulders move of their own accord and my whole body twitches and convulses for a moment. The muscles in my wrist start to flex spontaneously. I cannot stop them. But I can stop Stalker.

"Victor?" He calls me that name again and it angers me so I charge him with Gáe Gorm. He dodges it and breaks it by hitting downward with his own lance. Mine is brittle but typically unstoppable. It takes much energy to summon. So instead I Draft my Mileduithe. I Draft two of them for good

measure. They are my faithful wardens. I understand that and mentally thank them. I slam into the side of Stalker and cut into his shoulder, ripping it upwards. I take the other and stab into his side.

When Stalker goes to spear me with his lance I think that I need to teleport behind him. And I teleport behind him, using a magic I didn't even know was confirmed to exist. But now I know. Until my brain stops working. I can't handle this pain anymore and my mind is breaking down. So is my body. It's like my wattage is too high. I'll explode. Short circuit. I'm going to die fighting, though. I am going to die standing up. I feel Stalker turn around and fix his lance through my right shoulder while I dozed off.

But that pain is irrelevant to the other pains. So I move past it, crawl on the lance, watch Stalker's horror as I kill him with my daggers of a thousand cuts. I kill him rapidly with the promised two thousand cuts from the daggers of the lightning assassin, Latroka. I collapse finally. The Servants are dead. The Servants are dead. If I can make it to the Grail, I'll win.

And then I remember the sixth and seventh. Archer and one other.

"And where are *you* going?"

I hear a noise from behind me. I struggle off my knees, get up and face the speaker. It was my own voice. I knew that. I turn and see myself. Except unlike my red eyes and heartlight, he has green eyes and heartlight. I feel the effects of the 'Flare' spell have worn off. My magic energy is critically low. At this rate, I'll simply fade away just like Saber and Stalker and Reaver did when I killed them all.

"Who are you?" I ask him, my brain not prioritizing things right. This person is important. This is the man who will try to make me bow. This man is — my enemy. I have to kill this man. That man begins to speak.

"When Thrion went insane, he created an alter ego for himself to pin the blame on that person. He called it 'Archer'. I am the personification of all of your evils, and you're adding to it with every minute. Killing a misunderstood hero like Toa Caius? Did you even know Gasai, Servant Stalker? And you let Kjellen Whitehart die before your eyes? The woman you reset the world to protect. You — Archer. I am all evils of your world. I hereby introduce myself as the Master of a dead Servant Shielder. Now, call upon your Servant so we can fight."

I do so. I hold up my deadened arm — I can't feel it — and try to use my Command Spell to call Berserker; Ordra; Spring.

"Berserker! Come to me!"

The silence that fills the air sends a chill down my spine.

I gulp.

"Berserker! Get over here and help me!"

I try again. Still no result. And then my tired mind comes to terms with the fact. "She is dead," I say out loud. The other me, ARCHER, nods slowly. The Command Spells slowly recede from my hand, all

of them never to be used. I wince as my magic supply lessens again and it causes me severe pain. I know the pain is bad. But the other ones — so I can barely feel this one. It'll have to get in line.

"Vraievel left her house with you and Ordra sleeping in it. I told her I'd found her sister so she gave me her loyalty. I snuck into her room, where Saber had placed you and, unbeknownst to Vraievel, unbeknownst to you, I killed Ordra. And until now, you were none the wiser, Archer."

"I am NOT Archer! I am Thrian! You are Archer!" That's what I shout, anyway, even if I'm no longer sure, or even lucid. Am I delirious? Almost certainly. From exhaustion. I'm constantly slurring my words because I am perpetually correcting myself from listing over. If I fall, I'll die for sure. I might just die anyway.

"Can you prove it?" ARCHER Drafts an axe and stands ready to fight.

And I call upon the magic circuits in my Magic Crest to help me. "Flare, on," I say to myself. I feel pain—

And then I don't feel a thing. My arm goes limp and then my entire body hits the ground. I feel myself enter what must be a coma. That doesn't make sense though. I can see and hear. I'm just paralyzed. Like a vegetable.

"You *are* Thrian," The ARCHER confirms, "because Thrian was too weak to protect anything. I would never be so foolish as to overload my magic circuits like that... Ahaha, ahahahahahaha! Heeheeheeheehee! You total fool, you stupid varlet! It's unbelievable that I set up this huge, elaborate conglomerate of other Servants *just* to take down Thrian of Aoiki, and then you fall down and die right before my eyes after I hardly said so much as a single word to you! And in the end, you still couldn't save anybody, not even your pitiful, dying body! Ahahaha! You've fallen far, haven't you?"

He's right. I had so many friends that just died. Even Crissoul. We could have been friends.

"Oh," ARCHER continues, "But bless your little heart if you didn't try! I'll give you that much, you tried. Take solace in knowing that you died with honor... even if it was an honor I'll never forget and laugh at when it comes to mind."

I could have had a friend. Somebody to talk to. To laugh with.

Vraievel might be dead. Or I will be. Either way, I'll never see her again.

Yeah. I really messed up, as always. He's right. He's right. He's right. But he's evil. So while I don't have to agree with him... "I was... never... wrong," I force the words out of my aching body that just wants to die. My Magic Crest imploded, my nervous system overloaded. I'm shutting down. I'm practically already dead, but my magical energy supply is keeping me alive like life support. I'm pretty much dead already. No lances in trees, no getting saved, I am going to die. I can't even breathe. I have no heartbeat. My heartlight and eyes extinguished with my Magic Crest's death.

I'll never have a friend. I lived and died alone. Even now. That's when it hits me so hard it almost makes me want to laugh: I'm only here with myself.

“But this battle has been an utter nuisance,” ARCHER informs me. “It ruined my plans completely. Do you know that the priest suicide bombed my Servant? She was a Shielder, Thrian! A harmless Shielder!”

That is most certainly wrong of Crissoul. Probably. I don’t know the circumstances. How can I judge?

“So... as sorry as I am, I have to leave you here. I know what I must do. Indeed, when you see me again, I hope you kill me. Isn’t it funny how villains are often portrayed as egotistical tyrants when all I wanted was to protect people and am full of self-loathing? ... Hmm... Dying men usually make for more interesting conversations. I’m going now.”

But he doesn’t. He doesn’t he doesn’t he doesn’t. The boot raises and comes down towards me and—

(ARCHER) Chapter Seven: Extreme Countermeasures

I put Thrian, my true self, out of his (my?) misery. I walk over him and into the church. I walk up past the rows of disturbingly pristine seats and past the altar, and remove the carpet from behind it. I hear footsteps behind me. I open it up and see a simple chalice. The Unholy Grail, unlike the ‘Holy Grail’, actually does have a physical form, but only Servants can handle it. I knew what my wish would have been—to give my Servant life. And yet... I will go insane (more insane) if I know that Kjellen Whitehart lies deceased. So I have no choice. I am still the man who remade the world once to save her for Arick.

Speaking of Arick, as I fondle the Unholy Grail, he comes across her body. He looks over at me, at the wounds which look like my shortwords made them. So Thrian learned to Draft the Warden and Faithful in his final moments? Interesting. He must have stabbed the already deceased Kjellen while brawling madly with Stalker. It wasn’t a bad kill. But Kjellen cannot die. Neither can my Servant. It’s not like a wish can save two beings. To my knowledge, at least. But it’s not worth the risk of trying. But there is one way I can fix this, bring them back to life.

— Rather, it involves them never dying at all. So I speak to the Grail:

“I am Servant Archer, victor of the Unholy Grail War.”

Arick runs up the altar, charging at me with his mace. I didn’t expect him to turn on me *this* quickly, but I suppose he does suspect I murdered his girlfriend.

“And I wish to start again from the first Night. Right after I slew Sir Sigurd II, the first Master of Berserker before Thrian.”

And I feel it all collapse, the time and universe around me. As Arick runs towards me and the entire space where we exist turns to black. I feel the first strike of his mace, too. And then I feel it again and again and again. I know that when I die I will wake back up in a reset world. The last piece of the first puzzle is in place.

Your move, Thrian. This is still anyone’s game. Or rather, it is about to be, was, and is anyone’s game.

And so were many tragedies of Fate sealed when my voice rang out like a raven's shrill cry, deeper and deeper—

— into the night.

I feel myself being recalled back to that first night where I chased off Saber, who stabbed Arick. I will claim my wish from this Grail once more.

(Ordra) Chapter Zero: Point of Inclusion

— I believe it was in a column of orange light in which I appeared before my first Master.

"I am Ordra, the Servant Berserker. Tell me, are you my Master?"

I asked that to the knight in blue and silver armour. His fine steel shone like my whitmett plating. I was reminded of the whitmett mines back where I was born and remember my last moments at the hand of a terrible cave-dwelling monster. *That's right. Sister could still be looking for me. I have my wish now.* I thought those kinds of things.

"Yes," the tall knight said. "I am Sir Sigurd the Second, your Master. When I found your sword..."

He handed me back the Ash'rado. The real one, not the one I feel like I'm able to project into physical form with my mind. They're separate entities. Versions of the same thing, though.

"I had wondered if you'd be Saber or another class. Looks like I've found my answer."

But I didn't believe it. "You summoned me to sate your idlemost curiosity?"

"No, no. Of course not. You see, my intention is to win this Unholy Grail War for my country and for Faiklen. My people, the Aterra, cannot live amongst the Terran here in harmony. The opposite is also true. I wish to put an end to such passive strife."

"That's quite a noble wish," I replied. "Does that make you a Toa?"

"Indeed. I am the pupil of Klorin the Ranger and an Aterra of the island of Nui, making me a Toa. I want your warriors, like Archer, and mine, like Roark and Ajax, to get along."

I perished the thought that he was insincere. This was nice.

"That's nice. I'll help you," I told him. It was a magical moment. I was struck by this noble knight. I wasn't smitten by him of course. But I was certainly full of admiration. He was a man who has come from distant lands to make wrongs right. He was the epitome of a hero, wasn't he? A living legend in the making.

"Ahaha," he laughed. "Thank you, Berserker."

I smiled and so did Sigurd II. This peace lasted not a moment longer, of course. Steams flow. Rivers course ever onwards. And rapids—rapids are always there, even if you can't see them yet. Worry not of missing them: they will make their selves known.

I'll never forget (not actually true, I soon will) how the hilt of a katana broke through the wall. It was a cheap wall, I just noticed.

I held my sword at the ready. It was out of character for me, but I had an instant connection with my true Master, the likes of which I could not forge initially with Thrian, my current Master. But in death, I see all.

A green eye poked through the hole in the wall. "The Seventh," the intruder hissed. "Apologies."

"Master," I said. "Keep behind me."

"... Okay!" He said, and unsheathed his longsword anyway. He did, however, get behind me. It was the arrow that came first. That's how I knew we were doomed. That single arrow bolt—I could feel it. It shattered my armour as the metal bearings were being sheared off entirely. It blasted the whitmett steel off of my under-suit. And the worst part was that I knew that the warrior who had fired that bolt at me —

— had held back his power.

"Master, this is the end." I told him. "I'm so sorry." I wanted to get this over with. I nearly surrendered. I wanted to cry and then be slain. But before I could...

"No," Sigurd said. "I'll protect you. That's what any good Master does. They help their Servant. I'll fight for you until the end... so don't give up on me either, Berserker!"

Not to make excuses for myself, but I am still a young girl, even if I was considered a prodigy among the Havoc clan. So I was intimidated even beyond his words.

"You're scared," he said with a sad smile. "I see. There is a man in this city who looks like the one attacking us. His name is Archer. He's a friend of mine. Go see him and he'll help you."

"Master," I begin.

"Run," he says, using a Command Spell.

My legs moved on their own. They ducked out from under the assailant. But I'd never forget his look. There was, something about him... he, deep down inside... had a dying light. A certain shred of warmth. And I know that... ARCHER... he let me go.

And it was the single part of that night I could remember. I felt it when my Master died. Felt my energy drain and drain while I ran frantically through the night. And the thoughts dripped away with my body. I felt myself lightening. I could run faster because there was less substance to move, less mass. I was fading away, my energy supply cut off; I was vanishing from this world. And when I stopped at Thrian's door... it wasn't because I wanted to.

Somebody, maybe the gods or maybe my Master, had carved that inscription into the stone. That picture. How could I not stop and stare? And that's why I didn't look away from Thrian straight away. But I knew when he spoke that there was much more of that 'warmth' I had identified. So maybe he was the twin of the one who killed my Master and could have snapped me like a twig... but he wasn't

him. And that was enough to make me, desperate, grab his outstretched hand. I accepted the contract he assumed I was going to propose.

— “So, looks like you’ve come to the right place, huh?”

I had lost all my memories but that of the one who wasn’t Thrian. And so, unknowingly, we took the other’s hands in our own and strolled... right into the night.

(Thrian) Chapter Eight: By The Bow

Waking up, I stretch hard and yawning wide, I manage to slap myself off the floor. I need practice my Drafting spell. The vase on the counter, perhaps?

A floral patterned vase, light lilac with purple... petunias, it seems. I focus hard. I drag energy out of my own body and shape it into a clone vase with my brain. My mind is a forge of unlimited weapons.

— Or so I thought. “Aaah!” I panic when my Magic Crest doesn’t activate. In its place is a searing pain, like as if the canals that scars form in one’s skin had been filled with tiny streams of lava. Maybe— hopefully I’m getting old. Maybe I lost my magical powers somehow. Before I get more worked up, I need to think about this logically. My arms hurt, as if I’d worked out all day and night yesterday. But that’s not the case. I didn’t need to do much heavy lifting and the forest job I took was easy, I only had to *scare* off a few bandits. Then again, I did have to investigate the night up until the late hours of the morning. Nobody has been going outside. So what hurt my arm? Why am I so exhausted I cannot perform magic? And that pain... it’s like my memory’s become dislodged. Ah, there was... something, wasn’t there? Something which made my arm like this... Damn, what was it?

But there’s a knock on the door. And I move across the house to answer the caller. Stood in my doorway is a pretty girl in a white cloak. She’s young and smaller than me. She speaks—

“Are you my Master?”

“... I am,” I say, feeling compelled, like I must. What is this vague... feeling? Is it of reunion? “My name is Archer.”

“Archer? I can’t call you that. I need to call you by a different name so we don’t get confused with the Servant Archer.”

— Snap. My mouth, dumbfounded at the flooding of memory moves by itself, mumbling that cursed title back to her. I relay her words: “*Servant* Archer?”

— — — That’s right. I remember it all. This girl, Ordra, who is Servant Berserker and my Servant in the Unholy Grail War. Gasai. Caius. Vraievel. Phantom. Serthyk. ‘Shielder’.

ARCHER.

And I vividly recall in a wonderful epiphany how that version of me had two magic crests. One on each arm. I shouldn’t be alive right now if my right hand’s magic crest is gone... but I seem to have two magic crests, with the left one simply not activated. That may mean that my right arm is just sort of hibernating, or resting, or even just like my left one; inactive. Turned off. So if I train, I might

be able to get both of them activated. I can fight back against ARCHER. I can turn the tide and win, and avenge myself and my Servant.

"Okay," I say. "I'm going to explain it to you, Servant Berserker. Come inside. Your name is Ordra Havoc, daughter of Wreax Havoc and younger sister of Vraievel Havoc..."

I bring my Servant inside while I tell her about my bizarre experience with the Unholy Grail War. Only this Servant 'Shielder' is a mystery. The rest I understand and know how to bring on my side. My Servant and I will create a team. And with that, we will take revenge...

... And I will kill Shielder myself with my own hands. For Ordra and other others. For ARCHER.

"Your name is Ordra Havoc," I tell my Servant. Gone is Spring, but when we make it out the other side of this war – and this time we will – I'll tell her all about it. I'll be able to. I'll have the time. "You are the daughter of Wreax Havoc and inherited the half-god's powers of battle. You wield his mighty sword, too, the blade that was said to cut other blades down the middle, the Ash'rado. Due to your heritage you are eligible to be classified as a Villainous Spirit in the Unholy Grail War. You are Servant Berserker and your sister, Vraievel Havoc is in this city, looking for you. I..."

There's too much to explain.

"... I recognize you."

And then I do something I told myself I wouldn't do. I get on one knee and bow.

"I am Thrian, the Archer of Aoiki who killed your father, Wreax Havoc. I beg your forgiveness and wish to make it up to you and your sister through granting you your life by winning this Unholy Grail War."

But that's okay. I'm hardly the same person I was when I made that vow. It's practically null and void. After all... technically, I'm not even a magus anymore. I look at my arm. How will I go about fixing that status? How will I become a magus again? How can I learn to use Flare without killing myself, like ARCHER can?

My Servant hasn't said a word. "You know a lot." Nothing about when 'wolves don't get down often from trees', however.

"So I do."

"Oh... you can get up now," she says shyly. "I don't really get why I would be upset."

I stand back up. "It's not that I thought you'd get upset, just that I'd be very dead if you were to be angry... Berserker."

"Archer..."

"Thrian, please," I smile. I'm happy now that I remember the horrible moment when I had to come to terms quickly with losing Spring. But now she's here. That will not happen twice.

"Can you take me to my sister?"

It's day time. I know where Vraievel is, loosely. Her house, probably, at this stage. I open the door to my house and look outside. There was silence. "I could never foresee this when I lay upon the ground with blood in my eyes and no light in my heart." I look down to the crystal in my chest. My people call it a "heartlight". There are another species other than us terran who live across the sea, called the Aterra. They have similar crystals with similar functions. But theirs are mechanical, like a reactor to perform as their heart. In the past, we warred with them over our crystals, the enemy's was always highly valued in the home land. We, however, could live without ours, although it stripped magus of their powers. I'll never forget the horror of when my heartlight and eyes went out. So that's why when I opened my door and saw the glistening sun and heard the silence of the early morning... I felt like I was truly breathing again for the first time. Even before I remembered my death.

"Come on," I say, turning to my Servant. "We'll have to track her down," I smile. "But I have a rough idea."

I walked through the still-moist cobblestone streets of Aoiki. This Grail War has really made me realize how much of a home this place is to me. I can't believe it. I wasn't born nor raised here. So why... is this place my home? I don't lament on it. There are much more important things to focus on.

We make it to the house I woke up in – in a future that I will ensure doesn't exist – Vraievel's house. I knock on the door. "She's in here," I tell my Servant.

"Thrian... you're grinning."

I... I am. I *am* grinning. Am I looking forward to seeing Vraievel? Is this just me... wanting to make it up to her? To show her I'm a hero – so of course I want to help her and Ordra? The door opens.

It's not Vraievel at all. It's... not Vraievel. It's not Saber, either.

I find myself staring deeply into a horrid, green eye. Of course it wasn't Vraievel's room. Vraievel would have had a picture of Wreax. Or at the very least, Ordra. Her personal belongings. I'm sure she has Wreax's weapons and Ordra's. So of course it would be his room. Of course. It was barren because he did not begin life with personal belongings. He didn't have a life. He was born of my rejection of my true self. He was a projection of all my shortcomings as a hero. As such, he was a Villainous Spirit. And so...

"Berserker..."

I will use my first Command Spell and begin the final battle with ARCHER, the man who killed me once.

Kill me once, shame on you.

Kill me twice, shame on me.

"Wait, Thrian. You remember, don't you?" I take a step back. But I know his reach is as endless as mine. Range isn't a problem. We're—knights of bow. "Let me show you why I was going to win the Unholy Grail War."

"Why should I ever look?" I hold up my hand, showing off my Command Spells.

"We will have to fight; yes but there's no reason to begin until I make my motives clear to you!"

"Like hell!" I reply sharply.

"Thrian?" Both of us turn to my Servant, Ordra. "What's going on? ... Where's my sister?"

ARCHER sighs and rests a hand on his hip, looking at me with distaste. That's when I look beyond his figure, past the doorframe. My eyes widen at who I see. It's Arick Emiya with a fresh set of Command Spells. I have to ignore that for now. But how can I keep both Kjellen and Arick safe?

"Thrian is your Master. I am a product of his existence. My name is ARCHER and I am the Servant of the same class. That's all you need to know, Servant of Sigurd."

"Ah!" Ordra gasps and hides behind me. I glare at ARCHER.

"You'd better get to talking if you're talking," I say, giving him his time.

"I'll show you my Servant, since I've seen yours," ARCHER smiles sadly. "Only fair."

"Bring her out here, then. I'm not stepping foot inside that room."

It's quickly become a focal point of my shame. "Understandable," the ARCHER replies with a not of comprehension. He disappears.

"Stay on your guard," I tell my Servant.

"Okay," she replies. "Thrian... how do you know everything?"

What charming innocence.

"I don't, my dear girl," I smile sadly at her. She lets her eyes drop to the floor. In all the week I first knew Ordra, I never once found out... "What do you want, actually?"

She looks up at me, surprised. Here's a young girl, trapped in time. Her ambitions are unknown. But I chose to fight for her. Why? I guess I'm still a hero, whether I like it or not. I'm not like my enemy. ARCHER. Although I admit he has a twisted sense of honor. Still. He kills mercilessly all the same. He is the part of me I have forsaken. To climb the metaphorical mountain range before me I'll have to tread on him. I won't regret that; killing that part of me. That darkness that the light in me will overcome. Heroes never get defeated by villains. Human good triumphs over human badness. This, I am sure of, is no illusion.

"I... want..." Ordra thinks for a moment, and then kicks a small pebble with a white boot.

"Never mind," I interrupt her thinking. Her white boot stops dead. "Sorry, that was a stupid question. For a young woman like you to have some sort of big ideal... it's not exactly something everybody develops at an early age, is it? Not even all of us run on idealism. Maybe I'm just weird."

For me, it was idealism that propelled me forward. But I'm a special case. A headcase, even.

"I just want to be happy," Ordra says earnestly. I shouldn't really be surprised. But even though it's a standard response, I understand it. "That's it, I guess."

"Alright," I reply. "That's something I can do for you."

"Here," ARCHER calls out, close to the doorframe. "Here you go, Thrian. This is why I killed you, and your Servant, and was about to kill the rest of them if you hadn't done it for me."

He brings out the seventh Servant. I was unprepared and shocked. How was I supposed to bring myself to defeat this? How could I steel myself to kill *that*? Would I leave this War alive? Can I uphold my promises? What was I even going to say next?

Words were unneeded. I just... didn't want this. I could barely fathom it.

"How... how... What Master did you kill to obtain this Servant?" I ask the ARCHER.

"This Servant was given to me free of cost by a cowardly Master. *Take it*, he told me, and wished me luck. He's fled the country out of fear. His name was Davant, if I remember correctly? Quite an unbecoming name, funnily."

"And this one... this Servant..." I can hardly believe it's a Servant. "What's her name?"

"Talía," ARCHER said. The tiny little girl hiding behind him quivers. Her prosthetic legs are shaped like sickles. They're ancient and they don't look safe or comfortable. "She is Villainous Spirit Talía, although how she came to have that moniker is unknown, like her origins."

"Talía." Ordra repeats the name. She looks distant. "Talía..." Does it seem familiar to her?

I take a step forward and crouch down to look her in the eye and say her name, myself; "Talía..."

"Get close to her, Thrian. Look at what that maniac priest exploded last we met."

"Oh gods..."

"Enough to make any man believe they exist. Even you and me. And that they *hate* us." The little girl's protection was his objective? "Should we talk inside? I promise not to have any tricks."

I shut my eyes in order to see. And I think with impartial clarity, setting aside my emotions and tangled passions in favour of what needs to be done.

"No," I reply. "There's nothing to speak of," I say definitively, with my eyes closed.

"But—"

"I said there's *nothing* to speak of! I know what I must do." I open my eyes and stare dead into his. "I will burn you down to the ground, that won't change. I still don't even understand you, ARCHER. You're somehow a different version of me. But I hate you, and I can't stand your very existence. I've heard that once the World detects two versions of the same entity, it acts to kill them. Maybe it is messing with my mind to make me eliminate you: but I feel a deep-set animosity even right now. Or maybe I'm just taking traits from Berserker," I say, looking at Ordra.

"It's probably both," ARCHER shrugs. "I can tell you I'm from a universe where you killed your sister and took her power."

"I don't have a sister," I reply to him, sharply.

"... We have two sisters and one brother," he tells me with a confident smirk and nod. "Where *did* you come from?"

"... I don't know." I realize at that moment I haven't thought about my origins since I remembered my name I don't even know where my Noble Phantasms came from.

"This isn't relevant."

ARCHER is probably right on that one. Talia tugs at ARCHER's cloak suddenly. I look back to Ordra, and she puts one leg back slightly and digs in her heel.

"What's wrong?" I ask her.

"Master, we should go," Ordra cautions.

"Thrian—let's not go killing each other. We could fight together and then have an honourable duel after the War," ARCHER tells me.

"Not a chance. I'll kill you, and then ensure Talia's safety."

"Don't do that!" The little girl finally speaks. "Don't hurt him, leave him alone, you stupid bully!"

I'm taken aback. She displays feverous loyalty to him. I shudder deeply, my motivation shaken.

"Hey pal. Let's not be so rude, right?" Ordra says, crouching down low to meet Talia's gaze. "My Master is a good man. He likes to help people. He wants to help you too, that's all. And he's a little easily angered," she smiles charmingly.

"N-no, no! Go away, I don't *want* your help!" Talia says as she curls her body behind ARCHER's tattered cloak. Looks like he's a lot older than me.

"ARCHER," I address him, "I don't know how you got the likes of Gasai and Caius on your side last time, and I won't ask. But I want you to tell me where Vraievel is. We both know—Ordra deserves to see her."

"I don't think you get it, Thrian. I'm extremely powerful. I *killed* Vraievel and Sir Faust and took their Servants. What makes you think I haven't already done that again?" I take a step back. "Remember," He continues, "Today I'm letting you leave. You should go. Right now. Maybe you can find them if I haven't killed them."

I grab Ordra by the wrist.

"Master, I told you I had a bad feeling about this..."

I feel it too, now.

"Vraievel can be found in the farmer's market at seven in the morning, tomorrow. That much I'll tell you. You'll probably never see the night anyway," ARCHER smirks. "I'm defending my Servant to the end. So are you. But I'm just *better*. Now listen. You need to get out of this town within the next ten minutes, or I'll put an arrow through your heart, Thrian."

“Ordra...” I grab her wrist. “We need to run.”

We take off running. I decide that the old mill is the best place to hide from enemies, and hope that no other Servant had the same idea.

I hear the clicking of Ordra’s heels behind me as we run. I notice something.

“The streets are empty, Thrian!” My Servant calls out, sharing my realization.

“Just keep running with me!”

They’re devoid of life. The citizens feel the dark magic present in the town. Just like I do. I feel the black energies, as if I’m being trapped by a Villainous Spirit. If I can’t confront them first—if they ambush me—I won’t have any time to bluff and figure out my battle strategy!

“When the sparks fly, stay out of harm’s way until I call for you,” I call back to my Servant.

“Yes, Master!” Ordra says, her voice gone strangely stone-cold. She’s half-way snapped into Berserker mode. I smile a little. My Servant was never as defenceless as I thought her to be... but I’ll never abandon Ordra for as long as I draw breath. Half of it is my debt to the man I was forced to kill. The other, I still have been unable to put a finger on. If anything, it’s probably Ordra herself. I like her.

I think while I run. My mind focuses on stupid decisions already made like taking Ordra in as my Servant. And then I stop hearing her heels clock away behind me. “Ordra?” I turn around and see her panting for breath a few feet back.

This is bad. We’re on a bridge. I don’t have the endurance to run with her. It’s the perfect place for us to be ambushed. And then the worst possible thing happens.

“Archer...” I turn around to see Vraievel Havoc. “What the hell... is this?”

“You need to help me,” I say to Vraievel, calmly. “And her. She’s my Servant. She doesn’t remember you yet. We’re in danger here.” I walk towards her. “My true name is Thrian. I need you to listen carefully because what I’m about to say is very confusing. First, command Servant Saber – He’s Toa Caius – to safeguard Ordra, before anything else. Let’s agree that the girl’s safety is both of our number one priorities.”

“... Saber!” Vraievel calls.

“At once, Ma’am.”

Fading in as if from nowhere, Caius de-cloaks from Spirit Form, already walking towards my Servant. “Know, Master,” Caius says, “That this is not the same Archer that we made the contract with. This is the one you’re allied against with the Servant of Arick.” Caius doesn’t as much as stop walking as he speaks. I watch him until he reaches Ordra. She looks to me and I nod.

“Okay,” Vraievel says. I turn around to face her. “You’ve got your chance to explain things.”

“I had no idea I was housing your younger sister. I’m so sorry. If you want me to bow or whatever to show my apology, I’ll do it without question. I’ll do this quick: there are two of me. One is this one,

me, right here. I am Thrian. A long time ago, I won a Holy Grail War, but kept the name of the Servant I was summoned as. I felt some strange connection to it, like I'd been called an 'archer' in my past, too. Went insane, enduring a multitude of existential crises and bouts of depression. I was evil. I had to flee that country I was in because I did terrible things. I lost more control of myself while trying to fix my mind and spiralled worse, not being able to separate 'Thrian' from 'Archer'. That's how my body was split into two separate entities with different ideologies; there is Heroic Spirit Thrian—me, and Villainous Spirit ARCHER—*him*. We both know him. He's evil. He's just like me, trying to save his Servant... but I'm going to have to take that girl from him and save her myself."

"... Why?" Vraievel asks. "ARCHER, he's probably thinking just the same thing."

"He is. It's a long story, but I know that he can kill me with a snap of his fingers."

"So what makes you different?"

"... It's hard to explain. For one, I'm not willing to kill any innocent people, unlike him. I know you don't get bothered much by that because of how you were raised, but I implore you to help me and Ordra. We've decided. We have to take that girl— we have to get Talia from him."

"Why? Then what? Why should I help Thrian over Archer? I could kill you right here and take Ordra as my own Servant."

"He's using you like a pawn! He'll kill you when he's done with you! He's evil! Would you have a young girl raised by a man regarded as a 'Villainous Spirit'? It's not like I have any idea what she did to come to have that brand—but damnit... I can help her, raise her right, into a real girl!"

"Just like how he helped me!" Ordra shouts from a ways across the bridge. "Thrian, I remember now! I remember the first Night too! I remember Phantom and I remember you! I... I'm Spring!" She shouts with a giant smile.

"She's *what*?" Vraievel asks, folding her arms, but letting out a smile.

"Well, before she remembered her name, she asked if she could be called Spring—"

——— *T-TISH!* —*vmvmvmvmvm*. The sound of wood reverberates like an arrow hitting a target made of glass or crystal. Something shatters.

"And so... we... called..... her..."

"Oh my gods!" Vraievel exclaims.

I hear Ordra scream. I look behind me, but she's screaming and looking at me. "Thrian! Thrian, THRIAN!"

"Get behind me, Berserker!" Saber demands. "It's not safe here!"

——— As I turn back around to face Vraievel, I finally notice it. "Oh!"

——— Where did this arrow in my heartlight come from?

If I was— if I was standing — standing here — and the arrow... came from — came from... I look at where it could have come from. And there's — there's ARCHER, with a — a bow.

"I warned you, you stupid, stupid fool. I told you, told you plain as day that you couldn't save them all! Yet you lost your time trying. Ten minutes, Thrian, is well up."

I realize — realize the gravity of the — situation my brain is going dead already.

"You really should have bowed when I asked you to," ARCHER laughs. "Of all the constants and variables in this universe, looks like me slaying you was simply destiny."

Vraievel's arm turns into a cannon and it fires at — fires at ARCHER but he vanishes.

"Get back here, you coward! You are no warrior!"

While she shouts, I stumble and fall, my knees giving way — knees giving way — way and tumble over the side of the bridge. It's a rainy week — rainy week, so the rushing river I hit carries me away — carries me away —

— carries me away from the Unholy Grail War so very quickly — so very quickly and permanently —

— and permanently —

Episode Three: Sandswept Cadenza

Chapter 9.1: Birth by Death

— Genesis of the dream. It begins. My emergence is incomplete. My summoning as a Servant to the Unholy Grail War is botched terribly. It's a wonder all of me made it through. Why though was I, Servant Stalker, given a botched summoning? The answer is before my eyes. I sense that two men before me exist, and one of them is my Master. The other is a powerful magus. I can feel the magic blood in their veins. They were clearly fighting, but I have no idea who was fighting who.

"I am Stalker. I come in response to your summons. I ask of you. Which of the two of you is my Master?"

The silence could cut glass. Neither of the two have Command Seals. This could prove to be very difficult.

"I ask again. I am Stalker, Knight of the Hunt. I come in response to... ambiguous summons. Just who is my Master?" I raise my naginata so they know I'm capable. Do neither of them want me as a Servant?

Here a powerful magus and a red-clad knight stand, dumbstruck. Say something.

"I'm Sir Faust and you'll address me as such," the knight speaks. "You're my Servant. I summoned you."

"Don't listen to him," The magus says. "I'm Doan. And no matter who summoned you, Stalker, you've got a choice to make right now. Birthrights, in my country, are irrelevant. The actions make the man." Doan smiles and reaches out his hand. "Want not for the conquest of a domineering knight, but fight for this city's right to freedom with me!" Faust reaches his hand out after batting away Doan's.

"Fool. You believe you have an option. You will be my Servant. One with such good independent action such as you... I can feel your power." Faust smiles in a different way. It's a charismatically evil smirk. "I am proud of you already."

I take a step back, digging in my heel and raising my lance. "Wh-what is this?! How is a Servant left with the decision of choosing his Master? That defies the definition of a Servant!!"

"Come on, now," Doan laughs. "Everybody knows that a Servant is only good once he likes his own Master. That's true for Servants in a Grail War, and that's true for servants in a castle." Doan reaches his hand out again, taking a step forward and slightly away from Faust. "Join me and fight for what's right."

"Contemptible fool," Faust sneers, taking his own step forward. "Stalker, you need only a powerful Master. Join me and we will claim glory. I will make you a champion."

I curse under my own breath. I am running out of time. Without magical energy from a Master, I will fade away. I should not allow that yet. The winners of this battle between seven Servants get a wish each from the Unholy Grail. I might want something but don't remember it yet, like my true name. I make my choice and step forward and grab Doan's hand. "I am Stalker, your loyal Servant. With this, our contract is complete."

"Excellent. You made the right choice, Stalker."

I nod and look at Faust. "So be it," Faust says. Two giant cannons emerge from previously hidden arms on his back; they spin up and aim for me. Half awake, I cannot believe this and my feet are stuck to the ground. I don't even close my eyes when they start to fire. The blinding blue flashes go off and the plasma fires out at an alarming rate. But I didn't die. My leg armour took a hit or two, but I'm fine. No, it was Doan, my new Master, who jumped in front of me at the last second. My Master falls and I catch the mage.

"Master?!" I exclaim in shock. It's not a yell or a scream. I throw no tantrums.

"Are you alright?" He asks me. I nod. He reaches up for my naginata and grabs it with one hand, and catches my arm with his other. "You carry on this fight for both of us now. What is your name? Can you remember your name?"

"No," I reply. "I am only Stalker."

"No longer. You now take my family name. This is Aoikian tradition." He swallows hard, but throws up no blood. He's at the end of his rope. "Welcome to the family, Stalker Gasai." Doan Gasai goes limp and dies in my arms. Faust walks over to me, the giant guns receding into his back again. His iron boots clank all the way over.

"So, Gasai. It's not like I have no honor: I'll respect Doan's last wishes. You are now Gasai."

"Not as if you...!" I stand up, leaving Doan down, pointing my armoured finger right in Faust's face. "That why you tried to kill me in cold blood, friend?! Because I do not appreciate it! And I do not find one thing honorable about such an ambush!"

"Please," Faust laughs, knocking downward my fist with his heavily-armoured silver gauntlet. "You were armed with that naginata. Tell me boy: can you use it?"

"I will never fight for you," I declare, and then spit in his face. "Look at Sir Faust's knightly visage now. Nothing but a backwoods coward, you are." I turn my back on him and stare out of the bombed-out wall corner of the high building we're in. It's the night. This building, now that I look at it, seems as if it could come down at any moment.

"Silence, boy. Just this once, I'll pretend I never heard that. Why don't you become my Servant and then revive Doan with your one wish?" I stop in my tracks and look over my shoulder.

"... You would allow such a wish to carry through?" I ask him cautiously.

“Of course,” Faust replies. He kicks Doan’s corpse lightly. “I wished to have a duel with him myself. I might be short on ethics, but never on honor.”

“I would call that a fine balance, friend. I would nearly go so far as to say you cannot have one without the other.”

“Call me ‘friend’ again and you’ll see how fine that balance is. Now. Stalker. Become my Servant. Become the Servant of Sir Faust. Make sure the winner of this war will be Stalker.”

“My name... is Gasai.”

The Command Seals appear on Sir Faust’s hand.

~~Fate/~~UGW/
GASAI

Chapter 9.2: Invisible Warrior, Stalker

I do not understand.

“What is your goal?” I ask my Master.

“I will tell you because I have nothing to fear from you.” Faust smirks condescendingly. “I have come to Aoiki to win the Unholy Grail War. The former Occult Specialist out our knight’s keep in Brennan, Arick, left our keep to come here, I believe. It might have been pure chance, but he came here. And I can’t afford to have him win the Unholy Grail War, and I can’t kill him without a Servant, and so I summoned you. If only that Dread Fighter, Doan, could have minded his own damned business, he’d still be alive, you know.”

“Tarry a moment if you would answer me,” I demand. “I am not from this world. You’re going to have to start explaining things. What exactly is a Dread Fighter, what has this Arick man got to do with things, and what will you wish for from the Unholy Grail?”

“Hmph.” Faust shuffles in his chair, drinks down the last of his prized grog and slams the goblet back down on the table. “A Dread Fighter is the organics’ answer to a Toa, if you’ve heard of those. The synthetic Aterra overseas use these Toa stones to transform their small warriors into larger, stronger ones. Of course, over there, normal villagers – Matoran, they call them – are about up to our knees, but they’ve actually got more strength than a Terran villager. Dread Fighters are actually weaker than Toa. Toa are more like sentient robots with personalities, and I met one once, and he was a very nice lad. Too bad we have to kill him. That brings us to Toa Arick. He has dormant elemental powers. And yet, as fate would have it, he summoned a Servant that wishes to cooperate with us. Looks like it is the Servant, not the Master, who’s got the lead.”

“Interesting,” I say. But internally I roll my eyes.

“And so for now we play nice with team Archer. They, however, spotted a Toa in town. And he’s got the artefact of a dead villain from his land, meaning he’s going to try to summon a Servant. Sir Sigurd the Second of the Skrall Knights across the Dividing Sea... from the continent of Imum.”

“Let us get to the point: what would you have your Stalker do?”

“Slay Sir Sigurd the Second, of course. He’s a nuisance and my intelligence sources say that the catalyst he has for summoning his Servant is... beyond the comprehension of other Servants. I need you to kill him before he summons his Servant. If you fail, I want you to kill him anyway.”

“Your orders are clear and well understood. I shall seek out and destroy Sigurd.” I spring out of the window, onto the roof and flee.

Faust speaks alone. “Hm. Thought he would have the sense to wait for more information than that.”

I heard him with my enhanced hearing. But he does not realize that Stalker will do what Stalker does best. I bound along the rooftops, with no clear destination in sight. I go wherever the will of the hunt will take me. I feel the blood of a hunter coursing through my veins... I

feel anticipation, excitement at the notion of ensnaring foes, trapping them and doing what I will with them. This soul of mine is different than the one of the warrior who inspired it, but the body is the same. And this body of that hunter, the man who I am based on, whomever he may be, is trying to control my will, to take this soul of mine and hammer it into the soul that should be in this body. I will have to let this body acclimate to me instead of acclimating to this body if I wish to remain myself. At the end of the day, a Servant is a copy of a hero, be they fallen, future or on a field faraway. We are not necessarily the same as the person, the 'Heroic Spirit' the Holy Grail wants us to emulate. I figured that out quickly, but wonder why is. I doubt I'll find out in my lifetime... since it's going to be short, anyway.

But no. I should stop being so pessimistic. I need to focus on my mission... and figuring out who I am can wait. Bobbing and weaving about the skyline of the verdant and free city of Aoiki, I cross between light, thatch roofs and slate panels to make my way to wherever the wind will take me. I feel the night zooming past me and slink through the darkness, enjoying the thrill of the oncoming hunt. I feel it drawing near, the start of a brand new hunt will dawn with the new day.

Yet in the back of my mind - the analytical and strategically-thinking section of my head - the real war still rages on within. Who am I? Servants are modified versions of legends, based half on the truths behind them and half on the current-day warpings of said legends. So half of me.... is nothing... but a figment of somebody's imagination? I refuse to believe that.

All the while, I note my surroundings. I scale the tallest building in my sights and ascend to its atrium. And from the apex of that sandstone-hewn tower that felt so warm to me, yet so cold to touch in the dead of night, I saw for the first time the place in which I would make my stand.

The city of Aoiki lay before me, lit up by the amber glows of the houses below. Cloaked in midnight blue darkness and clad in the shadows of higher towers and merchant warehouses, the homes to uncountable tribesmen lay below. No, not tribesmen, normal civilians. Townies, living normal towny lives. "By the grace of the Master..." I whisper to myself an utterance of awe. The city is divided by a river... and each side big enough to split off from the other and still be considered a city. The side I stand upon is constructed mostly out of sandstone, and the other side, limestone. "Hmm..."

I see a few torchlights moving in the city streets on the other side. It looks more residential and more civilian than this side of the city, meaning this side is likely for businesses and not homes. Makes sense, I suppose. I'd consider sandstone more homely looking and feeling than limestone. "So there are people about the town, still. That means the Grail War has just begun, and the veil of dark magic hasn't been fully cast over the town. Once that happens, say goodnight to any signs of nocturnal activity in this city." Indeed, once Aoiki city's magical ley-line feeds the Unholy Grail and creates the Servants, it will be project that aura of enmity at night, keeping normal people indoors. Then as the souls of the Servants that die are absorbed by the Grail once more, it will slow down the generation of that field. And once six are taken in, the Grail will stop it altogether, and will be full of magical energy - enough to

grant both the Servant and their Master one limitless wish each. That's when I see the large ship sailing steadily through the river. "Looks as if the eastern port is closed, so they sailed west to see if the western port was open. And I'd bet this man who came from the continents to the east is on that boat, shipping in just in time for the Unholy Grail War. Sigurd, I hope you are an opponent I can pit my full might against... Well then. I head for the docks."

I leap from the high perch. What the hell am I doing?! On the way down, I connect my legs with the building I jumped from and push off of it, managing to get enough distance to sink my taloned gauntlets into the side of the next one. The force of it nearly rips off my arms, and I feel the ball and socket joints at my shoulders beginning to come loose, the tendons starting to rip and tear, then I hit the ground and flop down. "Damnit..." I need to figure out why I did that.

I look at my hands and see they are clawed with sable black fingertips. It doesn't seem to mean much, but I cannot help but feel that it's a hint at what I am. I struggle to get up, ripping myself off the ground and standing up with creaking knee joints. Even my ankles blaze with pain. But I am a champion and command my weary joints to move.

Chapter 9.3: For This, There Is One Remedy

I crawl across the rooftop, watching Sigurd II from a place where he cannot see me.

I could slay this man easily. Eavesdropped conversations revealed to me a number of things about Sigurd.

He is an emissary of the Skrall Knights who come from across the sea, on the island of Daxia. He was a friend of Wreax Havoc, the legendary hero of that isle. He has come to Faiklen to resurrect the daughter of that man who was killed. I didn't hear how it was that she was killed, though.

So far, I confess to having zero interest in slaying him. His wish from the Unholy Grail is characteristically pure. He wishes to set aside racism between the people of the two continents, the Viridian Knights and the Skrall Knights, so and on and so forth. It's hard to believe, yet makes a lot of sense. He seems like a naïve child who is fuelled by ideals.

I watch him move through the streets. I cannot simply kill this man without reason. Every man has their own code of honor, and every warrior knows to live and die by his. Killing this man would bring me dishonour. I need to think hard about trying to justify this killing.

I slink down from the roof, confident I can catch up with the young Master-to-be later on. I move down into the market, clearing out my head all the while I move through stalls of goods colourful and varied in size and purpose.

If Sigurd summons Ordra Havoc, he'll have a good chance of winning the War. Idealism is a potent form of energy. It can make you realize pain is an illusion created by your body to protect your health; which is why pain is your true enemy in a fight. I wonder if I realized that in a fight during my own life. Or if it was what got me killed and that is why I am here.

Why am I here? As a Villainous Spirit, I mean. I am certainly dangerous, but why on Onius am I treated as a villain? Is it vain or presumptuous to wonder that? Does that not already put me in a box?

I see some boxes of goods heading right for my face. They're not budging, not moving around me. The person's Kanohi is blocked by them. They cannot see straight in front of them. I hold out my hands and grab the box from them once they reach me, then hoist the topmost box onto my shoulder. I can see the girl's face now.

"Where am I taking this? It would be remiss of me to let you continue heading to disaster like that."

The young woman stares at me for a moment. Then she looks me up and down and shrugs.

"Fine. Follow me. What's your name?"

"My name is Gasai," I tell her.

"Gasai? That's weird. You don't look like a Gasai. Did ya know Doan Gasai was found dead a few nights ago?"

"I am aware," I say. Are the Gasai family well known?

"So are you like extended family, or...?" The curious woman asks.

"I am actually unrelated. Gasai is my only name, you see."

Myaar eyes me a little. "Do you know the history of the Gasai dynasty?"

"I do not," confess.

"They are the house which slew the apostate mages of the far east. Their house motto was, 'Gasai Does Not Bow'. Did you know? They're rather amazing, really. Anyway. So you're... from the far south?"

"Perhaps. I am not from around here, I don't think."

"You don't know where you're from?" She turns her head towards me and almost clips somebody with her crate of goods. I follow her like no such thing occurred.

"I suppose you could say that. I am... amnesic."

"Ah, there's a lot of 'em in town these days. Ran into some man who looked exactly like our dear Archer, 'cept with these blazin' green eyes, and they were even shiftier than our own Archer's, too! Said he didn't know much about hisself, either. Was enough to make me wonder if he was the lad's evil twin!"

"That a fact, now?" I ask.

“Didn’t know much more than a few words about the town, for that matter. ‘Twas only that I saw the real, blue eyed Archer prancin’ about later the same day that I believed the bugger.”

I crack a small laugh at her speech patterns. “Right. But it would seem you are not from here either? And I never got your name?”

“Me name’s Myaar, and I’m from the west. There’s a town five days that way by the name of Shelter, protected by a girl a lot like Archer who holds a blade made from the knee of a dragon.”

“The Raicleach. I am familiar with it; it’s a fairly famous piece of regalia from that direction.”

I look around us and view the market. “So, what’s in these boxes? This one’s rather heavy.”

“Weapons. Lots of them. We’ve got a fresh shipment of thornax fruit from the farms up north, past the heathlands. Storm passed through there during transit, grounded the supply line for a week. Need to sell these today or they’ll spoil,” Myaar explains.

“People have a lot of uses for exploding fruit over here?”

“Dunno! But in this state they’re no good for eating. So, Gasai, would you fancy keeping me company so I don’t have to think about how I am going to pay rent for the month?”

I’ve already lost Sigurd’s trail. It will be no more difficult to pick back up now than in six or even twice as many hours. “Yes, I can do that,” I agree.

“Great! With muscle like you, I can kick that blasted Yavirren out of spot!”

The woman moves forward toward the poor man in question.

Chapter 9.4: Entrepreneur-class Servant

Resting my cheek on my clawed fist, I look over at Myaar. She’s fidgeting with her legs in her own chair.

“Are you not entertained by my unique brand of comedy? The more sullenly I stare at your customers, the more unlikely they are to ever glance at your wares ever again. Is it not humorous?”

Myaar snaps her legs shut as if I was highly interested and looks me up and down. “Then just don’t stare at them, you dunce.”

“Chat with me, then. I have many questions.”

“Oh? Such as?”

“What is the currency of this place... this Aoiki?”

“Gold, just yer common gold,” she says. “Where’d you say you were from, Gasai?”

“Distant sands, probably long since shifted and blown across the dunes,” I reply, with a shrug. It probably was some sandy town or clan that I originated from. “I feel at home on this side of the city. And you?”

“I’m from across the river, other side of the town. Y’ever been there?”

“Slow your speech down. Taking appropriate time to choose your words is a good habit to get into. I visited the port last night and was less than impressed. I seem not to be fond of water.”

“Really? Interesting.” She sniffs a little. “Alright. Well. We need to sell these.”

“You need to sell these,” I reply. “But I feel like helping you since you were kind enough to supply me with information about this Aoiki.”

“First thing y’can do f’me is stop saying *this Aoiki* like the city’s not really named that! Next, have you got any ideas for this?”

“For what? The thornax?”

“No, the malevolent fairies on the moon. Of course the thornax!”

“Hah.”

I enjoy her sarcasm, it’s bitter and refreshing. What Myaar doesn’t know is that a Servant is a reasonably good choice to market and sell munitions.

“Alright... I’m going to go get something for us to eat... please don’t leave the produce unattended?”

“Of course,” I reply with a firm nod. She smiles charmingly at me before turning and walking off. “Hm. This woman, this Myaar, seems to be a match for me.”

Chapter 9.5: The Death Lines

“You want me to *what*?” Faust asks me in disbelief.

“You heard me. You want Sigurd dead? You either waste a Command Spell here and now or buy half her stock. Let us review, there forty thornax in the box... Meaning you must purchase twenty. One thornax costs four gold coins. Which means you must hand me over eighty gold coins.”

Sir Faust drums his fingers, one after another on the table, raises them and repeats. He does this three times, nods and looks at me. “Will this happen again?”

“You tell me. You’re the one waving around three Grail-bestowed uses of absolute power magic.”

“Why are you doing this? I’ll find out, one way or another. You know I have sources. So tell me. Why do this?”

“Ahahaha.” I laugh a cynical laugh. “I stand to lose nothing by not telling you.”

Faust pours some cordial into his engraved silver tankard. He drinks most of a sip and then spits out a bit that seemed to have crystalized. “What’s this you’re telling me?” He holds the tankard in his right hand, so that the three Command Seals on it are visible to me.

“Right,” I say. “Since you are too foolish to grasp my situation with your own small brain, I, your loyal Stalker—”

“Don’t say that,” he says, shaking his head before taking another slug of the weak drink.

“— will explain it to you. It’s simple. You will certainly find out if I tell you, but there’s a chance you will not if I withhold the information.”

Faust slams his tankard down on the table hard, the cordial splashing around him.

“Boy,” he begins with a snarl, “Do not ridicule your Master, or you shall find yourself out of his service *permanently*. Now...” He throws me a bag of gold as if it were nothing. “That’s your whole budget for slaying Sigurd. Accomplish your mission... do not return until he is dead.”

Clicking the heels of my boots together, straightening my back and offering a mock salute, I promptly fall backward out of the window behind me.

What the hell am I doing?! This is the second time I’ve done something so reckless. I feel the desire to save myself and see red lights flare up on the wall; eight of them. Suddenly I feel energy explode out of my back and I see eight appendages claw into the wall behind me. The slow me down. It hurts me as gravity pulls me down to the earth. I hit the ground, having turned right-side up and land on my feet, fine, thanks to the eight skinny legs that protruded from my back.

“A spider,” I say to myself. “I just took on the form of a spider.”

I notice the shades of my armour and the colour of the legs that grew from my back and have now disappeared. “I draw from the wolfspider, it would seem.” This knowledge means nothing yet, since I don’t know how I even summoned those arachnid legs.

I march back to the stall, where I see Myaar half asleep. I toss her the bag of coin. “What’s this?”

“Yours. The Viridian Knights will collect 20 thornax sometime in the near future.”

“Oh... alright, I guess. I mean... you didn’t have to do that, you were doing a pretty good job of impressing me without involving money.”

“You will know that I am not buying you. Yet I...” I think hard, but nothing comes of it. “I think I have had hard times. I am amnesic, but I think in the past... Maybe there were days where I lived on very little. And I never want to see that occur ever again.”

“See that’s what I’m into.”

“Men who by all appearances seem to be trouble?”

Myaar smiles and shrugs. I laugh at her casual demeanour, and find myself liking it. And looking to the west, I see the sun beginning to set. I begin walking towards it, deciding that Sigurd II would have much more likely set foot in the side of the town that closer resembled his homeland rather than this one.

“Going already, Gasai?”

“I am leaving,” I smile, feeling the hunt’s presence well over me like water tumbling down dry, sandy rocks. “But I will see you again, Myaar, some time.”

“Why not here again, next week? Wouldn’t mind a bit of company.”

“Very well. Be punctual!”

And with that I bound up the wall of the nearest building and mantle onto the roof with little effort. I’m starting to realize my armour must be imbued with some kind of enchantment to make it more efficient at this. I feel which direction my prey is by outreaching my hand feeling into the sea of city where Sigurd is located. Direct northwest; run.

I take off like a bullet, vaulting over rooftops using my naginata like a pole and my legs more a blur than two solid constructions of the body. I cross Faiklen’s third-largest city in just under three minutes, counting all the while. And from the roof above, I watch Sigurd again. As I analyse Sigurd’s every last move, I lament again my situation.

Watching Sigurd, I have no motivation to kill him. Furthermore, something deep inside of me—perhaps the core of my magic circuits... they’re telling me, like this itch inside my veins. That they will disobey me if I try to attack a soul as pure as Sigurd.

“Oh...? ... What’s this?”

A warrior clad in yellow and black who seems familiar walks through the night, totally unarmed. He casts before him a pale, sickly green glow, like that of envy. It comes from his eyes, which are alight with magical energy. This is a ‘Servant’, just like me. But this is a *soul* inside of a body he is not familiar.

“Ah, so this is the so called ‘evil twin’ of the hero of this town, the Archer.”

The piercing green eyes gave it away. This is the evil entity—and likely some kind of alternative version of the hero of this town, or perhaps another member of his species if he is neither Toa nor Terran.

He walks slowly, every movement calculated and methodical. This is done so that if anybody sees him, they focus on those movements—scarcity marks points of interest. But I do see the way his gaze does not falter—that pale green that hits the ground and paints it. It does not move, does not budge. He is headed for the house that Sigurd is about to enter.

Who am I to follow the orders of Sir Faust, anyway? Am I a knight? Not one of his. Nothing about me is green. I come from distant sands. And I do not value my life; this is well established. Hm.

The end of my life is irrelevant. I live without memory of my life. Unlike the other Servants, I have known no pain nor experienced genuine happiness. My life bears no meaning. I will slay the Servants, but only the ones who are unredeemable. And soon Sir Faust will find himself at the end of his rope – at the point of my lance.

I spring my legs and land down in front of the enemy Servant, hitting the ground in a kneeling pose with my hand down before me.

“Your green will not encompass the dark beige of the distant sands my armour was forged on.”

I uncoil my posture and stand up straight before the envy-eyed demon that stands before me. He opens his mouth behind his mask and speaks.

“Doan Gasai died and it was your fault.”

“Wh-what?!”

Holding my naginata behind my back, I take a step backward. And the other Servant takes on forward.

“I will kill Sir Faust for you if you do as I ask you. In two night’s time, you will run in to a man who looks like me, but with red eyes. In a future that will never exist, he slew you. I am him from that future and protecting you is one of my objectives. Stalker, fight for me. Or at the very least—get out of my way, I need to kill the Servant that Sigurd the Second is about to summon!”

“That is nothing but an impromptu bluff that a spy would conjure!”

“Who could stalk the Stalker? Just give in and accept the situation. I am Servant Archer, and allow me to lead you.”

I regain control of my posture and stand up straight, pointing my naginata at him. “And I am Gasai, and I will not let you pass! You will know that I will defeat Faust myself,” I tell the Archer with a giant grin.

“I can respect that passion... but I will have to quench the fire in your heart tonight for your insubordination.”

The Servant before me does not summon some holy bow nor fight with a sword that looks like an arrow—no, instead he summons an exact copy of my own naginata.

“But I will give you an honorable demise!”

Confused, I make no movement. Instead, the Archer looks at me, nods once, twice, and thrice. Then at a blink-like speed, he charges at me and cleaves my naginata in half with his.

I'm swept back three meters by the force of his attack. The Archer returns to where he stood.

"Will you let me pass now, Gasai?"

"G-Gods..."

How did he do that? How did he pull off such a move? It was as if he was backed by the wind itself. But my pride gets in my way, and I have to shout—"NO!" — my defiance!

The force of the wind comes and hits me again, this time in the form of a kick to my centre of gravity, my chest, and before I can even summon my naginata, I'm knocked off my feet, tumble twice and am slammed up against a wall. The door suddenly opens and a white knight emerges in its frame.

"Hold on, stay inside or run away!"

"Who are you? What's happening?"

"Not something a Master should be involved with," I say, pushing myself off the ground. Archer laughs and says—

"Irony is a cruel mistress."

The door shuts as the Archer hits me again, this time pushing me through the wall altogether and I end up on a different street of the city. I am being destroyed. I force myself to stand up straight.

"There is no raven upon my shoulder. Why did you not ignore me and kill Sigurd when he opened his door?"

The Archer marches over to me, slowly and deliberately as ever, and then speaks. "Because I have honor like you. But the reality is that I know what I'm doing, and outmatch you." The Archer leans in close to get a good look at me, or to intimidate me, or something.

But that's when I see them. The lines that cover his face. But they're not...

Attached. They are a projection of some sort. I feel energy flow into my mask.

——— There are lines all over his mask. And I need I need I need *I need* I need *I need* I need *I need* I NEED I NEED I NEED I NEED I NEED TO CUT THEM.

I leap up, unsheathe my scimitar and slash and the Archer before me. He falls back, bleeding from his face.

"How are you an Archer if you forsake your own weapon? I have not seen you use a bow."

"How did you strike so fast...?!" The Archer asks me.

“I see the lines on your face... no...” I look closer. “All over you. I have... to cut them, I have to cut them! I cannot unsee the lines!”

And I realize all the lines, like veins, congregate at a single point in his torso. I twirl my scimitar why the Archer covers his eyes and in severe pain. But the point—it’s a Point of Death, it is where the Death Lines lead—it is like a button—and I have to press it!

I close in and summon my naginata and push it deep inside the kink of his armour just behind that Point of Death, and it’s so satisfying my body goes numb. The Archer roars in pain, and then yells—“Insolence!” before creating a thin, needle-like sword from the air and shoving it into my side.

My head hits the ground first and my vision blurs.

That’s when I see it—I can make out just enough to see a young woman with a giant sword at her side running from the house, just as the Archer blows the side of it out.

——— But that’s alright, so long as Sigurd’s Servant is safe. She will... carry on for him.

——— I can feel it.

My vision clears as clanging noises echo from the now-ruined house. I summon my scimitar and press its fine tip against the ground, pushing myself upward.

I once heard a wise warrior say: *I may die, but it will be on my feet, facing my enemies.*

Then I feel somebody sneak up behind me as I regain my balance. I swing my scimitar as I spin, straining the fresh and seeping wound in my side, and tumble over like a damned fool. I am damned; damned to death if I do not get up. But as I am about to fall, I am caught.

“You need treatment,” A caring and tender voice whispers to me.

“I am losing sight over my wound. Who are you?”

“I... am your best friend, and a *far* better stalker, Stalker. Lay down now. Your fight tonight is over.”

All light fades from my vision. I hear a spilling of blood and a scream of pain. And then I hear the woman beside me unsheathe some giant weapon and her boots clacking their way, slowly, toward the one who inflicted the wounds so deep in my side, and even deeper cut my pride. Then that same voice that seemed so tender calls forth a voice that shatters the silence of the night——— “ARCHER!!”

Chapter 9.6: Gasai Does Not Bow

“Sigurd the Second is deceased,” I tell my Master.

Servants have highly accelerated healing, so after I woke, I saw the body myself. It was left in ruin, stabbed by over a hundred different blades. I have to wonder why the Archer did not unleash the same fate on me.

“Good. I won’t ask of your methods; I do not care. You should know that I am having forty of my Viridian Knights enter the city tomorrow.”

I will not stand for that. I hate Faust. I would not let him have control, it is that simple.

“Where are these knights coming from?”

“The city of Brennan. They’ll enter by the Eastern Gate.”

“I will not stand for that. Call off your knights,” I demand of Faust.

“Haha. You do not make these decisions, you lowly Servant.”

“I am running out of patience, Faust—”

Faust extends his arm and points at me—“Leave! You will strike a deal with the Servant Archer at the round tower for an alliance.”

“Did you just use a Command Seal?”

And then, feeling a compulsion not unlike when my Kanohi Mask activated and I felt the need to cut the Death Lines, the lines of sure-hit, I exit from Faust’s two-storey rented house and onto the roof and find myself bounding to the next, and the next at the Command Seal’s mercy.

Cavorting skyline slates and gambolling grounded street lamps I bounce and pogo my way to the round in the town south. I look around this city and think: the Servants are finally spawning and I am no longer by my lonesome. There is an Archer whose powers contradict the laws of time. How can one being become so powerful in one lifetime? I have heard of the Apostate Blood-Mages from the isles to the far south, but even then, I suspect the ‘Archer’ if not their strongest, could trounce in battle them all. My affinity is with my naginata for I am Stalker, a Servant class which I know through knowledge imbued in me by the Grail at my moment of conception, uses lances. An Archer that I have not even seen use his bow... And yet he still beat me until that power of mine activated.

I know what it must have been. They come back to me after they activate.

——— A Servant has a *deus ex machina*, a god from the machine that is the Holy Grail. At least one. These are super-powered devices, weapons or abilities most oft used in battle. However, Noble Phantasms are exhausting on a nigh-usable level and drain magical energy.

The Archer has the magic of Drafting— a magic that seems too familiar for some reason. I realize he can “draft” any weapon from bodily energy and once it has served its purpose he can discard it: the weapon will melt and the energy used to make it return to his Magic Circuits.

——— My Noble Phantasms have revealed themselves now: the first lets me partially assume the form of a spider, growing long and spindly appendages from my back. It became clear to me then that my fighting style is based on the wolfspider, a being I feel an innate connection with. The man before me, ‘Gasai’, must have known the creatures well.

The second Noble Phantasm hit me last night—the Mystic Eyes of Direct Death, I now remember they are called. After using them I was both exhausted and temporarily blind. Waking up with my vision, but cold and wounded in a city street was humiliating, but I am alive for it.

Thanks to a certain mysterious stranger. A fragment of my past or a challenge in my future? Either way, I must familiarize myself with my Noble Phantasms and be prepared. And there is only one way I know how to do that. I foresee tonight being the greatest battle of my life. I am going to broker this false deal with the Archer and then kill the Forty Emerald knights entering the city.

Finally, I make it to the round tower. The sun is setting. The peoples’ doors are locked. The Grail’s magic will keep them trapped indoors by fear: too afraid in the morn to speak, or perhaps simply not allowed to remember. I scale the tower, sprouting eight pointed legs and climbing it like the spider my heart says I am. I bound over the wall at the top and land on one knee, then slowly stand, my lance carried by three of the legs. The Archer takes a step back.

“What the hell are you supposed to be? I’ve seen a lot of demons and a lot of freaks but never anything like you.”

His green eyes emit a terrible hostility.

“I was told to come here to broker with you an alliance,” I inform him. “I fought you last night. You fought exceptionally. And I would love to work with you until the War progresses further. As would my Master.”

Not all of that is true. I hate this person. Sigurd was a pure soul. The soul in front of me is the opposite of pure. I do not know the man before ‘Gasai’, how evil he was that he would become renowned as the ‘Villainous Spirit’ I am here and now. But the soul before me is exactly who he was... This ‘Archer’ is tethered to an ethereal shadow, a smothering and consuming darkness that I can feel in my deep heart’s core, and it makes it skip another beat every few seconds I stand near him. Wary of that darkness, I step forward.

“So what are your terms?” I ask him.

“Absolute loyalty. Do you value honor, Stalker?” The Archer asks, folding his arms. He taps his boot impatiently on the ground.

“Not particularly,” I answer honestly. “When it suits me, I do. But stare at the ashes of your tribe and ask yourself if honor matters. The voices in your head are your answer.”

“Try a nation, ahah, aha, ahahahaha!!” The Archer laughs, his shoulders jerking up and one hand covering a beryl eye, an eye wired to the insanity and the evil. “Funny, I took you as the honorable type, Stalker.”

“You will know that as a warrior I have my own codex and rules and do not follow anyone else’s,” I say, folding my own arms and grimacing in disgust at the knight that has finally begun to show his true power.

A rain starts easing in behind us. I feel the air pressure around us rise.

“We are allied,” the Archer says. Thunder claps and lightning sparks behind him as the storm rolls in.

“You have made a bad impression on the sky, too,” I smirk.

My Command has been fulfilled and I feel the compulsion of the order from Faust lift. I take my scimitar in my hand and break out into a rooftop dash across to the eastern gate.

After a minute, I can already see the silver and green armour marching towards the city gates. They are mortal and I am Servant. It will be a hard fight but one I can win. The rain cascades down the terraced slates and mask all the sounds of my journey to the gate. I jump atop the wall of the city from the rooftop, mantling over the top of it and then dropping down at the opened gate. I wait there, holding my blade.

After four minutes by my count, I meet the knights who would send me to my second grave.

“Step out of the way, warrior. I am the Viridian Knight-Lancer Shirin, and—”

“I know who you are. I am... *Gasai*. I have no friends in this city: do not seek them after you fell me, for you will chase shadow. Leave this place immediately or be forced to fight me. One of our parties will not live to see the sun at its zenith if you attempt to proceed.”

“Gasai, we’re just trying to follow orders and do our jobs.”

“You work for an entity more evil than any nightwraith. Sir Faust,” I lie, “has come under demonic possession, a possession by a Regnant Demon. I am the only one who can make sure he does not destroy the city. I cannot tell you what to tell your commanders, but know that Faust would use you to enslave this city.”

The worst lie I could ever tell, but I spoke with unshaking voice, just like how I fight: with sheer, unflinching resolve.

“That doesn’t work for us,” the knight Shirin replies.

“Do not speak another word or I will take less diplomatic measures. You will leave,” I say, having the eight legs bring my naginata above my head, over my shoulders and placing it firmly in my right hand, the scimitar in the left. The knights form columns behind Shirin and the columns surround me. I will need to stand steadfast as a titan to triumph.

“Listen, you’re just a civilian with some whackjob magic and a giant ego like every other mage this side of Odina Continent, so just—”

My left hand outstretched and tainted by blood, Shirin’s helmet and head hit the ground with a wet noise and then a soft clang.

“Mystic Eyes of Direct Death: On!”

Blue light emits from my Kanohi mask. In my mind, I am someplace safe: that place is where the enmity of my enemies is a sea the mask can drown in. Remembering a fragment of my previous mind suddenly, I chant the Incantation for the Mystic Eyes so I do not lose vision—

“The hunger is the all of it, and all of it is hungry.

Until this divine demon’s belly is sated, I am become its eight arms.”

The stunned soldiers do not expect me to pounce on them like the hungry spider. I fling my naginata at the nearest soldier and it strikes his torso, felling him. I move to my right, dodging a machsteel crossbow bolt. Two arms on my back move on their own and strike another soldier down. Impaling him, I use another two deadly talons to pick him up and throw him over my shoulder, into two other soldiers. The lines come into my vision and I hold the scimitar in both hands.

———— The lines.

———— I have.

———— To cut.

———— The lines.

Just as well. I have to kill these men for trespassing this ground. Maybe Archer was right. Maybe I do have honor. My own twisted honor. I cannot let the tribes of Aoiki suffer for no reason. The city will not fall. I will be its gatekeeper tonight.

“Hahahaha!”

The fourth, the fifth, the sixth, the seventh and the eight fall before the blade. I only must slice, no, trace along the Death Lines and they cut, they die, they cease. I pick up the naginata and hit the pole of it so hard off one knight’s helmet I hear his neck snap. The lines growl, shake and enlarge. Quench the thirst.

———— This is it. This is the mantle of who I am. This is the insanity that must have claimed the mind of the past version of me, the one whose name was lost to time. This is what he could not hold off. This thing will do the same to me. I have to turn off the Death Lines before they take control of me. The hunger for violence is making my mind slip, and fade away.

Suddenly the lines disappear. Two knights charge at me. I do not know what to do. I want the lines back. They return just like that.

————— I understand. This is a call from the shadows. If I do not answer, I will die. I have to take the reins. If I fear this darkness, will I become like Archer? Will people sense from me the deep-set self-loathing I noticed in the Archer?

I spin my scimitar and cut once up and diagonally, tackling the other knight and spinning him over my shoulder. As he falls, I grab an incoming sword from my left and it nearly cleaves through my gauntlet. Feeling instant palpitations of sweat, I grab it and flourish, then shove it into the Point of Death where all the Death Lines on him lead, square in the knight's face. I return my attention to the knight who I dropped and shove my scimitar into his Point of Death right in his sternum, feeling it the sword not bend around nor cut through it, but smash it entirely. He is not dead. But he will die in a pain I did not want to give him. This mask is evil. Using it for good is hypocrisy. I hope one of them kills me.

But the mask demands more. I spin and shove it through the torso of another encroaching knight. I spike through his Point of Death and retract my fifth limb from his heart. He falls like the rest of them. I cut the lines again and again on every knight. They are masters of fighting, but they are not Servant. I am faster than they can see and think quicker than they can move.

I whittle down the knights to only three remaining soldiers faster I thought I would, but I have become exhausted. My weapons fade from my hands like particle dust. I am too drained of magical energy to use them. The Death Lines disappear. My extra arms are no longer spike erratically from my back.

"Please, I have no wish for fighting. I never had. Leave this place, you would be best never coming back," I plead with the last three knights.

"We swore an oath," a knight says.

"I have no idea what it was, but your life is not worth your honor... ask the dead men of your tribe whether honor matters. From experience I know... honor is worthless unless you have somebody left worth proving it to. A plasma Toa-Ranger of the sandy wastes I knew once told me that *discretion was the better part of valour*. Please cut your losses and discard your honor. Explode your ideals: and the truth shall free you."

"Enough of your 'path of the warrior' rubbish," another knight says. He comes at me with a lance and an oversized shield. Perhaps I can use it to my advantage. I wait for him to get in close and kick the bottom of it. The heavy shield topples the knight quickly and I stomp hard on his back once he falls. I hope I did not break it. The Death Lines' madness has left me. I take his lance as the penultimate knights charge at me. I block the longsword of the knight on my left and headbutt her hard, hearing her brain ding around behind her helmet. I twist my wrist and instinctively face the lancehead at the final knight. He runs right into it. It pierces his heart. I realize that I killed him despite not meaning to.

This is no time to be forlorn. I have made my choice and sealed my tomb: Sir Faust will want my head.

Chapter 9.7: Terminus of the Dream

Clang.

Clang.

Clang.

Clang.

Clang.

Clang.

Faint embers are rekindled as I walk past windows, children getting out of bed to peek out windows with some semblance of light in order to see the defeated Sand-Stalker, to watch as the lightning that was his naginata make the thunder of it, my makeshift crutch, clang off the ground. That Sand-Stalker is me, a man who has no name but one gifted to him by a generous and too-honorable mage who is dead for it. Spitting blood like some terrible viper, I am anything but subtle. At this moment I feel my least like, “Stalker”, and my most, like “Gasai”.

I feel the night’s coldest breeze, and it is like somebody took a pickaxe to my bone marrow, but I smile through my teeth. The resonating, drilling pain of the chill helps remind me that I am alive. That I, Gasai, still have things to look forward to. I am honoured on by that man who gave me his name. Honor.

Is that not a... a strange word. A funny word that has more meaning to me than I like to pretend.

Deep retrospective about the meanings of my soul whilst traversing the darkest winter night.

Clang, clang, clang. I am alive.

The most therapeutic droning metal sound shall ever grace me.

“... Gasai? Is that you? You’re covered in blood, what on Onius happened to you?!”

The dream ends and nightmare begins with that sweet voice.

“G-get away! Do I look like I am safe to be around?”

Of course, it’s Myaar, the girl from the other day. This is bad. I do not want any more blood on my hands. And most certainly not that of a girl I quickly took a liking to. An awful event dawns on her horizon and I do not have the strength to prevent it. I sense the evil behind me, I see his reflection in the beautiful eyes of Myaar.

“Occlude!”

I feel even more energy expelled from my body and an emerald dome encases Myaar as hundreds of thousands of tiny blue flames riddle the shield I have somehow cast. I slowly turn to face the enemy I know has been chasing me: the enemy I was content with slaying me until Myaar was threatened.

“*Faust*,” I spit the name. “Come to claim your vainglorious vengeance. Slaying me is the requiem for your power fantasy.”

The ‘knight’ that once guarded the walls of the city of Brennan is clad in silver and red armour. With rotary canons armed on his back, he steps towards me.

“Stalker, you have crossed a line.”

“Many,” I reply.

“You are a simply disgusting excuse for a soldier, unwilling to discard your ideals to serve your Master. Simply disgusting. I wanted you, the man inside that shell of some or the other insignificant and eldritch mage, to realize, remember or *decide* who you are, and what you wanted from life. I wanted to give a man as driven as you power. But you betrayed your own right to that. You leave me with no option, Servant Stalker. I will make you hurt until you bow. Hurt from your heart...” He stares at Myaar. “And from your head.” He takes out a sword glowing with magical energy – more than a normal sword, likely with the potential to harm if not kill me outright. “Any words before we do battle?”

“I can now only rationalize that this new body was given to me by the Grail only to deliver justice, heavens fall as they may. I will kill you, Faust of the Viridian Knights, that is my new contract,” I tell him.

I walk forward, which is as fast as my legs can carry me.

“Mystic Eyes of Direct Death! Khamsin Naginata! Dunemarcher Scimitar!” A weapon in each hand and the lines to guide them all are burnt into my vision.

Suddenly there’s a crippling pain in my brain.

“AAAH!”

So painful it surpasses my mental walls and I let out a wail. I hear Faust laugh.

“Heh. It seems our simple pagan dune-eater is trying too hard to play mage. Does it eat your head? I hardly anticipated you to make your own head hurt, Stalker.”

“Gasai!” I hear Myaar call, still inside the shield I somehow created.

“I did decide who I was to be, Faust! I AM GASAI!!”

I force my unwilling legs to straighten and my head to process thought, the lines. My scimitar fades from reality as quickly as it entered it. I take one, then two, then three cumbersome steps forward. On the fourth one, my knee gives again and it feels like it’s eating itself alive.

“Gasai! Gasai!?” Myaar is still calling my name, more desperate and confused. Did I really establish a connection with this person? I bend my neck backward and see her pummelling the inside of the shield, is she trying to help me? For what, endangering her? Just because I set it up so that she would sell some wares and put food on her table for another night? What on Onius... Did I really do anything significant enough to warrant this? “Gasai! Gasai!!”

“I did not anticipate that you would bow for me before a fight,” Faust laughs again.

And then I hear something I really didn’t expect.

Ker-chunk. Ker-chunk. Ker-chunk.

Were those door handles opening?

And then many voices.

“What the hell is going on here?”

“Why is a Viridian Knight attacking a merchant and a sick man?”

“Daddy, tell the man with the sword to stop bullying the poor man!”

“Hey, who gave you the right to play ranger around town? Who do you think you are, some paragon of the wastes! We’re civilized in Aoiki, you wretch!”

That last voice... That was... her!

I feel hands on my shoulders, a woman is helping me up.

“Well if it isn’t the poor Stalker from the night before,” she whispers into my ear. “I’m Rubi, and I can help you and your girl out, but only if you promise to help me find my brother after this is done.”

“Please... help me,” I implore her.

“Cast: Invigorate!”

A surge of magical energy suddenly flows throughout my entire body, and I emit a brilliant green glow, like the sword of Faust.

I stand up straight and reclaim my beautiful naginata, and see all the men, women and children that came out to help me when I was in need of help. The quality of the people of Aoiki... this is nothing like I have ever felt before, I knew Faust’s rule was going to be unjust before, but now I know it is worth fighting to the last for! I turn around to the woman in black and red with the glowing blue magic crests in her arms.

“This man was trying to put Aoiki under martial law, hoping to become its regnant. Help me stop him.”

“He never would have gotten past my little brother, Archer,” Rubi smirks, “But he *does* seem like a bad guy... Okay, I’ll help you out.”

“Well then, Stalker!” Faust laughs. “Seems like you’ve been given a fair fight after all!”

“My name, is **GASAI!**”

I dash toward Faust as he pulls a shield from his back and blocks my naginata’s first blow, knocking me back severely. I realize I need to close in quickly before those guns on his back rattle off into my body. He aims for me and suddenly a giant flame bomb hits his chest, not going through his armour but staggering him. I look back and see Rubi, with a large war club that is hollow in the middle. The centre of it is primed with light firebombs.

“Go on, then. Finish this,” she insists.

I close in on Faust in an instant and he pulls up his shield. I slash through it in a single stroke, and then kick Faust a mighty blow. The eight appendages from my back extend and grab the cannons on his back just before they finish revving up, and they aim them at his own shoulder blades. Faust’s face is painted in horror but he’s too late, and the cannons let loose and tear into his back, shredding his spinal cord and killing him instantly.

I let go of him and lean again on my naginata.

“Occlude, end!”

The shield that protected Myaar collapses.

“I am only sorry I could not have defeated him and kept him alive to be tried fairly... but the people of this city will not suffer this invader king to live.”

I turn around to the people of Aoiki.

“I can never thank you enough for what you did for me today, and I promise you that as soon as I can, I will report this to the Archer and the city’s guard. I owe you all an eternal debt, and if you have any issues, if you see me do not hesitate to stop me and command me.”

“Noble,” Rubi says. “But irrelevant. People, go inside. I’m Rubi *Ríoga*. Name mean anything?”

The people standing in the street look confusedly at each other.

“I’m Thrian Ríoga’s twin sister,” Rubi clarifies.

More confusion.

“Sorry, does *Archer* ring more bells with you people? That’s right. Go inside. I have your best interests at heart. Trust me.”

The people instantly shuffle indoors.

“I keep hearing about this Archer,” I tell Rubi. “How important is he, to this city?”

“You’ll know soon enough,” Rubi says. “As part of our deal... Stalker, become my Servant. I accept you.”

“And I you, my Master.”

“Good. I think we can work well *together*.”

“That is all I shall ask,” I say, walking past her. I quickly move to Myaar. And I get hit in the face.

“What the hell was all that?” Myaar yells at me.

“A good lesson in why women should keep their distance from me,” I inform her.

“Shut up! I’m not going to abandon you after seeing you go through all that to protect me!”

“Well it is hardly as if you were not screaming my name in an effort to somehow help me,” I retort.

“Well maybe if somebody had lowered the shield earlier I could—”

“HEY!” Rubi shouts at the two of us. I straighten up and look my Master in the eyes. “The new day is dawning. We’re wasting sunlight. Merchant, Gasai will explain everything to you once I’m done with him. Where can he find you?”

“I’ll be in the market every day this week,” Myaar says, letting Rubi’s authoritative tone draw the information out of her.

“Shouldn’t be longer than two or three days,” Rubi says. “So wait for him. I like you two.”

With that, the strange Rubi Ríoga walks the other way.

“I have to follow her,” I tell Myaar.

“Hmph,” Myaar frowns with a genuinely angry expression. “Whatever. You BETTER show up in the market someday this week!”

“As you wish,” I reply. “Be safe.”

“Y-yeah, w-well you had better take care of yourself too, damnit!”

I give her a strange look as I walk to catch up with Rubi.

Women are strange creatures.

And so are men. I was never going to relate to the ideals of Faust, so I killed him. I destroyed him. Is that normal? Is that not savage? Should I not regret that?

I follow my odd and new Master through the night... but I feel happy. Tossing my eyes up to the stars, I smile.

“Well, Master,” I say, not talking to Rubi. “For you I shall tread upon stars, should it not cease to give me this welling sense of purpose.”

“Say something, Stalker?” Rubi asks.

But I was talking to the other Master. The one who I am told was a magus who used his magicks for good, his powers to defend.

“I am Gasai,” I say. “I will serve you as best I can... Master.”

Episode Four—Double Down

(Vraievel) Chapter Ten: Lost in the Night

“THRIAN! No!” I reach out to grab the falling Master but I can’t reach him and he falls over the side, disappearing into the river’s blue depths. “Damnit!” I ball my fist and strike the barrier of the bridge. I look over to Ordra and Caius. He’s a Toa of Iron. He can’t swim. And Caius can’t fight the ARCHER alone. We probably can’t even do it with all three of us.

“Ma’am... nothing to lose,” Caius says, bringing out his giant scythe. “I’ll get her home safely. Follow the current.”

“Caius...”

“Go!” My Servant says, his scythe hilt clashing off the ground, the opal pommel making an ear-splitting crack, and then turning to defend Ordra.

“Hm...”

I lean over the side of the bridge. Odd. I didn’t realize it was so far down. If Thrian were to be alive down there... It would have to have been a deep river. Even then, he would have likely fallen with his back to the surface of the water – the surface tension would have snapped his spine. In a perfect world, he could survive by floating downstream, washing up on a bank or out to sea. Servants have no need for breathing. But in that perfect world – he can come running back if he wants. I slam my fist down on the barrier again. And then again and again and again until the armour is lodged into my wrists.

Caius turns around promptly. “Sorry, ma’am. Spoke out of turn. Got a bit brazen. Forgive me. You’re right – what your expression is saying – you’re right. He’s well gone. And if he’s not... well, he can find his way back to us.”

I look out on the sparkling waters which just took the hero and resident protector of this city. “I just had I distracted him, didn’t I.” Who’s going to watch over this city now? Logically, it would have to be me. Vraievel Havoc, aegis of Aoiki? Unlikely. Archer watched over this city for hundreds of years. His vigil was fabled across even seas—not even the waters could sink his legend.

“Hold yourselves together! Unity makes the strong stronger!”

My arm morphs as I turn around, a plasma arm cannon pointed right up at the neck of the speaking person. “Who are you?” Caius asks for me.

“He’s Gasai, the Stalker-class Servant,” Ordra says.

“You are correct,” the black and tan armoured figure says. “My name is Gasai. Not my name as a Villainous Spirit, but the name a dear friend gave me.” The Stalker smirks a confident and dangerous smile at me. “Who put sand in your potion?”

"You can save your energy, sister," Ordra says. "Last time he attacked me and Master, Gasai was a lot stealthier than this."

"Last time?" 'Gasai' looks at Ordra. "... Oh. I see. You'll have to tell me about this last time, later. Let me ask you, though... are you the cause of my distant memories of the future now passed?"

"That's right," my baby sister nods at the Stalker. "And your murderer is dead."

"I knew it had to be him, the real Archer, who ended me. I was in that time, corrupted by the evil Archer. I can respect the real one by knowing the misdoings of his opposite," Gasai muses. "Well then. My condolences per the true Archer. However the Berserker gains a new guardian in me. I was commanded by way of Command Seal to serve the Servant Berserker as her personal... well, retainer, one could say. That is how my Master worded it, and she should know, being a royal herself. Saber, do you not remember battling the true Archer? The one with the eyes of blood and heart azure?"

"I do have some cloudy memories of Thrian killing me... although I assumed I duelled him in my former life," Caius remarks.

"What the hell are any of you talking about?!" I ask in an agitated yell.

Gasai laughs at me. "There is really no need to worry about it, Master of Saber. All that matters is that I serve Berserker now as much as I do my Master. And as long as she trusts me to fight for her, that's just how it will go. Objections by any party? Speak now, Berserker, if you do not trust me."

It's not like any of us has much of a choice. Three Servants and one angry Master gives us a good chance.

"And when the time comes and it's only the three of us left? You'll choose that moment to stab us in the back?" I ask the Stalker. Even his name makes me not want to trust him.

"Having no memory of who I am, I am a lost soul. I live only to serve my Master because she inspires me. I can say that she knew Thrian well and I almost envy that. When the time comes, I who have no wish will shove my scimitar through my chest and lay down my life for the benefit of those to whom I had been given reason. My death will be in gratitude and pride. That will satisfy the existence of Gasai."

His words were so sincere they cut right through our doubts, like a proverbial version of his all-to-real scimitar.

"Reassuring..." Caius mutters. "Master?"

"I trust him," I admit. "Simple as that. There's room for him at the place."

"Alright."

Taking the lead, my Servant, my sister and her new familiar all follow me to my lodgings. What a stupid hour.

(Arick) Chapter Fifteen: Before the Grail

Sands shifted underneath our boots as Sir Faust was giving us another speech about protecting the town. I was the youngest knight in the whole keep, and with a position like that of the Occult Specialist, I had to keep an eye out for jealous glares at all times. I'd barely graduated from being a boy – didn't even have armour nor a sword when I got this position. And Sir Faust was one of those men with those kinds of glares. Sadly for my friend Redya, he spots her dozing and interrupts his speech to berate her.

"And what do we do when a wraith comes to our doorstep, pray tell me, Redya?"

Caught off guard, Redya's helmet shifted on her head when she snapped her drooping head upright in attempt to meet Sir Faust's piercing gaze. She began stammering—"Oh, well, ah, y-y-you y-you do the—you get your—your sword and you—"

"Forgive her, Sir," I spoke aloud. "There was a slughoul under her bed last evening I had to take care of, and I doubt any knight would get decent sleep after knowing that. We all know that slughouls should rightly be called bloody spirit leeches or the like, so consider my word as her doctor's slip, eh?"

"That doesn't change—"

"I said leave the girl alone, Faust," I interrupt my superior with a sharp look and by folding my arms, the bolts on my babraces making a scraping metal sound. "Or I'll have to notify the Lord Caeder of this badgering you insist on to make us fall in line."

"Arick Eiyam..." Sir Faust spits my name. "You're getting too big for your britches."

"You're well past that, though, aren't you?" I smirk at Sir Faust. I will give him no quarter. "Sir Faust, you should be careful. I know you are not from here, but know that the knights of Blackthrone have a reputation for allowing no weak links remain in the chain of command."

"You would call me weak?" Sir Faust smiles back, taking three paces towards me. I unfold my arms.

"I would never say you were weak as a warrior nor of mind, but weak in a team, and alien to the concept of a family!" Standing straight and proud with the grin of a champion, I declare to Faust our culture. I close my eyes in admiration for my friends around me and remember those who fell. "You see, alien, here in Blackthrone the knights operate as one unit, fuelled not by rage nor desperation but by the strength that comes when fighting with your brothers and sisters, using the mental will to put aside passions and fears, replacing that fuel for a more simple yet complex one. You, see, Faust, outside those high walls of Blackthrone are unthinkable evil spirits, quite literally hell-bent on destroying the joy and health of the people who live here out of envy greener than a stormy sea. That's a lot of pressure to put on any knight of the walls. And the ghosts outside the walls can project thoughts of madness into your own head, possess you. It's only through your own strength of will, and that of the brothers and sisters who surround you that we survive. No knight can stand alone against their urgings of unbridled envy, but through bonds of loyalty and duty they can be held at bay. That simple and complex fuel to drive the knights: that is our family's unique ability to put aside worldly thoughts to commit to our duty and our duty alone and defend this city."

I finish my words and open my eyes. A crowd of people had gathered around us, and they all start clapping and cheering. Faust stands a few paces in front of them, his face half painted with a smile.

“Go on, then. If your unit needs sleep, you can take the day off. I’ll get some other guards to man your quadrant today. Arick, I’ll never like you, but you’re a clever boy. Now go on. Take your day off for what it is.”

“Hardly necessary,” I say with a wry expression. That wasn’t my intention at all. Then I feel two skinny arms worm over my shoulder. I don’t even turn my head in her direction. “You alright?”

“Better now that I have a full day to spend with you,” Kjelle smiles.

“You seem happy recently,” I say, looking her in the eyes with a smirk.

“I’m *very* happy recently,” she replies with an expression to mirror my own.

“Come on then.” I jerk my back up and catch her legs, pulling her onto my back and walking through the parting spectators.

“Arick! Let me down!”

“You used to love piggy-back rides when we were kids. Something change between now and then?”

“A lot’s changed since now and then!! We weren’t a couple, for one!”

“Hahaha,” I laughed a mirthful laugh.

“Where are you even taking me?”

“Nowhere and everywhere in particular.”

“Smooth,” she states, her frown audible. “That one made me fall for you all over again.”

That’s when it happens, just like it happened for the last three nights. Kjelle upon my back, I stop dead still.

“A-Arick, what’s that?”

“I don’t know, Kjelle...”

I let her down and she draws her lance as I draw a red scimitar that’s not mine at all. Where it comes from I will never know.

But there’s a black puddle on the ground and it spreads its shadow for about half a foot around it. Inside of it is a raw nightmare – a swirling blaze of blue and purple and red flames, as if of the fires of Gehenna itself. And from that terrible puddle arises a man in black and yellow armour, his arms folded and with a smirk like my own but in the armour only a knight of hell can have. His green eyes surpass Faust’s for their intensity and I cannot move before him. And he draws a hand axe from the air itself and swipes, the swipe coming not for me but for my girlfriend and I am powerless before it, unable to move before he lands the strike on Kj—

I awaken with a start.

"Master, are you well?"

My eyes refocus after what was yet another terrible nightmare. I move my hands across my face, rubbing it carefully in an attempt to wake up. "I thought I told you to stay out of my room at nights?" I ask the Servant Archer, my tone severe.

"Why, Master, it's morning. I just entered."

I know you did. You only appeared at the end of the dream. I got a few more steps than usual.

"Remind me why I cannot leave Aoiki?"

"Grail magic," ARCHER explains. "You see, once the six souls of the other Servants have filled the Unholy Grail, the Grail is full enough of magical energy to grant one wish. You're connected to it by me, your Servant, and also the Unholy Grail. Even if I die, you're bound here until the end of the war when the wishes are granted, when the Grail rests. Until then, you genuinely cannot physically leave the city, as if surrounded by invisible walls."

"I've always been around walls," I reply.

"The only walls I'm concerned about are those in your heart, Master."

"... Excuse me?" I ask my Servant, finally staring him in his envy-coloured eyes. "What exactly are you trying to infer?"

"That Kjellen Whitehart is your woman. I saw it in your dream and created your nightmare. I can do that because I *am* one," he says with an authoritative tone. "And I know that Kjellen Whitehart is a Master like *you*, with a Servant like *me*."

"That's impossible."

"She wanted to tell you that she didn't need those herbs, Arick," The ARCHER smiles sadly. "So she caught up to you."

"I do not believe you," I tell him.

"That's your problem. But you're not strong enough to let your arrow fly. So..."

I stare him down. "Your blood is then upon your own hands. I am *the Master* here. Recognize this or be destroyed."

"Even if it kills Talia?"

"I can find a way to save the girl while killing you, and I will."

"Well," Archer smiles, "That's fine, since I have no plans to slay Kjellen Whitehart."

"Leave my room. Check on the child. And whatever you do, don't think for a second you can come between my partner and I."

"Very well," the Servant says with a bow, before vanishing into a puddle of shadow like I saw in my dreams. I jump as he disappears with a low grin.

My face falls into my hands as soon as he leaves. What if he's right. What if there's no avoiding it. How would I do that? How would I kill myself?

(Kjellen) Chapter Twelve: Continuation of the Dream

Taking it out of the case, I snap my lance together from the three pieces. It's doing well, hasn't rusted or anything since last I opened the case, which is fortunate.

"That lance is lovely, Master. May I see it?"

I admire the lance for another moment. I remember when Arick and I tried fishing with it and there wasn't much left of the fish to eat. I let out a short little laugh at it. Each part of the lance is longer than the next, and all three are separate lances, although miniscule. They were given to me at ages where the sizes were appropriate; in proportion to how long a lance should be in comparison to a fully grown lance fighter. But I learned to snap them together somehow. One day, I just knew how. They join and come apart with some strange magic seal. My father said it was a magic crest awakening, but I shouldn't have a magic crest. None in my family do. I hand my lance to Servant Assassin.

"Here you go. Hold it for as long as you like, I don't mind," I smiled at her. She looks young, very young. She's much shorter than me. Probably shorter than Arick, too. Well... Maybe I shouldn't get ahead of myself. What contrast so much with that is how wise and powerful Assassin is. "I envy your strength," I tell her.

"Why thank you, Master," Assassin smiles back. Her smile is easy on the eyes, like Arick's. Maybe I see a lot of him in her. Strong and powerful. And sometimes I wish I could be more like that, even though he tells me I'm already plenty good at fighting. Still unsure how much lies come out of that man's mouth, though.

Assassin ogles the bladed stick like it was a toy or decorative object. But she does it with fervent interest. This lance could be familiar to her. "Looks ancient. Where did you get this, Master?"

"I told you, you can call me Kjellen, or Kjelle, or Kjel. Just anything but Master. It's unbecoming for both of us."

"Then where did you get this lance, Kjellen?"

"I don't remember who told me how to snap them together, but all the individual parts were given to me by my father. I don't remember who he got them from."

"Mysterious. There's a hidden history to everything, Master. Do you know anything else about this lance?"

"Yes," I reply. "Its name is Calad Bolg, and parts of it shouldn't yet exist. Best guess is that it's a Noble Phantasm. From somebody whose name I don't know."

(Caius) Chapter Thirteen: No Shame Greater

"Something's not right."

I wake with a start. Something's not right, and something is wrong. I attach my mask after falling asleep while relaxing to regenerate my magical energy supply. The Kanohi Vita, Mask of Last Resort, seals on my face with a hiss. I feel the helmet past its domed forehead and along its poignant mane. My sleepy joints hiss similarly but silently as I stand up from the chair, my legs gone half dead.

"Come on," I say to myself, my body moaning. "Get up..."

I need to hurry. There's no time to awaken the Master, Berserker needs sleep and I don't trust Gasai. There's a Servant running from our house – I can feel it. I open the door and lock it behind me with hopefully little noise. I spit something like blood mixed with oil. I shouldn't be moving while so exhausted. The fluid paints the inside of my mask and stains my upper lip. Moving like this might kill me. But if that Servant saw the *three* Servants and a Master in a house, they'd come at us with an army made of all the other Servants for sure. It would be irreversibly catastrophic – and we've already lost Thrian.

Once outside, I follow the footsteps on the blue-painted streets of the beautiful city of Aoiki. High rising buildings made of limestone on this side of the river give way to the sandstone ones across it. I see the footsteps as if the person had stepped in magical paint and the town was their canvas.

I pass by a dilapidated mill and decrepit church I feel somehow connected to. Is the renegade Servant in there, hiding?

I keep walking, deciding they didn't stop, and trusting my instincts that the perpetrator kept walking like me. I follow that sense of smell, these premonitions of a stormy figure, their mind cluttered with distant thoughts of grievance and rage. Why? Why is this sense of anguish so strong they leave it behind in even their footsteps?

I limp my way through the purple avenues and azure boulevards as I follow the confused soul. I draw my mighty sword Eirscarbh and will the wind to push me forward. Raising my sword, the tailwind, sure enough, blows on through behind me, propelling me forward through my journey deeper and deeper into the night.

It occurs to me just how far away I am from the house now. Am I sure I locked it? Am I positive that I am sure? I trudge onward, my left knee no longer wishing to bend, through the night. What if this is a plot to separate me from the rest and kill me? But even if that's the case, then it's worth the trouble, isn't it? It's worth having the peace of mind... that the Master and her sister are safe. It might even be easier if I did die... Berserker could be the Master's Servant, and I could finally prove I'm not a villain.

"I'm not a villain..."

Could prove I wish to do no wrong.

"I'm not..."

I have to prove it to them. The ones I slaughtered.

"I'm not a villain..."

The Toa I killed. The ones Makuta Teridax robbed of their free will, forced into servitude.

“I’m not a villain!!”

I break into a sprint, reminded of my ideals and what I must do. I must prove I am not a villain. Serthyk and I did not kill the other Toa Hagah because we wanted to, we did it because nobody else would raise a finger in resistance to Teridax if he had the Toa Hagah under his control. It’s because of me and her that the people of Spherus Magna lived in peace for so long afterward. I firmly believe that.

“I’m not a villain!”

I shout it so the whole night can hear me, so the Unholy Grail can hear me.

I realize, coming up on the struts and supports, that I’ve been led to the bridge where it happened. Where I saw the hero of this city fall upon his own sword. Or perhaps his arrow. Either way, this is a place where I never wanted to go again. So why am I led here by the rogue Servant?

I see a figure up ahead, waiting for me. I increase my pace. “I’ve found you! Wait there!”

But the figure doesn’t hear my voice. I can tell, even not being next to her, that this figure – isn’t one any voice can reach. Perhaps one person could reach her – but he is dead.

I stop once I fully convince myself my eyes tell the truth. “Ordra... What are you doing out here?”

The small girl looks over in my direction, tears in her eyes so heavy I wonder how she stands up straight. “.... Ordra,” I repeat her name, my legs starting to move. “Ordra... Ordra, no!”

The young girl tumbles from the bridge of her own accord, splashing down into the vicious rapids far down below after a full five seconds of falling down.

“Ordra!” I shout over the side of the bridge. “ORDRA!!”

She’s gone.

“ORDRA!!!”

But my voice will do nothing. A killing blow and a word, once thrown, cannot be recalled.

Ordra Havoc died right before my eyes and I simply watched.

There is no shame greater.

“Arise and bid me strike a match...”

I summon my sword, cloak it in flame, and ram it through my chest.

(Vraievel) Chapter Fourteen: Reservoir of Pain

“Haa!”

I wake up in the middle of the night with my hand burning. “M-my Command Spells!” They incinerate and disappear after a moment. And I am left in confusion and with a shocking sense of loss.

“Vraievel Havoc,” Gasai calls my name. “Your sister threw herself from the bridge Thrian fell, and Caius slew himself on the spot. Hold back your thoughts. Hold back your tears. It is time I introduced you to my Master.”

“How the hell am I supposed to do that? Why should I do that? Well?! Huh?! When my Servant is dead and my sister—you know what? I don’t have any tears to shed! I’m out! I cried myself to sleep after Thrian died, and now I get this message? Calm down?! Hold back my tear?! And now you’re taking me on a walk?! Nobody is left for me to save, you idiot! And just what do you want with me, anyway?! I’m yours for the taking now! So go ahead and kill me already, just end this futile life of mine!”

“I refuse.”

“WHY?!”

“Because my Master... I am not permitted to tell you her identity, but you will know who she is if you come with me, and you will see. What I can tell you is that once my Master and I win, I will wish for Ordra to be returned to you and my Master will wish for her brother back. If he is dead, I cannot save your Servant, sadly, but that’s just how it is.”

“... Just take me to him,” I say.

“Him? Haha.”

I ignore him, brushing past him and walking out of my room, through the main hallway and out the front door. Gasai materializes beside me.

You will not lock the door?” He asks me.

“Why? I don’t plan on returning,” I reply with a glare that could make a fly drop dead.

“Because even if you wish to return to your home – Thrian won’t want to let Ordra stay forever, right? He’s an uninterested man and she’s a young girl.”

“Gasai...” I stare him up and down, my gaze softening slightly. “Why would you and your Master do this for me?”

“Ask her yourself,” the tight-lipped sand man says, folding his arms. “If you do not lock that door, I’ll go nowhere with you.”

I walk to my door and hesitate. Then I lock it quickly, forcing myself into it. The stoic Stalker waits for me, still as if his heart wasn’t beating. “Thanks, Stalker.”

“Thank the Master.”

(?????) Chapter Fifteen: Run

On the wrist of my right hand, my arm is getting a good, hard tug. And then I feel my armour scrape off of moist concrete. It's displeasing and gives me a start. I stop moving after a second.

"Good. You're here. Get up. I need you, Spring."

I lift my other arm at the sound of that holy voice and put my left hand on the concrete and hoist myself up. I cannot see, but I know my Master is right beside me.

"How are you, my Servant?" Thrian asks me.

"I'm just so happy to know you're alright."

"I'm not sure if I'd say I'm alright... you can't see, can you?"

I shake my head.

"You jumped, didn't you?"

I nod my head.

"Ah. So the water's surface tension blinded you when you hit it."

"Thrian... are you real?"

"I am alive," he tells me. "I think; therefore I am. Besides. I died, and then fought my way back into being allowed on this planet Onius."

"That's good. I really didn't know if I wanted to be alive, back there," I say, letting my thoughts flow out while stretched out on the ground.

"You'll live, Spring. I'll make sure of that."

"How do you know that? All I have been seeing is death. Life here is the same as my life on Daxia, across the sea."

"You are asking me to give you a will to live, which is simply not possible. Furthermore, I would refuse." I hear him grunt after a moment and then he curses under his breath.

"Thrian, are you alright?"

"Not exactly. My back is broken. That's why I couldn't pull you up, but only catch on to you. My legs are worthless; my back armour was crushed into me by the surface tension of the water. The reason you're fine is you've got less surface area; you're smaller. I wasn't so lucky. But I have a plan. Now listen to me. I cannot give you a will to live. Until you showed up, I hardly had one myself. But I can help you get one, after we win this war."

"Tell me more," I say. "I need to hear more."

"I know. Right now, for your sanity's sake, every word counts. I've been there when only four walls and a roof were there to talk to me and I'd never let what happened to me happen to you, nor to anybody else. If I did... well, I'd probably die of grief. My will to live is to help you because I can see so much of myself in you and the fact that you're the child of my sworn enemy... makes me wonder

if Wreax and I were the same after all. You'll never be able to understand the evil of the Holy Grail. The Unholy Grail—I hope with all my heart that it is different. I truly do. The infinite cancellation of all is what happens when the seven become one. Azoth. That's the first rule of alchemy. Sorry... I've had nobody to talk to for a while, and I'm used to it... but I guess I'm out of habit. I'm all over the place. At the end of the day, I'm searching for my own will to live. It's not something easy to find: I went through insanity and back to find it. But I'm alive, and when I realized I was sane again... that's when I knew. I was *alive*. I had scraped by bloodied tooth and sharpened nail for every last breath and the air tasted sweet in my throat and my chest welled with pride that I was strong. Strong enough to give others the will to live, or even just improve their lives. And I found a city plagued by ghosts, named Aoiki. And I defended it with everything I had. The loneliness was still killing me... but I was alive and the people around me were happy. It was through many journeys, but I found something. And that was enough. Now..."

There's silence except for some metallic sounds and scratching noises.

"I see..." I say, thinking about what he said. "So, wait—"

"Ah, actually, if we could talk about this again in a second... I need... to..."

"... Thrion?"

"This will be loud, Spring. Be prepared... Just don't try to stop me."

That's when I hear the most gut-wrenching scream I'll ever hear. It's loud, it's long, it's making me shake and shudder on some unnatural level. After a minute, I hear his voice give in and stop making noise, trailing off with something like a croak. Then I hear something like a torch lighting up, and then a laugh. And then I hear another one. And then a third one torch. He says—"Draft, on."

"Thrion?"

"Okay, Spring. I'm going to scream louder this time but for shorter."

"Thrion..." *Shhinnn*. "Thrion why did I hear a blade?"

"Just... if I stop responding, get out of here however you can. Servants don't drown, remember?"

"Thrion? Thrion?!"

I hear the swinging of a sword and then the cutting of armour and flesh followed by a horrific scream, much, much worse than the first, it's not of fear, but of acceptance and there's rage and determination in it. There's no fear in it, only pain and drive. Then after a moment he says in a hurried and hoarse voice; "Gods, Draft, on!"

For two minutes straight, I hear very little.

And then I hear Thrion pick himself up off the ground.

"Are you... walking?" I ask after a moment.

"I am walking. Hold on. I—ahaha! I can't believe it! Hahahaha! Spring... I think I just figured out how to defeat the ARCHER!"

"Well, go on, tell me!"

"See for yourself! Hold on, with my new magic crests I can probably access more spells... let me try this... Mend, on!"

I feel him crouch down beside me and wave his hand slowly over my mask, the air slowly moving and circulating on a strange way and suddenly I can see.

Thrian is standing before me, his usual blood-red eyes staring right at me, but he's got a satisfied smile on his face, and it's lit up like he's been reborn. "Are you alright?" He asks me.

"Are you? You look different."

Thrian holds up his two arms, and they're lit up with twin glowing blue magic crests. "I am different. I remembered who I was." Then he holds up his cloak, his 'mantle', and I see that it's cut off at his waist, raggedy and bloostained. "And there's this." His leg armour looks shinier than normal, too. And he's holding a katana that's just as red.

"Th-Thrian... you..."

"You can't really 'Mend' snapped spinal cords. Cutting myself off and regenerating my body was a desperate bid that had a slim chance of working, but work it did. It was painful, but I'm fine now. And besides, it doesn't matter. What can you tell me about the situation above ground?"

"Well... There's a woman looking for you," I say. "Do you know her?"

"What do you know of her?"

"She's a royal and a magus. She's Stalker's new Master. I don't know what happened to Sir Faust, but he doesn't seem to be around."

"It must be my sister," Thrian replies. "We need to get onto the surface, which... we should be able to do if we pass through the link between the sewers and the catacombs. The catacombs connect to the surface through some small stairs in Confluence Square. From there we can get to the surface and.... kill the ARCHER."

Thrian gets up and starts walking away from me. I finally take notice that where we both washed up was sewer presumably below Aoiki. Beside me greenish waters flow and I rest on the path beside it, likely used for maintenance.

"Wait, Master! How are you even alive?"

Thrian turns around and points at his red heartlight. "The reason I am alive is the same reason that I can defeat ARCHER – it's not these over-edged magic crests nor my will to live, it's my realization that the ARCHER shot me in the heart and not the head because he doesn't know I am a Servant who won the Holy Grail War, even though my story is somewhat famous. But he does know a lot about

me... I no longer believe that even he knows who he is, Spring. Listen, I'll tell you the true identity of our enemy..."

(Kjellen) Chapter Sixteen: Approach

"Why are we here?" My Servant asks me.

It's a cave which leads to the catacombs under the city, where the dead are stored. "This is where the Unholy Grail's reservoir of souls is. The Grail isn't necessarily here, but this is where it is." I snap my fingers to trigger my magic crest and the silent and harmless blue flames erupt from my right hand. "Assassin... look!"

"Your dream of becoming magus, Master... it looks like it will come true. Once we win the Grail War, we will further that dream of yours," Assassin smiles.

I still am jealous of her. She's so kind and quiet. Elegant and cool.

"Tell me, Assassin. Just who are you? I have to know."

"Very well, Master. I trust you with my true name. I am the Toa of Lightning, Serthyk. I am normally as kind as I can be, and warm to those who I like. But then... I am prone to what one would call 'snapping'; fits of rage and outbursts of me releasing my anguish. My kind front is my way of dealing with myself."

"So, that would make you the legendary Toa Magus who controlled lightning. It's said that you were tortured and would even beat your brother, Caius, when the mood took you."

"That's right, although I don't know anything about me being tortured. Neither did my brother nor I ever know the source of my rage. When I talk to you know and behave well around you, Master, I want you to know that it takes most of my magical energy to suppress the magical impulses put upon me."

I can't help but cockily tilt my head with a smug grin. "I know of a guy in this town named Archer who can help with that. But for now, let's just get familiarize ourselves with where it is that the Grail collects prana."

(ARCHER) Chapter Seventeen: Footsteps of Destruction II

I approach the church with Arick and Talia behind me.

"Archer," Arick starts, "Why specifically do we need to eliminate this Master?"

"Because the church is normally a place of refuge in the war. This church, however, is actually build on non-consecrated ground and as such is no sanctum. Fighting can occur there. I am a good Servant who lives and dies by the sword," I admit, "And as such I will have no Servant or Master fooled into entering it. The dead body of the priest should be enough to keep away the others."

"I sense something darker, Archer," Arick tells me.

Right you are, Master.

A yellow beast of a man exists the church. “The Servant Reaver,” I announce him as I summon my bow and pull it back.

“Who goes th—nnnrgh!”

I cut him down by transforming the overcharged Calad Bolg to arrow form.

“I am on another level than you, Reaver!”

“Hraagh...” He grunts and pants in one noise as he struggles to pick himself up.

I fire another arrow at him to end his life and it accomplishes the mission. The beast ceases movement. I walk past him as Talia cowers behind Arick he stares at me in horror. This is only the tip of the iceberg. I will undoubtedly commit so many more atrocities before the night is done. I walk inside the church to take my revenge on Crissoul. This battle will be simple... but I can make it last until dawn.

(Thrian) Chapter Eighteen: Footsteps of Destruction III

Making my way through the catacombs beneath the city, I lead Ordra through the haunted tunnels.

“Thrian, do you know this place well? Seems like you know your way around it...”

“Inside and out,” I reply. “Once the Holy Grail War is over, my job will go back to being the protector of this town. The catacombs are necessary for burying the dead without polluting the water with rotting organic matter – nevermind, kiddo. Won’t get into that. Basically the catacombs are a necessary but not ideal feature of Aoiki. Then again, they keep me on payroll...”

“Do you actually get paid for hunting ghosts and monsters?”

“Well, yes and no. Each ‘Archer Contract’ has its own rewards, and most aren’t even monetary. I guess I’m a shallow person who gets a kick out of helping the poor with their spooker problems. All I know is that busting monsters and hunting ghosts is all I seem to be good at. Although...”

“Although?”

“Although new evidence suggests otherwise.”

I summon the Bull Shield of Toa Aredeth and charge through a hollow wall. “Come on, Spring. In here.”

“Master... have you a plan?”

I look at the three Command Spells on my arm. I used on of them in the night that didn’t exist, when we killed Phantom. I ball my fingers into a fist and strike my shield, invigorating myself with the idea of defeating that which thinks of himself as ‘ARCHER’. “I have something more than a plan. I have a concrete method of defeating the enemy. I’ll use my tactics and my mind and I will end the Unholy Grail War. I know what I have to wish for now.”

“What’s that?” Ordra asks me.

“I need to destroy the Grail by wishing for something massive. And I need, now more than ever, to stick to my own ideals and beliefs to defeat the ARCHER in both battle and philosophy. Our fight is one moreso of identity and the mind—so I’ll keep my belief in people, keep hoping for the good in people. I won’t go down the same lonely road as him because I’ll always be ready to fight and die for my friends.”

I Draft the mighty blade of Toa ladies, ‘Fifteen’ and smash through another wall, creating another shortcut for us.

"I'll make a wish for the future."

(Rubi) Chapter Nineteen: Avenger

"Welcome," I say to the Daxian woman. "Vraievel Havoc, to my palace."

Vraievel sniffs gruffly as she enters the room, her lithe frame being the only feminine thing about her. The armour she wears over it is impressive, clearly crafted by the finest smiths of the mechanical Toa that lived across the sea from the Deireadh. "It's funny. Your armour took my fancy when I first saw you parading through the night with Toa Caius. It is alien and but not unknown to me. My brother Thrian's retainer, Ffarrahgo, was a Toa from a foreign land. He came to ours looking for help with a brain tumour – a strange affliction. None of your immortal friends in your tall grandiose towers knew how to treat it, so you abandoned him like any other base animal. When he came to our island, we saw a person in the lights that formed his eyes. When we saw that fading, we restored it. We are not savages, the royalty of Deireadh. Nor are we blinded by class and do we treat ourselves like we are above the 'peasants' or 'plebeians' or whatever you would call them. We wouldn't know. We are the Ríogas. Do you know what our family's motto was, Vraievel?"

Vraievel Havoc, depressed and defeated, hunched over in sadness, looks at the bow above my desk.

"Shoot it 'til it's dead?"

I take out my bat from under the desk and slam it on the table as I say our mantra:

"You'll know it when it happens. And that bow up there is the true and physical version of Eclipse."

"... Eclipse? Eclipse, Eclipse, Eclipse... I know that name!"

"Do you, now?" I keep a firm eye on my prized passion on the table, but fold my arms and recline in my seat. "Tell me more of it, and of my brother's status."

"Your brother?" Vraievel looks up at me. "... Archer!" She says, her eye ablaze with revelation. I roll my own.

"Very good, child of Havoc. Now if you could do something by yourself and answer my questions?"

"What happened to not speaking so uppity?!" Vraievel revolts.

"Vraievel, it is unwise to stir the Master's emotions. She's volatile. And she's about to be a whole lot more volatile once you —*ahem*— hurry up and tell her."

"Your brother was Thrian, right? Well, he... died. He was killed by the physical manifestation of his own alter ego. He calls himself ARCHER and is—"

"I know about the Servant Archer," I reply, shaking my head. "Know that what is dead cannot die, but only be destroyed in a certain number of ways. I am not in the original Rubi Ríoga. I am a version conjured by a Holy Grail for a Holy Grail War in Xia. I, like Thrian is of the original, am merely a copy. We are fakers, but we are good at it. Sometimes, we can even fake our own death."

"What are you saying?"

"The bridge where it happened—hide your surprise, Stalker, I have many connections here—I have known people to survive its fall before."

"Don't implant me with false hope. My sister jumped from it too."

"All the more reason you need to get off your light behind and start believing in your friends."

I get up, and swing my bat over my shoulder. "Vraievel, if you shot my heartlight it wouldn't matter. Servants made truly alive by winning the Grail War have no weak points and are only defeatable by decapitation."

"I don't understand. I don't know that I want to. I can't have my heart broken again."

I feel some compassion in sympathy for this woman and offer her a smile. I lay a hand on her shoulder. "Dear, I know exactly how you feel. But trust me... there's a chance that both Thrian and your sister are alive."

"The Master would never say something in which she does not believe," Gasai reaffirms.

Vraievel balls her fist and shakes her head. I hear her gloves crunch. "Where would we start looking?"

"I can probably sense Thrian if I'm near him. Gasai can do the same with Ordra."

"In that case, I think I can help," Vraievel tells me. "All the sewers in this town lead to one point of confluence."

"Which is?"

"Confluence Square, of course. The name was a joke and slang... until it stuck. Or so my Servant told me."

She looks at her hand. "If you're wrong, I'm going to try to kill you."

She says it without hatred or any true emotion. This woman can only be saved through her sister. I remove my hand from her shoulder. "You stand to lose nothing."

And when I leave my sparsely decorated room I feel Stalker's silent footsteps follow me, and the loud ones of the firstborn daughter of Wreax Havoc.

"Have you the keys?" Stalker asks me. I turn back to him and give him a look to tell him he's stupid and shake my head in response to his question. "Very well..."

"What?" Vraievel asks. "What, what—what? Why don't you lock up?"

"Because it's dangerous out there. May not come back," I tell her.

(Serthyk) Chapter Twenty: Footsteps of Destruction IV

I watch my Master as she ascends the stairs out of the catacombs. She stops and looks dead ahead.

"Master?"

"Serthyk..."

I freeze in place. I don't know what the wisest move is here. I know nothing. All I can do is push ahead of my Master to protect her, and so I do. Adrenaline hits me, and strangely, my vision is unimportant. My eyes unfocus and become unconscious while I throw my Master out of the way of the danger I feel in the air. The second I do my eyes refocus and I don't even have time to raise my sword.

"Forgive me for what I must do."

The arrow cuts right into my chest as my sword rises.

"Serthyk!"

"S-Stay behind me!" I stammer out, gritting my teeth and moving forward. "Who are you?"

The warrior in yellow and black armour stares me down with terrible green eyes. He loads his bow again. He aims it steadily and then targets my Master. He must be able to see her head. As he shuts one beryl eye I spin my sword to give it the most surface area. His fingers release the string with elegance and class as the arrow begins slicing through the air like a horizontal guillotine. It hits my sword and breaks it, the arrow shooting upward and coming back down to land in my shoulder while I am distracted. I wince, dropping the broken katana on the ground with a clatter in response to the pain. I keep my gaze on the yellow warrior.

"... P-pfft! Heeheeheeheeheeheeheehee! That's some of the worst luck I've ever seen in my life—and I've lived, let's see, one, two, three other times! Truly magnificent!"

"That power of yours is ridiculous," I say. I summon my katana anew, mended in my functioning arm.

"I lived my life trying to be a perfect silent warrior... And yet you were sneaky enough to even go unnoticed on my radar... Who are you?"

"A jack of all trades... master of some," the knight with demonic armour replies.

Left with no other option of combat, I throw a lightning shuriken at him. He catches it with his hand and throws it back at me. I deflect it with my sword and it flies into a street lamp. A lightning bolt comes down from the heavens, shorting it out with a loud bang.

"That's what it does?" The archer asks me. "That's your Noble Phantasm?"

"..." I open my mouth but chose not to speak. It will do me no service.

"That's the Anguish Rain, the legendary weapon of the mythical Serthyk... isn't it? I never did run into you before... Well, now I have known them all."

I have no idea what he's talking about, but he knows my Noble Phantasm.

"Master... Go back from where we came. I will stand and buy you time."

"No, Serthyk. I will stay and help. If we need to use a Command Spell..."

"Master... Not even a god can save me now. Save yourself."

"I said no, Serthyk!"

"I'll make this easier on the two of you— Draft, on!"

The archer interrupts our conversation. When I look back he has three of my shuriken between his fingers on each hand. He throws them all at us. I raise my sword and prepare to deflect them, but know in my heart that I am doomed. I deflect two of them with one swing but a third comes in from the side. I dodge it and it heads straight for my Master. I correct my movement much too late.

"Master!!" I yell. It was what my body resorted to doing after I realized I could do nothing else.

The shuriken that summons the wrath of the heavens plies itself into my Master's chest. I hear her heartlight crack as the spikes puncture the thick glass and sticks. "S-Serthyk..!"

I realize I have to act fast. Throwing caution to the wind, I move to her to pry the shuriken that contains the anger of the gods from my Master's chest. My hands cut and oil-blood spreads around them. As I desperately try to erase the signature on her death warrant, the archer speaks. I focus solely on my freeing Master from death's gold and stony grasp.

"It is regrettable that a warrior as brilliant as you would have to die simply because your Master had to be eliminated. Know that you fought with honor, and that my name is ARCHER."

The last words this body would ever hear. Three bolts of lightning came tumbling down from the impartial skies above. I was caught in my own storm—and was too distracted with the irony and cruelty of it all to let go of the metal conductor.

(Thrian) Chapter Twenty-One: Message in a Body

"I'm feeling uneasy," I admit to Ordra. "A powerful Servant walked through here a moment ago."

"Let's just keep focused, Master." I smile at that. What was once just a hooded girl running from who-knows-what, clueless and amnesic, is now a regularly functioning Ordra Havoc. She's not Spring, she's not Berserker. "Is that... light?"

I walk up the steps, towards the low light of the night, feeling uneasy. It must be near morning. My boot hits something that my exhausted eyes didn't see.

And when I see it, I for a moment want to die.

"... Kjelle? Kjelle? Kjelle?! Kjelle!!"

I pick up Kjellen Whitehart and check her eyes. They've gone out like her heartlight.

"Oh my god. Her circuits were entirely fried."

"Damnit... Damn... it... She was hit with her Servant's own Noble Phantasm. Just like Kjelle was in the first war... when I was tricked into killing her. Ordra, keep watch above the stairs. I'll need to investigate the corpse for clues and lay my old Master to rest. The final battle is just ahead of us, so be vigilant..."

I scratch my temple. I look at the green, plated armour of a good woman. The partner of my friend. I look at her dead eyes and speak to them.

"They say eyes are the portal to the soul of a person, but that's just because they're important for survival, I think. Maybe we evolved to breed with people who have sharp eyes, is all. But Kjelle... if you can hear me, then just..." I shake my head. *Then just* what? "Be patient. Master, someday I will join you in the realm between this world and the demon's. For everything you taught me... how to kill the other Servants, how to live by myself, suppress my rages, control my inner self... the strength I carry with me now is all really belonging to you. You are always known to me as my... M—M—..."

Unable to finish the sentence, I stand up with Kjelle in my arms. I feel my red eyes take on a darker shade. As I walk into the catacombs where I'll lay her to rest, I speak with the non-sapient corpse. "I've change somehow. The time I spent paralyzed in the catacombs, when I turned all of my nerves into Magic Circuits... what gave me the strength to go through all that pain were the messages you taught me! Maybe in the land wherever you are now, you are able to know the stories of the War where I was your Servant, and this one too... I'd like to think that, because I want you to know that every ounce of my strength is owed to you, and god damn it..." My arm aches with a certain pain, like being jabbed with a butcher's knife from the inside. Like a rabid animal trying to claw its way out. I know that while ARCHER and I coexist... the world makes two of the same entities hate each other, like polar opposite magnets. So while he exists, he corrodes my very life, and I corrode his. By sharing air, we are killing each other. "Did my sharing air with you kill you? Is that what it was? In universes of constants and variables, was your death a constant so long as I was present? Was it my fault?"

I stopped when the pain struck, but thinking about the first War... I moved through the pain of it all so that I could create a happy life for Kjellen and Arick. Despite Arick said I was doing beyond the best that I could do, they won't be able to live happily ever after unless I sacrifice the Servants for them. I harden my resolve. Master did not die for nothing. It's clear who killed her – the lack of evidence is deafening. It's trademark of my own style. ARCHER—I will put him six feet underground by the end of the night. For master I will keep protecting the innocent. I will never give up on being who she trained me to be. Back when I didn't know who I was, she helped me find myself—so well, that my own sister has come to the city from just hearing about a person so like their brother, if Berserker is to be believed. "This pain is illusionary, just like the permanence of death. I will find a way for you and Arick to be happy, master. I have my duty to those who are even less fortunate than you two... but you are my noble master."

I find a spot for her and summon the blade of a thousand cuts, the Mileduithe. I carve the name Kjellen Whitehart in the stone above her, and the dagger cracks and crumbles to dust. I can't Draft another one after that, for whatever the reason.

I bound up the stairs and close my eyes in order to see. I cannot sense any enemies present, but sense a number of people coming in from the west.

"Ordra, stay close. I don't like this." I prepare to summon my weapons until I see who's coming through the night. "Never mind, Ordra. All's safe now."

I put my hands on my hips and click my tongue as they approach us, the still-nearsighted Ordra clinging to the remnants of my mantle. "Rubi Ríoga... Looks like you've aged well in *death*."

"And yet my brother still hides his face, but how much of his sister does he really remember?" Rubi asks me.

"I remember enough. I remember that Orde's still holding down the fort in Deireadh, probably, and I remember the whole Gaia Primus event." I talk about things the others won't understand because they happened so long ago. "I remember Clear and I remember us having an older sister, but I don't remember anything about her. Fill me in on the details if we ever make it back home?"

"Sure thing. She's going to punch you, by the way," Rubi says, pointing at Vraievel.

The lady in question walks on up to me, anger written on her face, and throws a mighty punch. Sensing her pseudo-enmity, I swiftly dodge it (and the subsequent seven after it).

"Oh well I'm glad you're not dead either," I say as I contort my body with my evasive manoeuvres like some kind of possessed snake.

"Take ya lumps!" She roars.

"Vraievel?! Why are you so angry?"

"You too, y' scamp! C'mere!"

The gruff arbiter of plasma takes a gentler approach, but still somewhat tackles her little sister and seems to now be trying to suffocate her with a lethal hug. Rubi walks over to stand beside me.

"Quite the takedown strategy."

"We should file that one away," I laugh.

"Or perhaps try it," Rubi adds.

"Maybe when our war is over, sister," I say.

"The true war wages within and never ends."

"Clear's ended. So did our big sister's," I reply.

"Hey." She nudges my arm. "We made it here. I mean, we might be hard to miss if we camp out here. You know how I felt when our inferiority-complex-little-brother had *dared* to take the name of Archer and was revered as Faiklen's hero? The most well-known man on all of Onius?"

"Alright, alright. Cut that out," I say, rolling my eyes. "So you won your own Holy Grail War?"

"I did. Had a good Master. But there'll be another time for that. Let's finish your war first."

"You're right... Nice Command Spells. Whoever it is, bring it over."

"Stalker!"

Gasai walks in from the shadows, his naginata cradled like a toy in his arms. He smiles at me and gives me a nod of respect, which I return. Vraievel and Ordra turn around to me.

"First thing is first. Six Servants need to die to fill the Grail. I know, Ordra and Gasai, that it's terrible. But it is what it is."

"You'll figure it out, right Thrian?" Vraievel insists, hands on Ordra's shoulders.

"I've been down this road before and I've survived it. I think it's time to reveal my plan to all of you.

"Ordra and Gasai, I will ask you both to kill yourselves."

"Acceptable," Rubi speaks for Gasai, who nods.

"No way in hell!" Vraievel responds. "Not a chance! What the hell, Thrian?!"

"Hear me out. You can always say no," I reply. "Six Servants have to die, and well, there's one that I can't kill."

"... Talia," Ordra sighs. "She's a girl less than half my age, and she's been summoned as Servant Shielder for whatever reason."

"Right," I agree. "Now, my real plan? Find Talia, secure the girl, and then... No easy way to say it; Ordra's got to kick the bucket. I'll take Talia on as my Servant and with her I will destroy the Holy Grail."

"Why destroy the Holy Grail?" Gasai asks.

"Know your place, Servant," Rubi replies with a stoic grimace.

"Get lost, Master. Victor—my question stands."

"Haha," I laugh. "A repeat of the Grail War has taken too many civilian lives already. And put a lot more in grave danger. Would you disagree?"

Gasai tightens his grip on his naginata.

"He would not," Rubi says. "Gasai already lost somebody."

"Sorry for your loss. Come to me after the War, we'll talk about maybe seeing her through a spirit medium, okay? Helps with the grieving process, believe me," I tell him.

"How will he do that when he has to die, too?" Ordra asks.

"I'm not letting anybody die. Once Talia is found both Gasai and Ordra will kick the bucket. I will deal with the ARCHER myself because only I have the power to do so. If I die, and I may very well die, then I'm sorry but it's game over. But if I take revenge for Kjellen and kill him, Talia and I will make a wish from the Grail. My wish is simple... To destroy the Grail I will make it use all of its power at once, completely draining the prana – that's mana, magical energy, collected from natural life energy within the ground – um... call it magic ground lava that's brown! I will essentially uproot the Grail into bending it to my will and destroying it. I will ask them to return the Servants to the lands. The six Servants. Whatever Talia does is fine. But I believe in my heart and in my mind... that Caius, Serthyk, Phantom, Talia, Ordra and Gasai all deserve to live! My soul tells me that they're good people, mislabelled by some arbitrary judge who rests in the heavens above! And I will train them to be good

if they are evil! They will be my arrows which I will use to protect lands close and far away. So, all of you... will you support the continuation of this dream?"

"I support it," Rubi affirms. "You're always right about these moral debacles, if a little naïve and cliché for it..."

"I'll do it!" Ordra and Gasai chime in, in unison.

"If you die, I'll kill you," Vraievel informs me.

"Small problem," Ordra objects. "Talía is already ARCHER's Servant. You can't take her as yours if she's contracted to ARCHER already."

"Wrong," I say. "There exists a Noble Phantasm called Rule Breaker which steals Servant ownership once stabbed into the Servant's heart. I'll hate doing it... but I'll do it so Talía doesn't need to know the pain of death again. The Saber of my Grail War was a magus and the most powerful Servant I ever encountered, barring ARCHER. He owned this Noble Phantasm, and as such..."

"Fakers as we may be..." Rubi says. "As fakers we are good..."
I Draft a copy of the twisted dagger. "Behold Rule Breaker."

Rubi looks over her strained steel war club. "So... What next?"

"We need to find Talía. But after that... it gets complicated. Quite complicated."

"How so?" My sister asks. I pass Rule Breaker from hand to hand.

"Because only a trained magus can use a wish to overload the Grail—the legendary spell *Azoth of the Seventh Servant* is dedicated to it, I read after my own Grail War. Which means only I can make the wish to end the Grail War, which... after looking at the destruction around us... I think we're all committed to doing, like saving our friends."

"Right," Gasai nods. "The problem, out with it."

"I need to fight ARCHER. Only I can do that, too," I say, rolling my eyes in frustration. "So one of you needs to take Rule Breaker and become Talía's Master, so she doesn't fade away when he dies – and yes, that's very painful, for those of you wondering. If I kill the ARCHER, then we can hit the kid with it again and I can be her Master and we can finish this. Only the Master of the final living Servant gets to make a wish. But..."

"But..." Rubi asks.

"But if I die fighting the ARCHER..." I shrug. "I guess one whoever takes Talía as a Servant is going to have to try to cast the Azoth spell."

"Crap," Vraievel mumbles. "I'm the closest thing to a magus here. You've all seen my protodermis arm cannon. I should be the one to try Azoth if it all goes south."

"I have to agree with that. Which means Talía will be your Servant. Here. Take this." I hand her the Rule Breaker. "Be careful, it's brittle. Use it only on Talía. Now, get out of here, all of you. I have to

kill the ARCHER. Listen: the incantation chant for the Azoth spell is not prewritten. It comes from the heart of whoever recites it, and it's an activation of their own potential or pre-existing Reality Marble. Rubi can brief you on that as you head to find Talia."

I summon two versions of the simple blade Calad Bolg. Nobody moves. "Get out of here. Search for Talia. Ordra, try leading them to the house where we met the ARCHER. As for me... the ARCHER will only confront me if I'm alone."

I walk from them, holding the two rapiers, walking in the direction from which the ARCHER probably went.

"How can I even trust you?" Vraievel calls out to me in question.

I shake my head. "Really, you can't."

"I trust him," Ordra says.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, kid," I say. "But it doesn't mean much to Vraievel, even if she is your sister."

Vraievel groans. "This sucks."

"I know, but this way accomplishes all of our goals and my duty to the city. I leave you now. If I never see you again... know that I was grateful for the... friendship? And... fun..."

Shaking my head again, I walk forward with purpose. The person who falsely believes he and I are two sides of the same coin – he is sorely mistaken and I will inform the truth.

(Arick) Chapter Twenty-Two: Definition of a Good Man

I keep watch from the window. Talia bumbles about behind me.

"You alright?" I ask her. She jumps up and down on the bed and I find it sort of endearing.

"I'm good, Mister Arick!" She says, not stopping her charming bouncing. She's making noise, but as long as I keep an eye out, I guess it's no harm.

There are still people out there who would want to harm Talia. Honestly, I find it hard to believe that the man who told me he was a villain would sacrifice his life to save this young girl. Maybe even the ARCHER can grow attached to somebody. I don't notice myself slipping into thinking aloud.

"Weird... I guess he wasn't that bad after all. Then what of his true self? It's weird that I never met the real 'Archer' of Aoiki, especially since ARCHER informed me that he was a Master himself. Master of Berserker, huh... Maybe I'm glad I never ran into him." I look up at the now-stationary Talia. "Hm? Oh, sorry. You can keep doing whatever you're doing. I was just thinking... out... loud." I gulp as the young girl's long ears twitch. Her breath becomes ragged and deep, full of the terrors of the night.

"Talia, is everything alright? Do you need someth—"

A giant steel club bursts through the door, smashing it to smithereens, sending the timbers flying everywhere. I take out my Morningstar and move toward it quickly, just in time to get shot by a giant protodermis round. It was unavoidable, and sends me careening back and flying through the air to the back of the room. I am concussed and unable to get up. I feel my vision fading in and out as several figures enter the room, three of them, two in white and orange armour, one with a lot of black and another with a tint of blue, and then another in red and black. That last one comes over to me and crouches down. I get a good look at her tribal yet regal war Kanohi.

"You've been visited by the Ríogas. Next time, you'll know it when it happens."

She raises her giant steel club and brings it down hard on my head. Before being knocked into the darkness, my final thoughts are those of being very confused.

(Rubi) Chapter Twenty-Three: Aiming for Your Head

"Well, that's kicked to the wayside. He won't be any more trouble, whoever he was," I say, rearing my club over my shoulder. My spirit weapon vanishes in a more violent puff of blue dust I crouch down to the fallen man. "You did a real number on him, Vraievel. Charred his armour out to hell... Well, after you he sure looks like he just came back through its gates, doesn't he?"

I look at the swirling black wisp of smoke that comes out of his lightless eyes. Hm. He's inorganic; a Toa magus, not a Dread Fighter. That's strange. Were he like Thrian, Gasai and I, he'd have eyelids I could shut. Instead his lifeless eyes now remain ever open, closed portals to a soul trapped in a body that will never again move. "Vraievel?" I turn my head around since she didn't answer me. Vraievel seems lost in her own thoughts.

"Vraievel?" Her sister asks. She remains mentally far away from us. "Vraievel, wake up." Ordra walks over to her sister and seems to want to shake her from some kind of sleep. "She used to do this back home. I can fix her. Rubi, can you... mind Shielder?"

"... Of course," I say. Now that I no longer have Gasai, I have to be wary of these sisters. Even if Thrian trusts them, they're Havocs. He seems to know that, though – which is strange, because my sources on Hestus Island told me that there was a legend of 'Archer' defeating 'Wreax Havoc' in a great battle in the church. I suppose, assuming Thrian's plan goes well, the only way to know is ask around once the War is over. Now's hardly the time, and besides, looks like I have a child to mind.

"Hey kiddo," I say, inching over to the girl with tall ears. She moves back. I wince when it draws my attention to her legs. "Oh my gods. Oh my gods, sit down, child!" I pick her up and sit her firmly down on the bed. "No more walking on those things... Ugh... you poor kid. What the hell happened to your legs?" The small, girl shrugs. I shake my head and sigh. "My brother, Thrian, he can help you with those. Make you better ones."

"Is he a blacksmith?" The girl asks me.

"Not exactly. Hey, that guy over there... what can you tell me about him?" I ask, pointing at the fallen man.

"He's Arick... um... Emiya, I think his name was? I don't ren...renen... remember."

"Trouble with your M sounds?" I ask the cute kid. She nods. "Maybe I can help you with that sometime."

"But aren't you going to kill me? You and the short girl are Servants."

"I'm... different, and so is my brother. We were Servants who won their freedom, in different Grail Wars. We are... victors of past wars. I'm Rubi Ríoga. My brother, Thrian, sometimes calls himself Archer."

"That's my Master's name," the girl says.

"No," I tell her. "It's not. He pretends to be my brother. I know that might be hard to believe, but your Master isn't really my brother."

"How do you know?"

"Because he's my brother. Do you have any siblings? Family?"

She shakes her head. "Wait. Master is family."

"Well, he really doesn't like my brother."

"Can't they be friends?"

"Never, sadly," I say. There's not much else I can. I look over at Ordra desperately trying to wake up Vraievel. "So what can you tell me about Arick?"

"That you killed him and it makes me not trust you," Shielder says. I roll my eyes.

"We might have made a mistake, but I thought he was a bad guy. Because your Master tried to kill my brother. Look, I'm sorry, but I want you to know that my brother, Thrian? He sent us to you... to make sure you were safe. So please try to be friends with us. That's all we want."

Talia nods sagely. "Okay, Miss Rubi."

"Now, now. I'm your friend, right?"

"Not yet. Maybe. We'll see!!" She says.

"Well, you're very cute, so I'd like to be your friend. Put me into consideration? And call me Rubi. And I'll call you Talia. Alright?"

"Okay, Rubi. Wait... whoa... how did you know my name?"

"I'm magic," I say, getting close to her face with a cheeky smile.

I turn to Vraievel and Ordra, still crouched down to Talia. My Noble Phantasm, the 'Queen's Insight', flares into action. I see Vraievel dying. I quickly get up on my feet and summon my steel club as the 'corpse' of Arick Emiya rises and a single blue eye-light flickers back into action. He runs for Ordra, the nearest to him. I see Vraievel finally mobilize and my second Noble Phantasm activates: 'Analysis Complete'.

Time literally slows down. I slow down with it, but my movements are more precise and analytic. I move forward to get in front of Talia. Who knows what a mad Master would do when faced with death? I bring my club forward and strike his left kneecap with it as he passes by, tripping him up and sending him spiralling into Vraievel, who just threw Ordra out of harm's way. I see her bring up the Rule Breaker and scream for her to drop it, that there's only one, but it slams right into Arick Emiya's heart as he falls toward her.

Time goes back to normal. Vraievel throws Arick off of her. "Gettoffame! What the hell? He was dead! Dead as hell! Rubi?!"

"Don't ask me!" I retort. "He looked pretty damn dead when you shot, him and deader when I ended him!"

"He doesn't die," Talia says. We all turn slowly to her.

"What?" Ordra speaks.

"I don't know. Arick just doesn't die."

"..." Ordra gulps audibly. "Did you say... Arick? As in... friend of Kjellen Whitehart?"

"He talked about somebody named Sh...elly, I think."

"She means Kjelle. Oh my god. We have to go. We have to go right now!" Ordra says.

"Why?" I ask.

"It's a long story. For Thrian's sake, we need to leave right now."

"I'll trust you. Let's go. Talia, get on my back. You're getting a piggy back ride." I pull the tiny girl on my back.

"It's just like with Mister Arick!" She yelps.

"But... b-but R-Rule Breaker!" Vraievel stammers.

"It's only *g-g-good* for one use you bu-bu-bumbling idiot! Let's get out of here, head to church and figure this out on the way!"

We get outside into the lashing rain. I can't Draft on the same level as Thrian, but manage to create some kind of umbrella for Talia to keep over her body. Ordra runs us through it.

"Arick was Thrian's Master. Thrian's wish... might have made Arick immortal. It's a long story and not important. What is important is that we know that ARCHER and Arick are no longer in a contract... that should at least make Thrian's job of killing his mortal enemy a little easier... I hope."

"Don't worry. Ordra, did you ever seen Thrian's Noble Phantasm?"

"Do you mean the Calad Bolg?"

"No," I smirk. "I do not. Looks like he's saved it for the right moment."

"What do you mean?"

"Well... Archer... He'll know it when it happens."

(Thrian) Chapter Twenty-Four: Rattling Chains In the Silent Night

"I guess I'll start," the ARCHER says. "How are you alive?"

"You shot me in the heart."

"I did. So why is it still beating?" He asks me, narrowing his eyes.

"Hahahaha!" I laugh at that and shake my head. "I'm already dead. I was in a Holy Grail War. Arick was my Master. Didn't he tell you?"

"What?"

"I won and wished to live again. I don't age. From the moment we met, my heart was never beating! Hahahahaha!"

"Alright, alright," the ARCHER says, shaking his head. "How didn't the impact of the water kill you?"

"My body was limp from shock. Still broke my back, though."

"Well then how are you walking?!" ARCHER asks me.

"Not so fast," I say. "I've come such a long way. Maybe you were physically superior, but I have outsmarted you and it's my every right to savour it. The moment I woke up, I was floating in the sewers. I used my arms to crawl onto the maintenance walkway. I lay there until my Servant tried to kill herself and washed up beside me. Well, I struggled and pulled her up from the same waters, but same difference. She went a little blind from it, actually. In fact, I'm thinking she'll go permanently blind from infection once I revive her after we finish this dirty business."

The ARCHER shrugs. "Some part of me hopes you do."

"What does that mean?"

"My connection to my Master has been severed. My Servant is going to fade away after me, if your friends haven't killed her already too. So all that is left for me to try to kill you. My enemy. And your objective is to kill me, correct? This destined final fight of ours... I know it is time for it. I accept it. But please, continue. We have no need to fight just yet."

"Very well. You'll enjoy what I have to say, though, I promise you."

I lean against the church door. He stands ready and waiting at its altar, steps above me as always.

"You see, I've figured out your existence. You were certainly an enigma. In all my research of the Holy Grail Wars—this is the first Unholy one on record—there are no mention of one identity becoming two because of their alter ego. I always had my doubts about your identity as, well, half of the man I was, and that I was the other half. In a way, you were right. We're two parts of the same coin."

“Don’t you mean two sides?”

“Well... you’re like the rim of the coin, and I’m like both sides, actually. You—hahah this feels brilliant—you are not actually ARCHER, I realized.” I start walking toward him. “I am the man who lived ten thousand years ago and died then too. You are... nothing, actually. Not anymore.”

The ARCHER Drafts a copy—a dirty fake—of the divine bow of shattering, Eclipse.

“You can continue your elegy after you win the right to! I can tarry no longer—if nothing else, do me this last honor, prove you have virtue I did not, and defeat me in a fair fight!”

“Let me tell you something I know about the magic I practice,” I say with a smirk. “They call you the Master of the seventh Servant. The seventh of the seventh. And in alchemy, my magic...”

“Seven represents the azoth; the death and rebirth of everything,” the ARCHER replies. “Maybe this game was rigged from the start.” He throws away his copy of my bow and creates one of my sword that cut the mountains, the Calad Bolg, walking down off the altar.

“Yes, but only when seven becomes one.” Having seen the real thing up close, I Draft a copy of Saber’s sword, the sword that controlled the air, and feel a mighty wind stir up behind me. “I am going to take your power for myself to make myself more worthy of this life I’ve been gifted!”

“Come then... do me this justice, Thrian Ríoga. En garde!”

I yell the incantation of my last resort: “Flare, on!”

The ARCHER charges at me and I launch the sword at him straight away. He dodges it as I predict but I then toss the hilt toward him and it explodes in his face. I teleport in and use my left elbow to hit his left temple, then duck under his reactionary flailing of his arms and swoop his right leg out from under him, then summoning Calad Bolg for him to fall on. He falls backwards more than I expect and narrowly misses being impaled, landing a kick to my shin on the way down. Even though I’m in extreme pain, the rage creeping under my skin like a thousand blades totally eclipses it. It’s just like when I fought my idealistic enemy—Wreax Havoc. I move in above him and summon Calad Bolg backhanded, striking it down towards his heartlight. He rolls out of the way despite me not telegraphing my attack in the slightest. Footwork: the word comes to mind. Yet as the ARCHER picks himself up, I still struggle for balance. I decide that a katana is my best bet and summon Kjellen’s to aid me. The ARCHER summons two Calad Bolg and holds one out toward me, telegraphing his attack immensely. I block it when it goes down to strike me but the other hits me, despite me just Drafting a shield to prevent such an attack landing. I fall back and roll out of the daze and my mind races.

I have a huge gash on my hip. At this rate, I’m going to die.

But how? I should be defeating him: he’s telegraphing, goes for obvious plays and getting beat down upon. It’s only the final strikes I cannot land. And also, I’d swear he didn’t move the hand that struck me that last swing.

Wait—

"You're telegraphing on purpose," I say. He rests in the eisenport stance, catching his breath. "That's right... that's it. You have more than two arms—because you're not me—because you're a demon. Unbeknownst to even yourself."

My style of swordfighting is so ruthlessly calculated and efficient that not a single strike is non-lethal unless the target moves. It has no unnecessary cuts. So if he had extra arms that only another demon could see—as demons do—then I would likely never even cut them by accident. He might even be using them subconsciously. After all, he doesn't know he's a demon. He's looking at me now like I'm one. I need to take him down.

I charge at him and swing wildly with the katana, then summon a duplicate in my other hand and cut parallel to his body, and feel resistance. I hit one. I was right. ARCHER cries in pain but parries my strike and hits my shoulder with an invisible hand. I summon a shield and charge, knocking him over, and then switch to the bow of shattering. I quickly draw the string and aim for the Magic Crest on his left wrist, and fire. The arrow makes more than a few entry wounds, and I quickly cycle to the other arm as he writhes in the pain. Then I back away, another arrow drawn in my bow.

"Now will you hear me out, ARCHER?"

Gasping for breath, the ARCHER makes no objection.

"ARCHER.... It is time I displayed to you my Noble Phantasm— the Knight's Nightmare!"

A black portal appears beneath our feet and we are sucked into the world it leads to—my world.

(ARCHER) Chapter Twenty-Five: Your Hero

With his boots upon the ground, Thrian is not unsettled like I am by the dark and scouring wind blowing across the hellscape of blue flames. We stand on black rocks floating in the middle of a sea comprised of blue flames. We can see through them, but above, around and below us is the swirling perpetual cyclone of blue flames. I can't stop looking at them, seeing them.

"Wh-Why am I so afraid of this place?!" I can't help but shout it out.

"This is where you were manufactured, this is where you must be kept. This is my Reality Marble, the Knight's Nightmare. It is here you were born; it is here you will die. It's not like you used some elaborate machination to escape it. You simply needed to rest in here and wait for me to become enraged enough to let you – the demon within me – out. And whenever I called my self 'Archer', those extended periods of cowardice in my life when I, Thrian, needed a scapegoat, I'd let you out of this realm, and into the real world for a time."

Thrian does not move, and he appears a million miles away. Yet he speaks as if in my very ear.

"This is the torn world which I came from?" I ask, deciding to humour him.

"Yes and no. I had to get inside my own head. The locked vault of my own mind... I had to blow the doors clean off and squeeze myself through the gap I made in my own psychological walls. It was my botched summoning, not unlike Gasai's, which created these mental blocks. But now I remember my past, the entire story. My twin sister, Rubi, my older brother, Clear, and sister, Opal, who were also

twins. You are none of them, yet you're not truly Thrian either. So that got me thinking—how could somebody who's not me, take on my appearance?"

"We are the same."

"We are not." Thrian confidently shakes his head. "It is without pride and devoid of self-rejection that I say this. That which is truth is not inflected by emotion and thus cannot be a lie. I am beside myself with surety that you and I are not born from the same mother and father. But you look like me. Logic would dictate that you, who claim to remember his moment of creation, would know exactly who he was. Furthermore, you – again – claim what you do remember your inception, and it was inside of my mind. But if that were true, why would you not remember this place, where you *did* come from? The only thing could think of was that if you didn't remember this place, my theory had to be true: it had to be because it was unimportant to you as an entity and identity, and as the unison of both of those concepts, for that is what makes a living, emoted being. If you were born here you would remember it. And because you do not, you were not born here, it is not important. You are not from here. Who are you? Why do you think you were born from me? *Are* me? I question these facts now, also. And do you know why?"

Thrian takes a step forward but crosses a million paces with it. My legs are locked in place.

"It's because really, why on Onius would your summoning not have been as botched as mine or Gasai's? No, it is absolutely impossible that you had a complete summoning. Indeed, as I understand it your summoning was accidental and it's a miracle you're fine and with your memory. My summoning was also from Arick, albeit Arick in a different time... but still. How do you know you know your own mind is intact?"

"E-Excuse me?"

"So that led me down a different line of thought. What if you were me, but only partially?"

Thrian paces again and he's right in front of me. He lifts up his hand and I see a deep groove running through it. "I can now say that I remember that this is a demon wound which I received when I was a boy. My first expedition with Clear was a failure. We told our mother and father, the queen and king of Deireadh, that the demon had gotten away. And for a while, we thought that, too. Until strange things started happening when I was around. I'd say things in languages that weren't of our tongue, break things and have no memory of it. If only I'd remembered, myself... but my botched summoning made it so I could have never come to my own conclusions." Thrian shakes his head. "So it was decided, quietly, without the attention of anybody but my mother, father and brother, Clear, that I would have an exorcism rite performed on my body. But the demon that had taken refuge in my body was not one that could be destroyed. The exorcism let me... control it. My body changed and I changed my armour to match it. I was a more gothic knight with more daemonic looks than my brother and sisters. And that was that. But my family – the Ríoga family – had something running in its veins. The Archer blood. It allowed access to the magic of Drafting when it awakened in one child of a bloodline, but would only awaken in one. That one was hoped by my family to be the next in line to our throne, Clear, the oldest son."

Thrian steps back and is now barely visible even on the horizon. How does this place even have a horizon?

"But that's not where it ends. Couldn't have been all sunshine and rainbows. No, instead of Clear, who was in line for the throne, I got the Archer blood. The demon awakened it inside of me. I gained these powerful magicks of Drafting, while my other family members like Rubi and Clear could only Draft weapons spiritually bound to them, such as Rubi's great club."

"Why are you telling me all of this? I suppose I am at your mercy, but if you're going to kill me, get it over with."

"Well, I am not. Since you're a powerful demon, you can't be killed. Not only that, you ensured your survival by literally becoming what gave me my Archer powers! That nameless demon never left my veins. Despite being alive, it was still a villain that had made me do terrible things when it had taken over my body in the past. But that was your nature as a demon and I personally cannot fault you for it. You were created in some tube beyond the gates of hell to rage; rip and tear this world apart."

"I'm not a demon," I protest, "I'm the alter ego you created, physically realized through the Grail!"

"Wrong!" Thrian shouts across the plains of blue flames. Three glowing swords and three glowing lances fall from the heavens above the blazing sapphire sky and form a hexagon around me. They vanish and the ground itself bleeds red blood, which now swims and swirls around my boots.

"What the hell? ... Wait..."

"You've finally figured out where we are? My own personal Hell: the land where the demons play. I meant what I said about taking you to a knight's nightmare. It was real. This is my Reality Marble. My interpretation of hell is a knight's nightmare. You're the demon who awakened my Archer powers!"

"If what you say is true, about me being technically alive, how can you prove it, Thrian?"

"You have no right to call me that! You are deluded, you aren't even ARCHER! You are nameless, like all demons since their names cannot be spoken in mortal tongue! See for yourself—come out, demon! Look behind you, Servant Archer!"

I look behind me. "What?!" There's another of me, standing there like a mirror. Except when I move, he doesn't, so it's not actually a mirror. I turn back to Thrian. "This cannot be!"

"It is. You're a demon. You sap the life force from those around you. At least, that's what you'll do if you win the Grail War and wish yourself back to life. That's what demons do. So if you were to raise Talia, you'd kill her by... by proximity. So I cannot let you do that, you see."

"That's... that's a reason I can respect. But I challenge my fate! Maybe I can wish to not be a demon, and live as a mortal!"

"The Grail has the power to restore a few lives," Thrian says. "But not to change them. Since you're not technically deceased, it cannot change your existence. I cannot wish to be a Toa magus; I am forever a Dread Fighter magus, and it's the same thing."

"Y-you're wrong!"

"I am not." Thrian sighs. "This is the last place we fight. This is the last piece of the puzzle, killing you. Then I can revive all the other Servants: that is my wish! To give them all a chance to show they are not evil!"

"All of this murder around you and you're nothing still but a stupid, naïve fool!" I shout at him impulsively.

"You're wrong again!" Thrian shouts, commanding respect. I see giant gold objects sprout in the air around him. He walks towards me at a reasonable pace, and what I now realize to be plates of golden armour cover the black ones on his body as he walks towards me. "They are all either misguided, were fated to fail, or were simply wrong at one stage! They are damned villains, yes, but they all want in their hearts to be heroes, just like everybody else! I... I still believe that – no, I believe more than before that nobody becomes evil because they wish to be! It is the nature of all men to do good, and while that might lead us on a poor path at times, I refuse to let it bind the Villainous Spirits!" Thrian's golden figure approaches me, picking up speed and momentum. "Reaver, who was made into a monster! Shielder and Stalker, who want to do nothing but good! Saber and Assassin, who cared not the names they were called in a glorious quest for peace!" The sword Calad Bolg rises from the bleeding stone and Thrian picks it up, breaking into a jog with it. "Berserker, whose very name the World unjustly decided meant villainy! And Archer, who wanted the same thing as me! All of the Servants and the Masters were damaged! All of them are imperfect! But I am going to help them—" Thrian breaks into a mad charge at me, coming towards me at speed of light— "To help them realize they can be heroes!"

I feel an enormous cut go through my body and there is no going back. I gave no resistance.

The dust settles and the sound of the flames cracking fills this hollow, soulless land.

Both of us stand still.

It is done.

"You did not defend yourself?" Thrian asks.

Closing my eyes, I accept this fate. He will be good to Talia and the others. This is for the best.

"At least if this body's energy goes back to you, then I may serve to do some good. I wish it could have ended another way, but I see now— you are the hero of this story."

"No," Thrian says, surprising me. "We are all the heroes of this story."

"Even among the glistening stars... one must shine brighter than the others, to lead those below them to greater places. I will never like you. And I will fight you from within if you make a mess of this chance I give you. But for now I will return to your blood."

My body disintegrates, fades away, like dust blowing away with the winds.

"With you in mind then," I hear as I die, "I will work toward the brightest future."

(Thrian) Chapter Twenty-Six: As The Sky Opens

I blip into existence again, kicked out of my own Reality Marble by exhaustion. The energy of ARCHER floods my system like the release of a curse. I can feel that I am now fully, one-hundred percent at my former glory—from when I was hindered only by my mortality of age while alive. As a Servant by species, that is no longer a hindrance. I gasp for breath, but still don't need it. I'm still a Servant and essentially ageless. I can be killed by swords and other weapons but the advancing march of time will never defeat me. My eyes water and I feel the darkness of earlier slip and wash away with the rain. I look above me and see the rain has begun to pour through the cracks in the roof.

The door slowly opens and I see the troupe of four enter. "Took your time, ladies. Full harem's here." I shake my head. "Which means there's only one step left."

I step down from the altar and walk toward them. I see that Ordra is alive and Talia is tired on Rubi's back, as if about to fall asleep. "Which means we need to wrap this up fast. If that little girl could be groaning, she would be." Ordra and I shudder in sync.

"H-How are we going to do th-this?" My Servant asks me. Vraievel holds her.

"Is there no other way we can do this? Can't I take the hit?"

"I'd make Rubi do it if it was that simple," I frown. "She actually trusts me. I hate this, Vraievel, but we're running out of time."

"Guys! Shut up! How can we like... make this easier?" Ordra asks. "Thrian, I trust you to do everything you can! You didn't give up even when the ARCHER shot you. I believe in you, Master."

I see the look in her eyes and feel revelation. What Arick and Kjellen were for me... I have been to Ordra. The Servant became worthy to be a Master of her own calibre.

"Let Thrian do it. He can make it quick. He didn't do this just to kill your baby sister in a manner that satisfied him, you know," Rubi advises.

"She is no baby, she is now what a child should strive to be. Come here, Ordra." I pull Ordra in for a hug and she reciprocates it. "You were Berserker, but you are your own Master now." I feel Ordra's fingers tighten up slightly between my shoulder blades, over my cloak and on the back of my neck. Words this kid—this person—needed to hear. She is strong now. She won't die like she did, however it was that she did, back on Daxia. She will survive now, just like the rest of us.

"We need to hurry this up," Rubi says, cradling Talia, who's barely lucid.

I let go of her and look at Vraievel. "It's you or me, because she's holding the kid. And I'm not going to let you do it, not going to let you with those scars. Now turn around, please."

Vraievel looks at me and without anger or distrust, she turns around, but grabs Ordra's hand. Ordra squeezes it. I try to summon Calad Bolg, but it won't allow me to. I summon the bow of shattering, Eclipse, and pull the string as an arrow materializes between my fingertips.

"Let justice be done as the heavens fall... let me hold your hand as the choir sings in the dawn of a new day... let me fight your wars small and large... for I am the bone of your Sword!" I recite the

shorter version of the chant and release the arrow. My Servant's short last gasp of air is cut off by the arrowhead I fired and dies like the night as the new day dawns.

"Thrian, quickly..."

I move over to Talia and place my hand on her small forehead. "Here goes everything... I accept you as my Servant who has come in response to my summons. Guard me, Shielder."

Ordra's command spells break like glass and a new set appear, as a circle with a box made of two lines inside of it. "It worked. All sigh in relief. Now we just make a wish..."

(Thrian) Epilogue

Waking up, I stretch hard and yawning wide. I slap myself off the floor. I need practice my Drafting spell. The vase on the counter, perhaps?

Oh. Wait. I slept at the office last night. "Did I just lie down on the floor?" I ask myself.

"Yes, yes you did," Ordra sighs. "Hope you slept well, because I've got not one but two contracts for the Archers today. And it's already past noon."

"It is? I should get another three hours in order to work the night, when the monsters are most active. Maximize work efficiency."

"Most of us are managing our sleep cycles pretty well, you know. Besides, you'll miss today's little event if you go now," she chides. "Tell them I'll see them soon, alright?"

Event. Event, event, event. Oh, it's *that* day. "Crap."

"Crap as right. Get up, Thrian." Ordra kicks me lightly from her chair. I kick her back. She kicks harder. I kick harder again. A little flustered, she kicks her hardest.

"Ow! Whoa! That was pretty good, you went right for where the shin bone is weakest!"

"Sorry, you just know how to push my buttons," she shrugs.

"You're absolutely right, Spring."

I get up and trot to the main hall of the offices and head for the door. Those two are going to be so angry if they're waiting for me, still... The door opens in front of me and in walks Reaver.

"You're late," I remark sharply.

"You're wrong, mate," Reaver replies. "I was actually around the offices while you was sleeping, so a, don't go trying that one again. Later boss man. Catch you down in the pub for a drink later? Got an issue worf dealing wiv."

"Ahah!" I crack a laugh, shaking my head, caught in the act, and walk out the door onto the main street of the city.

It's weird to see the natural accents of the former Servants coming out. The Grail masks the accents of Servants to hide their identities but now they're open as can be. The last act of the Unholy Grail was to revive the Servants, but there was a minute amount of prana that escaped so now there's a slight rise in the number of paranormal encounters in the city and nearby, so it called for me to use my new allies in bringing them into my line of work. I now have six subordinates and we were able to negotiate a much bigger office from town hall to counterattack the threat of the monsters.

I pass by Kjellen and Caius talking on a street corner. She's had a rough time getting over Kjelle's death, just like me, but we made the best out of it and bonded over it. And I don't know where Arick is because he's gone missing, but I hope he's not taking it as rough as he really has every right to. I owed my world to those two. Caius, like Kjellen, has overcome his inferiority complex due to being a villain because I, a Heroic Spirit, joked that I gave Death himself a reference to those two as heroes.

When he took the joke too seriously neither of us could bear to tell the poor man it was meant to be taken for what it was; a joke.

I manage to walk past Gasai playing with Talia in the park. Those two get along very well. She's calling him "Uncle Gasai" now. He calls me "jealous". The first thing I did with her was create her some new legs, first by Drafting prototypes and then by making her them out of real whitmett steel. She managed to show me that she has magic circuits, so I've taken to training her all the spells I know. She's already starting to Draft vases, meaning she's very special, like me. I wonder if she has something like the Archer blood.

I reach the southern gate of the town. Waiting for me there are two women.

"How're you two doing?" I ask.

Vraievel looks at the prairie behind her. "Anxious and impatient and unsure as to why you decided to make us wait for you to see is off."

"Because I want to make sure you two are going to be let back in, you fool. Especially you. You telling me that you just walked through the gate when you got here? Or is there a Vraievel-shaped hole somewhere in these walls?"

"Probably the second one, but it's not like I can't just do it again," she smiles.

"Honey, next time I'll pull one of my own little tricks to get us in," Rubi smirks.

"What's that?" Vraievel asks Rubi.

"You'll know it when it happens," Rubi winks.

"You two going to be alright out there?" I ask them, interrupting a conversation characteristic of their girly bond.

"What's the big guy getting so sentimental about? Going to miss us?" Vraievel teases.

"Of course I am. Rubi's my twin and you're one of my better friends. I mean sure it took you long enough to trust me, but I'm never going to find anyone like you no matter where I go. Unless it's near you. And if you find Wreax out there somewhere you'll never come back."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because you know I'd have to kill him," I retort.

"Whatever," she says, rolling her eyes. Rubi thumps my arm.

"But, hey, if you do find yourself in town, make sure you show up at the Archers' place, alright? For... supplies and stuff."

"Alright," she smiles. "For supplies and stuff. And when I need to make sure you haven't killed my little sister again."

"You watch my sister's back and I'll babysit yours. Deal?"

"Deal." Rubi answers on Vraievel's behalf, laughs, and walks off.

"Hey, come back when you find Orde!" I shout after her.

"Worry not, brother!" She says with a wave, wandering off.

“Are you going to miss her too?” Vraievel asks me.
I nod. “When a fight breaks out.”
“Take good care of my sister and I’ll make regular resupply runs, alright?”
“Yeah... yeah, sounds good to me. Stay safe out there, Vraievel Havoc.”
“You too, Thrian Ríoga,” she smiles coyly as she follows my sister.

Well, I’d better head back of my office. The Archers are just starting and the Archer Contracts are beginning to flow in. In time, there’s going to be more pages added to the chronicles of this busy man. And when Rubi finds our old kingdom, we’ll reclaim and rule that too. When Clear and Opal finally show up. Until then... I’ll keep my chin up. I have new reason to. I have friends who carry damage, and I want to help them. I had to help myself, but I want to make it easier on them.

That’s right. Unlike before the Grail War, I have friends now. With them came responsibilities to train them to be the best people they can be, to be a cut above normal and the opposite of Villainous Spirits, like the hero I’ve come to terms with being.

“Alright,” I say, turning away from the prairie where Vraievel and Rubi set off toward. “Time to put the lads and lasses to work.”

I turn around and wind up face-to-face with a person I’ve never seen in my life. Her armour is draconian. She looks strong... She carries herself stoically but irresponsibly: her stance is incomplete. “Excuse me, I am looking for the hero of this town. My name is Eblayre Frostlorn. Could you point me in his direction?”
“That would be me. My name is Arch—.”

I let my shoulders relax.

“My name is Thrian.”

UNHOLY GRAIL WAR

“A bow, a sword, a reason: the armamentarium.” – Thrian Ríoga

— A *Fate/Stay Night* and *Bionicle* crossover

By shoottheglitch

Illustrated by Tristan Ex Machina

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No Wreax Havocs were harmed and definitely not created during the production of UGW