Fate/Stay Unlimited Bullets
by Ma_Kir

Summary

Sometimes, one requires more time and resources to truly defeat evil ... and find what may lie beyond it.

In another plane, on another night, the Emiya Clan has some unfinished business.
Emiya Norikata enters his Workshop and almost immediately notices that something is missing.

His flora specimens remain intact, along with many of the substances contained in his beakers and Bunsen-burners. He can still feel the shimmering field of temporal magecraft surrounding the white flowers, though he knows its only a matter of time before the World catches up to them, and they rot or crumble into dust. He knows what the issue is. Even Shirley, who has little biological magecraft potential beyond her gifted intelligence quotient, and an eidetic memory for complex formalcraft could understand the situation. In order to maintain a Bounded Field that approximated an internalized Reality Marble and being to stagnate or accelerate the flow of one's immediate space-time -- internally or, to a limited extent, externally -- one needed to construct an elaborate ritual, possibly beyond a ten-count aria, and possess an extraordinary amount of Magical Energy to maintain the phenomenon to the ideal conclusion.

Simply put, after the ritual or process of Time Manipulation is completed, the object or subject in the field will be exposed to Gaia and its natural law: in all of its brutality. From what little experimentation he has done on fauna, he has seen cells rupture, bones break, and sometimes even the advent of accelerated rot. Yet the process does work. Norikata knows exactly what it requires. Even Shirley figured out how to use this magecraft to a limited extent in a copy of his flower experiments.

That was the reason he created the potion.

He didn't want to make it. Even being hunted as he is by the Mage's Association, having been Sealing Designated as a result of the intense promise of his work, the creation of this potion was no small matter. Obviously, he hadn't used any blood from a Dead Apostle itself: that would have been suicide at best. The flowers were the beginning: the ingredients along with some of the fauna that he had experimented on. His magecraft was integral to this particular process: maximizing the reagent properties that would preserve the elements that would potentially allow for biological components to temporally regress to its original state. Ironically, however, this same process has similar issues to the internalized Bounded Field required to meet his Family legacy's end goal. It requires a considerable amount of energy: Magical Energy. And that energy would need to be consumed directly through a medium such as blood.

Shirley helped him with the early experiments on the smaller animals: hoping to create a variant of Dead Apostle that wouldn't be ruled by its appetites or constant consumption of life to exist. Theoretically, with an ideal host it would bypass any danger of them becoming of the Dead, or even a Ghoul. It would bring them right to the Vampiric stage. And because there is no parent Vampire making them, no Dead Apostle, or even a rare True Ancestor, they would come into their own as an Apostle directly with all the benefits: the potential to use magecraft at its nth degree without using one's personal energy to keep one's body alive due to ingesting the energies of others, and the longevity to be able to perfect one's own Mysteries to their highest instead of requiring an heir to continue that research. And all of this without having to overcome a sire or master. As long as one had the necessary Magic Circuits and strength, it should work.

But Norikata is no fool. Magi are still human beings, whatever pretensions they may have otherwise,
and there is a chance the hunger will overcome a magus inhibiting this formula. Even if they didn't become a Ghou instead, severely destroying their higher cognitive processes and soul connection to their body until they could overcome it with more blood sustenance, the Vampire would be unstable: as it didn't have time to develop at a proper rate, have the tutelage or control of an Apostle master to instruct them, and hunger would be their only baser focus for a long time. And this would be with a fully developed magus. He had done his research. Shirley had helped him with the potion itself: the one that, right now, he can't find.

He thinks to ask Kiritsugu if he has entered the Workshop. But he knows that his son knows better. Kiritsugu isn't ready for the knowledge in here, or the processes he has been undertaking. He hopes that soon he can begin the process of transferring the Family Crest to him: if he even needs it ... if the plan succeeds. But Norikata knows better. The Emiya line has to continue one way or another, and having a fresh, intelligent mind makes all the difference: even with the potential for a qualified form of immortality. And Norikata lost Kiritsugu's mother thanks to the Clock Tower. He will not lose his son too.

Sure enough, he asks Kiritsugu if he had been in his Workshop and knows his son tells him the truth when he says no.

He tells him to stay in the house. It really is a pity. Shirley was a brilliant assistant. She obviously wasn't on the level of his son's potential, but her time with him has made him approach the problems of Time Manipulation in different ways. She had a unique perspective. But she forgot what he told her about the potion. He made it clear. Shirley doesn't have many Magic Circuits, if any. Perhaps she thought she could consume some of their plant specimens to forgo this, or thought that he had just been overly cautious. She had a fanatical faith in him and his work.

He goes to check on his contingencies. Shirley is gone. By the time he finds her, she will have no doubt started feeding on the other villagers. Norikata knows that he and Kiritsugu have to leave Alimango Island. Losing Shirley is a shame. He knows that Kiritsugu will take the loss hard. But there is nothing he can do for her now, her or this island. He warned her, but her curiosity got the best of her this last time. Now, all Norikata can hope for is eluding the inevitable Sealing Designate Enforcers and the Church Executors coming to clean house.

*They are close. If there is one silver lining in this travesty occurring at the moment, it's that the Association and the Church are too busy fighting Shirley and her Ghouls -- possibly the Dead as well -- to find his home and Workshop ... to even sense his Bounded Fields. He is amazed, in a detached way. The potion did everything he thought it would. Shirley is, or was, a Dead Apostle. Perhaps had she continued to exist, she would have developed her genetics through blood and been able to compensate for her original lack of Magic Circuits: becoming a magus in her own right. The fact that she could create Ghouls so quickly was simply amazing. If anything, he thought she would create the Dead first: as undead extensions or familiars of her will.

But he was right the first time. She had no experience dealing with the hunger, never mind the power suddenly rushing through her body. Perhaps it was because she hadn't technically died before ingesting the potion. Most Vampires, as he was given to understand, needed to physically expire first with the Apostle blood in their veins before the process began, but he also knows that other forms of magecraft -- such as his attempt -- could potentially bypass that need as well. But it is a failure: another dead-end in his research.

Norikata is frustrated and, he admits to himself, scared. He can't find Kiritsugu. He told the boy to wait in the house while he gained the means of their escape, and assessed the situation as much as
possible. He's burned his notes. Most of the information has been recorded into his Crest in any case. It is too close. If Kiritsugu is out there, he might be danger, and even if he is all right his enemies could find him and use him against him ... or lead them right here.

The truth is, on some level, Norikata is tired of running. He is exhausted, on a mortal level that he has tried not to show Kiritsugu. Most of the flowers have withered by now, in his Workshop and he has destroyed the other potions.

All of them except for one.

Norikata picks up the vial. Not even Shirley knew about this formula. That was one of the reasons he told her not to take the potion that she did. He had already been thinking about a variation. It is still experimental, even more so than the one she stole.

Kiritsugu isn't back yet. And he needs his son. They need to leave, and they might be facing considerable odds. This particular batch of the potion is similar, except he has used his magecraft to stagnate elements of the formula: making the potion a slow-acting substance. The changes created by the previous formula happened almost all at once, and overwhelmed the specimen's nervous system and cognitive processes. Unfortunately, he hasn't been able to remove the major need for energy consumption leading to vampiric hunger. But Norikata, while being a fourth generation magus, is a prodigy. He has been slowly altering his own Magic Circuits over time, exercising them with his Time Manipulation. Nothing too strenuous. The worst he has done is bruise his bones, or burst a blood vessel from time to time. It is nothing that healing magic couldn't fix.

He is running out of places to hide. He will still need to hide, of course, he and his son. But this slow burn might ... offset the hunger for a time ... until he needed to compensate that energy ...

Norikata downs the contents of the vial.

Now there is no evidence that the magi or the Executors can seize. He doesn't feel out of the ordinary. Not yet. Perhaps nothing will happen. It is a diluted potion at best. At the moment, he has other matters to which he must attend.

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Relief fills him as his son returns. He really wishes that Kiritsugu hadn't seen the horrors growing outside. But Kiritsugu has to understand that to be a magus is to walk with death, and sometimes in order to achieve perfect understanding, even ascension, sacrifices have to be made. The mutations of the villagers of Alimango are regrettable but there is nothing he can do for them, and as much as he valued Shirley, all of this was ultimately her doing.

And now, with perhaps more time and his son at his side, he will see his experiment -- four generations of Emiya experimentation with Time Manipulation -- to the end. More experiments need to be done, it's true. In an ideal world, he would have had Shirley to observe. But now he has himself to ponder. Perhaps it is adrenaline from his flight or fight response, but the air seems clearer, its different smells of blood, smoke, sweat more noticeable. It might be his imagination, but it's almost as though he can hear his poor son's heart beating fast ...

He turns to leave, to prepare ...

There is a horrible pain in his neck.

Norikata feels time slowing down, but he hasn't opened his Circuits. He's fallen. He's on the ground. His ears roar as two sharp blasts, like the first, fill the air. His back erupts into agony once. Then
twice.

He thinks he hears his son breathing hard before darkness, perhaps the darkness at the end of the universe, finally claims him.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone. I am not sure how long or how far this fic is going to go. I am still keen on working on -- and ultimately finishing -- my epic length Fate/Stay Life fanfic. I suspect I might have botched some Nasuverse lore here as well on Dead Apostlehood, and I obviously took some creative liberties here, but it is all an idea that just ... didn't want to go away. I have some ideas, and I just want to see how far they will go. I don't plan on it being long. If anything, I hope it will become an inspiration, if nothing else.
So in the first chapter, I dated Alimango Island and its infestation as occurring in 1973. This is not canon. The truth is, I don’t know what time period it happened in as I can’t find the precise date.

What I did was I found out how old Kiritsugu was before his death -- thirty-four -- then took the date he died in, 1999, realized he died five years after the Four Grail War, which was 1994, and what I did was I subtracted 34 from 1999 which made it 1965: the date in which he seems to have been born. Then I played a guessing game and guessed that young Kiritsugu -- or Kerry -- had been about eight when he shot his own father in the neck and head, so I added eight years to 1965.

So that is how I got the date 1973, with what could be some questionable math. If anyone knows the real date, or how old Kiritsugu was when he lost his innocence on Alimango, by all means let me know. Interestingly enough, we know that Kotomine was born in 1967. I always thought the two were in the same age-range. But In the meantime, speaking of Kiritsugu ... let's get back to this story, shall we?

1999

Emiya Kiritsugu smiles.

The full moon shines down on the two of them. For all he expresses his regrets to his son, the core of them at least and not even beginning to scrape on the surface of their details, he feels peaceful. For some reason, Angra Mainyu's constant pain in his bones and flesh feel distant, if not completely absent. If hadn't known any better, it is almost like he has Avalon back in his body. But he does know better. The Noble Phantasm created by the fey helps one heal from the most grievous wounds and injuries, but it never protects them from the pain. And he suspects that even if he still had the holy sheathe inside of him, with or without its original owner, All the Evils of the World would still be gnawing at him, waiting for a way to get in, constantly making his body and its magic fight it, and perhaps still losing for all of that.

But the man who was once called the Magus Killer is tired of fighting. He has been tired of fighting for quite some time now. If he had been perfectly honest with himself, he had grown tired of fighting about the time he had met his wife, and then his child. The Fourth Grail War was supposed to have been the last time that Kiritsugu spilt any blood.

And, that much at least, remained true.

In the five years since the War, as his body degenerated under Angra Mainyu's influence, as his soul had been shattered by the things he did, and what he lost by his own hand, Kiritsugu had stopped fighting altogether. It has only been about Shirou now. Shirou is the only thing that matters, he and ... the other that he left behind. Kiritsugu feels tired. It isn't exhaustion, or a malaise, or even ennui. It is a gentle tiredness. He actually feels sleepy.

He tries to tell Shirou that the dream of being a Hero of Justice is impossible: that for every person
you save, or help, you ultimately abandon, thwart, or even destroy another in their place. To defend someone meant to defeat someone. To make one's dream come true, means you have to destroy the dreams of others that oppose you. He even muses, aloud, that it is easy to make such vows when someone is a child, but as adulthood encroaches and the nuance of life and pain etch their way onto the soul, the dream of saving everyone becomes impossible to undertake, never mind comprehend. Kiritsugu simply tells Shirou that he is too old to have that dream now.

But the boy is stubborn. Yet it's more than that. With amber eyes filled with conviction and a determination beyond his years, perhaps lost with his innocence along with everything else in the Fire that Kiritsugu inadvertently had a hand in causing, Shirou tells him that it is all right, that it is his dream now: to become what he couldn't now that he was a grown-up. To become a Hero of Justice.

A part of Kiritsugu wants to tell Shirou that he wasn't listening to what he said earlier. That he is wrong. That no one, never mind him, should take up that horrible burden. But looking into that earnest face, and the peaceful joy beaming from that smile, Kiritsugu feels a burden he never felt he carried suddenly lift off of his shoulders. And he smiles as well.

The last words he hears in his mind as he stares up into the sky from the veranda with his son are from the past. Shirley, poor, sweet Shirley is there, again, and he is a young boy: bright and innocent. She asks him what he wants to be when he grows up.

A Hero of Justice ...

Then, all Kiritsugu sees is the radiance of the full moon, like the embrace of his poor, sweet, lost wife. He thinks he says, or at least thinks about how beautiful it is. And then he thinks of nothing more.

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There is darkness. Then, something burns through it.

It too is black. And liquid. It courses past lips, from something cool and glass, past a tongue, down a throat, scourging the insides of a chest and belly and limbs that have gone long since cold.

Extremities prickle in agony. A scream erupts out of dead lungs, and vocal chords. Within the writhing body, no longer rigid, but still white Circuits flare back into existence, ripped suddenly awake and activated -- cells and nerves reactivated and rearranged by this foreign, dark substance now coursing through them, linking them back together in new and alien configurations. Even the Crest on the back of the former cadaver roars back to a semblance of life, cycling through its new state.

It is being held down. It can smell the magic radiating off of the restraints around its wrists and ankles. And even though its skin is dead, it can feel everything. The cloth of the chair screams against its naked body. The smell of must, and dust, and blood feels its nostrils along with the scent of something else that is dead but animate. The moon still shines, now painfully, from outside a ... window, right into its eyes revealing facets of light and shadow like a kaleidoscope of madness. It shrieks again, but its noises and movements feel contained. It's as though it can only feel this way in this room: in this place. Time is continuing on normally, outside of this mausoleum that isn't one, but an old house, a mansion. How does it know this?

Time slows down like molasses, like embalming fluid flowing into something dead and giving it a seeming of life, or the amniotic of a womb rushing past the being as it psychically returns head first into the World.
But if it is being reborn, it is simultaneously going through growing pains. The bonds seem to vanish and time reverts as the other presence steps back. It falls to the ground, feeling itself teething. Long, sharp fangs grow out of deadened gums, but it all still hurts: just as much as the nails elongating from its cold fingers.

And yet, it sees the moon from the window. The full moon seems to give it succor, though not for the ravenous hunger growing in its core, the emptiness left behind from the burning fluid it had been forced to ingest with its metallic, coppery taste. It is a taste and smell that it has sensed before, that it has caused throughout many battlefields ...

That he had caused.

He blinks. The spectrum of colours and shades are disorienting along with the smells and the feel of air. But he is adjusting, as though to a new environment. The Crest on his back prickles in sympathy to a familiar energy, a magic, in the aura of this place. But in addition to this new hunger, not quite urgent yet, is a stillness. It is a familiar stillness like the painful breath before the sudden lurching of a pulse or a heartbeat as time resolved itself.


"I knew it." A voice speaks from nearby. "I knew that you would be cognizant when you awakened. This is a good thing."

There is a strange emotion behind that tone, a very familiar one. He thinks the other is speaking with pride. There is a sympathetic energy from the other, pulsing into him. He can ... almost feel the other's emotions. It's as though they are in him, but they were once outside of him, receptive, from the past.

"Yes." The voice speaks again. "I was afraid that your Circuits were too compromised by the Curse of the Grail to be able to reawaken, never mind even regenerate. Vision seems to have been restored. Your bodily reflexes accelerated. But it does seem that the Curse of Restoration does, to some extent, trump the Curse of Angra Mainyu. That is good to know. For the future. I am not sure about the other possible effects it may leave on you, but we have -- if nothing else -- time."

"What ..." He finally manages to croak, realizing he can still vocalize. He can still speak. "... what have you ...

Then he realizes that he can see through the darkness. He can focus. It is as though the night is alive and bright, and shadows no longer exist for him. It's like infra-red vision, but instead of seeing the pulsing of body heat, or heat signatures, he sees and perceives a cold, calm void of a person sitting right in front of him. He places an empty, smeared vial down on a nearby table.

It is a serene face. It wears a slight smile of triumph. And then he remembers. The man looks like he did, like he does. He even still wears that old pair of spherical glasses. But his eyes glimmer with a red that they never had before. And his skin is pale. Pale: just like his own hands.

"Hello, Kiritsugu." Emiya Norikata says from the other side of the room. "Welcome back to the World, my son."
Chapter 3

1973

The Enforcers leave the chamber. They didn't ask why the Wizard Marshall had insisted on visiting the Sealing Designate, such as he was now, by himself. The tentative cooperation between the Executors from the Church and themselves in dealing with the Alimango Incident had already put the hierarchy -- and by extension themselves -- on edge. Besides, they knew what the heretic had been experimenting with at the very end, and if anyone had personal experience with that sort of thing, it would be the Lord Second himself.

Besides, none of them wanted to be in a room alone with Kischur Zelretch Schweinorg any longer than was absolutely necessary.

Zelretch doesn't take their eager leave personally. In fact, he appreciates the prompt cooperation. The mission, he was told, was a complete success all things considered. They had found the Sealing Designate, seized his research, neutralized the vampiric influence on the Island, and any other witnesses to the outbreak: be it through hypnosis or, more likely, euthanasia. They even secured the Designate's Family Crest intact: where the majority of his magecraft would most likely reside. Of course this achievement, as Zelretch knows, wasn't accomplished by either the Church or the Enforcers. The Executors would have soon as burned the Designate's entire corpse than preserve the magecraft that the majority of them, save for a select enlightened few, considered blasphemy even on the best of days: of which this mission had not been. And the Enforcers simply didn't know where to look for this particular Designate of the Philosopher class, though their failure had not been due to a lack of trying.

As Zelretch had been given to understand, a freelancer had located the Sealing Designate and dealt with him: handing his remains over to the Clock Tower for a considerable and tidy sum ... including negotiations to transfer some of the Crest to the Designate's heir, who had been instrumental -- and had willingly participated -- in his death.

Of course, Zelretch understands that it was really the son that found and destroyed the father, and that his current mentor is simply taking credit for such to benefit the both of them. It has been the same in almost everyone of the main timelines, this tragedy of obsession, hubris, and lost love and innocence culminating into this one particular outcome. It is a story ubiquitous among magi, never mind parallel worlds. He has witnessed it, and seen this specific story play itself out over and again with the same result. At best, it has given him a greater perspective on the disaster that a small experiment that the efforts of his own student and his peers ultimately becomes in many of the other timelines. It's true that that particular story happened centuries before this one, but this here -- right now -- is the end to the start of one person's story that shapes the Wars to come, for good or ill.

Zelretch isn't even sure what he is looking for. There is something that feels ... different about this timeline. And he thought that, perhaps, this feeling had started here in this holding cell with a heretical magus' corpse, shot to death by his own son. Sometimes he comes in here, in different worlds, to see if anything is different, slightly different of course as there have been many radically diverse timelines to which he has borne witness, and even ... assisted in some capacity. Most of the time, he hasn't even bothered to visit this place at the beginning, or after the retrieval of the body.

He is about to leave, somewhat disappointed ... when he notices it.

One of the corpse's fingers just twitched.
Zelretch considers for a moment. Through his inhuman senses, he can feel the growing void, the cold sense, around the body, from its core.

"Ah." He says, after a time. "So, you risked it after all." He strokes his bearded chin with one thoughtful finger. "Hmm. This may be an interesting start."

It will take some doing on his part, of course. But if there is one thing the Kaleidoscope understands after centuries of existence, it is the power of sheer possibility.

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1979

It is ravenous.

Hunger eats away at its insides. The Crest on its back has been cycling, burning with fiery-ice pinpricks throughout its dead nervous system, piecing itself back together. It is in an enclosure of some sort, though whether or not it is above ground, or under it is a sense it simply hasn't figured out yet.

"It's too bad." A voice says, across from it.

It turns, a low growl growing in its throat, but it makes no move to attack. It has no reason. The creature senses the same coldness emanating off of it as it does from its own core. The figure shakes its head at it.

"The good news is that your Circuits are still working, along with your Crest. You are not one of the Dead, which you should be thankful for ... though if you were this would be a pretty boring conversation with myself ... talking to a puppet without a puppeteer."

The figure chuckles, with a little mirth. "Your potion worked well enough. A diluted solution, right?"

It moans as it reaches for the remnants of a small creature, a rodent, forming its fangs again, somehow hurting through dead gums as it tries to suck out more sustenance ... even marrow. Anything. Anything to slate the thirst, to satiate the hunger ... to make it stop.

"You have improved quite a bit and rapidly. Unlike your assistant, the solution started working in you after your death." The figure says. "Whether or not you regain your mind is a whole other matter, of course. You aren't an Apostle, like her as of yet, but she devolved quickly past the point where you needed that potion to be useful. I suspect her soul degraded and died fairly quickly: her body changing too much for her soul to keep up with, or remain inside ... never mind even return into. A more advanced Ghoul is the only thing she managed to accomplish becoming."

Eyes squint at it. It can feel the other's scrutiny. "But your soul is still nearby. It is gradually reintegrating into your form well enough. So I suspect you will hear everything I've been telling you." The figure taps its cane on the ground idly. "You will probably become an Apostle very soon, as you have no sire. No one to rebel against, or fight, or kill, or break free from. Me, though."

The figure shakes its head. "You could say I gained this curse from a bad non-consensual blood transfusion after killing a being I ... did not like. To think anyone would infect themselves willingly with this. But you wanted time, right? Well, my friend, you got it. You got all the time in the world now ... if your mind holds up, of course."

The figure looks down at it as it chews on the creature in its mouth. Somehow ... it can almost recognize ... pity perhaps? Or, more likely, something detached like fascination? Perhaps with some faint disgust. It seems ... familiar somehow. Like it wore some of those emotions long ago.
"When your assistant drank the potion that you left in your negligence, it was her own doing." The figure acknowledges. "Then she became hungry. Just like you are right now. As you have been becoming these past couple of years. Usually, a vampire has a sire -- a creator -- that instructs them in what they are. Most of the time, they become extensions of a vampire to help them feed, or further their plans. You will find, if you remain sane, that a vampire's greatest enemy isn't the sun, or fire, or running water, or even a head shot. A head shot that, by the way, you would not have survived had you been either a mortal or a pure vampire instead of the transitional state in which your dilution left you. No, my friend. A vampire's true foe is time. It's boredom. I guess ..." It waves a dismissive hand. "You can say that's why I've been doing all of this, all this time, in all of these places. To keep myself entertained. To keep giving myself meaning, and use."

The figure shakes its head again. "No. That young girl didn't have the time to ponder any of this. As I said, she didn't have a master to show her how to eat. Your son found her in a chicken coup, begging for her death. Then she became feral when the chicken blood didn't satiate that hunger she didn't understand. That she couldn't understand and for which she had no basis. And she made all of those Ghouls ... all of those villagers who knew even less than she did. They scrambled around leaderless, ignorant, hungry ... utterly starving and afraid. At least the Dead never had minds to begin with."

It senses magecraft, smells it, as the figure -- the old man -- summons a bag. Then it smells ... something else. And its hunger increases with even greater agony.

"That is just something for you to think about." The old man tells it, its tone dispassionate. "You are lucky that you have someone who understands, to an extent." He tosses it the plastic bags from the larger bag, filled with red nourishment. "We can help each other, to a degree I think. I'm going to look further into the problem. In the mean time, I think I will wait a bit so that this conversation might become a whole lot less one-sided. After all, and as I said before," the old man turns and walks away, "boredom is the enemy."

But the creature isn't really listening towards the end, as it rips open the sterile-smelling plastics and begins to consume the sustenance, greedily, messily, and as quickly as it can, its back and Circuits burning, its mind starting to scream again.

In retrospect, years later, it will realize it had never really stopped.
Emiya Kiritsugu reaches for his gun before he remembers two things. First, he hasn't carried any of his weapons in six years. And second, he isn't wearing any clothing at all. But it doesn't matter. Not even his cold, pale flesh and the lack of a pulse in his body registers as the first thing that concerns him as he looks at the man he killed twenty-six years ago.

His father. Emiya Norikata.

The two regard each other silently, in the span of a few heartbeats, an irony that Kiritsugu that only vaguely registers at the back of his mind: pushed far back by shock, horror, and utter fury. It comes to him almost immediately. He knows exactly what's happened to him. He even knows how the man who ruined his life all those years ago, whom he ended with a few bullets to the back of the head from his own handgun, is standing right here before him after all of this time: seemingly whole, apparently unchanged, but ever so pallid ... just as he is now.

"... how?" Kiritsugu finds himself having to ask, despite remembering enough to answer the question for himself. His voice is still a cracked whisper, but it is harsher, louder in his ears. The sound practically rings through them. But has to hear it. He has to hear it, figuratively and literally, from the corpse's own mouth.

Norikata's face remains calm, but there is almost a ... sympathetic look in his expression at the sound of his voice that makes Kiritsugu want to tear his head off. "You have already figured it out. I ingested another variant of the formula before our last meeting.

Before our last meeting. Before I turned around, and you shot me in the back. Before you murdered your own father. The words are left unsaid, but implicit, Kiritsugu slowly shakes his head, trying to clear out the powerful afterimages -- or perhaps the gradation of different sights that his new eyes can now perceive. "No." Kiritsugu says. "I mean, how are you even ... here?"

"Ah, now that is a good question." Norikata nods, adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose as he always used to do in Kiritsugu's childhood. That familiar gesture brings back memories of nostalgia, for simpler times, but knowing what Kiritsugu knows now, and after everything that has happened since then, it only makes him feel sick. "Natalia Kaminski traded my ... remains to the Clock Tower. The Wizard Marshall Zelretch took me out of Sealing Designation."

Zelretch ... The name hangs in the air between them. Kiritsugu had always been a Freelancer, but he'd done enough work as a mercenary Enforcer to know enough facts about Sealing Designation and the Kaleidoscope to make him know there is a lot more to this scenario. Kiritsugu manages to stand at his full height even as the room continues to move and swim around. "That isn't possible." Kiritsugu says, fighting back a wave of disorientation and a gnawing hunger. "Even for him. If that were true ..."

"How did he get me out of the Tower, you mean. And how did you get so ... little of our Family Crest if I had already been gone?" Norikata seems to sigh. He looks up and actually manages to meet Kiritsugu's eyes. For the first time, in this whole conversation, in this entire situation, Kiritsugu can see something akin to normal human emotion ... to fear in his father's eyes. "The Kaleidoscope has his ways."

And Kiritsugu understands. Every magus and spell-caster in the Moonlit World knows that the
Second Magician has frequent travel between parallel worlds. It wouldn't have taken much for Zelretch to find a version of his father in another timeline or reality, perhaps even an already dead Emiya Norikata, and replaced him under the Bridge of the Tower with the corpse, to do with Noritaka as he pleased. No one would be able to prove it, one way or another: at least, no one who particularly cared. Kiritsugu may have once felt sorry for him, but he doesn't. He won't. That explanation, that is the most pragmatic solution to this maddening new reality in front of his eyes, in his skin, in his blood ...

Kiritsugu's patience is gone. "Why ..." He glares. He doesn't care though, his fury is almost bubbling over with the foreign blood coursing through his dead, his very dead, veins. "Why now? Why did you do this to me?"

"Because, whatever happened between us, you are my son." Norikata says, leaning down to sit in a nearby chair next to an old table of vials and Bunsen burners. "And I need your help."

A part of Kiritsugu, the old part of him that hunted heretical magi and Dead Apostles, the human part, would be ashamed of his loss of control. When dealing with an unknown variable, one has to be calm and collected. Calculating. Just like the monster you are facing down. Just like his father ... Memories of Shirou in the flaming rubble of Shinto, of the black mud of the Grail erupting throughout the city and covering everyone with horror because of his last command, of killing the visions of Irisviel and Illya, of watching his wife die before that, Maiya lying limp in his arms, of blowing up Natalia's plane with a missile launcher, of all the men, women, and children he killed throughout his line of work, of Shirley eating the remains of that chicken in the coop begging for her death, and Noritaka ... Norikata turning his back and Kiritsugu pulling the trigger over and again ... He sees the full moon, as white and silvery as his wife, and remembers the veranda and Shirou and the aches and pains of Angra Mainyu fading away into the blessed warmth of oblivion ...

He had finally been freed from all that. He had been free! He was free! And this evil bastard, this demon, that always wore his dead father's face brought him back to experience more pain! More damnation!

Kiritsugu finds his hands, his ... claws inches away from Norikata's impassive face. He can even feel his fangs bared from his snarling mouth. He isn't sure if it is the monster in him wanting to cause destruction and feed, or if it is pure and unadulterated anger and grief ripping through his very being. It also knows why his hands aren't wrapped around his father's neck. He has encountered enough Dead Apostles during his hunting days to realize exactly what this is now.

"You are not an Apostle, my son." Norikata says, almost sadly, as the blood in Kiritsugu refuses to let him strike down his sire. "Please, don't try that again. That won't help either of us."

Kiritsugu feels his fangs, forces his fangs, to retract as he grits his teeth together. Slowly, he backs away from Norikata, lowering his hands and keeping eye contact with the other. He is a vampire now, not an Apostle. Just an extension of his sire's power, and desires. Father and son have now become master and slave. He has not freed himself from the other's bonds, from his control ... Not yet. Mad fury rolls around in the back of Kiritsugu's mind, before he remembers his control, before the anger turns into a familiar coldness that he thought he had put behind him a long time ago, an act that makes him hate Norikata all the more. As he dons the mask of the Magus Killer once again, he actually recollects something Norikata said a few moments before, when awareness had returned to his mind.

"You ... know about Angra Mainyu."

Norikata nods. "I know all about the Heaven's Feel Ritual." His father shakes his head. "I know that a Servant, during the Third War, representing All the World's Evils, died and infected the Grail with
his darkness. That much Zelretch told me. The Einzbern Clan were the ones that summoned that aberration, the family you worked for during this War."

Kiritsugu takes in this information. He knew how much the Einzbern Clan wanted to win the War, how much they wanted the Grail for themselves. The fact that they would go through such lengths to gain it, no matter the collateral damage, doesn't surprise him at all after facing the evil that wore his wife's face, after everything they had done to Irisviel herself, after everything they were going to do to ...

"And I watched you."

All of Kiritsugu's attention immediately returns to Norikata. Cold fury moulds itself into clear dispassion. The more information he collects and puts away from the man he called father will be useful, one way or another. "I saw you grow under Kaminski's guidance. I saw you master more mundane weapons and tactics. You used the dregs of the Crest you were given to specialized and great effect. What would have taken me ages with elaborate ritual and arias ..." Norikata seems to catch himself, and shake his head again. "And your bullets. Origin Bullets, correct? I always wondered how your Severing and Binding Origin could manifest as magecraft ... and it is potent indeed. If it helps, Kiritsugu, if the fact that you are my son doesn't appeal to you, I turned you now - - instead of many other times in your life -- because you have enough living experience and skill to be useful in what we need to accomplish."

Those cold words with their seeming callousness and their knowledge of all of his secrets may have caused anyone else to flinch, or feel anger. But, strangely enough, Kiritsugu finds himself nodding once. It isn't out of compulsion or obedience. It is a logic that he can understand. The monster right in front of him is at least being truthful to an extent. Norikata sees him as a tool. A useful tool that has learned a variety of applications for itself over the years, to do some of the things that he cannot. It also tells him that Norikata has mastered his own nature to the extent that he can hide himself from most magi and hunters, perhaps even right in plain sight. It is good to know. But still, it isn't nearly enough.

"If you know all of that, or have some idea of everything I've learned," Kiritsugu replies in a level tone, "Then you know I can kill myself, rather than serve you."

"You could." Norikata acknowledges, his words now placid. "It's true. I know you could figure out a way. But I would rather you not, and I suspect that despite your anger right now, you know that this is a second chance for you."

And there it is. Norikata has played his hand. He has Kiritsugu's grudging attention as he recalls the other stating that he has been observing him, for a very long time. "You will not harm my son."

"I don't want to." Norikata tells him. "But it isn't me that will harm him. Or your daughter." Kiritsugu mentally grinds his teeth, realizing that his father knows about Illya. "No, it is Angra Mainyu that is the problem."

This actually takes Kiritsugu aback. "I destroyed the Lesser Grail."

"Yes. Unfortunately, you just destroyed its material manifestation and ... without the proper knowledge ..."

Kiritsugu lets the anger play internally along his dead nerves, this time at himself. He is letting Norikata get to him. "It will not happen for another sixty years. And before it does, I have provisions in place that will neutralize the issue."
"You mean the explosives you planted along the leyline?" Norikata almost looks pained. "Kiritsugu, aside from the fact that I am given to understand that destroying the Greater Grail that way will cause potentially even more harm, it is academic. The truth is, Heaven's Feel is going to manifest again in five years time."

Kiritsugu says nothing. The shock of seeing his father standing before him is almost eclipsed by the horrible realization of what the other is saying. "But how ..."

"Remember your basic lessons, Kiritsugu." Norikata gets up and folds his arms behind his back. "You destroyed the Lesser Grail before events could be resolved. What happens to Magical Energy when it isn't dispersed properly?"

Kiritsugu is about to ask what in the hell the Fire was if not a dispersal of energy, before he realizes that Norikata is right. Even the Fuyuki Fire in Shinto wasn't nearly large enough to manifest the power of five Servants and, apparently, Angra Mainyu as well if it had been one too. The Greater Grail still has a surfeit of energy inside it. It can, and it will, begin the Heaven's Feel Ritual again. It will begin another Holy Grail War, and no one aside from himself and a few others know about the pure evil residing inside of the Grail itself. "And why does this even matter to you?" He asks Norikata, shunting aside the fact that he wants to protect Shirou from being swept into this conflict, and Illya from becoming the next Lesser Grail of the Einzberns that made this abomination to begin with.

"There is a reason why Zelretch saved me." Norikata admits, looking away from his son. "And a reason why I want to help you."

And then Kiritsugu realizes it. "You can't reach it, can you." He says, his eyes narrowing at his father.

"Zelretch allowed me to continue my experiments, under supervision of course, once I regained my ... faculties. But even with the added power and a few more years without interruption ..." Norikata begins pacing, the calm movements belying his obvious unease and frustration. "He told me the results would be the same, no matter how many years, how many centuries, I narrowed the stagnation and acceleration of time around me." Kiritsugu understands. Time Manipulation slows down the stagnation of passed time, and accelerates the forward flow of it. Norikata must have attempted to go forward, into the future, for himself as much as he could. It had always been his plan. But it obviously didn't work, or rather didn't turn out the way he thought it would. As it is, Norikata turns to look at Kiritsugu and the latter actually sees a haunted look on his face. "Zelretch confirmed it for me."

"Alaya or Gaia has closed all the gateways." Kiritsugu doesn't even bother to disguise the disgust in his voice. "As long as Angra Mainyu exists in this timeline, in the Grail, it will manifest and potentially spill over into this world ... and others, if those forces don't destroy us first." He glares again at Norikata, who is actually nodding at him with approval. "And you can't reach Akasha until it's dealt with, can you ... Dad?" His anger flares up again, briefly forgetting the Hero of Justice morality he shed ages ago before he even stopped being mentally human. "You only want to help me, help the World, so you can continue your experiments."

"I never said anything otherwise, to be fair." Emiya Norikata replies, turning to gather some items from the table. Kiritsugu smells something ... tantalizing and coppery and all too familiar under plastic as he does so. "My goals have never changed. Zelretch counted on that. He told me that the Heaven's Feel was an attempt at reaching Akasha or one of the True Magics that failed. It is, currently, in the way of anyone else in this timeline reaching the Root. I want to remove this obstacle. I have been developing my powers for a few decades, but I need help and someone who has had
personal experience with the Ritual. In addition, having a vampire related to me by blood and under the right conditions such as the waxing of the moon, will only increase our chances of removing this taint. And this isn't even going into your own unique nature, should you utilize your full potential."

"You are disgusting." Kiritsugu says, his voice dispassionate as well, despite the utter loathing behind it.

"Whatever the case." Norikata continues. "We have much to gain from cooperating at this point. I have the knowledge of my studies to aid us and continue, as you say, once this debacle is dealt with, and you have the practical skills to help me, and save the world from the Counter Force or Gaia's creatures, your son from getting involved in the War, and your daughter from the Einzbern Family. As I said, this is your second chance Kiritsugu." He turns around and Kiritsugu sees vials of blood in his hands. "It's up to you."

But it isn't, and they both know it. For a brief moment, Kiritsugu wonders if this is how Saber felt when he was her Master, right towards the very end. Norikata is holding out the vials. Slowly, Kiritsugu reaches forward and takes them, touching his father's hand.

"Very good." Norikata smiles as his son takes the vials to nourish himself. "We have some time yet. But there is still much work that we have to do first."
"Come in."

Fujimura Raiga sits at his desk as Emiya Kiritsugu opens, and closes, the sliding doors of his office. He literally sees the blood drain, almost instantly, from the old man's face: sluggish, but strong. Kiritsugu feels terrible. A part of him is still glad that he can. He didn't want to do this. But, considering all the circumstances involved, it can't be helped.

Raiga attempts to rise, shakily, to his feet but Kiritsugu holds up one hand. "Fujimura-sama. Please."

"D-Demon!" The old man makes a Buddhist warding sign against evil. "Yokai ... that ... that must be what you are! T-taking my friend's ... his form. Dammit!" Raiga seems surprised that Kiritsugu is either still standing there, or that he is there at all. He clutches his chest for a few moments, through his robe. "I am oyabun of this band of degenerates, but we're not even the worst ... We don't deserve ..."

"Fujimura-sama ..." Kiritsugu tries again.

"That damned Ryuudou!" The old man fumes. "Priest said I was going to hell. Like hell I am." Kiritsugu almost smiles at that before the other reaches for something under his table. "I'll take you down with me if you touch my granddaughter ..."

Kiritsugu narrows his eyes at that comment. "I would never harm Fuji-nee." His voice grows cold despite himself. "Ever. Now sit down, Raiga. Please."

Fujimura Raiga blinks. Then he blinks again. Kiritsugu senses the old man's pulse returning to something akin to normalcy considering the situation as he lowers himself to the padded mat, and behind his desk. "It ... is that really you, Emiya?"

"Yeah." Kiritsugu sighs. "I'm sorry. I can only imagine ..."

The old man slowly shakes his head, his eyes still wide. He reaches towards his desk, and takes out a bottle of sake. He looks at the glass next to it, shoves it away, and downs a significant swig. Then another. He looks up again and still seems surprised that Kiritsugu is standing there in his room.

"Damn ..." The old man growls. "N-not nearly enough spirits in the world ..." He stops himself from another swig, looking up at Kiritsugu and then back to the bottle. "Well, I guess that's not the problem here, eh?"

Kiritsugu says nothing. The place looks exactly same as it had about a year ago, when he updated his last will and testament for the old man to manage. He had already made arrangements and provisions for Shirou before this point, but there was always something: especially since he had gone soft after discarding the lifestyle of the Magus Killer so long before. He waits for the old man to collect his faculties. He can sense the haze forming inside the old man's body from the drop in adrenaline and the addition of the alcohol. He can smell it all in the air. There is still an obvious wariness there, but Kiritsugu senses that this is as receptive as the old man is going to be.

"... how?" Raiga finally asks. "Ryuudou and his monks burned you yourselves. Damn fool took his time giving you the funerary rites. We were all there for the cremation."
Kiritsugu tries not to wince, or bare his fangs at the surge of anger inside himself. His father must have developed Mystic Eyes during his time as an Apostle, altering and mutating the Circuits in his eyes to create power that could affect aspects of the outer world, or the perceptions of others. He himself isn't familiar with how long it takes to create one set of Eyes or another. Is it possible that his father had been able to develop Mystic Eyes of Enchantment in about over three decades time? It would explain how he had been able to take his body and make his friends, his family believe that they saw him being cremated, replacing his remains with ashes from elsewhere. Kiritsugu quells down this inhuman fury, this outrage at what Norikata did to the minds of his loved ones. This is what the average magus would do, and as a Dead Apostle, it had been positively tame by comparison. It reminds him that he needs to continue customizing his own Circuits, his own new body before the events of four years time begin. He has to remain in the present. Only then can he deal with what comes next.

"Remember what I told you, Raiga ... about staying away from certain places. Certain Families ..."

"Ah," Raiga nods, slowly. "... it's that kind of business, huh."

"If it makes it easier for you, I paid a great deal to fake the nature of my own death." A bitter smile forms on Kiritsugu's lips, hating just how right those words actually are when everything is said and done.

"You don't have to tell me ..." Raiga murmurs. "Those damn Matou especially. Don't know much about them and don't want to know. We've always stayed away from them. I wanted to keep Taiga and Shirou away from the Matou girl ... Sakura, but ..."

Kiritsugu shakes his head. "Sakura's all right." He tells him, thinking about the girl that Shirou befriended while he still lived, the beating he took from the bullies that came after her like the cowards they were, and ... everything else he found out about her, and her Clan since.

"Can you ..." Raiga finally sighs in exasperation. "I know it's probably pointless to offer you some." He gestures at the sake. "I guess dead men don't drink, unless you're some kind of hungry ghost or something. But can you please just ... sit down."

"I can do that." Kiritsugu sits down and crosses his legs on the floor opposite Raiga, leaving the other's desk between them.

"This is just ... so weird," Raiga chuckles nervously. "I mean, the anniversary of your ... your death is coming up and ..." He gestures right at him.

"Yeah. That's why I'm here."

"That's why you're ..."

Kiritsugu reaches into the pockets of his trench coat and takes out an envelope. To his credit, the old man barely flinches as Kiritsugu places it on the desk in between them. "On my anniversary, I want you to give this to Shirou."

Raiga eyes the envelop cautiously. "What's ... in it? And why don't you ..."

"I don't want him to know I'm still here," Kiritsugu says, curtly. "He's moving on. In fact, it's best no one knows. Especially not Taiga."

"N-no, of course not." Raiga laughs and shakes his head. "This is so crazy ... But seriously, Kiritsugu. What am I giving your son?"
"It's nothing you would understand." Kiritsugu tells Raiga truthfully. "Some Family business that needs to be settled. If you have to, think of it as an addition to my will. One last amendment. Just don't ... open the envelope. You wouldn't understand what's in it even if you could."

"I would never violate your privacy, Emiya-san." Raiga growls. "Whatever you are now, you should remember that much."

Kiritsugu allows himself a slight chuckle. "I know, Raiga. You have been a good friend. I hear you and Ryuudou handled my wishes well."

"And then some." The old man manages to pour himself some sake into his cup this time instead of drinking it from the bottle. "It was a good ceremony and funeral. I hate that self-sanctimonious priest with a passion. And his son, the eldest mind you, still has eyes for my granddaughter no matter how blackened they get. You'd think he would've learned by now."

Kiritsugu smiles. It almost ... almost feels like old times between them, if only for a moment longer. "It takes some time for the young to learn some lessons."

"I'll say." Raiga downs another cup of sake. "But really, Kiritsugu ... what am I going to tell Shirou, or Taiga about ..."

"You will tell them nothing, my friend." Kiritsugu says softly, keeping eye contact with the old man as he intones a brief chant under his breath. "You will tell Shirou you had a dream of having a drink with me near the anniversary of my death. And it reminded you of my last wishes, and that envelope. Besides ... I think you've had enough to drink. Taiga will kill you if you keep overindulging as you are."

"Yeah ..." Raiga slurs, yawning as he slumps forward on the desk, putting his arms, under his head. "She is a real pain in the ass, my little tiger ..."

Kiritsugu waits until Raiga falls completely asleep. He doesn't have Mystic Eyes yet, the Circuits in them still shifting, still forming into what he might need them for later. He is still young by ... the standards of what he is now. But basic magus hypnosis still does the trick. It certainly worked on the yazuka guards outside, at various points. Those poor men will get an earful from Taiga, right along with chewing out the old man, but nothing worse. He reaches out and pats a snoring Raiga on the back, gently. A sadness forms in him as he realizes he is never going to see him again, one way or another.

He gets up and leaves the room, sliding the doors behind him as he makes his way out of the residence. He has a lot of work left to do, both with and without his father, but this was something he had put off for far too long. Kiritsugu remembers the contents of the letter and instructions he's left Shirou like the back of his own hand. He can still see it within his mind, behind his eyes as leaps away into the night.

Dear Shirou:

I had hoped to have dealt with this matter long after I was gone, and even longer after you lived out the length of your own life in peace. I wish we could have had a lot more time together, even though I didn't deserve to have your company.

It's hard to write this, but I will get to the point. Six years ago, I came to Fuyuki City in order to participate in the Holy Grail War on behalf of the Einzbern Family. This War was designed in order to allow the victor access to the Holy Grail: an artifact that can grant the winner any wish they desire. It is fought with a powerful familiar known as a Servant: a being that is essentially a spirit
taken from the ranks of past and possibly even future heroes. There are seven Masters, nominally magi, who are paired with these Servants to win the Grail.

I was one of those Masters. And I had the Servant Saber. Unfortunately, the Einzbern corrupted the Grail, after the failure of the first two, during their Third War, and unleashed All the World's Evil into the artifact. As a result, any wish made on that Grail will cause untold chaos and suffering. I attempted to destroy the Grail, but I failed. Worse than that, because of my failure Shinto burned to the ground: as the energy in the Grail still manifested its curses.

I was the one that destroyed your hometown.

There is nothing I can say that will make up for what I did. I wish I could have told you this to your face, when I was alive. You deserved to know the truth. I failed to destroy evil and it cost you your life. I tried to make up for it, but I fear it wasn't enough. I'm so sorry, Shirou. You deserved better. I was afraid. I was afraid that I would lose your salvation. You saved me, Shirou. I gave up on being a Hero of Justice long ago, before I found you. I thought, before I realized what the Grail was, that I could make up for my gruesome crimes by using the Grail to wish for world peace. I was wrong. For a brief moment, I was a hero. Even though I caused the pain and suffering of Shinto, and I couldn't save anyone else from my mistake, I did one more thing.

I saved you.

But I failed to stop Angra Mainyu, All the World's Evil. The Grail will manifest again by 2004. I'd hoped to have dealt with it before then. I thought I had more time. But I didn't. It has to be stopped. The Masters and Servants need to be stopped from utilizing it, or a tragedy like Shinto -- or worse -- will follow. I would love to tell you to stay out of this fight: to run away as far as you can. But in those brief six years, I know you better than that. You are going to want to protect everyone. I wish I could have somehow taught you that this isn't possible. Even so, enclosed with this letter are instructions as to how you will summon your Servant.

There is a Summoning Circle in the storage shed. You won't need a catalyst. Your Servant will be there to protect you. If you can, tell the other Masters about this situation. The Tohsaka and Matou Clans are the Founding Families that made the Wars, along with the Einzbern.

Do not trust Kotomine Kirei. He is the priest of the Church on the Hill. He will be appointed Supervisor of the Fifth War, but he is warped and twisted. Avoid him beyond registration. He is not impartial and he has his own plans.

The Einzbern ... they are also one of the Founding Families of the Wars. Illyasviel von Einzbern ... Illya, is my daughter. I failed her mother, and the Family has kept me from her. She will be sent into this War, I am sure of it. She is your sister. I don't know if she is aware of this. Try to talk with her. Show her this letter if you can. And ... if you can, tell her ... tell her I'm sorry. Tell her I didn't abandon her, that I was kept away from her, that I was corrupted by Angra Mainyu's curse and it was the force that destroyed my magecraft and my Magic Circuits. It is the disease that killed me. It is not an excuse, to either of you, but you both deserve to know the truth.

There is nothing more to say. For whatever it is worth now, I love you Shirou. You are already a better person than I ever was. You saved my life, in all the ways that matter, my son. I only hope that, even now, I can still save yours.

-- sincerely,

Emiya Kiritsugu
2004

It actually took Kiritsugu some time to breach the Bounded Field around Homurahara Academy.

He knows, based on what he had seen from his familiars, that Tohsaka Rin and his son had done their best to weaken the wards that sustained the Field during the day. But at best, they only minimized this abomination of primordial blood magic. He can feel the effects distantly, even now. The air is listless and dank. There is a smell too: a sickly sweet scent of honey in the red-misted air.

In his line of work, before marrying into the Einzberns and participating in the previous Grail War, he had seen examples of magecraft designed to absorb the life forces of its victims: made either by heretical magi, or Dead Apostles and their servants. But this is on a whole other level: one that only a particularly old Apostle or, more than likely, a Servant could accomplish.

But it is by no means infallible. Perhaps it was crafted to keep mortals and other Servants away, but between the work that Rin and Shirou had accomplished, and his own unique nature he had been able to circumvent a weakness in the Field: to break right through it, and into the Academy grounds. His sense of hearing has also improved since his father resurrected him from the dead. He can hear his son's voice as he darts towards the area, quiet and preternaturally fast, as he pleads with someone to see reason. Another male voice, young, with a cocky, yet somewhat unhinged tone claims Shirou rejected his offer for an alliance, and he was going to have his Servant kill him. Kiritsugu's eyes narrow. There are three particularly powerful heat signatures in the hallway coming up. He doesn't even need a heat sensor scope anymore. It is just right in front of him. One of those signatures is his son's, who's Circuits have opened. The particularly powerful one is the Servant's ... but the other ...

"I told you, Shinji! The Grail is tainted! Please, we don't have to fight! All of us can --"

"Us? Hah hah hah ... you mean, you, me, and Tohsaka? Pah! She rejected me too. But don't worry, Emiya. I will make her pay next. I will make her mine." There is a little more demented giggling. "Rider, I'm tired of this. Kill this ... pretend janitor!"

Then there is a scuffle, of inhuman force hitting bone, or metal. It is fast. Then glass shatters as two forms fly out the window. Kiritsugu feels the inclination to hiss, to intake a breath he no longer has. He has finally gotten to the hallway, just in time to see a broken window, and a young boy wearing the Academy uniform holding a book under one arm. Strangely, the boy's heat signature is normal. He is not utilizing any magecraft, or energy beyond his basic body temperature. Aside from erratic pulse indicative of some kind of hysteria or mania, there is nothing that stands out from the blue-haired boy of at least seventeen years of age. Blue eyes and blue, wavy hair. Kiritsugu remembers ten years back when he infiltrated Matou Manor and interrogated a man that looked exactly like this boy, stinking of alcohol, and giving him nothing but pleading and screams of agony when he blew off his hand with his sidearm.

The book is the only thing giving off an extraordinary heat signature now. It pulsates and throbs like the living thing that, in retrospect, it probably is.

"You should have listened to him." Kiritsugu says from behind Matou Shinji, before taking his knife, and drawing the edge across the boy's throat.

Even the boy's blood smells weak as he gasps, redness splattering from his mouth and neck, the book thrown to the ground as he grasps underneath his chin, flailing and in vain, like a worm. Like his father before him. Matou Shinji manages to reach up one, shaking, blood-soaked hand towards him,
his blue eyes wide, bulging, and pleading. Kiritsugu kicks the hand away, and leans down to pick up the book in his hands before seeing a flash of gold outside.

**Good. He summoned Saber, though he certainly took his sweet time about it.** A part of Kiritsugu wants to berate his son, but he remembers the promise he made himself before this War even began. It isn't particularly fair. In a way, it's not unlike how he treated Irisviel and Saber in the last War: except this time his adopted son is Saber's real Master, and he is simply playing, as the now still Matou boy put it, "pretend janitor" from the shadows. But is the height of ... what, hubris, or simply pure stubbornness on Shirou's part to think that he could defeat a Servant, even a weakened one, in his state. He knew that Shirou never had a specific aptitude towards sorcery, but there was only so much he could even teach him as a weakened Specialist in his time. At the very least, Kiritsugu is comforted by the fact that Shirou has Avalon inside him, unknowingly, and that it will keep him from dying: unless he takes direct and powerful head trauma.

As it is, he knows Rider is weakened. The Matou boy had no Magic Circuits. But this book must be the source of it ...

Almost immediately, Rider -- a tall, pale, violet-haired woman with a blind across her eyes -- leaps back into the hallway. She regards her late Master lying in a spreading pool of his own blood. Then she inclines her head towards Kiritsugu, with his hands on the book. It confirms another one of his suspicions.

Kiritsugu makes this simple. "Deactivate the Bounded Field, and meet me at the grounds of the Edelfelt Mansion at Shinto." He looks down at Matou Shinji's corpse. "I can help your real Master."

Rider pauses. She inclines her head, slightly. Then, Saber and Shirou leap back into the hallway, the latter under the arm of the former. They take in the bloody scene before them. Rider turns, abruptly, taking out her chain and blade and gouging it into her neck. There is a blaze of pure, white light. Something instinctual in Kiritsugu quails at this sight of Divine power.

"*Time alter square accel.*" He grunts as he speeds away from the hallway, but out of the corner of his eye, he thinks he sees Saber's green eyes widen. It had probably been his imagination. His face is hidden under a variant of his Time Manipulation Field, a technique Norikata taught him these past five years which he adapted to making his features into a blur. Shirou can't see him, but Servants have different senses. Even so, there is no way Saber can remember him from the Last War. She is just a copy of a preserved archetype of the King of Knights from the Throne of Heroes. That is how Jubstacheit von Einzbern had explained it ...

The night blurs around him as he exits the school and its crumbling Bounded Field. Right now, he has collateral. This book has influence over Rider, a Matou creation most likely, perhaps a Mystic Code. He holds it now. Besides, even if the Throne of Heroes hasn't given Rider the geographical information of this area, he has a feeling that based on the fact that her eyes are covered, she has other senses in which to track him: similar to his own increased sense of smell, sound, and even the ability to perceive energy.

In other words, Rider knows exactly where to find him.

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Kiritsugu stands under the trees near the ruined Mansion. It is close to the Einzbern property in Fuyuki, his former base of operations and the place where he already knows his daughter now resides. It is now his father's makeshift Territorial Field and Workshop: their own lair for the moment in which to instigate this mission. He isn't sure how Norikata was able to seize this Mansion, and its twin in Old Town, from the Association that took possession of both Western mansions after the
Third War. And while he somewhat suspects that Zelretch, yet again, might have had something to do with this: it is more likely that without the Edelfelts, and with the assassinations of both the Association observer and the former Master of Caster by different parties altogether from he and his father, Association agents simply had no reason to bother upkeeping or following up on the properties one way or another.

"Speak."

For all of his inhuman reflexes, Kiritsugu perceives Rider's low feminine voice before feeling her blade at his throat. He's actually surprised that she didn't make it into the territory sooner, but even a weakened Saber is a tenacious enemy from which to flee. He knows. He had observed what she had been capable of during the Fourth War. Kiritsugu doesn't know what Rider did to escape her, perhaps utilizing a Noble Phantasm of her own based off her Bounded Field, but that is all academic at the moment: and academia is more in his father's area of expertise, if nothing else.

He gets to the point. "We can remove Matou Zouken's influence from your Master."

Kiritsugu senses Rider regarding him. "And what makes you think that I would trust you, or your master, vampire?"

So she can smell or sense his nature after all. Heightened senses. Good to know. "I've been following her. She wants to help my son." He minces no more words than necessary, getting right to the point.

"Your ... son."

Kiritsugu nods. "Shirou was telling you ..., and the boy back there the truth. The Grail is tainted. It endangers the entire world if it gets activated. You can probably ... sense the area around here. Shinto was the city it manifested in last. The curses are still in the land."

"And why should we help you?" The dagger cuts a little deeper into Kiritsugu's skin. "You said you followed my Master. Stalking her. You know who my Master is. I should just take that book, and kill you. It would save us the trouble."

But aside from the deeper cut of her blade, she makes no further move. He knows now that she wants to give him a reason, one way or another. His statements have only confirmed further matters about the situation. He has to be careful.

"Your Master visits my son." He tells her. "I know Sakura. She would help Shirou. If you ... really wanted to kill him, back there, it would have been over almost instantly. Did Zouken force you to work with the Matou boy? No." He shakes his head. "It doesn't matter. Here is the deal. You and your Master agree to help my son stop the Grail, and I will help remove Zouken's influence from her. It's that simple."

"The boy already has Tohsaka and her Archer on his side. She would not fight to dismantle the Grail, as one of the magi of the Founding Families." Rider observes. "How do we know it's not a trap by you and the boy?"

"Shirou has no idea I'm even alive." Kiritsugu admits, laying all the cards on the table that he can. "I prefer to keep it that way. Tohsaka and Shirou are working together to make sure other Masters and Servants won't harm any civilians until the end of the War. She might not believe that the Grail's compromised, but at the moment their alliance is one of convenience, from my observation. And my son doesn't lie. How did you know I am not an Apostle?"
"... you don't have the smell. You smell ... new. Your scent is overpowered by another's." Rider sighs. "It's true. Your son is too straightforward to be a manipulator." That was the Matou boy's methodology, is what she doesn't say. "But why should I trust you? Or your creator?" She shifts her head to the ruined Mansion.

It is a fair point. Kiritsugu doesn't trust his father. It is interesting to know that she can sense Norikata through his Territorial Field either way. "You will be there, with us. All you need to do is tell your Master the deal." He looks down at the book and has an idea. "When she feels her Master's rights return to her, that is the signal for you to bring her to this location."

"I'm no fool, vampire. I won't let you keep the Book."

"It wouldn't matter either way." Kiritsugu replies. "I looked at it. It has one Command Seal inside it. But my ... associate and I need it: to look at its Mysteries so that we can understand the ones affecting your Master."

"And what makes you think they are even related?"

"I was in the Fourth War, the one before this one," Kiritsugu says. "The last Matou Master ... had similar abilities to what this Book is made from. Worm familiars, right?"

Rider actually flinches. It is now, or never. Either she accepts this, or she kills him. An eternity seems to pass throughout the rest of the night when Rider finally speaks again. "You could use the magecraft to compel me into your service."

Kiritsugu actually shakes his head. "That doesn't suit my purposes at all. You want to keep Sakura safe, right?" When the other doesn't answer him, as she doesn't have to, he continues. "Fair enough. She has been good to my son. I want to save her too. And, no offense, but you are too ... loud and flashy for my methods in finishing this War if what you did back at the Academy, or everywhere else has been any indication."

"And leaving the boy's body?"

Is there actually a hint of amusement there, at his expense? "There have been a series of murders happening in the city lately." Kiritsugu has his own theories about those. "Those, along with the gas leaks, will just make this one more casualty." In other words, no one will miss him.

"Heh. And tell me, vampire. What makes you think I don't have a wish of my own? What makes you think I believe what you had told your son?"

"Well." Kiritsugu pauses, and then asks. "What is your wish, Rider?"

There is a pause. Then, he feels the blade disappear from its place at his neck. "It is called the Book of the False Attendant. Destroy it when you're done looking at it. Don't take too long, or try anything else, or I will kill you and your maker."

Then, she is gone, in a way that if Kiritsugu hadn't known any better, would have made him wonder if she had the Presence Concealment of an Assassin. Her smell still lingers: sweet, honeyed, and saturated with the blood and fluids of others, and a hint of lilac.

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"Worm familiars indeed." Emiya Norikata says, handling the Book of the False Attendant over his worktable and instruments. "And you were right, Kiritsugu. This is something of a Mystic Code: created specifically to house one Command Spell."
Kiritsugu says nothing, quietly drinking a tincture of blood, observing his father at work. Once, long ago, before he knew what sort of... man Norikata was, he used to relish watching his father work, delighted in having the chance to see him practicing his magecraft in his Workshop. He had once been utterly jealous of Shirley for being his father's assistant, his student... Now, he wants to be anywhere but here, with this monster handling another monster's toys.

"It is fascinating. The Command Mantras, or Seals themselves, are creations of Matou -- or Makiri -- magecraft. Or so Zelretch explained." Norikata says, his tone faint, and distant. "The Matou were the ones that created the link between Master and Servant, binding the magus in question to their familiar spirit and vice-versa vis a vis these Command Seals which, themselves, are of a similar biological origin to these Crest Worms. It is probably one of the few reasons, beyond extremely advanced Spiritual Surgical skill, that a transplant like this would even function."

One part of this statement gets Kiritsugu's attention. "Crest Worms?"

"Yes. Such as the ones displayed by Matou Kariya during the Fourth War, as you told me Kiritsugu." The older vampire peers at the Seal in the Book. "It sounded like, from your intelligence sources, that Kariya had attempted to adapt to his Family's magecraft a little... too late which resulted in unstable mutations: ones that cost him his life. They are made from one magus' body. Magic Crests altered and adapted into familiar beasts... If what your sources say are true, they are also capable of altering someone from an unrelated bloodline... Changing their Affinity and Sorcery Traits."

Matou Sakura's purple hair and eyes are obvious signs of magecraft alteration. Combined with what Kiritsugu observed of Matou Kariya and his magecraft, he wouldn't be surprised if these elements were related. And if his sources had been accurate, Sakura hadn't been born into the Matou, but adopted... It rankles him. He thinks about how he left Illya behind with the Einzberns, and he wonders how someone could give their daughter away to something as rotten as Matou Zouken: a being who resembled many other old men who had been a part of the Matou, and Makiri lines. Something occurs to him.

"You said that this Book is made the Crest Worms that come from one magus?"

Norikata nods. "It's true that Matou Sakura and her uncle, yes? They control them. The Worms are symbiotic in nature, from what I can glean. Mostly parasitic. They take and absorb energy. A Water trait. But they are sophisticated magecraft. Someone had to have made and nurtured them for quite some time. It is an extension of them: of their very being. Theoretically, with Crest Worms or something like them, you could alter your very essence so far, you could create a solid body of them several times over. And consume others."

"Zouken." Kiritsugu mutters.

"Almost on the cusp of Dead Apostlehood, but not quite. Not nearly enough to get... Association notice." A faint note of distaste enters Norikata's voice. "Though, granted, it does nothing if the soul continues to deteriorate, and not even a substance such as blood can stabilize the soul and body link between them and their Circuits..."

"Can we get back to the point please." Kiritsugu says. "If Zouken has his Worms in Sakura, can we remove them?"

"It depends on a few matters." Norikata replies, closing the Book and turning to Kiritsugu. "How deep they are incorporated into the Circuits and nervous system of the body, and what they are designed to do as such. However..." He brushes a finger across the Book's cover. "I think there might be a way with our magecraft to deal with the Worms, as living beings, themselves... This
specimen will do for a start. It should take a few nights. Really, this Code ... it transfers the link of the Master from the Servant to itself ... though whether or not it is attuned to a specific person who gives genetic material or if it can be attuned to others is a whole other matter entirely ..."

Kiritsugu's patience is all but non-existent at this point. "We will destroy this Book once you're done with it. Then Rider will bring Sakura here."

"Yes. I heard you the first time, son." Norikata shakes his head.

Another thought then occurs to Kiritsugu. "If ... the Book is made of Zouken's Crest Worms, and they are a part of a magus' body, as Magic Crests are, he can sense ..."

"No. I've analyzed the Crest material in the Book and they are not active with another's consciousness. Or even their own. Now, as for the young lady you want to bring here ... that could be a whole other matter entirely ..." Norikata sighs, as if continuing an age-old argument about the weather. "It would be easier if we could just terminate --"

"The deal was to help her Master." Kiritsugu says abruptly. "And through Sakura and Shirou, possibly Tohsaka Rin and the others, we will be to distract Kotomine and Gilgamesh, possibly even Caster and her assets, from the Grail so that we can eliminate it."

"And will your daughter be helping us?"

Kiritsugu doesn't reply. He knows that Shirou and Illya have had contact. That they fought through Saber and Berserker. Whether or not Illya believed his ... Shirou's words, or if she was just tired of the Einzbern Family and acting on her own, was another matter entirely. And almost a moot one, if the War continues and Servants begin to die ... At least she doesn't seem to desire Shirou's immediate death, actually seeming to have some interest towards him. Illya had always wanted a younger sibling ...

"She is not against us." He tells Norikata. "If anyone can get her to assist in the Grail's destruction, it will be Shirou."

"Hm." Norikata remains skeptical. "Through your letter, correct? No matter. It is just as well you brought the young lady, Sakura yes, to my attention. Not so much her, but her supposed Grandfather. If we can succeed here, with her as the ... Test subject, is what he doesn't say, but Kiritsugu knows exactly that this what he is thinking. His hand clenches into a fist around a trigger to a gun he wishes he has in his hand. "I will be able to deal with him."

Kiritsugu hesitates, and then he nods. "I see. That is a prudent course."

It makes sense. Zouken is an ancient magus, one who is potentially able to spread his form and essence through these Magic Crest familiar symbiotes. Kiritsugu has methods, one especially, of eliminating powerful magi, but with someone as possibly old as Matou Zouken, one could never be too careful. Norikata is a Dead Apostle. In addition to that, he has studied his condition, and perfected his own Family's magecraft: not a Specialist like Kiritsugu, but a full-fledged magus prodigy. If anyone could decipher Zouken's Mysteries, and kill the old worm, it would be Norikata. If anyone can kill a monster, it would be another monster.

"In the meantime. You will have your own task." Norikata reminds him. "Are you ready yet, Kiritsugu?"

Kiritsugu looks down at his hands, at his fingers that can now become claws. He thinks about the new ways he has been channeling his Od into his reanimated body, changing his Magic Circuits and
accentuating their original qualities to the nth degree. "The basics have been achieved." He tells his father. "The rest will be execution."

"As always. Well, don't worry. We have some time yet. We will take care of the Matou heir first, and I will deal with the Clan Head after. Then, well, hopefully your plans will be set in motion: to allow you to do what you must."

Kiritsugu nods. There are a few loose ends that he has to attend to, but once those are finished ... He thinks about Iri's body being changed into a goblet. He thinks about her genetic ancestor Justeaze Lizrich von Einzbern as a massive Magic Circuit in the earth, the Greater Grail under Mount Enzou. It would be too risky to attempt this now with so many players on the field. But that is what he has to do. He has to even out the field. Give them, those that refuse to stop the farce, something with which to distract themselves ... to entertain themselves.

And then, he will strike. And the Grail Wars will end: one way, or another.
Chapter 7

Archer lands quietly in Fuyuki Central Park. It is the ghost of Ground Zero, and it feels all the more so at night.

He can feel the grudges hissing around him, the negative emotions of ten years ago weaving together, and almost conversing in faded shrieks. No one else would see this, especially not during the day. Everyone else, save for a few magi and Spirits like himself, would see a placid area of grass, with play sets, trees, birds, and park benches. Even so, Archer has enough of his memory to remember sitting here, after the fact -- years after the fact of his survival -- seeing very few children playing in this land where the Fuyuki Civic Center, and a residential district used to exist before it was all erased by burning mud.

After that, Archer had seen many such places. Too many. Once, perhaps when he was still alive, he encountered another ... manifestation that even he, at the time, didn't have the resources to deal with. Perhaps that changed after he made that fateful pact with the World, after agreeing to Alaya's terms ... Archer wonders if this is why they are meeting here ... to test his memories ... to make him relive the first time they met ...

If so, it was a dick move. The other would know all about what happened here. Archer briefly considers the depth of the grudges and the echoes of curses in the Park: forming into something not unlike a Reality Marble. Of course, for all his discomfort here, he would find sympathy with this place. After all, it practically inspired the creation of his own Reality Marble, all but its prototype in his soul: the empty crucible of his moulding. After all, what happened and spread here all but shaped him ...

Along with one other.

He's sitting on the bench, the same bench his younger self sits at on his off-hours contemplating the purpose of his survival out of five hundred lives, the same one he used to ... Archer can sense the magic around the other. Anyone else would see a blurred image where his face or even his impression might be. But his senses, whatever else, have improved to the point where he sees right past such superficial magecraft. He sees him as plainly as the day he saved him from the Fire that used to live in this place. He sees him just as clearly as all the times they spent together afterwards, for those five or six years, as father and son.

He sees him just like the day, at the veranda of their house, where he looked up at the moon and he died.

Seeing Emiya Kiritsugu all but punches the Servant that used to be Emiya Shirou in the gut. He thought Alaya was cruel before, that his ideals had been even crueler. But obviously, all that time dealing death to prevent greater death and horror, hadn't been enough. The World and fate still held more mockery for him, especially when he can sense the other man ... and realizes what has happened to him.

Emiya Kiritsugu has a cigarette in his mouth, smoke trailing from his mouth into the air around him. And when Archer sees him, he realizes the look on the other's face, matches exactly what he is feeling right now. To the other man's credit, the expression fades back into a blank, almost melancholic look. It probably also matches whatever is on Archer's face at the moment.

There is nothing they can really say right now.
Kiritsugu is slouched over, his hands on his knees, as he smokes his cigarette. He doesn't extend a hand for Archer to sit, but he isn't telling him not to do so. Archer, despite his inhuman stamina, feels very tired. He walks over to the bench, and sits down across from the man whom he used to call Ji-san.

"Does Tohsaka know you're here?"

A wry smirk comes to Archer's lips even as the other's older, deeper voice gouges into his heart. "Nah. She's not looking through my eyes, if that's what you're asking. Just a simple patrol." While she deals with my idiot self, is what he doesn't have to say. "Does ..."

"My father ..." Kiritsugu shakes his head. "It's possible. I asked for some privacy, and maybe he'll honour it. If not, well ..." He gestures around the park. "It will be harder for him to see anything with these grudges, unless he comes here himself. And he won't."

So Emiya Kiritsugu isn't a Dead Apostle. Archer suspected as much. But now, based on what he's remembering from his own research during his time, he's piecing enough of it together to get a somewhat bigger picture. "And here I thought we might be here for old time's sake."

Kiritsugu inhales and slowly exhales more smoke. "I hate this place, Shirou."

Archer feels himself bristle. "No. That's not who I am anymore."

But the question must have been in his eyes, in this unguarded moment, because Kiritsugu is chuckling -- actually chuckling. "What, did you think a tan and a dye-job with your hair up would fool your old man?"

"Tan and a dye-job, huh?" Archer lets his sarcasm continue to get the best of him. He can't help it. Anything else, right now, might make him scream or cry. "Looks like you need a bit of a tan yourself, old man."

Somehow, the two of them crack a smile at each other. For a few moments, it's almost as though they have forgotten that they are a spirit and vampire respectively. But the grimness of the situation sets in. If nothing else, their surroundings serve to remind them that this isn't a social call from beyond the grave.

"I could ... sense you." Kiritsugu admits. Archer thinks that he might as well have said he could smell or taste him. He fought enough Apostles and their vampiric minions in his life time and countless others to know the basics of how they work. "And I'm guessing you can see right through my magecraft, such as it is."

"I wouldn't be a very good Archer if my eyes were shit." Archer says, and feels bad when he sees the older man flinch at his words. "And ... I don't remember getting a letter the last time." He pauses, and then sighs. "Zelretch?"

Kiritsugu's shoulders somehow sag even more. "Zelretch."

"Goddammit." Archer mutters. Then a thought occurs to him and his eyes narrow. "He didn't ..."

"No." Kiritsugu replies. "That was my father. And he managed to change himself into an Apostle first."

"When did he ..."

"Right after the funerary rites, I think." Kiritsugu says. Archer feels a seething rage he hadn't realized
was forming. An Apostle changed his ji-san into a vampire after losing him, after that promise under the moon, in this timeline and he ... Then he notices Kiritsugu looking at him ... scrutinizing him. "When did you ..."

"I was thirty-five, maybe thirty-seven." Archer tries to brush it off. "I got stupid." He shakes his head. He has to get this back on track. "So you sent that familiar with the note. Right through my Master's wards. She never even saw it. You really do have skills, old man."

"It's nothing special." Kiritsugu says. "You know the rest. Sh ... your younger self must have told you and Tohsaka if you know about the letter."

"She still doesn't believe you." Archer replies. "Says you were living here, on her land, illegally. Hell, she might even think you're the one who killed her Father."

Kiritsugu's eyes, once dark, narrow into red slits, though the tone of his voice doesn't change. "I didn't kill Tohsaka Tokiomi."

"I know that." Archer says, though he doesn't say that he knows Kiritsugu had been more than capable of doing so. "But we're not here to talk about my Master or the Fourth War, are we, old man."

"I need your help, Shirou."

"Stop ..." Archer holds out one hand, the word almost dying in his mouth. "Stop calling me that. That idiot died a long time ago ..."

"Is that why you are trying to kill yourself now?"

Archer's blood, magical or otherwise, freezes. An equally cold, brittle anger crackles through his voice. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Even a complete novice could feel the killing intent coming off of you whenever you're both together." Or have enough intuition to recognize someone who is suicidal. "It won't work." Kiritsugu says. "You are already a Servant from one timeline. Killing Shirou in this one won't negate your existence. It will just kill my son, here."

Archer opens and shuts his mouth. His anger still isn't gone, though. His fists clench. "Then ... I will kill this one. I will end him before he wishes he had died. Maybe he won't ... become like me. But at least ... at least he won't hurt anyone else with his stupid, stupid ideals ... with his pointless death."

Kiritsugu is still scrutinizing him, his red eyes a mixture of many different emotions under a stoic facade. "Archer ..." He says, after a while. "If you kill Shirou, now, you will hurt others." For a few moments, Archer almost remembers this man talking to him patiently, gentle but firm, stern for one of his mistaken childhood actions. "Taiga would be heartbroken. And Sakura ... I know how you stood up for her, when you were young. She loves you. Anyone can see that. And Tohsaka as well ... If you kill yourself, whatever else happens, you will hurt them. You will make them unhappy."

Archer rises to his feet, the skin on his neck all but bristling. "You know nothing, old man! Better they see that little idiot die than have them die with him! Better they see his guts on the ground, than have him abandon them for people he's never even met -- who he will fail to save! Better he die, even just believing his delusions than ...."

Than having them slowly erode over time with the consequences of his actions. Than becoming anything close to being like me ...
He turns back and looks at Kiritsugu. "Old man, I'm not a Heroic Spirit. I did nothing Heroic. I made a deal with the World. I ..."

Kiritsugu looks down at the ground. "You're a cleaner."

Archer feels the steel in his heart rusting. For the first time in ages, his eye sight is blurred ... with moisture. He hates that. He hates this. How dare Alaya do this to him, letting him get summoned back in time, to another timeline that won't make any difference on his own fate, just to see this parody of his father again, to know everything that he knows ...

"I'm sorry, Shirou."

Kiritsugu interrupts Archer's thoughts as the older man looks up. His eye-sockets and cheeks are stained with blood. For a few moments, Archer panics, that perhaps someone has struck him while he was distracted, that he is dying again ... Before he remembers what Kiritsugu is now, and what that means.

The red liquid dripping down Kiritsugu's face are tears.

"I did this." His father tells him, his body shaking. "I broke everything I ever tried to save. I failed everyone I ever loved. Shirley, Natalia, Iri, Maiya, my own daughter, all those people in Shinto, humanity." He smiles through blood-stained tears in a painful mockery of the way he smiled at him all those years before when he found him in the Fire. "I thought, if I saved one person from that Fire, from my mistake, it would mean ... mean something. If I raised them, made their life better ... made up for what I did ..." Kiritsugu wipes at his face, angrily, furiously. "But you wanted to be a Hero of Justice. I remember what I said before ... before I died. I should never have left that on you. It destroyed my life. If I had known, if I could have just said anything else ..." He puts his head in his hands, his cigarette trailing smoke and ashes off to the side. "I never wanted this for you. I've failed you most of all. So spectacularly. I am so sorry ..."

Archer watches the man take a shuddering breath, a breath he no longer needs, pain blooming through his chest. He didn't recognize any of those names, but it made sense that his father had his own regrets. More than enough. He thought he hated the pointless moisture in his own eyes, or seeing the mistakes in his life repeat again, or his father suffering under the curse of the undead, his peace stolen away from him, but he realizes that -- more than anything else -- he hates seeing his father cry. He is not ashamed of him, but for him, to break down like this. That is what he keeps telling himself, as the other's vulnerability reminds him of that time so many millennia ago now. Perhaps, Archer thinks to himself, a part of him is still that idiot after all.

"I need you ... to help me ..." Kiritsugu manages to say, looking up at him. "Please. Help me destroy the Grail and save everyone here, and I promise you ... you can kill me. For everything I've done to you, I deserve ... much worse. Just please ..."

Archer shakes his head. "Old man. What happened in the Fire, that wasn't you. It was that fucking priest. I remember that much. Kotomine caused the Fire. And maybe you spread it, but you didn't know. I don't blame you for that. And." He breathes out. "I don't blame you for my mistakes. I remember that night. I was the one that made that decision. I'm the one that carried it out. And I guess ..." He looks down at his hands, his hands that never hold anything but his own Projections, his regrets, and his resolve. "I'm the one that has to live with my own mistakes. We all do. But ..." He looks off to the distance, to where his Master is staying, to where his younger self sits with his own Servant. "I guess there's no reason anyone else should die for them."

Slowly, Kiritsugu stares off to the distance. Perhaps he can see others as well, or he is lost in his own thoughts. Then, the man nods. "All right. Well, now that I know you are a Counter-Guardian,
perhaps you can ..."

Archer shakes his head. "I can't call on that power, right now. And by the time I can, everything
would be so fucked, the Counter Force would need to take me over ..." Perhaps this is why Alaya
allowed him to be summoned to this Fifth War to begin with, to make it easier to deal with it if
everything went sideways. He tries to make his tone gentle as he sees Kiritsugu flinch again. "Trust
me, old man. You really don't want that to happen. But ... I will help. When you need me, I'll be
there."

"I see." Kiritsugu stares into him, as though trying to find some trace of the foolish boy he used to be,
that perhaps he still is deep down. "Will you be able to act independently of your Master, if it comes
down to it?"

"I'll be able to leave Rin if need be." Archer affirms. "And I do have Independent Action, if it comes
down to it."

"... you don't have to ..." Kiritsugu says, his words hesitant, but filled with a slow, desperate hope.
"If it does come down to it, you and I can make a Contrac --"

"No." Archer says, his tone firm. "No. I'm done for when this farce is over. And even if you could
keep me here ... I don't want it." I don't deserve it, after everything I've done.

"Please, son." Kiritsugu adds, quietly. "I ..."

Archer shakes his head. "No, old man. I don't know what your creator wants, in helping us destroy
this abomination. That's fine. He wants it gone too, and that works for me. But I can't serve a Dead
Apostle. I'm not that forgone." He makes himself say, hurting himself as he says it, knowing it is a
truth. "If I'm going to do this, I'm doing this for them. Even that little idiot. If you want to save him,
that's fine. I can accept that. But you need to know something. You killed Shinji, right?"

Kiritsugu nods. Archer sighs. "I don't blame you. There was no saving that bastard. Overseer
probably thinks Assassin got him, or something. The kid and Saber were there when they saw Rider
stab herself. If I could see you, then Saber definitely did."

He sees Kiritsugu's oblivious look. Archer groans. "Of course you don't know. Your former Servant.
She was never a normal Servant. She made a pact with the World, different from mine. But Saber is
still dying between worlds. And ... she remembers. She remembers everything from Camelot, and ...
the Fourth War."

He holds up his hands. "I'm guessing you were going to talk with her. Help my younger self with her
energy issue? Well, if you are, you better deal with that, first. And if I remember Saber well enough,
from what she told me ... the last time, she's going to be pissed."

Kiritsugu seems to take this information in stride, though Archer knows the other couldn't have
known this at all. It might fuck up his plans, but that is not his problem right now, and he is not
getting in the middle of that clusterfuck.

"Thank you for letting me know." Kiritsugu says.

The other gets to his feet. Servant and vampire regard each other. Archer gets the impression they are
both overwhelmed with information. He looks down at the smouldering cigarette in the other's hand.
"Does the nicotine still do anything for you?"

Kiritsugu shrugs. "It used to calm my nerves." A rueful smile forms on his face, as though recalling
that he doesn't have any nerves to calm anymore, making Archer's heart unexpectedly ache. "Do you
"Still know how to cook?"

"Yeah. You don't forget that stuff ..." Archer says, searching for the words. "Rin likes her tea. The rest of it, though, I just can't be arsed."

Kiritsugu nods. "Filthy habit, this." He gestures at his cigarette. "A vice. I guess it reminds me that I was human, once."

Archer closes his eyes, thinking about his sarcasm, his needling of the boy, wanting to kill him ... "I need to get back before Rin gets cranky."

"Understood."

A chasm of years, even centuries, and different states of being yawns out between them.

"I will find you, when it's time." Archer says.

Kiritsugu nods. "I know."

"Well, see you around ... Dad." Archer says, and before he can feel anything else, or nothing, leaping into the air, leaving the wraith of his father's shadow and his past behind him.
Chapter 8

The slithering, skittering, crawling insects made of Blood Worms and augmented into the poisonous creatures that make up Matou Zouken converge on the old Edelfelt grounds.

The ancient magus focuses the full force of his thoughts and intention past the Bounded Field. He has to admit that it is formidable. He recalls sending these parts of himself here, through his familiars, and passing it several times. Often, these thoughts didn't align properly. A part of Zouken thought that, perhaps, this had been a sign that his soul had truly deteriorated, that perhaps some of his faculties had been compromised over the years in a way that taking another host body would not cure. But the other, more experienced aspect of him, the one that had lasted through over five centuries for one purpose and one purpose only, knew better.

He burrows through the blood sigils of the Field. Many of his extensions sizzle and die, but at the moment he is legion. Still, he can't help but marvel at just how many of his familiars are dying. Some of their perceptions, their multifaceted eyes are seeing nothingness, or the ruins of a house, or rats. Some of them are even retreating, thinking that they have to go somewhere else. Zouken lets those insects die, their usefulness completely at an end. He still controls the bulk of them, the majority of what he is. And he -- and by extension they -- can sense the most important of their number beyond the rapidly fraying Field.

Even as the last of the worms burst from the blood sigils they've consumed, Zouken senses the opening and goes through, following the sense of ... another extension of himself being held in the Mansion. He can taste the foreign nature of that blood through the other parts of himself, and he has a fairly good idea just who -- or what -- he is about to face. After all, it was an avenue he had explored -- and one other he knew had achieved -- a few times.

He doesn't even care when the Field reforms behind him, leaving only a tremor of energy behind him. He thinks nothing of it. Only the strongest of his familiars survive, and that makes his will keener. The spectrum that he has bred into them, he can sense the opened Circuits of the Field's creator below the confines of the Mansion. Zouken mentally smiles in vicious triumph. And he senses ... himself down there too. The fool thinks he can hold his property -- his experiment -- hostage. Well, not to worry. Matou Zouken will destroy this arrogant intruder and then he will rescue his ... beloved granddaughter in the bargain.

Matou Zouken reforms through the floor boards of the old basement, his worms twisting into approximations of ligaments, nerves, and aged flesh. He doesn't even shatter the windows, or destroy the wood or brick: though he can transform his familiars to do exactly that. No. The intruder has gotten the message with the infiltration of his Territorial Field, and the fact that whatever effects it possesses are not enough to affect his mind or form in any way.

"You must be new." Matou Zouken probes as he fully manifests and takes in the sight of the Dead Apostle. He is a pale man with short dark hair and round spectacles. Zouken has never seen him before, and yet there is something ... familiar about his face, something he can't quite name. "Your Field is not particularly strong."

"Hm." The vampire turns to him, away from the slab and his equipment. Zouken notes that there isn't much in the way of said equipment or tools. "Well, I didn't see the bother, to be honest. Especially as I wanted to meet you."

Zouken manages to make the grin that he couldn't when he was dispersed through his mass of familiars. "In this old house, near the Church?" He shakes his bald head. "I must admit, I'm not quite
The ancient magus lets that word sink in for a few moments. Now the vampire understands just what he is facing. Zouken is old, far older than this ... child monster. This place had belonged to one of the Edelfelt sisters during the Third War, one that he still recalled well. After the War was over, and the Association took custody of the houses of the sisters, he had committed to his own exploration of the territories and other places. And while there were obviously areas of Fuyuki with which Zouken had not been able to infiltrate, he knows the layout of this place well: where a Workshop can be established, where the sigils making a Bounded Field could be set, and a variety of other details that may not have occurred to the intruder.

For his part, the vampire simply observes him. Zouken can feel the Apostle analyzing him, can sense his attention spanning to their surroundings. No doubt the Apostle can smell or sense the rest of his familiars ready to eviscerate him in his own domain. Even though the Apostle is young, he doesn't expect this encounter to be easy. He had been able to infiltrate Fuyuki without anyone initially sensing him. The Tohsaka girl could be excused of course, as she is still young and inexperienced: the last of her Clan. But being able to get past the Supervisor -- the priest that had such promise -- and himself? Zouken isn't taking any chances. He still has a formidable amount of familiars back in his Workshop in case anything should go wrong, but he really does need to be mindful of his stolen property.

"I was willing to let the death of my grandson go." Zouken admits. "He was a disgrace of a sorcerer and arrogantly stupid besides. I'm still not even sure you were the one that killed him, or if you just took advantage of the War. It is a pity in some ways, my grandchildren do provide me with some ... amusement in my old age. But then you took the Book." He shakes his head again. At first, he thought the Mystic Code had been destroyed. It was nothing irreplaceable, of course. Much like Shinji. No, that Book had been created to give his useless biological descendant a chance to command Rider and it could be replicated. And that had been an issue on his mind. When he sensed that the bond between his granddaughter and Rider hadn't been restored after Shinji's death, and the Book was nowhere to be found, he sent his familiars to find it. After they traveled from the Academy, they got lost in the Forest ... and that was when his perspective, through his insects, began to have issues. Not much could repel Zouken's familiars and even the corners of his mind through them, and it kept him on alert: wondering if there was another Master or magi attempting to interfere with the Ritual.

Still, Zouken had been patient. He knew, eventually, that if he focused more of his mind he would find the Book. But what disturbed him a little bit more was when he could no longer sense the Book itself. They had been made from his Crest Worms and while not the most sophisticated of his breeds, it allowed him to keep track of their existence. "And even then, it was only a matter of time before I could track it down. Certainly, very few -- if any -- have the power to take the Mysteries of my Family. So it was all well and good." Zouken says. "Until you took my granddaughter."

Zouken stops smiling. "I think you will tell me where she is now." His insects do not bother to hide
themselves any longer as they converge around the Apostle. "Because, while I know your Curse of Restoration won't allow me to kill you outright, well ... you can still be consumed ... And this building is old, despite its looks. I can bring it down. And I can rip you apart all day, really. And while sunlight is ... uncomfortable for me, by the time everything is said and done, it will be much more ... inconvenient for you."

The Apostle regards him as though he is some form of fascinating, yet oddly grotesque specimen. But there is no fear on that drawn, expressionless face or in the eyes behind the glasses.

"You would kill me regardless." The vampire says, with a thin smile on his face. "But I suppose prevaricating any further is pointless, as you can no doubt sense her symbiotic nervous system here."

"I will make it quick!" Zouken spits. He glares up at the vampire as the clacking and buzzing of his familiars begin to fill the space around them. "You will not steal my secrets, nor interfere in this Ritual, vampire."

"It's a pity." The Apostle replies, reaching for something in his shirt pocket. Zouken lets him, cautious of the other creature's powers but fairly confident that he can destroy him and walk away from this with what he came for. "Your Ritual is interfering with my own experiment."

It's when Zouken sees what's in the object that the Apostle takes out of his pocket, a moderate sized vial and what it contains that he pauses. For the first time in ... Zouken can't even recall, the facsimile of the thing that could be called his heart lurches. The sight of what he sees is even more startling than the moment he felt and saw Rider teleport away with Sakura right in front of his very eyes: the very act that eventually led to this place. His familiars remain gathered where they are, massed everywhere into a growing black blotch in the enclosure, but they too grow silent. Inside the small glass between the vampire's fingers is a tiny worm: a very unpleasantly familiar worm.

Zouken actually blinks. "How ..."

"I suppose there is a little time to ... talk shop, as it were." The vampire says. "Before I assumed my Family's Crest, I was an amateur entomologist. So was my son, actually. It isn't an unusual hobby for a child to collect insects. But I would tell him about their functions, how many insects retreat into a state of hibernation, altering their metabolisms -- slowing them down -- to survive a particularly harsh season, or form a new carapace ... or a cocoon. The Crest Worms that made up your Book of the False Attendant, for instance, were in a similar state: given just enough Od or mana to remain alive and functional, but ultimately made placid and static."

This is almost too much for Matou Zouken. It is bad enough that the Apostle has ... this, but to have him figure out his Family's Mysteries and throw them back in his face ... He has done many twisted things, by his own admission over the centuries, but this cannot be countenanced. Fury burns through the ancient magus as he points a finger. "You will beg for the sun's rays by the time I am done with --""

It's then that Zouken notices the air shimmer around the vial. No, that isn't quite right. Come to think of it, it did something similar when he created the entrance through the Field as well. The Apostle, however, seems to ignore everything else has he continues to talk.

"I realized, after studying your organic Mystic Code -- before disposing of it -- that if your Crest Worms were given enough energy, on a relatively perpetual level, they would become dormant. Even docile. Of course, it wouldn't be enough to mask ... this particular specimen from you, but it would eliminate many of your fail safes inside of the young lady while, by extension, also slowing down her metabolic rate for extraction to be even possible." The vampire sighs, using his other hand
to push his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose. "Since I know that you specialize in creating symbiosis with Blood Worms, and that we can both agree that I stole your knowledge, I only think it fair that I tell you my Family's specialty."

He holds out the vial. "My Family specialized in Time Manipulation. We figured out how to slow and accelerate our own sense of time and those of others ... and, of course, that of an enclosed space."

The Apostle regards the small worm, curved fetal, in its glass container. "My late assistant and I used to experiment with prolonging the lifespan of flowers on Alimango Island, with the aid of reagents, formal craft circles, and arias. We had, well, varying degrees of success."

Zouken takes in this information and a cold chill runs down the phantom spine of his assembled body as some of the implications begin to sink in. "Magecraft that can manipulate time. But ... Gaia ... the World, how did you ... how do you compensate for its reversion?"

The vampire smiles, perhaps more coldly than the moonlight on his glasses. "We didn't." He looks again at the vial. "I imagine this particular vessel, for what is left of your soul, wasn't designed to exist outside of a human host. Even in this solution and my spell, it only has so much more time before the World sets in again ..." He looks up at Zouken, who feels himself growing extremely pale and incredibly angry ... along with another feeling whose name he has only ascribed to others. Fear. "The Makiri were a Russian Family, correct? There is a legend I'm sure you've heard: about a warrior named Koschei the Deathless. A powerful man who couldn't be killed: with his soul was hidden in an egg, in a duck, in a hare, in an iron chest, and buried in ..." He puts the vial down on the table in front of him. "It's funny. We both sought immortality. Both to continue our research. And now, our means are at cross purposes with our similar ends, Zolgen Makiri."

Zouken watches something shimmers within the vial, within his small worm vessel -- his true form -- as the glass suddenly ruptures, shattering and spraying blood and fluid everywhere. Agony rips through him as his body begins ... to lose cohesion. He feels his mind, his essence, disperse throughout the rest of his screaming insects sharing in his pain, in the maddening sensation of being ripped apart even as he kick starts the ichor inside of them, their biochemicals warping and twisting them into an unholy force of nature.

The magus smiles, before he falls apart, a feral, twisted, wide grin of pure hatred. "You fool!" He snarls through many inhuman thoraxes, his insects swarming towards the vampire. "That was just a contingency! One of many! That won't be enough to kill me!"

"Oh yes." The vampire replies, his tone distant as the unnatural living storm plunges over him. "I know."

* 

The worms and insects writhe and squirm in the Pit of Matou Zouken's Workshop. Rider stands over it, her face clenched into a grimace of disgust and righteous anger. She has already begun mashing a few of them with her heel. Even in her monstrous state, she would never have deigned to consume them. Still, with Sakura unconscious and hopefully recovering from intensive surgery, she can't afford to utilize her prana. Instead, she tears open a package that the one called Emiya Kiritsugu gave her. She tastes his blood, its vampiric nature strengthening her reserves in a way that no amount of stolen life force from random strangers, or unsuspecting young students ever could.

It is enough. It is more than enough.

Rider focuses on the Pit, remembering all of Sakura's memories being immersed in it, being violated
as a child, seeing her lying on the operating table in the other Mansion, watching the vampire take her heart out from her body to extract one of their repulsive number, frozen and still with his Time magecraft flowing sluggishly through her exposed veins, and her having to leave Sakura behind to do this. And Rider looks on at the source of all of her suffering. Crushing these things to a pulp, while satisfying on a primal level, isn't enough as Rider tears off her mask, and opens her eyes.

Her pale violet orbs regard the Worms that are Matou Zouken and their shrieks are all suddenly cut off as her square pupils begin to dilate.

* 

Emiya Norikata sees the swarm itself begin to lose further cohesion even as they sting and bite him. He can still feel the pain, but his body is already remembering what it was like before all the little damages, these deaths by a thousand cuts already muted by the fact that his body was already inhuman and clinically dead.

"Release alter." He whispers, closing his eyes: a calm smile on his face.

Then everything around the enclosure, around the borrowed Mansion, ripples back -- reverting suddenly, and violating back from his temporal cessation spell -- into Gaia's normal space and time.

With its inevitable, catastrophic results.

* 

"Will she be all right?"

"Yeah." Emiya Kiritsugu says, holding Sakura's hand in his own. After giving Rider the samples of his own blood that he had been gathering, meant originally to help Shirou with Saber, he vowed to protect Sakura upon another threat to his life. Not that he wouldn't have done it regardless. The girl's colour, even under her oxygen mask and the life support equipment he managed to procure, looked much better. "For someone having gone through open heart surgery, removal, and re-implantation, she looks marvelous. Thank you, Shirou."

"Tch." Archer looks away from the man that used to be his father, his arms crossed. "I didn't completely do it for you, old man. What can I say. Even now, I guess I don't really want to see my Master cry."

It reminds Kiritsugu of their last meeting. He still feels ashamed at how he lost control of his emotions back at the Park. Of course he cried blood. It was only fitting, given how much of it he shed in his lifetime. If Kiritsugu is honest with himself, he was damned even before his father turned him, by his own ruthless actions. Even though Angra Mainyu no longer plagues him, he knows that one Curse has simply been substituted for another. A small, rueful smile tugs at the corners of the grim line that is his mouth. Perhaps he does deserve this fate, at least he is doing his part in releasing someone from a damnation that they never deserved. Norikata had analyzed the Book of the False Attendant and, once he had destroyed it, Rider and Sakura immediately appeared in the laboratory under the old Edelfelt Mansion.

He looks down at the girl's hand, seeing that it possesses one less Command Spell. Rider must have had Sakura use the Seal to order Rider to teleport them here, once the link between Servant and Master had been restored with the destruction of the Book. It truly was miraculous to see something like that at work again, even through a Dead Apostle's basic Territorial Field. Kiritsugu isn't sure what the Servant told Sakura to get her to agree to meeting them, and having this surgery, but judging by the steady agreement she had with him and his father, he suspects that it didn't take much
convincing. A small part of him wanted to reassure her, before Norikata put her under, the part that had watched his son bring her to their home, seeing her routine with Shirou and Taiga develop, witnessing her come out of her shell just that little bit each day ... before his own illness finally overtook him. But he couldn't risk it. He has to keep as level a head and as few people knowing that he is here as possible. This is neither the time nor the place. Both have passed since. He bungled things ten years ago, and all he can do is save this era -- this timeline -- and those that he still loves.

"I got to say." Archer says. "I didn't expect you to call in that favour so soon."

"I ... wasn't actually sure you could help." Kiritsugu admits. "I mean, I gave Avalon to ..." He shakes his head. There was a bit of friction when Archer arrived to the Territorial Field after Norikata finished his work and left to go to the other Edelfelt Mansion days ago now. But Rider seemed to sniff the air around Archer before either could engage in melee and accept his aid, with a similar token threat to the one she gave him. Kiritsugu suspects it helped that she sensed Shirou's scent on the Counter-Guardian, along with the fact that he had summoned a copy of Avalon to place inside of her Master.

Avalon ... Even now, Kiritsugu finds the fact that Archer can Project a copy of Saber's Noble Phantasm, with its healing properties, truly miraculous. He remembers when Shirou could barely even Structurally Analyze or Reinforce a basic object, never mind replicate a powerful artifact created by faeries. He is truly proud of his son, no matter what his other mistakes might have been.

"I had no idea you could do something like this ..." Kiritsugu whispers.

"Heh. Don't give me any credit. I did hold the thing in me for most of my formative life." He reminds Kiritsugu. "And it'd be almost a useless paperweight if Saber weren't around. That copy won't last, but by the time it degrades, it'll dissipate in Sakura and she should just be a little bruised if nothing else." He turns to look back at Kiritsugu. "She's never going to know how you helped her."

"No." Kiritsugu says. "She won't know it was either of us. Rider promised that much."

Archer nods, taking one last look back at Sakura before beginning to walk away from them. "I'll be around."

"Thank you, Shirou." Kiritsugu whispers. His thoughts wander for a time, wondering if Rider and his father succeeded in their tasks. He mentally shrugs these thoughts off, feeling the reassuring weight of his guns, even as he focuses the rest of his attention on keeping Sakura company.

*

"Do not pretend. Retribution for forgiveness, betrayal for trust, despair for hope, darkness for light, dark death for the living."

There is a splattering and a laughing, creaking shriek. Emiya Norikata struggles back into consciousness. Around him is the results of what happens when one temporally stagnates an area for a few days, and suddenly releases the spell. He is surrounded by broken glass, pieces of wood, and shattered walls. The corpses and exploded pulp of insects drip on the remnants of the floor and the crushed in ceiling. Through a great deal of pain that rivals his undead body, and greatly surpasses the memory of the gun shot from his son, Norikata can sense his Territorial Field, weaker than the one he established at his real base of operations, having completely been expended with the destruction of his hidden sigils.

Zolgen Makiri may be ... may have been an ancient magus, but he had no idea that he had been trapped with Norikata for several days in this Mansion. It had been easy enough to keep his tiny
Worm body alive, to lure him here in hopes of finding Sakura. In retrospect, Norikata is lucky that the ancient magus hadn't detected the real power of his Field before this point.

"Relief is in my hands." Norikata gradually perceives a voice continuing to drone, with a certain level of dark satisfaction and pure hatred. "I will add oil to your sins and leave a mark. Eternal life is given through death."

There is another series of wet rattling, wheezing and inhuman cackling. Norikata realizes he isn't buried in rubble. The sun isn't even up yet, though time has indeed shifted back -- forcibly, brutally -- to the rest of its axis. He doesn't know how long he has lost his senses for, or how damaged he had been, but surely he should have healed by now. It is when he tries to get up, that he notices that he can't.

"— Ask for forgiveness here. I, the incarnation, will swear."

Well, that is interesting. Despite all of his efforts, some of Zouken must have survived. Long enough for this. Norikata is fairly sure the voice, a deep male baritone -- is drawing its words deliberately out. He looks around, seeing what is pinning him in place. It doesn't take him long to see the moonlight from the window shimmering down on him ... and the sword embedded in his shadow.

"— Kyrie eleison."

There is a splatter of noise, and sloughing of some biological matter echoing through the ruins of the basement. Norikata can't help it. He smirks. It couldn't have happened to a more deserving creature. If what he and the Servant had done to the thing that used to be Zolgen Makiri hadn't been enough, the priest had finished the rest of it. Zolgen Makiri may have been a genius, once, but his soul was practically on its last legs. Besides, a magus that wasted resources such as Matou Sakura and her Imaginary Numbers and helped to pervert the very Ritual he and his compatriots designed to achieve enlightenment, deserved nothing less to be exterminated like the pathetic vermin he truly was. And, deep down, Norikata has to admit to himself that he took a dim view of a magus who viewed their perfectly viable heirs -- such as Matou Kariya and Sakura -- as disposable.

Norikata can see him now. The tall priest gets up and cleans his hands. He slowly walks over to where Norikata lies, prone and broken. The Dead Apostle understands that even he will eventually start to heal despite the presence of the Black Key, but not nearly fast enough to deal with this former Executor.

"Kotomine Kirei." Norikata manages to rasp, trying to readjust the glasses that are hanging from an angle from his face, but forgetting that he still can't move. "I am glad you got my message. I think you might be interested in what I have to offer."
Kiritsugu maintains the hole in his father's Territorial Field, the one he created for Archer to come into the Workshop, when Rider appears again. The masked Servant barely looks at him as she walks past, through the gap in the Field, and towards Sakura. He notices the dust and bits of gravel on her boots and hands, some of it even staining her suit but he doesn't comment on it.

He turns away from his makeshift exit and looks at the two of them: Master and Servant. Rider puts a hand on Sakura's forehead and says nothing for a while.

"I can't smell the worms anymore." Rider murmurs.

Kiritsugu nods. The two of them had watched Norikata at work. Even he had to admit that for someone who wasn't a Spiritual Doctor, or a licensed physician by any stretch of the imagination, his father was a genius. Once Norikata had figured out how the Crest Worms in the Book had been influenced to enter the hibernation necessary to create the Mystic Code to begin with -- the Matou genetics within allowing it to retain that single Command Seal within it -- he applied that same method to the makeshift Crest Worm nervous system within Sakura herself. Essentially, from what he understood, his father managed to use their Time magecraft to bring the Worms into stasis, constantly feeding them his mana in the process, and using layers of a Bounded Field along Sakura's body, traced in glyphs and arcane equations, to slow down her own processes so that he could perform his surgery. Even Kiritsugu, though not nearly as proficient in his Family's magecraft as Norikata had become, could see how his vampiric senses aided him in sensing the worms and differentiating them from the other nerve-endings within Sakura before he found her heart ... and extracted the particular worm inside of it.

He recalls smelling the rot of death and blood from that particular specimen. Even now, the thought of something so vile being implanted inside the heart of an innocent girl, growing inside her, violating her, fills him with an all too human rage. This was the reason why he had become the Magus Killer to begin with: to destroy magi heretics exactly like Matou Zouken, inherent enemies to humankind and anything with goodness or dignity in their hearts. Once Norikata removed the worm and placed it in that vial of solution, to lure Zouken away to the other location, he used his magecraft to stagnate the remaining worms into death and decay before sewing Sakura back up, and gradually removing the Fields around her body so that the reversion to Gaia would not be harsh on her system. By the time he let Archer into the Workshop and allowed him to use his Projection of Avalon, all of Sakura's incisions and the remainder of the worms had been obliterated by that potent healing magic. It had been close, however. Kiritsugu had called on his old connections to get the state of the art medical technology, medication, and the bags of O positive blood that was needed to keep Sakura alive. Without the equipment or Norikata's knowledge of basic human anatomy and research into such, which made sense given how the man used to experiment with Dead Apostlehood for his own sake, Sakura may not have survived: and while it may have destroyed Zouken, Kiritsugu owed it to her and his son that she live.

Rider checks her over. Kiritsugu allows her to do so. The energies of the Avalon copy should have done their job. She unhooks her from the machines and intravenous mechanisms and picks her up in her arms. Sakura still won't wake up for some time, Kiritsugu knows, given the medication in her body, and the hypnosis done on her mind. It's just as well one way or another.

"Shirou will have a guest room open for Sakura." Kiritsugu tells the Servant as she heads to the exit. Rider pauses. "He might not let us in. He, or his ally might think we are enemies."
Kiritsugu shakes his head. "You haven't spent much time with my son, but you know enough to realize what kind of person he is, and why he's in this War. As for Tohsaka Rin, I suspect she won't have many objections when you tell them what happened."

She manages to look at him from the side without her eyes, though at this point in his existence Kiritsugu knows enough to realize that sight is not always needed to truly see. "I see why he revived you." Kiritsugu can't tell whether this is a compliment or an insult coming from the Servant's flat tone. She turns away. "You saved my Master, and so we will keep our end of the bargain. But you and your creator had better stay out of our way." She walks past the gap in the Field and then stops. She doesn't turn around when she speaks one more time. "That said, if Berserker or Caster gets me, you and the boy will be responsible for her."

Kiritsugu merely nods. It is a thing that should go without saying. Then Rider leaps away, with Sakura in her arms, leaving the Magus Killer in his solitude. He wonders how Norikata did. He had sensed some pain on the other end of his bond, a greater echo of the agony of time reversion he had gone through multiple times when drawing on their magecraft but only a thousand times more extreme. Kiritsugu recalls the praise Norikata gave him for giving him the idea for that technique. While the elder Emiya had progressed their Family's research further after his mortal death, the Dead Apostle had never truly faced combat before. It was seeing how Norikata mastered Time Manipulation on objects and subjects outside of himself that gave Kiritsugu the idea of utilizing Gaia's reversion -- Release -- as something of a kinetic explosion. He would never have tried something like that, even with the knowledge or strength, without something like Avalon to regenerate the internal damage that the user would feel. The user still had to be in the Field to get it to work, but the Curse of Restoration was a poor man's substitute for that Noble Phantasm: just good enough.

Basically, Kiritsugu took Norikata's research and adapted it into making a pseudo-suicide bomb. As it utilized Time, it would be hard to detect by even an experienced magus such as Zouken, especially if incorporated into a Territorial Field: which Zouken had been determined to enter when he thought Sakura might be in it.

*I see why he revived you ...*

Anyone else would have died in that explosion, but he can still sense his father -- his creator -- in the back of his mind. The plan is still on. The Magus Killer is almost disappointed, and he doesn't bother to hide that fact, even if ... He shakes his head again as he takes his cellphone out of his pocket.

Before everything is said and done, Emiya Kiritsugu has one more favour to call in.

*"So that's what happened." Tohsaka Rin says into the phone.*

"Yes Rin." Archer, in his spirit form, can hear the measured baritone of Kotomine Kirei's voice from the other end of the line. "Caster's constructs had infiltrated the old Edelfelt property, holding the remaining Matou heir. Rider and your Archer dealt with them before they could get to the Church. They took Matou Sakura after Caster assassinated the Head of her Clan. I suspect that Caster is attempting to sabotage and manipulate the rules of the War to her favour. The Tohsaka lost their knowledge of the Grail system." The Servant can hear Rin's teeth grinding at Kotomine's little reminder about what her Family has lost. "Perhaps Caster was hoping the Matou would give her ... more information on how to meddle with it. I will send word to the remaining Masters to seek her out and eliminate her."

"And Matou Sakura will be brought to Emiya." Something, and someone else, the Tohsaka not only
lost, but gave away. Archer sees Rin's fist clench and unclench, even as somehow her tone manages to remain level.

"Yes. Even though I offered shelter, Sakura indicated that she wants to continue in the Holy Grail War. She said she would feel safer there, and her Servant will be bringing her to Emiya Shirou ... as I assume you are on his premises."

Rin closes her eyes, rubbing her face with her free hand. "Of course. Even though she is a rival Master, as Second Owner I appreciate being informed of this breach of the rules and I will protect Sakura for the duration of the War: until no longer feasible."

"Until that time." There is a slight lilt to Kotomine's tone that Archer is sure that even Rin can hear by the way she visibly bristles. "The Church will deal with the damage to the property and take appropriate measures to cover up the damage with the Association's cooperation. And as I said, I would suggest that you make Caster your priority. Casters have always been a troublesome class. Anyone that was once a magus, especially a powerful one, will always find a way to exploit their situation. Good luck, Rin."

The other end of the line clicks as Rin slams the receiver down. He almost forgot how much pleasure the false priest took in needling everyone around him, especially those that thought they were close to him: especially those that inherently detested him like Rin. Archer thinks about paying Kotomine a visit sometimes, but the deterrent of Gilgamesh always makes him reconsider. Now -- especially now -- isn't the time.

"First, Assassin kills Shinji." Rin mutters. "That's what Emiya-kun believes anyway, then a Head of one of the Three Families is assassinated and others, not involved in the War, are dragged into it. And now the Master's right is transferred to ... Sakura. Of course Emiya-kun's going to want to shelter her ... offer her to be part of this alliance ..." She shakes her head. Archer knows that Rin has learned nothing that the fool at the Emiya residence isn't going to be told by Rider. Even Sakura wouldn't know the rest of it, as for Zouken ... If there is one thing he agrees with Kiritsugu about, it's letting Sakura tell the boy and her sister what really happened when she feels comfortable in doing so. It is not their right. Even if Sakura hadn't given that condition, they would never -- he would never -- say anything. The fact that he didn't notice what was happening to her when he was alive just makes him angrier at his past self and his selfishness.

"And then you go off patrol ... without my authority, into a strange Bounded Field, and fight another Servant's minions."

Even though Archer is invisible, recovering from the prana he's already used to recreate Avalon, he can feel Rin glaring exactly at his position. He now realizes the reason they came back here, to the Tohsaka Manor, wasn't so much to receive Kotomine's courtesy call as Supervisor to Second Owner in the privacy of her own domain, but so that Rin could interrogate and more than possibly dress him down for his own behaviour.

"Would you prefer that I didn't help her, Master?" He sends, snidely.

"N-no!" Rin splutters. "That's not the point! I know that Caster will have to be dealt with, especially now, but following her into that Manor ... it could have been a trap. And it might have cost us this entire War!"

And what would you have told the idiot? Archer wisely keeps those thoughts to himself. The Servant is impressed, despite himself. His Dad's dad had a decent Territorial Field for a relatively young Dead Apostle. Between his own flight, and the range of the Field, it made it look like he was headed practically next door to the Edelfelt Mansion in Old Town instead of the one near the Einzbern side
of the forest. As far as anyone looking through Archer's eyes, such as Rin, she saw him go to the
place that was destroyed. And what an explosion that was. Archer wonders just what Kiritsugu and
his father placed into the site of Matou Zouken's demise: a small bomb? Either way, it couldn't have
happened to a better monstrosity.

"This War's already been compromised." He tells her, hating that he is going with the lie and only
partially mollified by the fact that it isn't all Kotomine's. "First the hospitalizations all over town, and
the serial killings. Now this. It could have spilled over into our territory and I'm pretty sure the idiot
wasn't prepared. I think we're going to need all the allies we can get."

"So now you're interested in allies?" Rin's eyes narrow. "You know, I couldn't see what you were
doing in that Field. You spent a lot of prana in that place. And I could feel that explosion." She
brings her hand up. "Perhaps I should use one of these to get you tell me what's going on."

Archer glares at her from his astral state. "You could. But it's exactly what I said. The Field blocked
your magecraft, and you know it. I did what I had to do in order to save that girl when I saw her.
And I don't want to go into it. Even though I can't really remember who I was, I know enough to
realize the less you know about me the better if somehow an enemy gets you. Those ... creatures
were cleared out, between Rider and me. And yeah, we are going to need all the allies we can
against Caster if she's taken control of Ryudou Temple and its leyline, as you said." And then
Archer rolls his eyes, knowing she can probably feel the emotion more than anything. "Also, given
that you wasted one Command Seal to ... 'remind me of my place' earlier in the War and how
Berserker's Master is probably not going to believe the boy's tales about the Grail, or ally with us, do
you really want to waste another resource?"

The Servant can't really lie to himself when he sees his Master's eye visibly twitch. When he was
alive, in his time ... one of his times, this led to a lot of ... very interesting moments between them,
one way or another. Finally, Rin unclenches her fist. "Fine. We probably will have to deal with
Berserker first. Illyasviel really has it out for Shirou, even more after he told her about that letter. She
might want to keep him alive, but she still wants to turn us into pulp. Another Servant might be
handy, even if ..." She sighs. "Just so you know, you are not off the hook Archer." She points at
him, with what he thinks of as her Gandr-finger. "I'll be watching you."

Archer all but nods to himself. He wouldn't expect anything less from his Master, from Tohsaka Rin.
Illya is going to be a problem. She always has, in some way. Even so, as they return to the Emiya
residence, and more of his memories begin to become clear again, Archer begins to come up with a
plan to deal with just that. It is a bad, very reluctant plan that might not even work. He sighs at
himself, unseen, at Rin's side. Perhaps he hasn't quite shed the weakness of sentimentality after all.
"Yes." Kiritsugu says, picking up his phone as he heads out to the next location.

"I am currently at Matou Manor." His father's voice replies.

Kiritsugu doesn't say anything for a few moments as he moves through the trees. His familiars still hadn't been able to pierce through anything in that area beyond the surface level and even the upper part of the house. Even with Zouken's demise, the Bounded Fields seemed to be strong around his Family's property. He knew Norikata had been all right, given the bond between them in the back of his mind, but it had been disconcerting. The Dead Apostle had been quiet these past couple of days. No, it was more than that. He had been practically silent and unseen. Kiritsugu's familiars couldn't find him anywhere. Certainly not where the other Edelfelt Manor used to be, or what is left of it, now that Kotomine had it sectioned off and seized. And the Dead Apostle hadn't come back to his Workshop, at their Mansion. It was risky, even for a relatively skilled Dead Apostle, to move in another magus' Land: especially after the damage Norikata took in their plan to eliminate Zouken.

"You've been there a while." Kiritsugu finds himself, reluctantly, stating to his father. "I haven't been able to locate you."

"Still healing, I'm afraid." Norikata replies. "And there is a lot here that I have to go through. Zolgen Makiri was one of the few that knew how to access the Greater Grail system. He did help design it, after all. However, if he recorded this information, he did not make it accessible." There is a pause, and Kiritsugu can almost feel the dry mirth from the other side of the line. "Is there any particular reason you need to find me? Do you have any other little girls that need medical procedures?"

Kiritsugu tries not to grit his fangs together. Logistics are important for the ultimate objective to be accomplished. For all he hates to admit it, his father's abilities are useful and even integral in destroying the Grail once and for all. A part of him even wondered if the priest had found him, and was holding him for interrogation if nothing else. Of course, the rest of Kiritsugu knew this was unlikely given that he probably would have felt Kotomine's attempts at such, and also knowing that Norikata would have attempted to summon him in the event of such a thing actually happening. No, the plain and simple fact of the matter is that Emiya Kiritsugu doesn't trust Emiya Norikata. Not one bit.

"Zelretch didn't tell you where it was, or how to access it?" Kiritsugu watches the trees blur around him as he speeds towards his own objective.

"I know, as you do, that the main leyline is under Mount Enzou. And while he did preside over the creation, most likely to see if the Three Families could resurrect the Third Magic -- as you also already know from your previous employers -- I do not believe he was involved in making any of the likely protective wards and curses around the Ritual area. It has also been two hundred years and formations could have changed easily, especially with Zolgen Makiri involved. It's almost a pity we couldn't question him ourselves ... As for Zelretch ... From personal experience, I know that he too isn't one for making things easy."

The Magus Killer mentally rolls his eyes. Zouken was far too dangerous a being to keep alive for any reason. He would have been more of a threat than a potential asset. Even if they had had the means to interrogate the ancient magus, it would have taken far too long with no guarantees of the
creature even telling them the truth: especially as it was so hard to threaten, never mind even kill him. And as for Zelretch, if rumours about him were true, even if he did know what they needed -- even if it was necessary -- he would not go out of his way to make it easy. Kiritsugu can believe, all too well, that virtually immortal beings with access to more than one dimension have a whole other conception of personal entertainment.

"Just find the location." He tells his father, remembering how the closest he ever got himself -- even with Iri's information -- was sowing the outward leylines with explosives. "I will deal with the Fields."

"And I believe you." Norikata says. "But, just as we couldn't deal with Makiri beyond terminating him, we don't particularly have time to have you break through the rest yourself. I also believe in your skills, however these are Fields created in tandem by at least three master magi. It is better just to know how to deal with them, or have some idea of what they are -- and where they are along with the location of the cavern -- in advance."

It is perfectly reasonable, all things considered. As it is, some of Kiritsugu's own preparations still need some time.

"And how is the rest of the War proceeding?"

It's as though his father, his ... creator can read his mind at times. It is still utterly infuriating, but the Magus Killer suspects that he hasn't particularly been controlling his thoughts all that well at the moment. The question is a convenient segue from his own questioning as well, rankling him just a little more. Still, the query itself is legitimate. "The energy draining, Caster's doing, has increased considerably. As have the serial killings. Some of bodies haven't even been found ..." Something bothers Kiritsugu about this, but he has to keep to the facts at the moment. "Assassin is no longer at the Temple Gate. I believe he has been eliminated and it would explain Caster's increasing activities." Kiritsugu pauses, his mind still processing what he knows ... and what it doesn't know. "The Einzbern Master took ... Saber's Master, before his alliance could move on the Temple." His heart, long dead, twists at that. "Tohsaka Rin, Matou Sakura, Saber, Rider and ... Archer went to deal with her ... and Berserker." Kiritsugu, the father, finds himself feeling even more infuriated by this. "The Einzbern and Saber's Masters made a truce and currently reside at the latter's residence. But both Berserker and ... Archer are nowhere to be seen."

"I see." There is silence on the other end of the line. "So it is possible that three Servants have already been eliminated so far. Do you know the status of your daughter?"

Kiritsugu gathers his thoughts together. "She appears stable." Iri had managed to maintain her motor functions with a few Servant essences inside of her, but she had the luxury of Saber and Avalon at the time, and in the end even that hadn't been enough before Kotomine took her. He knows that Illya is more advanced than her mother had been. He didn't know the particulars of the Einzbern experiments on her, but he knew enough that they had maximized as much of her magus potential and that of the Grail as possible. That's why they had wanted to win the War, to save her ...

"For what it's worth, Kiritsugu, I am sorry."

Both men are quiet now, separated by distance, time, and too many agendas. Kiritsugu tastes a dull copper and realizes he has almost bit through his lip. He doesn't even know how to respond to his father's words. How sincere are they really? Is this just another ploy to keep him invested? And why should it matter to him given everything the Dead Apostle had already taken from him in life, and in death? And what does it mean when on one breath he mocks the life of one girl, while commiserating with him about that of another he has never met, nor seemed to care about? The simple answer: it means nothing. "It's unfortunate if Berserker has been eliminated." He continues,
keeping his voice and mind level. "He, along with Saber, Rider, and Archer would have been useful against Caster ... and the King of Heroes."

"I can understand that." Kiritsugu believes him. If Norikata had been observing him and the Fourth War, along with believing his testimony, he knows all too well what Gilgamesh is capable of doing. He'd known the Servant had survived the War, after seeing him with Kotomine, and around before leaving the city. "But we must make do with what we have. I take it you are dealing with that at the moment."

"Yes." Kiritsugu is at the Castle now. He senses no life energy around, except for one particularly radiant bright spot where the entrance hall should be situated. "Afterwards ..." He says, wondering if there will actually be an afterwards for him with this meeting. "We should meet back at the Mansion. Assess how much longer you have to heal, and move on from there."

"I am healing fairly well, all things considered. Keep your mind on the objective in the meantime. If I didn't know any better, I would say you were worried about me, son."

Kiritsugu does not like that wry tone at all. As subtle as a gunshot to the head ... "Will report on the asset status." He replies, before turning off his phone.

And at the moment, as Kiritsugu walks towards the Einzbern Castle -- which looks a lot worse for wear -- he wonders just what the "asset's" particular "status" will be like when she sees him -- properly -- again.

*  

Saber is furious.

She isn't angry at what happened here, at Einzbern Castle: though the place has memories for her that she would rather forget. To be fair, the Einzbern residence in Fuyuki -- for all its current damage from the fight between Berserker and Archer -- actually still looked better than the destruction it suffered from the ... duel between her former Master, and the Master of the Fourth War's Lancer. The hallway has taken most of the ruination this time around: the results of Berserker's makeshift cudgel, made from his own Temple apparently, and a whole series of bladed weapons. Certainly, they didn't come from Rider: whose Noble Phantasm had actually taken one of Berserker's lives, turning him into stone ... before had completely recovered and become immune to the damage.

She passes through the Bounded Fields that still exist, even though she knows its owner isn't here anymore and can feel some of the Fields fraying.

God Hand was a horrific Noble Phantasm. It gave Berserker Twelve Lives and immunity to the very thing that destroyed him. It had taken Rider's Bellerophon, followed by a powerful magecraft technique by Rin, and the ... bond she facilitated between her and Shirou to activate her lost Caliburn and obliterate the demigod. And they had just barely won. The rest of the group's fight happened outside of the grounds, and spared the Castle for the most part.

And they won. Saber isn't particularly upset that Illyasviel even joined them after the fact: that Shirou opted to spare her life. It made sense, given how she was essentially his sister by adoption, Irisviel's daughter, Kiritsugu's ...

The logical part of Saber, the one that still wanted to win the War, believed killing her would have eliminated a potential threat. She had no illusions about the Einzbern and what lengths they would go to in order to win. But Illyasviel was different. She was just angry. She believed her father killed her mother and abandoned her for Shirou. And it was very clear she bore no love towards her House.
And by that her other logic, Saber should have challenged Rider to a duel and had Sakura neutralized: yet another girl that her Master, that Shirou swore to protect.

Her Master is ridiculous in so many ways, but aside from what he is -- a young boy practically a man now -- he is pure of heart, and she admires his determination. His compassion. His ... She knows that she isn’t the only one who has noticed this either. Rin’s face practically turns into a tomato when he compliments her. And Sakura ... poor Sakura. What Saber, Rin, and Shirou had to do in that shed ...

*She will be there for him when I'm gone.* Saber tells herself, ignoring her twisting heart. *Her or Rin. I have a duty here. I will fulfill my promise to him. If the Grail is tainted ...*

And that is why she is angry. It was just today that everything changed. After these events, she found a letter in her residence. A note. No one at the residence, not Rin, and not Shirou had sensed anyone or anything infiltrate the improved Bounded Field that Rin created around the area. Whoever it was knew the layout of the Emiya residence, knew how to get past Rin's Fields with ease, and left this note with handwriting that seemed too eerily familiar.

*Meet me in the main hall at Einzbern Castle. The King of Heroes still exists. You need more power to deal with him. Come alone.*

She thought it might be a trap by Caster. According to Rider, Assassin was no longer at his post and there had been some sign of violence on the Temple property: with a smell of human blood recently spilled. They had been warned by Kotomine, for whatever that was ultimately worth, that she might be manipulating the War: breaking the rules. That was why they had planned to deal with her, before Illyasviel and Berserker stepped in ...

Caster might have lost Assassin and her own Master, leaving her essentially defenseless. It might explain why she supposedly attempted to attack the Church and perhaps seize the Grail from the priest ...

But Saber had seen the letter Kiritsugu apparently left Shirou one year after his death. She had seen the handwriting on it. She didn't want to believe it. Yet unless there was a powerful spell on it to affect her mind that overrode the natural Magic Resistance of her Class, it was the same writing ... and there was no way Caster could know about Gilgamesh, never mind so casually mention him. Anyone who saw that ... being would be naturally terrified of him, and if he was still here, even after the Fourth War ...

And then there was that face she saw back at Shirou and Rin's Academy, the one that sped away just after Rider left the body of her false Master ...

It shouldn’t have been possible. Shirou said that he had died. But Shirou himself should have died many times, and this was before she appeared to him in his storage shed. It’s when she sees the figure appear in front of her, the grizzled black hair, the trench coat, the pallid face with its deeper but familiar lines, and the shadow over his eyes, she *knows.*

Saber can’t help it. A part of her knows that she should know better, but all she can remember when she sees that face standing in front of her again is Lancer dying by his own weapon cursing her, the cold way he ignored her, the manner in which he spat on her honour, and his words as he stumbled out of that Civic Hall and the two Command Seals that took her one wish away from her ... That, and Shirou telling her what happened *after* he forced her to destroy the Cup ...  

She can’t help it. Saber screams, lunging forward and punching Kiritsugu in the stomach ... and *through* his body.
He doesn't even have time to react. The man flies against the wall, crumpling against it, cracks appearing behind the wall where his back impacted it, blood spraying across it through the sudden hole in his abdomen, as he falls to the ground.

It's as though the wind is knocked out of Saber herself as she realizes what just happened. Emiya Kiritsugu is on his hands and knees, shaking on the ground, coughing up more blood. Her sword comes into her hands. A part of her is satisfied, her body somehow feeling ten years of pent up rage get unleashed through this small, petty act. But she also feels numb, the objective part of her mind distant and dispassionately observing the scene.

Then she really takes a look at him. The man's eyes are glowing red as he sits on the floor, holding his trembling hands, empty, in front of him. And then she sees the ... hole she made in him, with her fist. A human would be dead. Instantly. Even a magus would have been destroyed by a Servant's physical blow, even a weaker one, and Saber knows that she is far from weak, even now.

"I ..." He coughs, spitting out more blood. "I-I deserved ... that ..."

"Dead Apostle." Saber's blade, without Merlin's shroud, glitters golden in the ruined light of the hall.

"Just a ... a-vampire ..." Kiritsugu gasps out, his eyes squinting against her blade's light.

Saber regards him, her boiling fury turning cold and clear. "I knew you were a low man, Emiya Kiritsugu. But falsifying your own death, becoming an abomination, lying about God only knows what else ..." She breathes. In and out. She has to remember, as much as she despises this man ... this ... thing ... that used to be her Master, she is still a King. She is the King of Knights. She will not summarily execute someone. She has to hear out the condemned first. And then, and only then, would she make a judgment. "You have two sentences to make, or I will cut off your head."

Somehow, the Magus Killer manages to smile wryly, but with a tiredness she doesn't remember seeing on his face before during their War. "Gilgamesh is still around, in this War, fighting along side Kotomine. Neither you, nor Shirou, nor Rin have the power to deal with it, but I have something that can help."

Saber takes in that information. She keeps her blade at the ready. It could still be a trick, and even if it is isn't she never trusted this man even when he was properly alive. "How?" She asks. "How could Gilgamesh still be here ..."

He almost seems to realize that she is allowing him more than two sentences. He shakes his head. "The Grail. It ... it's tainted, like I said."

"I don't believe you." Saber growls, fury over the memory of Excalibur destroying her hopes and dreams filling her mind.

"It incarnated him through Kotomine." He tells her, his voice getting steadier. He sighs. "I killed him, but the Grail cursed me when I rejected it. It ... it couldn't bring utopia. The only peace it offered was death and destruction. It listened to Kotomine instead, as he was dying. It made the Fire. And we ... I ..." He looks at her, with an intensity that she remembers from their argument, after he killed Lancer's Master and his fiancee. "You have no reason to trust me, but you know how ruthless I ..." He looks down at himself. "I was. You saw Kotomine recently, or you know that he is still alive. You knew he was dead when I got out of that Hall. You saw what I was willing to do to win. It was him, or me."

Saber slowly lowers her blade as the truth of it sinks in. Then she dissipates its glow.
"The Grail is tainted." Kiritsugu repeats. "The Einzbern tried to summon an irregular Servant in the Third War and when he died, All the Evils of the World -- that he represented -- poisoned the contents of the Greater Grail. I had no idea about this. It was ..." She watches his hands, stained in his own blood, clench into tight fists. "It was all for nothing."

Former Master and Servant say nothing more. Saber slowly lowers her arms to her knees, leaning down to meet Kiritsugu's gaze. The ruthless demeanour of the Magus Killer persona is gone. A haunted, broken man stares more through her than at her. Like warriors shattered from one too many battles. "I meant it. All of it, Saber. I wanted to make the world a better place. You don't have to believe me, of course. It'd be easier to believe that I lied to you, that I betrayed my wife, that all I wanted was ultimate power or glory. And you can believe what you want. I'm not going to apologize to you, for what I did, because -- at this point -- my apologies are worthless."

Slowly, he reaches into a pocket in his coat. Saber almost starts, but then she realizes that he is taking out some packets. Large packets filled with a dark liquid. He places them, slowly, on the ground.

"You probably saw Rider drinking from a few of these." Kiritsugu says. "That's why she isn't trying to feed off anyone else in the city anymore."

It all starts to come together in Saber's mind. "You were the one that killed Shinji."

"Yes." Kiritsugu replies. "I figured everyone else would have thought it was Assassin."

"Assassin never left the Temple Gate." Saber remembers their brief exchange of blades on the steps before Shirou interfered, during one of their major disagreements in strategy earlier on. "I don't think he even could." She looks down at the packets of what she knows now to be blood. "You assassinated Matou Zouken as well? To bring Sakura to us?" She looks him right into his eyes. "Why?"

"You will need all the help you can get against Gilgamesh, and Lancer. Zouken would have prevented that part of the alliance." He tells her, a reasonable answer though she suspects there is a lot more behind it. "Yes. Kotomine killed Lancer's former Master and is using him too. He probably used Lancer to eliminate Assassin and Caster's Master at the Temple. She might come for you, as part of his plan, if she's looking to either get a new Servant, or ... the Grail."

Saber blinks a few times, taking in this new information. She remembers Archer's last words to her before his battle with Berserker, buying them some time. He recalls him telling her to avoid Caster's dagger. She didn't have time to ask what he meant, and even Rin didn't know what he was talking about. Otherwise she would have thought he encountered her ... But there is something that Kiritsugu just said, in the midst of the rest of his bombshells that catches her attention. "Why would she seek the Grail from us? Doesn't the priest have it?"

"No. Not yet. And if I have my way, he never will. It ... it isn't an it." He shakes his head. "It's my daughter. It's Illya."

If seeing Kiritsugu get up from her punch before startled her, these words strike her like a cold blade in her chest. Suddenly, another memory of the Fourth War burns into her mind as she remembers. "... oh."

Kiritsugu sighs, looking down, his face somehow looking even more pale. "Just like Iri. We were supposed to win. It was ... she was never supposed to be in this place."

He turns his face away from her, but the implications, and more of the memories drive themselves deep into her gut.
Irisviel. Her wan appearance. The way it got harder for her to move. Her kidnapping by a twisted alliance arranged by Kotomine. The sadness, but acceptance on her face throughout all of it. The moment Saber saw the cup she became. And then this girl. The same one playing with her father outside of the Castle in Germany. So small and pale. The same red eyes as her mother. She'd known. She'd been absolutely horrified. A part of her wanted to walk away, from all of that, even after the fight with Berserker. But she remembered Irisviel's words: to keep striving to help her husband. To save the world. To achieve her own dream. She wanted her to be happy even as each soul from a Heroic Spirit went into the Lesser Grail, into the Cup, into Irisviel ...

And now the same thing was happening to Illya ...

They'd been killing her. The woman she swore to protect. The one she thought she failed to protect for Kiritsugu. Every victory she had killed her. And now a little girl ...

She's gripping Kiritsugu's lapels, hauling them both onto their feet. Rage is white hot in her brain. She's smaller than he is, but she is lifting him over her head, her eyes burning into his. She's gritting her teeth. She wants to tear this bastard apart. But then she remembers. Irisviel knew. She knew she was dying. And then she recalls the agony on Kiritsugu's face: an exact mirror of the emotions flitting across it right now. She defended Irisviel to the best of her ability. But Kiritsugu knew the truth, and he went through with all of it, with his wife's blessing ... And then had to live with that. All for nothing. All for ...

"So you want me." Saber says, slowly. "To drink your filthy, disgusting vampire blood. To help me clean up your mistakes. To use me as a tool again. To make up for your lies. Shirou said you changed towards the end of your life. But you're just the same, cold, ugly, little man you always were." She steps on one of the blood packs until it bursts under her heel with a loud squelching sound. "Like hell I'm getting anything of you in me again! Shirou and I will stop this ourselves. And you can go throw yourself into the sun."

She drops him back onto the floor and begins to stalk away from this place, from this ... man.

"I put Avalon in Shirou."

Saber pauses. She turns back and sees that Kiritsugu has gotten to his feet. The hole she left in him is a bloody mess of tissue that is remembering what it is like to be whole again, slowly forgetting that it was punctured so brutally just a few minutes before. "I put it in Shirou. And before that I had it with me when I fought Kotomine. It was the only reason I survived."

"And you put it in Irisviel." Saber whispers, quietly, to herself.

She almost feels sorry for him when she sees the expression of sadness in his eyes. Almost. She thinks of her Master, her new Master. "That's how you saved him from the Fire. That is how he summoned me."

Kiritsugu looks down at his empty hands, at the blood packs on the ground. "It was all I could do."

"I'm ..." Saber says after a time, trying to find the words. "I'm glad you did. And I think ... I think I understand why you never told me you had it."

It made sense. Their views were seemingly incompatible. And barring that, it was less information that enemy Masters and Servants had at their disposal. Now she knows. It explains how Shirou could heal at an accelerated rate. She should have remembered her old sheathe and its power, even before it was stolen from her. This information could help them, her and Shirou both. But then, the anger comes back, like a dragon uncoiling. And this time, Saber doesn't hold back.
"You taught Shirou magecraft." She feels her tone become low. "Rin told me about his Circuits. Did you know, Kiritsugu, that Shirou had been using his own nervous system to make them? Did you know he could have died?" She sweeps her hand through the air. "And that isn't even the start of it! In the beginning of the War, he had been throwing himself in front of me! And others! He didn't even know about Avalon! You didn't write that in your letter! You didn't even tell him that you still ... exist! You ... you wrote that letter after you were changed, didn't you."

Kiritsugu doesn't say anything, and that is all the confirmation that Saber needs. Saber manages to rein in her dragon, just barely, as its fire seethes inside of her. She needs to make her point. "You know, Kiritsugu. I can almost forgive you commanding me to destroy the Grail. I can even accept that you once had good intentions, that you genuinely regretted Irisviel's death. I can even understand you using me as a tool to win the War as I saw myself and this body as little more than such. But your son. Your own son." Saber feels her eyes become slits. "Using him. Using us to win at all costs. We're just pieces to you, aren't we. I can forgive you doing that to us, but not to Shirou. Not to Illya. Not anyone ..."

The Magus Killer looks at her blankly. Saber feels the disgust overwhelming her, thinking about turning around and leaving for good until ... he speaks again. "I was never a good magus. At best I was a Spell-Caster. And by the time I found Shirou, Angra Mainyu had infected most of my Circuits. Shirou himself barely had enough Circuits or showed enough aptitude to even be an average magus. But I taught him what I could. I just ... I didn't ...

He looks away, but she saw the shock on his face. Kiritsugu gestures at the blood on the ground. "This was a way to get more prana. I knew he could support a Servant in a basic way, and I'd hoped to help any way I could. I just didn't know the extent of it. But as it is, you both seem to have incorporated well despite this. I know I failed him, Saber. I can't ... I can't face him after everything I've done. I'm already dead in his mind. It wouldn't be fair. As much as anything is. Please." He turns to her. "Please take this prana. If the price of it is my life, I will pay it. I don't want to live. I already died. This is ... isn't living. It's only existence, at best. You would have every right to do it." He bows his head. "I accept your judgment, King of Knights."

Saber regards him for a long moment. She considers. Then, slowly, she walks up to him. She looks up at him, into his wan face, and then bends down ... and picks up the packs. Then she steps back and speaks. "There are two reasons, and two reasons only why you still live, Emiya Kiritsugu." She tells him. "First, Irisviel wouldn't want me to kill you. And second ... you are Shirou's father. Those two facts, and those two facts alone are the only reason why I don't strike you down where you stand." She glares into his eyes. "I do not ever want to see you again."

Kiritsugu nods. Saber turns around and walks away. She makes it to the exit when she hears his voice, barely louder than a whisper.

"... what happened to Archer?"

Archer? Saber is confused. Why would he ask that? She stops walking, leaning at the door frame. She takes in the destruction around her. Saber doesn't turn around when she replies.

"Archer died fighting Berserker." She tells him. "It bought us time to escape and regroup. According to Illya, he took several of his lives before then." She pauses, wondering why it's important to say this to Kiritsugu of all people. "Whatever else he was, he died a true hero."

Then Saber continues to walk away. She doesn't see the anguish on Emiya Kiritsugu's face as she does so, or the devastation bringing him onto his knees far more than any physical blow ever could. All Saber can think about as she goes back to Shirou is how she will not tell him about the wraith that she just encountered. How she won't do that to him. How she is beginning to realize that the past
should be left well alone where it is, and how they need to deal with the future -- whatever it may hold -- going forward.

*

"What is this, Kirei?"

Kotomine Kirei goes down his knees in front of Gilgamesh, the King of Heroes.

It's a strange thing. His whole life he had been taught not to worship a false idol, but only the eternal glory of the Lord. But there is nothing counterfeit, nor hollow about the joy soaring in his black heart. He places his hand where said heart, granted him by the Grail a decade ago now, resides: beating in sympathy with something forming within the confines of a cavern below the earth, and in the chest of a small child.

This happiness, this feeling of hope and transcendence. It is real.

"Oh King of Heroes." The priest says, as Gilgamesh lounges on a chair, in his furred coat, sipping at his sacramental wine. "Something ..." He tries to find the words. "Something truly marvelous has happened. Something that I did not anticipate."

"Oh?" Gilgamesh arches one eyebrow, looking vaguely intrigued. "Have any of those mongrels done anything of worth in my Garden? Perhaps the King of Knights has despoiled herself, and her mockery calls out for my ... great and benevolent mercy?"

Kotomine thinks about what he is going to say. He treasures the words. The thoughts before they become words. The feeling when he learned everything. Gilgamesh is listening. If this is beneath his time, his life may well be forfeit. However, he has never truly bowed towards the Heroic Spirit, the King of Heroes, like this before, and he knows that the other has taken notice. The fact of the matter is that no matter what paradigm one comes from, on some level one recognizes a being that is two-thirds god and when one wants to ask a favour of such a demigod, a divine king, one has to show proper respect.

"A long time ago, ten years ago." Kotomine begins, knowing at this point exactly how to tell a story. One has to pace the telling, just as one does an introduction to a joke, or the beginning of an ultimate terror. "You said I would begin my masterpiece. A play for your entertainment. For my understanding. Everything, so far in this War, has been progressing as foreseen. Players coming and going." He thinks about Bazett Fraga McRemitz and how she would have almost easily destroyed him if he hadn't caught her by surprise, hadn't betrayed their friendship -- though that had a small thrill in it, in and of itself as he continues to abuse her former Servant. Kotomine doesn't move like he used to, a decade ago. "But, there has been a recent development, a return to an old theme. An encore to conclude a story, and begin yet another."

"Hmm." Gilgamesh sips his wine. "Go on."

Kotomine smiles. "The play will continue on as is. There have only been a few alterations so far. Matou's death was an added bonus, as you know."

"Yes." The King of Heroes replies. "For just as I cannot tolerate this degenerated world and its retrograde filth, even you -- my jester -- cannot countenance something rotten and unnatural with pretensions to what you come by honestly."

The priest finds himself smiling even wider, hatred and glee flaring in his heart in a way it hadn't in years, making him feel the age that he wants to be again. "Precisely, King of Heroes. And now, for
my final act -- before you cleanse this world of the weak and the unworthy -- and I take them into the bosom of a new life, made to understand why my own exists, I can finally see to it that a ... mistake be corrected, a wrong made to see itself broken in such a way that it understands precisely what this story ultimately is and has always been. I was initially content to ... settle for the legacy of that mistake, to have it see itself for what it truly is. But now, I think I have a better ending to my play."

"Well, Kirei." Gilgamesh says, an excited gleam in his own red eyes. "That is excellent news. I look forward to seeing this new development and how it will affect the end of your magnum opus. But tell me ..." He crosses one leg over the other and leans forward. "What is it that you seek."

It is a test, of course. They have had this dance for quite some time. When Kotomine really thinks about it, they always had from the moment they met. He thinks of the best way to phrase it. It doesn't take him long.

"I wish to make a single request of you, oh King of Heroes." Kirei bows low. "One that will aid me to personally destroy a counterfeit."

Chapter End Notes

So, here's the thing: this chapter was partially rewritten.

I hadn't read the light novel of Fate/Zero. I had just read about it on the Type-Moon Wiki, and I watched the anime. Unfortunately, what I didn't know was that Saber had been aware of the fact that Irisviel had been the Lesser Grail. How she didn't put two and two together in realizing that Illya was also a Lesser Grail simply by virtue of being an Einzbern homunculus and Master in the Fifth Holy Grail War alone is a bit of a mystery. I really wish I had known about this before. I had some good dialogue here where Kiritsugu reveals the extent of the War's machinations on Irisviel and Illya to Saber, but obviously in canon she already knew. So I had to salvage what I could of the writing, and I hope the flow of it still works the way I have it now.

It was tough. Chances are, there is a pretty good chance that there might be more I didn't find out but this is the most pressing, and I think I will leave it at that. This was a bit infuriating to find out, and in retrospect it does make sense that Saber would know given how ill Irisviel was getting, and she probably was smart enough to know that there was a reason why she was her substitute Master on the field despite having no practical battlefield experience despite her obvious skill as a magus. You'd think that would have clued me in. But, well, you do what you have to do.

I hope the rest of the story will be a little smoother continuity-wise. If not, I just want to tell a good one. That's all we can hope for in the end.
Chapter 11

Caster grits her teeth in fury.

A part of her is surprised that she managed to hold on this long, and hadn't unleashed the full power currently at her disposal. Even then, she is even more astonished at herself for being able to concentrate for as long as she has in her inner sanctum. She hadn't left her Territory, within Ryuudou Temple, since she got back from that one shopping trip, after finding Assassin had been dispersed, after finding ...

Tears course down her face under her hood as she clenches her fists. She tries not to think about holding her Souichirou-sama in her arms, his body burned almost beyond recognition, far past the point of any hope of revival, less bones than even the Dragon-tooth soldiers that was her father's legacy. Only one thing could bring him back to her now.

Only a few things stood in her way.

Instead of moving for the rest of the Masters and Servants in this War, she spent the day burying her beloved in the graveyard of the Temple: her plans for a wedding having become a funeral. She didn't drain the priests of their energies. Not only would it have been too obvious, in addition to the spells she already had on their minds, but she remembers how Souichirou trained with them. It's one thing if someone tried to attack the Temple itself, through the now mystically obvious gap in her Bounded Fields and that of the Mountain with the loss of Assassin: she would have made them attack in droves if needed. But she finds she just doesn't have the heart to do that to them, right now. Her beloved might not have cared, but she always knew of the two of them that she was the sentimental one. Someone had to be.

She smiles bitterly at the thought of someone like her still possessing sentiment after all this time. Caster feels her grief warping on itself, eating itself like an ourboros, until it becomes a cold, smooth sense of vengeance. Someone attempted to make it look like the Tohsaka girl killed Souichirou, but she knows better. There is no way Tohsaka Rin could be powerful enough to kill Kuzuki Souichirou with the potent Reinforcement she granted him. Besides, she already knows that she lost her Servant against Berserker. Even Saber, who had challenged both Assassin and herself -- even if the girl stole her from that fallible boy -- wouldn't have just killed the two at the Gate, and not come into the Temple grounds through the breach.

No. This ... this was some form of twisted joke. Perhaps Souichirou had been lured to the Gate by the homunculus girl's Mystic Eyes instead? No. She hadn't been there. Caster had tried to scry what happened, but something blocked out the shape of their attacker. All she saw was Runes on the ground, then Assassin's chest neatly burst open after he attacked ... nothing, and then Souichirou attacking the air himself, actually hitting something, and then being set on ... on fire ...

Caster screams. This bastard used dirty tactics to compel combat and burned her beloved alive. She can sense the Rune magic still wafting through the air. Was it just the remnants of the Circle in the dirt ... or the invisibility around the attacker ... or the fire ... Souichirou must have seen this fight, such as it was, through her scrying orb while she was gone. He did send her a summons, but it had been too late ... The intruder had been fast. Too fast. Why didn't he just wait for her ... Why ...

Her eyes narrow above tear-stained sockets. She would have hunted them, regardless. But now ...
now someone has cut the strings of her spell to Fuyuki. Her life-siphoning power has been stopped in its tracks, and she doesn't know why, or how someone could do it. And this didn't just happen today. It had been going on for sometime. Someone -- or something -- had been getting past her minions. The "gas-leak" victims were apparently slowly dying off. It had been part and parcel of her trial and error in draining as much energy with as little notice as possible. At first, she didn't notice as a result of the implications of her magic, but now ... She had attempted to limit the amount of deaths, but more people were dying, and she hadn't really given it much thought -- especially after what happened to Souichirou -- until now ...

And now, she wasn't getting any of their energy at all.

Caster knows, now, that she definitely has to act. She lost her Master, and now her mana supply is not nearly as plentiful as it could be to maintain her Territory. She won't be able to wait out the rest of the enemies in this War with power, even with the Mountain's leyline ... even if she wanted to do so. And she has lost her Servant, who had already been vastly limited given his irregular summoning and status at the Gate.

No. She has to deal with this. First, she is going to the Emiya residence. She will make the boy, or whomever is in charge, grant her Saber ... or lure Saber out. Such a pretty thing, Saber is. She might even take Rider as well. Rider has the ability to absorb energy and recoup her losses. She has more than enough minions and power to deal with an underpowered Saber and Rider. All she has to do is kill their Masters and leave them no choice.

She thinks about the rest of it some more. Yes. She sees it now. The people dying ... She was aware of the Dead Apostle and his vampire servant. But why would they interfere? Were the victims of her spell just too tempting a meal to leave behind? And how could they neutralize her power from the Age of Gods?

Then, she realizes, it doesn't really matter. Any of it. All of it.

Caster will win this War. She will manifest the Grail. And then she will have her wish: both her beloved, and her revenge.

*

Emiya Kiritsugu waits in his hiding place until, finally, he sees the constructs on the move: with Caster hovering in the air after them. He knows exactly where they are going. The guilt sits heavy inside the place where his gut used to be.

Saber's words ring in his ears again. She is right. He is using his own son, and daughter as bait. It could go terribly. Two barely trained magi with barely sustained Servants, one of them his son, two full-trained magi without Servants fighting even a diminished Caster with her army of constructs would be difficult. But he also has a feeling there will be another force, or two at work.

He also trusts in his daughter's ruthlessness, in Sakura's love for Shirou, and even Tohsaka's point of honour if the latter is still with Shirou after losing ...

*Archer.*

The pain still stabs at Kiritsugu's unbeating heart. But he realizes, now, that he's cried all the blood-tears that he could. It's just one more life on his conscience. Even if that Emiya Shirou had been from another reality, an unlikely one that would probably not happen here or in most of the multiverse, the fact that he died against his sister because of Kiritsugu's actions in the Fourth War is killing him inside, while also reinforcing exactly what it is that he has to do.
In the days when he was far more active as the Magus Killer, Emiya Kiritsugu had accrued more than just a certain amount of money. Most of his funds had been left to Shirou. It was blood money, true enough, but as long as it helped his son make a better life for himself, he didn't care where it came from. But sometimes, in lieu of money, Kiritsugu asked for other things. Some of them were mystical in nature -- from the Association or the Church -- though nothing of particular note that he hadn't already spent on different jobs throughout the years with Natalia, Maiya, or on his own.

No. What very few people realized was that the Magus Killer also collected favours: and not all of them were from the Moonlit World.

He may have lost Archer, but Shirou is still here. Shirou and Illya. They have already made peace with each other, and he doesn't care of the latter hates him until her dying day, or if the former realizes how much of a monster he truly was. As long as they have each other, he has done more than enough. There will be no Archer in this world. There will be no more Grail Wars.

The end game is finally near.

Still, even as he thinks this, Kiritsugu turns his attention back to the Temple.

Ryuudou. He thinks of his friend whose son is friends with Shirou, whom he got to know, who actually conducted his own funerary rites, and believed that he cremated him. I'm so sorry.

Then Emiya Kiritsugu turns on his phone. And makes the call.

* * *

"Damn you, Kotomine. You bastard."

Between his speed, his perception of Caster's threads, and all the time he spent finding the ingredients, Lancer has finally destroyed the other Servant's life-siphoning spell. Lancer sighs, leaping out of the last apartment complex, and into the shadows of the alley below.

Even as a spiritual entity, he is tired. These past couple of days, he had been augmented by the power of his ... Master's Command Seals. And nothing -- almost nothing -- he ordered Lancer to do had been anything anywhere near tasteful. He recalls the smirking priest telling him he was finally going to get to challenge a Servant and his Master to combat, even using a Command Spell to raise the power of his Runes to A Rank. It wasn't as though Lancer was particularly interested in having his mystical skills increased, given that he prefers physical combat but, frankly, he was tired of all of this reconnaissance, the skirmishes that just teased his sense of blood lust, reporting -- always reporting -- to the man who saw through his eyes, to the murderer of the Master who summoned him, who actually respected him ... who never would have had him murder men, women, and children to gain his prana ...

Finally, Cu Chulainn would have the chance to engage in glorious combat: in one good fight.

But that fucking smile on the priest's face.

Lancer should have known better.

It'd been bad enough to get denied his wish, for another chance at combat. It'd been monstrous to serve the person that betrayed his original Master. It'd left a bad taste in his mouth to kill a boy, even though it had been necessary ... and ultimately pointless given his strange regeneration and then the rise of Saber to his defense. But then he was going to get another chance against the swordsman at the Gate, the skillful blade that was Assassin ...
Pure hatred burns in Lancer as he recalls obeying Kotomine's order. It had cost the priest a
Command Seal, but it had obviously been worth it to the sadistic monster to make him use ... that
Rune.

Dagaz. The rune of bold change. A moment of illumination. A burst of light. Lancer used the Rune
on himself, to invert the light around him, to make himself unseen. With his A Rank, it would easily
hide him from any level of scrying beyond something specifically looking for a phenomenon like
this. And master magi tended to underestimate runes, especially in this modern times: preferring the
power of Magic Circuits and inbred Family Mysteries to do their work. Even magi from the Age of
Gods wouldn't be looking for runes with their concept of spoken language and reality: knowing that
most people utilizing them would take too much time to do so, and need to make them stationary.

This Rune had been taught to him by Scathach, like the others, to aid him in hunting: in dealing with
powerful spirits or demons. A Rune of Light for the Child of Light, she had told him once, fondly.

Kotomine made him use it to turn him into a common assassin.

Gae Bolg killed Assassin almost instantly. The Servant managed to counter his strikes, even closing
his eyes to hear him, but instead of a rewarding battle Lancer skewered the other Servant: ending him
right at the foot of the stairs. So much for the momentous battle that the two had promised one other,
even if he had been leery of actually challenging him one-on-one in that space, with his
swordsmanship, that Lancer had known they could have built up towards ... But it shouldn't have
ended like that. Skulking. In the shadow of his own misused Rune.

But to make him use Ath nGabla, to enforce ritual combat on the Master there, and then kill him not
even mercifully with his spear, but Ansuz was ... an utter disgrace. No, it was worse than that. It was ...
sick. Kotomine said it would make Caster believe that Archer's former Master had killed her
Master, but Lancer knows the priest just did it to make both the Master ... and himself suffer, as well
as Caster. He'd wanted to just stab the man through the chest and finish it, to stop that horrible
writhing. Instead, he wiped out all traces of his Runes on the ground, and left him there for Caster to
find.

Lancer hated making women cry, even twisted witches like Caster ...

Really, at this point, forcing Lancer to negate Caster's life-siphoning spell on her surviving victims
was almost a mercy by comparison. The Rune Uruz combined with the right ingredients destroyed
the witch's potion in the pipes and strings of the various houses and the local Hospital where they
were being kept. Finally, Cu Chulainn was allowed to do one relatively heroic thing this night: one
way in which Scathach's teachings and his respect for the Original Runes, hadn't been violated and
tainted by that abomination of a Master. And even that wasn't done out of altruistic feelings, but to
destroy more of Caster's resources ... and something else had happened to most of the victims ...

It's then that Lancer sees the constructs. She'd been building them for a while. He knows this because
he had seen her at work. They're moving en masse: columns of quiet, clanking bones. He knows
where they are headed. He was there before ... at the beginning of the War ...

Lancer instinctively twirls his spear and blocks all the projectiles sent in his direction. There a few
explosions. Damn. He let himself get distracted! They're nothing, but he knows he needs to move.
He ...

Something prickles at his spine. It is a light sensation. It doesn't even really hurt. But even as he feels
it, he can sense Kotomine's sight -- his presence -- vanishing from inside of him.

"Well." A voice says from right behind him. "It seems you are mine now ... dog."
I took some liberties with different events, and decisions. I know Gilgamesh apparently is the one that killed Assassin and Kuzuki, and eliminated all of Caster's life-siphoning before killing her himself, but it is a task beneath him and I can see Kotomine making Lancer do all of it instead. The fact that she didn't notice it was him has to do with her grief and even if on some level she knows, she is planning out her revenge: to cut her losses, gain new resources, and come after them.

I also don't know if her scrying allows her to see everything going on. If so, she would be very overpowered and be able to plan for contingencies for almost everything coming her way as she could spy on private conversations between Masters and Servants. The way I figure it, even Caster can't spy on everyone through powerful Bounded Fields ... otherwise, that's just not really fair and would have broken the story of not just this fic, but even the canon stories. Also, Caster tends not to really think things through when she is furious with grief, from my understanding.

As for Lancer though ... well, I took even more liberties. Kuzuki saw AthnGabla along with Assassin and both were compelled to fight. I gave him two more Runes that I don't think are in canon, but make sense as they are I believe Norse or Original Runes: Dagaz to conceal or manipulate light, and Uruz to heal. I don't know if even at A Rank they can counter Caster's magic, but I like the way this works thematically more.

Anyway, things are about to get well and truly nasty. Let's see what is in store for our friends soon.
Illyasviel von Einzbern crafts another one of her constructs. She utilizes Engel Note: Angel's Poem, the technique of her mother, and her mother's alchemical predecessors, to send another Zelle outside of the Emiya residence to render more of Caster's skeletal warriors into dust with a magical bullet.

So far, she has summoned six of her creations between their ibis forms and their sword Degen forms, keeping Caster's own constructs from completely overrunning them while her onii-chan Projects arrow after arrow into those that her creations miss. Even Sakura, holed up with them as Rin, Saber, and Rider deal with the maddened Caster and her small army outside the residence -- where she cut through Rin's Bounded Field like butter -- is doing her part. From what Illya is given to understand, Sakura absorbs some of the energy from the Dragon Tooth Warriors, while summoning her own small shadow familiars to counterattack the others. The Matou had barely been trained in magecraft, and it was mainly through Rin's tutelage that the other girl was even doing this much. Zolgen Makiri had apparently become a disgrace to the very end of his miserable life in even teaching adopted members of his own dwindling Clan.

And her onii-chan had taken some training from Rin as well, leaving a part of Illya extremely miffed. Her onii-chan ... Shirou ... Illya tries not to think about what Shirou told her, about their papa. She also tries not to think about Archer, about the last time they'd met ...

About Kiritsugu ...

It's just as well everything is out in the open now, as much as anything in Heaven's Feel, and the Moonlit World can be. Everyone knows she is the Lesser Grail now. Even Kiritsugu's note to her onii-chan didn't reveal that much. Illya felt the death of another Servant not too long ago, and suspects that it had been Caster's Assassin. The fact that Caster was powerful enough to summon her own, even irregular Servant, meant she probably also knew that Illya was the intended Vessel of the Grail: and wanted her for herself. Though, you wouldn't know it based on how much she is openly lusting over Saber outside at the moment. Saber was the one that, ultimately, admitted to her that she knew she was Irisviel's daughter, and that she was the Lesser Grail. Her father's former Servant, now her onii-chan's, at least had the decency to let her tell the small group the truth and, in doing so, revealed that she retained memories of the Fourth War: leading her to the revelation of this knowledge. However, Illya suspects that ... the Servant of the Sword is hiding something. Certainly, Rider had benefited from a visible change in Masters, and while it didn't surprise Illya to know the Makiri had attempted to cheat the system, even the usually quiet, tersely-worded Servant also seems to be keeping something from them. It made sense for Rider to have something hide, but ... Saber?

Illya has her suspicions. Not that it matters. At the end of the day, she is fighting to survive, and keep her onii-chan -- her new Servant -- safe. And it isn't as though she doesn't have her own secrets to keep.

Even so, now that everyone could see most of the strings -- much like the visible wires attaching her alchemical creations to her very being at the moment -- they are working relatively better together. Illya will attest, however, that she is doing most of the work: keeping Caster's hordes from fully taking the residence. Perhaps if her Castle had been more intact, they might have had better ground ...

... Still, one other advantage to revealing that she is the Lesser Grail -- which didn't particularly surprise Rin given the Tohsaka Clan's passing knowledge of Einzbern homunculi, though they had lost so much more lore since the Third and Fourth Wars -- is that they were able to actually convince
her onii-chan not to fight on the front-lines this time. Illya hadn't missed the looks of relief on Rin and Sakura's faces, as well as Saber's ... never mind her own. There is an obvious distortion in her onii-chan that even a fool could see, and Illysaviel von Einzbern is no fool. But the logic of Illya needing some protection as she was expending most of her mana focusing on Engel Note prevailed over Shirou's need to throw himself into harm's way. No doubt his mind is focused on their father's letter, and just how much she meant to him. Illya grits her teeth as one of her constructs is obliterated from an errant blast of Caster's arcane might.

It really helps that Rider and Saber are distracting Caster from fully focusing on her Dragon Tooth Warriors, or her own abilities or no Caster would have overwhelmed them a long time ago.

"Saber!"

Shirou's roar brings her out of her thoughts, and almost disrupts her own sense of concentration.

"Senpai!" Sakura shouts, running over to Shirou as he falls on his knees, clutching his arm. "Senpai, what's wrong?

"Onii-chan?" Illya looks over, her Magic Circuits and hands continuing to work. Shirou's eyes are blank. For the first time in this War, even when he faced down her Berserker, and was in her own clutches, she sees real fear and ... loss on his face. And with a sinking feeling in her heart, she realizes what has happened.

Shirou's Command Seals are gone.

*

Saber curses herself.

She should have listened to Archer. There had been no context, but a Caster's weapon -- their Noble Phantasm -- even against a magic-resistant class such as hers should have been a priority. Caster had kept her distance this entire fight, bombarding the area with her wordless blasts of power. Rin stood back and provided support, blasting more Dragon Tooth Warriors with her Gandr, while keeping near Rider to heal her. Saber couldn't hope for the Tohsaka magus to do more. She'd spent most of her powerful Gems attempting to deal with Berserker before their alliance with Illya.

It shouldn't have been an issue. She and Rider were at peak strength, or as close to it as possible. Saber had ... that man's blood to keep her levels going. And Shirou ... after she revealed to Shirou the origin of his healing abilities, he had given her Avalon. She didn't want him to. She knew that he would need it, but he insisted. He told her it was her property, and he wouldn't keep it from her a moment longer, that his father should have given it back to her from the beginning. Besides, as she and the others asked of him, he would be hidden guarding Illya from Caster's constructs while she would be fighting her, and ... possibly other foes directly. She had told them about Avalon, which was plausible enough given that Saber could have realized what her old Noble Phantasm from her days as King could do, and she could have realized it was the catalyst that Kiritsugu once used to summon her.

Saber hates lying. But she hates endangering her Master even more, and hurting him all the more so. She wasn't doing this for the shade that was once called Emiya Kiritsugu, but for the boy -- the man -- who still loved his father, and thought he had changed over time into the mentor that gave him the ideal and drive to keep going on. Besides, she will be gone from this World sooner rather than later. The Grail is a lie, and one that she will not repeat on this World. She won't leave anyone dead like Shinto had been. She won't leave anyone broken and alone like Shirou again.
Between Rider and herself, the former's Pegasus and Saber's sweeping blade, they cut Caster down - the remnants of her cloak and cowl flapping in the wind. She had been no match against their might. A part of Saber wondered just how Rider had gotten so powerful since their last encounter. Perhaps it was the Matou boy holding her true potential back, or Sakura becoming better as a Master ... But her power level seemed ... similar to Saber's. She didn't miss the way the other Servant looked at her, as though she sensed ... or smelled something familiar. Likewise, she doubted the other Servant noticed any of this. Saber is no fool. She knows Rider had been feeding on others. But then it just stopped. That was part of the terms of their alliance. But ... why. She was protective, almost overprotective of Sakura, which was one of the reasons the girl was left under Shirou's watch along with Illya in the residence. Rider would not feed off of her true Master.

Saber has her own suspicions as to where she is getting that prana from ... and perhaps just whom it was that killed another Matou that night. But that was a matter for another time ...

Until she felt the dagger clatter on her back.

It didn't hurt at all. Avalon didn't even have to heal her. But something shifted inside of her. Something ... felt wrong.

Shirou! She sent out. But the bond between her and her Master was silent.

"Protect me, Saber."

Saber felt the power of a Command Seal, and before she knew what it was, she took the brunt of Rider's Pegasus in front of Caster. Perhaps ... she could have resisted. If she had known ...

Now Saber kneels on the ground. Avalon is regenerating her rapidly. Rider's Noble Phantasm has dissipated as a result of their clash. The other Servant is avoiding the Dragon Tooth Warriors and the blasts of arcane energy from Caster. Caster has rolled up her sleeve, revealing ... two Command Seals, and a jagged iridescent dagger in the same hand. Damn. Damn. Damn. Damnation ...

"You will not harm me, Saber." Saber feels the burning of the same Command Seal radiating through her, but this time the Servant of the Sword resists. Instead, Saber is pinned into place, magical agony erupting in her spiritual veins. "Huh. No matter. Originally, I was going to take the both of you, but I always favoured you more Saber-chan."

"Saber!" Rin cries out, attempting to run to her through the skeletal warriors. "No!"

"S-stay back ... Rin ..." Saber gasps. She glares up at Caster. "I don't know what fiendish sorcery you just used on me ... you sick ... thief, but I won't ..." 

"You can't resist me, forever." Caster laughs, the tone bitter and twisted. "I will get to you, girl ... in a moment. I don't know if you are the coward that killed my Souichirou-sama, but I don't care. You will do as a Vessel. I know exactly how to make that so." Caster's grin is a death rictus under her hood. "I'll kill the others. Except for the boy. He'll make for a ... useful implement. Then that priest ..."

"You couldn't kill him before!" Rin shouts, blasting apart another construct. "When you went for the Church!"

Saber actually notices the Servant of the Spell pause. "Oh, you silly little girl. I never attacked the Church." Rider dodges and flows under several more destructive balls of light.

"You ... liar ..." Saber grunts, fighting against the power being used against her, stolen from her rightful Master, this ... utter violation. Rage brims inside of her. It's somehow worse than Kiritsugu's
betrayal.

"Why would have any reason to lie about something like that?" Caster snarls, suddenly, the sickly sweet tone of her voice shattered into a reality of pure, vicious spite. "I thought about it. Making the Overseer tell me where the Grail Vessel was. But I bid my time, waiting for you little fools to whittle each other down. But then one of you ... or someone killed my Servant. My Master. Maybe it was the Master of Lancer. No matter. I'll find Lancer, and the murderer of my Master, and then ..."

Somehow her smile becomes more manic. "Saber, I order you to ..."

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"Protect our alliance. Protect our alliance. Protect our alliance."

Lancer blinks as the power of three Command Seals fills him. Something beyond adrenaline, and enchantment, beyond even death itself fills the battle fury inside of him, courses through his spiritual form: turning his smouldering soul into a battery of pure and unfettered bloodlust mixed with glory.

He unlocks the power of his Noble Phantasm, one more, charged with the ultimate might of the power granted him as he throws his cursed, red spear into the fray ... and it hits its target. But when it's over, one thought fills his mind as he looks at the person that expended the Command Seals.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

The other chuckles, from the shadows. "You've been a good dog, Lancer. You deserve this."

The spear returns back into Lancer's hands, as he twirls it, his body tense, and ready to jump forward. "Just like that, eh?"

"Yeah. Just like that."

Lancer snarls. "You know, I don't know whether to kill you, or ... kiss you."

"Please. I'd rather you not."

"Ha." Lancer rests the length of his spear between both of his arms. "I don't think I'll ever understand you. Whoever you are."

He sees the other smirk, and turn away. "I'd better go. Before you change your mind."

Then the other is gone. Lancer shakes his head. "Coward." He says, without any real force behind it as he leaps into the air. "They're all keepers. Your loss."

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Caster opens her mouth. Then shuts it. She opens it again. And closes it once more. At first, Saber sees a little bit of red trickling down her mouth. Then she coughs as a gob of blood splatters down her chest. The red tip of a familiar spear sticks out from where her heart should be. She falls back, her hood falling away to reveal a pristine, almost elfin face with locks of lavender hair. It never occurs to Saber just how ... sad Caster's eyes look without her cowl. Then, she begins to disintegrate into golden dust motes, even as the spear twirls away back into the distance.

Rider lands on all fours even as Rin collapses to her knees in exhaustion, the Dragon Tooth Warriors all around them crumbling right back into dust.

"Yo."
Saber blinks up at Lancer, standing in their midst. She raises her sword, no longer feeling the power of Command Spells on her. No longer feeling any bond to any Master. Saber almost falls to her knees before Rin catches her. The Servant hasn't felt this weak in a long time, not even when her connection with Shirou had been botched in her initial summoning. She feels ... empty.

Lancer holds up his hands. "I'm not here to fight with you lasses."

"Oh?" Rin's eyes narrow. "And why are you here?"

"Well." Lancer scratches the back of his head. "I'd say, aside from reuniting a woman with her old man, my ... Master ordered me to help you. And I guess that's true. But I don't have ... one anymore, really." He looks at Saber. "Looks like neither do you."

"I do have a Master!" Saber spits. Then horror fills her. "Shirou, is he ..."

"The baka should be fine, but ..." A look of concern forms on Rin's face. "It's odd but ... I don't remember seeing anymore of Illya's constructs, or Sakura's familiars at the end of ..."

Rider immediately breaks into a sprinting leap, moving towards the Emiya residence. Saber and Rin attempt to follow ... Only for a wall of glittering metal to erupt right in front of them. They barely move back in time. It doesn't take Saber long to realize, with a sinking feeling, that they are surrounded by a large number of different, valuable, legendary weapons. Swords.

"My my." A voice calls out from the yard, followed by a slow, deliberate series of claps. "The dog has run away from his Master. Who would have thought ..."

Lancer jumps in front of the two Servants, and Master, holding out his spear. "Come on. Just give me an excuse. I've been dying to fight properly this whole damn War."

There is laughter as Saber realizes why the voice is so familiar. A figure in golden armour walks casually across the field, shining rifts in reality opening up behind, and around him. Crimson eyes glow with amusement from the blond warrior's face. It's him, Saber realizes in dread.

It's Gilgamesh. The King of Heroes.

"I was just about to kill the Witch for her impudence in trying to steal my bride." Gilgamesh continues. "But it seems you beat me to it, mongrel. Tsk tsk. Interfering with the King's Judgment, disobeying your Master ... Oh well. It saves me some time, really. That was part of our ... bargain for the boon I granted Kotomine."

Saber doesn't miss the looks of shock on Rin and Lancer's faces. Despite her lack of strength and her tenuous situation, Saber brings up Excalibur, readying her stance: a far cry from the strength with which she started.

"That ... that fake priest ..." Rin growls.

"Just when I thought that piece of shit couldn't get any more vile ..." Lancer says, holding his spear out in front of him.

"Yes. You were the spare." Gilgamesh almost yawns. "Both of you. Spare Servant. Spare Vessel. It would have been amusing. Kotomine would have sent you instead ..."

"R-Rider ..."

Through the wall of swords, Saber can see Sakura crawling on the ground. She is coughing up
blood, the red stain trailing under her in the dirt. Rider rushes over the blades, and to her Master's side. Gilgamesh doesn't make a move to stop her. He simply chuckles.

Rin glares at Gilgamesh, her hands balling into fists. A part of Saber is impressed by her fortitude in the midst of his intimidating aura.

"Neesan ..." Sakura coughs. "Rider ... Father Kotomine ... He ... he came. He knocked me out."

"Sakura, where's Shirou?" Saber barks, fury erupting from inside of her.

"I ..." Sakura begins to weep. "I don't know. I tried to call you but he was too fast ..."

"While you were playing out here." Gilgamesh says. "Kotomine did what you should have done, dog. Instead, the game ... the entertainment has changed." He looks at Saber. "Girl, your Servant is gone. And so is my bride's ... anchor. Make a contract with her, and I will let you live."

"I am not your bride!" Saber snarls, her utter fury warring with her terror over Shirou's fate. "And I will fight you."

"Rider ..." Sakura croaks. The Servant nods, reluctantly, and jumps back into the fray.

"Good." Gilgamesh replies. "I'd be disappointed if the King of Knights lost her spirit so easily." He faces the three remaining Heroic Spirits. "I am feeling generous today. Since you mostly fulfilled your duties, dog, I will give you the death you desire. And I will let the girl make a contract with you Saber, and I will even let her heal Rider's Master. I do want something of a challenge, after all." More of the golden portals open up around them. "Pray that you make this worth my while, before my wedding, before I remind this World of my rightful place."

Chapter End Notes

I had to look up whether or not Caster's Rule Breaker transferred a Master's stolen Command Seals to her person, or just nullified the previous Master-Servant contract, and allowed her to automatically make a new one. This was important because if she just stole Shirou's Command Seals, she would only have one left: as he used one to get Saber not to attack Archer and Rin, and another to summon Saber to save him from Rider at the Academy.

From what I have gathered, Rule Breaker is a Noble Phantasm whose anti-thaumaturgical properties reverts most magic or magecraft -- spells and artifacts -- to their "original state." I assumed that meant before there was a contract. It isn't explained all that well, and in the end I went with what worked for the story and gave Caster her three basic Command Spells: which she can use more powerfully as a Master as she is a magus from the Age of Gods, and thus something for Saber to greatly resist. It would also be pretty ... disadvantageous for Caster to gain a Servant, only to have one Command Seal left from their previous Master for her to use. At that point, why even gather trying to steal that Servant at all, especially if they are unwilling?

There is also another reason I looked this up given ... Lancer's status and recent freedom. More on that, and other stuff later.
Chapter 13

Kiritsugu no longer sees his home. His familiars, stationed around the Emiya residence, have stopped sending images of the battle against Caster earlier on in the evening.

But it's a moot point now.

It doesn't take a master magus to sense the power suddenly fading out of the wards surrounding Ryuudou Temple. Caster has been dispatched. Perhaps the blood that he left Rider and Saber made all the difference. Of course, it didn't interfere with his own plans at all. It only made them easier. The JSDF ground soldiers have evacuated the last of the monks. Kiritsugu made sure to give their task force directions: specifically making it clear that they should go through the mountain gate. Without Assassin continuing to guard the area, which Caster couldn't place a Bounded Field due to the nature of the Temple being built on the mountain's sunken leyline -- and counting on that mana to sustain her.

Certainly, the Temple's Barrier would have been a nuisance against mystical beings such as Servants, or vampires such as himself. Kiritsugu made sure to direct them through another one of his burner phones. The aura of the Temple rejects unnatural spirits by its very nature, though the direct path the front doors of the Temple seem sound: though even Kiritsugu can feel something of the discomfort in his bones. But he also knows that getting into the Temple itself isn't important.

It is getting under it that will be utterly crucial.

The favour he called in was a big one. The people involved probably didn't think he would do something like this, or that he was even still alive: which said something, given how they didn't even know who he was to begin with. There were obvious reasons why he didn't call in this favour, such as it is, during the Fourth War as, supposedly, outsiders from the mundane world are not allowed to interfere with Heaven's Feel, or the Moonlit World. And even though Kiritsugu hadn't gotten to where he was by playing by the rules, these resources would have wasted on menaces such as the Fourth War's Caster and his abomination, or would have threatened the peace he so desperately sought by tearing away the rules of magi secrecy.

But Kiritsugu knows, even though he is more of a monster on the outside than within these days, that he's gotten soft. If he couldn't blow up the Hyatt Hotel with collateral damage ten years ago, he couldn't destroy his friend and his children, along with the hapless monks in this War. The Magus Killer has no illusions about good karma, or not going into one of many hells. In a lot of ways, he is already in one. He just wants to make sure that no one else has to join him.

The soldiers that reported to him, with the codes and the protocol issued him, didn't see his face. And neither did Ryuudou nor his sons Issei and Reikan as he went out of his way to mask his face, and hypnotize them. As far as the monks themselves knew, there had been a terrorist bomb threat made on the Temple, and that is the reason they had to be evacuated. Religious war and extremism is not too much of an outlier, even in Japan. The area would be cordoned off by this protocol, under the excuse of there being a pipeline issue in the area, and no one else would be allowed in, or out of the territory. In a way, it's not unlike something the Overseer of the War would do in its last stages -- should there be a major battle between Servants and Masters here, or if this became one of the spots in which the Grail would manifest -- if the Overseer, in this case, wasn't a corrupt and evil madman.

Kiritsugu doesn't fool himself. He can smell the vast amount of mana gathering in the area. It is stronger, and more pungent than the energies that Caster gathered before her death. He suspected that the Servant of Spells, much like the monster in the Fourth War, employed more advanced hypnotic
suggestions and triggers into the inhabitants of the Temple. In fact, it isn't unusual in the Magus Killer's line of work for most heretical magi, and orthodox ones, to employ similar tactics. Luckily, as the soldiers had no idea about Caster, and there was no Servant stopping them, combined with Caster's own death and the major possibility of most of her magecraft dying along with her.

But they are safe now, as safe as anyone in this city -- or even the world -- is with the existence of Angra Mainyu in the Greater Grail. Kiritsugu shoves away thoughts of Illya already having absorbed four Heroic Spirits into herself, and how Gilgamesh's possible demise will affect her physical state. He hopes to obliterate the Greater Grail more directly before that is an issue.

The soldiers have taken the priests and monks to a more secure place of sanctuary, to the rebuilt Hyatt that Kiritsugu bought for them for as long as ... they needed the rooms. Everyone will see it as something of a retreat, or perhaps even a religious seminar. All the Magus Killer can hope for is that Ryuudou will forgive him one day when he has to more than likely destroy the entire Temple itself. But better the Temple than him and his children, than the monks, than the city, and the world ...

Besides, Ryuudou doesn't even know he's ... existing anymore. And if all goes well, no one else will.

It doesn't take much for Kiritsugu to get past the plain clothes guards left behind as he walks further onto the mountain. The Barrier only pulls at his essence, making his dead, cold skin crawl but other than that he feels no pain. He pauses, as he thinks he hears sounds of fighting in the distance. It doesn't matter now, though. Perhaps Rider and Saber are engaging Lancer and Gilgamesh. Perhaps Shirou, Sakura, Tohsaka Rin, and Illya are there, providing support, hopefully staying out of the way. A part of him wants to be there, to help them exterminate this threat once and for all. But he is needed here. He has done everything he can.

The moon -- the full moon -- is almost up.

And his father is waiting for him.

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Norikata had no need for a cellphone to tell his son where they needed to be.

He closes his eyes, more as a focus than a need, and shows his son the forest around Mount Enzou, the way they circle around behind the Temple, to a series of dead trees and a stream, and a wall of rock moving down, down, to something that would have resembled a mountain wall. But their keener eye, their greater senses, see the difference. There is a hut down below at the beginning of the stream, and in front of it a boulder. Even then, it looks like no human being can get through this structure, save for the crack between the mountain and the boulder itself.

There is some camouflage magecraft around the area, but nothing that neither Norikata nor his son couldn't resist, and move past. He can sense Kiritsugu's visceral unease as his vampiric nature is irritated by the power of the mountain's Barrier. Even Norikata feels it, as an annoying background noise. But the moon is rising. The full moon glows through his body, vastly increasing his senses, his Od, his mana channeling, his power, his very being ... Dead Apostles are at their peak of strength on the full moon. This is why he and his son chose this time.

To end this.

To begin Norikata's true quest.

And as Kiritsugu climbs down the mountain face, Norikata feels his power increase even more.
Those vampires who are blood-related, far more than the bond between creator and creation, share a vast boost in power when they fight together or, at the very least, are close in proximity to one another. He marvels at his son. He'd observed Kiritsugu for some time, but his son had quickly acclimated himself to his body's new powers. Kiritsugu had never been physically weak -- being the Magus Killer instilled a sense of survival and agility that one would get on a mystically, or even mundanely, charged battlefield. Norikata had heard of, and seen, new vampires that operated as if they were still human: still acting as though they had the same sensibilities and vulnerabilities as a human, but using their vampiric attributes sparingly. This was almost as useless, and even as dangerous as those Dead Apostles that can't control their blood lust, as what happened with poor Shirley: in battle with a more adjusted vampire, or supernatural power they would be at a tremendous disadvantage, and be easily destroyed.

That is, of course, not to say that Kiritsugu lacked some of these weaknesses. The Magus Killer had hunted vampires a good portion of his life, and thus had an easier time adjusting to their powers on the other side of the equation. At best, they were just another tool in his arsenal. He might use them sparingly, and stick to his old methodologies, but Norikata knows for a fact that Kiritsugu has been practicing with his vampiric strength. In time, his son could become an even deadlier hunter than he had even been when he was biologically alive. He can even sense the moon affecting his son, smelling the clearness of the air in contrast to the greater life energy of the leyline within the cavern that the boulder hides ...

Kiritsugu looks at the moon, and for a few moments Norikata sees something ... the image of a young boy, and an older girl looking out from a faraway, long gone beach at the stars and the moon in the water. They talk for some time. She asks him what he wants to be when he grows up ... Orange eyes like the Fujimura girl's, but from a tanned face with black, almost blue, hair ...

Norikata shakes his head as the memory snaps shut, and Kiritsugu crawls down to the side of the boulder. His son finds him standing on top of the boulder itself, looking at the moon through the trees, and the rock outcroppings.

"I told you to stay out of my mind." Kiritsugu's murmurs with a hard edge to his voice.

"It is not my responsibility to shield your mind." Norikata replies. "If you truly want to be an Apostle, you have to learn how to do that on your own."

"I didn't want any of this."

Norikata sighs. "To be honest, neither did I." He regards his son, scrutinizing his seemingly impassive face in the moonlight. "This is the best entrance into the cavern."

Kiritsugu actually sniffs the air for a few moments. "Just a camouflage spell." His eyes narrow in suspicion. "That is not a lot of protection for the Greater Grail."

"It may have a few more internal ones." Norikata admits, his pride in his son reinforced. "The Barrier around Mount Enzou repels, or provides great resistance against ... unnatural spirits, as you know. The Three Families most likely counted on it to keep out Servants. The camouflage spell is of a reasonable variety, and this spot is far out of the way. Due to the power of the sunken leyline itself along with its natural Barrier, it would be hard to differentiate specifically where the Greater Grail is located at all for a layman." He sees his son's unchanging facial expression. "I also did neutralize a few outside of here, from the information I gained. We will just have to see what else is inside."

Kiritsugu nods. "You found what you were looking for at the Manor."

"Yes." Norikata replies. "And I took care of a few loose-ends. Lancer had killed most of Caster's
victims. The rest required some ... euthanasia. Hopefully it did enough."

"I lost my familiars." Kiritsugu says. "But I believe that Caster was eliminated."

"Good." Norikata puts his hands on the mountain as Kiritsugu stares at him. "We have some climbing to do. I'd suggest we get going."

Kiritsugu climbs past him, before he can say anything more. Eventually, they find the crack between the boulder and the mountain wall. Kiritsugu stops, perching on a thin outcropping, and he waits. Norikata understands. He moves past his son, and squeezes past the boulder. The ... stench of life almost immediately hits him, wafting up from the depths of a long, winding tunnel. It is potent. The darkness here would be suffocating as well, but the two of them can see through it easily. He can see the miasma of mana and Od all the way below. It makes sense to Norikata now. Zolgen Makiri would have been easily able to navigate this path by turning his twisted amalgam form into the multitude of Blood Worms that it really was, once he disengaged many of the wards he found of course. He's sure the Einzbern and Tohsaka ancestors had their own ways down, and it went without saying that Zelretch had as well. If he and Kiritsugu were older, and more powerful, they could change their shapes to easily navigate the way down here as well. As it is, they are making good time with their climbing, their untiring bodies allowing them to move fairly fast down the tunnel.

Neither of them say anything for some time, the darkness playing eddies and whorls of Magical Energy and life around their enhanced senses. Norikata didn't count on the power of this place, as they approach. It made sense that a structure of qualified Magic Circuits focusing the natural power of this leyline would augment mystical energies. Their power would definitely not suffer for this. Even so, Norikata is thankful that they were able to approach this cavern. If the stream had been any larger, they would have had trouble crossing it based on their vampiric nature. A river, or a lake, or a sea would have been impossible to traverse. A small spring was easy enough, especially as he and Kiritsugu were excellent climbers: their very nature allowing them to crawl on the roof of the cavern. Eventually, the deeper they go, the less water travels until only damp rocks remain. Finally, the two jump down and, seeing that they have enough space, continue the way by walking.

"It's similar to the Temple." Norikata says. "The Barrier is an aversion to us, but once you are past it this land definitely supports spiritual bodies."

Kiritsugu says nothing in reply, but Norikata almost gets the hint of a memory of a time when he and his son explored the land around the site of the supposed shrine of Alimango Island, before Shirley ... when Norikata showed his son how an ecosystem actually functioned: a reasonable primer to training in magecraft.

"I remember the crabs." Norikata murmurs.

He can see Kiritsugu's eyes glitter red in the darkness as they glare at him. Norikata holds out his hands. "This place reminds me of that time."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Shirley told me about the legend too. About the girl that tried to save her ailing mother by stealing the offerings at the shrine of the deity. The place near our old home."

There is a flicker of memory of a burning mansion and shed. Norikata can almost hear the click of a gun safety being taken off, even though he knows that Kiritsugu will not -- cannot -- try to harm him. "You didn't do any of it for anyone else. You weren't punished for violating laws to help others. Just yourself."
"It wasn't always that way." Norikata says, his gaze faraway as they walk.

A pause. "You mean there was a time you didn't seek the Root."

There is no question there, just skepticism. A slight smile comes to Norikata's lips. "Don't be stupid, Kiritsugu." He feels the other flinch, and then he remembers the last time he told him that, long ago. "Our Family always sought Akasha. That was why we developed our Time magecraft. He pauses. "I liked Shirley, you know."

"You had a funny way of showing it."

Norikata can feel the other gritting his fangs together. "It was ... regrettable. I didn't want that to happen, you know. Shirley ... she reminded me of your mother."

Kiritsugu doesn't say anything. And Norikata doesn't even sense any thoughts or feelings on the matter. "You don't remember her. She died right after you were born. After ..."

After the Mage's Association found them, in one of their other homes, driving them out, making him destroy his research before they Sealed it, Sealed him, and his wife, and his son: taking away their lives, turning his Family's work into a stagnant artifact, an oddity for nobles to play with and study while not having earned any of it. He knows he is broadcasting those thoughts. Those memories. Kiritsugu turns to him, slightly, his ears all but twitching.

"What I told Shirley was true, though she wouldn't listen to me. That was her greatest failing. She wouldn't listen ..." The Dead Apostle shakes his head. "She said I could help the world with my research. And, once, I did. Once, I wanted to. Many magus Families did. Ours did. It's true, we wanted to see Akasha and the Origin. We thought we could find it by finding the End instead. Like the seeds of Camelot's destruction being sewn into its glorious beginning, you know."

They keep moving downward, and a luminous glow begins to show itself in the dark.

"The Association barely even took notice of us. Our research was promising. Interesting. We were even thinking of seeking aid from them, but the nobles made it clear we were a shallow generation. Small. Beneath them." Norikata focuses his eyes and senses on the light ahead. "Then I was born, and came of age. I figured out how to take the concept of the internalized Bounded Field, and narrow it down. Miniaturized it. Gaia didn't fight against its unnatural existence until it was dispersed, or the mana supporting it ran out. Then, they took notice of us. But it wasn't the nobles that came ... but the Sealing Designation Enforcers."

"We were never a numerous Clan, Kiritsugu. Your grandfather was gone, and it was just me. I barely left the Association with my life. Your mother ... she understood what we were trying to do. When your grandparents still lived, she and I determined your Origin and Affinity. Then, they came for us. Many times. Magi, such as these." Norikata waves a hand at the tunnel and the approaching cavern. "They want to protect magecraft. To keep it from dying. I wanted to make sure our magecraft could actually be born. That our legacy would live. We tried to help others with it, making medicines, and the like. But that exposed us ... and your mother paid the price. You and I barely got away, in time. I don't think you even remember that."

"I remember running." Kiritsugu whispers.

"I just wanted to get away from them." Norikata says. "But it was only a matter of time, ironically enough. We didn't have that. Not even on Alimango Island. So I gave up on helping others, and focused on our work. And to survive the passage, the accelerated passage of time the way our magecraft functions, we would need stronger, more durable existences. Immortal bodies. Honestly,
Kiritsugu, even with my plans I never thought it would be me."

"You wanted to use me as guinea pig." Kiritsugu says, the memory of the last confrontation playing between the two of them in their minds. "Just like Shirley."

"She was never supposed to be that." The Dead Apostle hisses. "She ... she was an excellent researcher. Everything she told you was true. You were always my heir, Kiritsugu. My son. And Shirley was gifted. I'd hoped ..." He sighs again. "I'd hoped that she would keep her promise. I'd honestly hoped that she would be your companion, or your wife."

There is no masking that mixture of feelings. Kiritsugu's fists are clenching. They are actually shaking.

"It's easy to say now." He says. "After you left her, and the Island to die."

"It's the truth, Kiritsugu, and you know it." A part of Norikata marvels at his son's iron clad control over these volatile emotions. Logic prevails over sentiment, no matter how strong the latter actually is. "It would have been ideal if she had left things alone, and grown with you. Our line could have continued. I'd never planned for Shirley, but when she came into our lives, it was almost perfect. With her assistance, we could have unlocked those secrets. But she decided to be a fool." Old frustration fills Norikata. "And honestly, in retrospect, while I never planned for her transformation, at least I knew the potion didn't work. And it was better her, and that entire, useless Island than you suffering for it."

This time the fury in Kiritsugu's eyes isn't masked at all. He is literally barring his fangs at him as they stop at the change in the cavern. "I did suffer for it."

"I ..." Norikata looks down, turning his face from his son's hard gaze. "I know you did."

"No, you don't." It looks as though all of Kiritsugu's flesh is clenched under his roiling emotions, and vampiric blood lust. "The thing you don't understand ... Dad, is that that potion should never have been a vampiric experiment. It shouldn't have existed. Just like the Grail." He gestures at the tunnel, filled with a nauseating amount of luminescent moss. "People suffered for what you -- and others like you -- have done for the sake of enlightenment, or power. I would have never followed in those footsteps. Never."

"But you did." Norikata whispers. "Before you knew that it wouldn't work."

Kiritsugu turns away from him. "I wanted to help the world ..."

"As I said." Norikata replies. "We all did, at one point." He adjusts his spectacles. "Kiritsugu, once this is finished, I will release you. Your existence is your own. I never claimed to be altruistic, but I will keep my promises."

Before Kiritsugu can reply, whether he was going to do so or not, they feel it before they see it. The green-blue energies of the moss begin to darken and change hue into a pink, crimson red. It is almost obscene, and the two of them had seen a vampiric outbreak and the insides of a young girl. The power of this place grows. It's overwhelming. The foundations of the rock actually tremble.

The two vampires, father and son, exchange a brief look. Kiritsugu's emotions are gone through their link. There is just cold, hard determination there now. He puts his hands in the pockets of his trench coat.

"Well." Norikata says. "We really don't have much time."
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gilgamesh means what he said to the dog. Under any other occasion if anyone, other than himself or someone that sought his permission, killed humans -- even the weak, pathetic degenerates of this disappointing era and its gaudy attempts at achievement, he would have killed them where they stood. Only he can render the King’s Judgment. Of course, this doesn't mean that the King can't have some enjoyment out of rendering his sworn duty to humanity.

Rider is nothing like the glorious would-be usurper whom he had the honour of ending in the Fourth War. And she shows it, as she shamelessly rips off her blindfold and dares to look at him -- to even glance at him -- with her eyes. Granted, they are beautiful eyes. Certainly, they aren't the product of mongrel breeding, even in the strongest of magi. Grey sclera almost the colour of pink regard him with square pupils as black and as cold as Kur. Gilgamesh smiles as her beautiful face turns into one of shock as she realizes that her Mystic Eyes are utterly worthless.

"Pitiful monster," He laughs. "Huwawa was a far more poisonous snake than you. I don't think you have seven auras on you. You would have had more of a chance with that Divine beast of yours." Gilgamesh gesture at her as a flurry of swords fly her way. "Die, creature."

He is just thinking about adding Rider's decapitated head to his Gate of Babylon before Lancer jumps in the way, glowing with pesky protective Runes. Original Runes, from the look of them. They glow on the dog's body like a pale shadow of the blood red tattoos that shine gloriously on his own when he unleashes his full might and enthusiasm in battle: a state that he hasn't even begun to be motivated towards by these pathetic spirits. Even still, he manages to actually deflect most of his projectiles with a crackling twirl of his spear. The others that went through are avoided by the Gorgon as she back flips and somersaults away. Even still, he can see some cuts on her perfect, smooth skin. He can smell her parody of divine blood spilled.

"You stink of magic, dog." Gilgamesh tells Lancer. "That must be from Kotomine's last commands, or maybe from after your new Master took you off your leash?" He smiles, sending another flurry of blades for Lancer, and Saber to deal with.

"Ha." Lancer pants, just like the dog that he is. "You really like to hear yourself talk, don't you Goldie?"

"Such impudence." Gilgamesh sighs, unleashing more weapons, keeping Saber at bay, entertaining the dog. "I might just feed you your parts once I'm done with you. That should break your last geis."

Lancer's eyes narrow as he realizes that Gilgamesh knows exactly who and what he is: a miserable Irish demigod forbidden to eat the meat of a hound that he once slaughtered. "You know, Goldie, I may be a dog but that means I'm my own best friend. You don't even have one."

The words and the wolfish grin on the other's face actually makes Gilgamesh feel ... anger. How dare this spawn of a small god mention his friend!? As if their stories even begin to equal each other? Gilgamesh activates more portals, focusing fire on Lancer. If he had been feeling more charitable, and if it were at all possible, he would obliterate Lancer into several scraps of meat that he'd force that disgusting Gorgon to eat before putting her out of her misery. It's all right, though. Rider is already retreating, and Lancer -- for all of its dodges and deflections, can't elude him forever. Besides, Saber is still in the fight, slashing down at his flying blades, trying to cut a swathe towards
him. He can even see the cuts on her skin sealing themselves with a golden light. Good. He doesn't want his property permanently damaged. That will be for him to decide, after his own leisure, once he exterminates the rest of the rabble.

Yes, he is going to take great joy in putting this rabid dog down, and the she-beast to the sword. Then, he will quell his bride and together they will watch the world end, and the potentials of a worthier one, where only the strong and the greatest can live, never mind strive, to begin. The gods flooded the world before, but stopped short of using humanity's own filth and sin to finish the job. Once more, Gilgamesh feels confident that he can correct yet another one of their mistakes.

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Rider jumps back, keeping her blade and chains in front of her as she summons more of her mana reserves and ...

"Don't bother with that missy!" Lancer shouts over the din of clashing metal and exploding earth. "Goldie's armour has powerful magic resistance. Probably other things too. Definitely those blood glyphs you put on the ground, though. And for fuck's sakes, woman!" He dodges another eruption of the ground. "Put that damned blindfold back on before you turn us all into stone!"

Lancer needn't have worried as Rider had already placed Breaker Gorgon back around herself. Her blindfold visor back on, she considers her options. It mildly surprises her that this Lancer would have been able to detect her Blood Fort Andromeda. Of course, given the magic radiating off of him, the scent of magecraft, it seemed as though Lancer had more than some small background in the Art. The glyphs, modified by her, Rin, and Sakura, were to become activated at her command in smaller, more localized spaces. During the battle with Caster, she had actually neutralized many of the spots with her own aura, but a few of them remained to be evoked by her. But if the golden Servant's armour had heavy magical resistance, if it could render him immune to her Eyes, the only thing she would succeed in accomplishing with activating them would be to endanger herself and her allies.

Breaker Gorgon also isn't an option. Even if she could get past the power of the armour to utilize it on the insanely powerful Servant, on someone other than herself, she can sense the terrifying aura around the King of Heroes, and knows that his sheer ego would be unaffected by entrapment in her own mind. And, again, she needs to keep Breaker Gorgon on so as not to endanger her allies, or Sakura and her sister.

She curses the fact that Caster was able to briefly turn Saber against her Pegasus. But, perhaps, this might not be a problem.

"Give me some cover." She says to both Saber and Lancer as she takes another blood pack, ripping it open with her teeth, and drinking down its contents. Then, she takes her dagger ... and stabs herself through the neck again. Pegasus had been dissipated, but he is not dead as he is a being created specifically from divinity itself: her gift from the caprices of Poseidon. She creates the circle .... and hopes that the other two will buy her some more time.

*

Ordinarily, Lancer knows that even he can't keep this up forever.

But his Runes had already been bolstered to the equivalent of A Rank and combined with the three extra Command Seals his unexpected ... ally granted him, he weaves, deflects, and redirects with a muscle memory rivaling the other monstrous demigod that terrorized this War, while still maintaining enough cleverness and sharpness of mind and wit to utilize magecraft that could actually pose a challenge to most Casters.
Perhaps as a Berserker, he would have made a better dynamo against this egotistical golden bastard, but he needed to fight smart, not mad against something like him. As it is, he's only just starting to sweat, a fact that he knew would have once made the ladies swoon just thinking about it. Such shining magnificence in battle, from the Child of Light, is obviously lost on a monster and a knight, though he thinks that the little miss and her sister on the sidelines may not completely remember that his eyes are above the waist. He's glad they are staying out of the fight, that Goldie sees them as so beneath him that they aren't worth him killing them ... yet. They need to stay alive, to keep giving their Servants prana.

Saber is holding her own, trying to charge forward against the onslaught of weapons. But aside from that one attack she has, and that passive healing factor she didn't have before -- its golden light reminding him of his own homeland’s background with the Fae -- Gilgamesh, as Archer or what ever the hell class he has given that there was an Archer already in this War, lived up to the role at least, and was keeping her ... and him, at a distance.

Damn, as good as Saber is, she's not as versatile. To think I'd miss that red-coated bastard ... Lancer thinks to himself, with not as much rancor as he would have thought. Would've been really useful if he'd stuck around ...

And he suspects Goldie is just playing around with them. No, he knows he is. Hell if that doesn't piss him off. Even with that crack about him not having any friends, striking a nerve he didn't think the narcissistic asshole had, isn't making him go all out. Each one of those Projectiles are Noble Phantasms. All of them.

However, he knows based from the Throne of Heroes itself that many Noble Phantasms required a specific command word, phrase, or the expertise of its wielder. Lancer's sharp eyes even saw some weapons that could not have belonged to Goldie personally. They were older looking, some of them even different from the ones he had seen and studied in his time in Eire and under Scathach. At the same time, he also knows that some of them have passive effects: simply by being wielded, or existing in the first place. And Saber, for all she is kept at a distance, doesn't seem unfamiliar with this phenomenon: not like him. They've fought before. He knows this at his very core, though the gross familiarity that Goldie showed her was a pretty good insight in itself. A part of him wonders if everyone knew about Gilgamesh except for him.

But he's painfully aware of the fact that the kid isn't here. It's a damn shame. He knows Saber and the kid had been a team. Hell, Saber saved the kid's ass from him when he was supposed to kill all witnesses. The kid himself had balls, he definitely had to grant the red-head that. He sees the worry in the little miss' eyes, and the trembling hands of her sister. And even Saber, her green eyes are filled with rage and fear. She's distracted, just hacking and slicing at the weapons coming at her. He knows people like Saber. She might have a new Master now, but the kid was -- is -- her partner.

Lancer tries not to think about Bazett lying on the floor of Kotomine's Church with her arm cut off, bleeding to death after trusting the wrong friend. Instead, he remembers his last Command.

Protect our alliance ...

He doesn't care that after this battle is done, one way or another, that is going to fade away. He never had a wish in this War. He didn't care about it as a Ritual to gain the Grail. Lancer regrets his poor Master's death, but he suspects nothing can truly bring her back now. And that was never why she summoned him to begin with. He knows that much. All he knows for sure is that he came here to fight. He's already killed two Servants, Assassin and Caster, but both deaths have left bad tastes in his mouth. Somehow he knows, deep in the cockles of his heart that fighting this bastard here -- right now -- whatever the outcome will cleanse his palette of all the bullshit. Besides, his Battle
With a feral smile on his face, Lancer jumps backwards and spins Gae Bolg through the air, its sharp tip etching the ground. He writes all of his Runes onto the soil again. He'd done it before, earlier, before the battle with Goldie: creating a Bounded Field to supplement the one around the property so that the girls -- and anyone else outside the War -- wouldn't get caught in the destruction, or dragged in to see what kind of madness was going on. This smaller version of the Bounded Field surrounds him, and Goldie notices what's going on. It's more than just his Protection From Arrows allowing him to survive now. The blades are actively been repelled. They are dissipating around the Field created by his Runes.

"You dare destroy my treasures!?" Goldie roars, his face twisting with an apoplectic rage as more of the infernal gold portals open, unleashing glittering death at him. "Insolent mongrel! You will be so many scraps that there won't be enough of you to make a shade for Irkalla!"

Instantly, pushing his raw energy to the limit, Lancer etches his Runes again, but this time there are just four of them, and all of them in a different configuration. He moves his spear back into his hands and ready stance as he watches Goldie look at his newest seal.

This time, an ugly smile appears on the golden Servant's face. Lancer can feel Saber and Rider's surprise as he holds up a hand behind him.

Goldie actually laughs. "Do you really want to die this badly, dog?"

"Lancer!" Saber calls out. "What are you doing!? We need to take him together!"

"Nah." Lancer says, regarding his opponent over the seal of Ath nGabla. "I don't think so. I had really specific orders. We started out sloppy, but this is how it has to go. You and Rider will have your turns, one way or another. I'll soften him up some more."

"First, you kill my subjects." Goldie says. "Then, you dare compare your life to mine. You then destroy my treasures, and then think you are a man when you are just a filthy mongrel slave? Your death will be humiliating, Lancer!"

"Maybe." Lancer replies. "But hey, it won't be nearly as humiliating as chucking around a whole bunch of Noble Phantasms you can't use, and never, ever earned. I might be a dog, but I am the Hound of Ulster. The Child of Light. And you, Goldie, you're just an empty little man using other people's toys to compensate for something!" He grins. "And that something, in case you didn't get it, is your small cock!"

"Die!" The golden Servant screams as multiple portals erupt around the two of them, falling towards Lancer like death.

"Tch." Lancer spits. He knows the Bounded Field won't last against that many Noble Phantasms. It has already weakened considerably from even just the first barrage. It will take some doing to maintain this Field, even with his increased parameters, but if there is one thing that all the ladies can agree with, it's that Lancer has a great deal of stamina. "Saber!" He calls out behind him. "That bastard priest didn't kill your Master! I know that twisted fuck. He'd not get any enjoyment from just side-swiping him at his house. Keep focused. We'll be done with this soon!"

Then, Lancer takes the rest of his prana and channels it into his own Noble Phantasm.

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Saber knows, somehow, after looking at that seal that she can't interfere. And even if she goes in, if
anyone goes in, they will fight Gilgamesh one at a time. She clenches her gauntleted fist in frustration. Gilgamesh was keeping her at a distance. It's true that she has a better prana flow with Rin, but even with that there is only so many times she can unleash Excalibur. The fighting has mostly been confined to a small space, to localized attacks and direct combat. She doesn't want there to be collateral damage: for bystanders to be obliterated by their full power. And Lancer doesn't know Gilgamesh. He has no idea what the King of Heroes is capable of doing. They needed to take him together. Just as she and Rider had dealt with Berserker, and even that -- with their Masters -- hadn't been a sure thing.

But the more time they spend here, dealing with this ancient lunatic, the more Illya is in danger.

*And Shirou ...*

"He's right, you know."

There is a flash of white light as Rider mounts her Pegasus again, her gilded bridle reigning it in, edging it on, keeping the two of them together. Rider rubs the horse's mane with a fondness that the King of Knights has rarely ever seen her display in their short time together.

"What do you mean, he's right?" Saber demands. "This ..." She gestures at this. "This is madness!"

"I am not disputing Lancer's madness." Rider replies coolly. "I mean, the boy is alive. I can smell him. And the homunculus girl. Their scent is coming from Ryuudou Temple."

It dawns on Saber. Suddenly, she is getting a fairly good notion of where this War is headed, and how it is going to end. Strangely, she feels herself letting go of a breath she didn't even realize she was holding. But this isn't over yet.

"He's buying us time." Rider says.

Saber sees it now. The entire duel is focused on Lancer now. He made that seal. But if he could make it ...

"Saber." Rider shifts on her Pegasus' back, making room. And, suddenly, Saber knows exactly what they need to do next. She knows what needs to be done.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't intend to go into too much detail with the Servants' fight. But Lancer likes to be the centre of attention, and that doesn't even include Gilgamesh's ego into the mix. It was all supposed to be about Kiritsugu and his father, and their plans. But it is fascinating to see how their plans have influenced the events that have transpired so far.

I didn't know if Pegasus could be summoned again by Rider if he had been dissipated. I know that Gilgamesh and Iskandar couldn't summon back their Vinama and Chariot respectively after they were Noble Phantasms that were destroyed, but I made an executive decision to say that with the extra blood I gave her Rider could summon him back as he is a Divine beast gifted to her by a god and that Bellerophon is her Noble Phantasm -- the bridle -- and not Pegasus.

A lot is going on, and it is easy to lose track of things, and determine who knows what
in this new dynamic I've made. And I made it so that Lancer could use his Bounded Field twice given how much he has been empowered by Command Spells. I'm sure there are a whole lot of other details to consider and I really wanted to finish at least two of the fights in this chapter.

But we will just have to see what happens in the story next time on Fate/Stay Unlimited Bullets.
Chapter 15

A doll dreams restlessly in the dark.

It doesn’t know how long it has been hanging here, in this pulsing place that is both a part of it, and something separate. Something, perhaps memories belonging to someone ... or something else whisper to it about a collaboration -- to resurrect a miracle squandered, or faded, or lost -- then a cold understanding of what had to be done ...

Which is sacrifice.

That seems to be what this is: a continuation of that rite of sacrifice. It permeates the entire chamber, its body spread out, its mind gone into its final purpose. Its final metamorphosis. And it, the doll, fits into the part of the node that the first ritual could not complete. It shifts again, however as memories, other memories flicker across the shadows of its muted perceptions. But they aren’t of an archmagus, of an inhuman Sage of Winter, and the morose fragmented resignation of failure, and a slight lamentation of the inherent foolishness of humanity. No, these are more ... recent ...

The boy lost his Command Seals. His amber eyes stare off in panic, and dawning horror. The violet-haired girl grabs onto his arm, trying to keep him from leaving, from running outside of the residence. And she ... she is distracted. Between her own puppets, and the tears streaming down the red-headed boy's face she turns away from the battle for just a moment ...

She never even felt the closest layer of the Bounded Field get penetrated, nor sensed the intruder. No one had. A foot catches her, hard, in the solar plexus. All air gushes out of her lungs. She coughs and gags. All thoughts about her dispelled Constructs, about even her Mystic Eyes, leave her mind as someone, a boy she loves, calls out her name ...

The doll grows still, feeling more than recalling being picked up, the feeling of air whipping against its cheek at high speed, a hand on its neck as even those sensations, even the bruising pain in its ribs fades away. Everything disappears. Then there is this place that is familiar, that it has never been too before but somehow vaguely remembers. There is a feeling of magecraft, of something invasive entering into it, interacting with the cavern, with Magic Circuits around it, with its own Magic Circuits. Spiritual Healing, a distant sentence floats through it. Hands enter it, after a few flairs of Command Spells, activating its Magic Circuits but deactivating all of its other previous motor functions, and cognitive processes. It doesn't take much. Words, thoughts, feelings, are distant, and jumbled junk information whenever they come at all. It thinks it perceives some screaming, but doesn't know where it's coming from, or what it can even do about it.

There is only darkness for a time in this womb-like existence. It feels solitary, even if there are other lifeforms around it. It is cut off from everything aside from this chamber of ancient, brain-dead knowledge.

But it isn't empty. It isn't alone. The memory of a swallow and an arc of sharpened light glitters in a corner of remaining consciousness. A woman mourns the death of her children, of her lover ... And there is a larger presence, grief-stricken but resigned, resolute, holding a small girl against its large chest with deceptive gentleness ...

And, soon, they have company.

The Lancer deactivates his Bounded Field before the Noble Phantasm can finish destroying it. His own Noble Phantasm blurs into multiple edges of crimson raining death, smashing into, and
detonating into many of the weapons coming his way. The ground explodes around the two opponents in multiple shock waves. Two other shapes stand in front of their Masters, shielding them from debris, as Gae Bolg obliterates the other Phantasms before before it zigzags around the Lancer, behind his opponent -- the golden Archer -- and speeds towards his back. It is a formality, really. The spear has already hit him.

Or at least that's what would have happened.

Ordinarily, nothing like this would happen. These are two entirely different move sets, even though they use the same spear. One deals with multiple targets and destroys the field. The other specifically targets one being and either instantly pierces their heart, or leaves them with a curse that will not heal unless the Phantasm is destroyed, or the Servant killed. Retroactively, the damage should have already been done to the other Servant. The Lancer is empowered by three Command Seals, unlocking abilities in him and potential more than just one class could handle, even with the best Master: of which he has none.

Perhaps it was the Archer's magic resistant armour. But, really, in retrospect it had probably been Goldie's Clairvoyance, and his insane collection of Noble Phantasms. Goldie moves away from the initial explosions caused by the spear, and then ... just as it arcs around to stab him ... A series of concentric circles appear behind him, shimmering purple light, another Noble Phantasm ... A Shield.

The Lancer can see Gae Bolg breaking through several layers of this shield before he realizes that Gae Bolg has returned ... through his chest. Hindsight's a bitch, he chuckles, as blood trickles down his mouth. It almost looks like his Gae Bolg, but it looks older somehow. A pre-existing model perhaps? Goldie didn't call out its name. Yeah. Goldie can't actually use other people's weapons, just the ones that have passive effects, or that just look fancy. A poser, right to the end. Was using his own spear to kill him a way to humiliate him?

The Lancer supposes it doesn't really matter as more spears, and swords pierce through him, Battle Continuation or no. He used all that energy to try and take the bastard out. He was already dissipating. Goldie tells him to die like a good dog, that he has only one use now. He hopes those girls will kick his ass. He wonders if Goldie realizes that the explosions he caused with Gae Bolg, now vanishing with him before it can even attempt to go through the other's Shield, have destroyed his curse ... his sigil ... that they don't have to attack him one on one now. That's more than enough time for the other Servants to pull something out of their asses.

Welp. He got his battle after all. But damn ... He probably should have told them about Caster's victims, that something or someone else had ...

The spearman's essence fills it. The images swirling inside it become more distant with that fierce light. The shifting eases more. It should be easier now, for it to gradually fulfill its functions, like lungs being less constrained and finally allowed to breathe ...

But something is fighting back. There is a woman asking a child what is she is afraid of. She tells her, this child ... talking to her mother that isn't her mother that she had a nightmare about becoming a cup ... a cup with seven lumps in it ... It doesn't matter. It isn't anything particularly meaningful, of course. Like the collection of organs it essentially is, the doll's functions continue even as other images and words struggle back to the surface ...

"It's true." The red Archer tells her in the ruins of her Castle, her hulking Berserker standing in front of her. "All of it. That entire damn letter."

"I don't believe you." The girl says, but her tone is off. Her porcelain surface of self-assured
"We both know that's not true ...." He says her name afterwards. Not her full, formal name, but something shortened and informal. Something someone she loved, and trusted would refer to her. "I know what you are. What you're supposed to be. Your Family shat the bed when they summoned Avenger, and they never bothered to clean it up. You can tell that I'm not a normal Servant. Counter-Guardians clean up these kinds of messes before they get to be them. But we have a chance, before it gets to that place. And that's not even what you want either way."

"Oh?" She doesn't know why she doesn't order Berserker to exterminate him then and there for his impudence. "And what would a strange Servant like you know about what I want?"

"I know you hate your Grandfather." The Archer says, softly. "I know he treated you like crap. Threw you out to the wolves, literally, right? He lied to you ..." He uses her name again, something that makes her begin to shake even harder than she already is. "Bad enough he stunted you, shortened your lifespan, but he lied about your father betraying the Family. He knew there was something off about the Grail. They wouldn't listen. And if you keep going like this, you will be infected by it, by All the World's Evil, just like your mother ..."

The girl is enraged. She's enraged because he knows far too much about her, and she doesn't know how. "Lies! He abandoned me for my onii-chan! He killed Mama to get away from us!"

"No." The Archer says, his hard steel eyes looking older, and sadder than she had ever seen another person's gaze, even her Papa's. "He never stopped looking for you. It was one of his greatest regrets. Just as it must have been when he lost his wife. I never even knew at the time ... I wish I had ..."

She wants to get Berserker to squash this Servant. Berserker is growling with her own rage, but she realizes why she's angry. It's more than just the old anger, of being abandoned, of being used. She's ... actually afraid. "Who ..." She starts. "Who are you, Archer?"

Archer sighs. "You know who I am."

She actually takes a step back. She doesn't want to believe it. But there is no other way, the common sense part of her mind tells her. The Tohsaka peasant might have been a member of one of the Three Families, but there is no way she would have had the spies or the network to know what happened to her. The only way he could have known this is if someone had told him, if she herself had told him ... at another time ...

"No ..." She denies. "No, this is ..."

He actually smiles sadly at her. And it looks like him. "We come from all times when the Grail calls. My deal still stands." His small smile vanishes, and a pleading expression forms on his face. "Please. Take it. I know you can handle both me, and Berserker. I can save you. And then I can bring you to --"

She's had enough. "No. No!" She shouts. "It's an illusion! A trick!" This treacherous being must have a Noble Phantasm that can override even her senses. Perhaps even see into her mind. Into her nightmares. Into her dreams. This is too much. It cannot be tolerated. She turns to her Servant, turning her eyes away so he can't see her angry tears. "Berserker, destroy him!"

As Berserker roars and charges towards him, Archer sighs again. The full moon shines on him through a gap in the Castle wall. "I guess there's only one way I can prove it you, then." He says as two swords form in his hands. "I am the bone of my sword ..."
Something tries to hold onto that memory. It tries to recall, to display, the rest of it. But then, there is another surge of energy ... as something else, another essence, flows into its form, and joins it.

*The Rider flies on her radiant Pegasus, burning through the air towards the golden Archer. She knows there isn't much more time. Her Master ordered her, after blocking her from debris, to go in for the kill. This is it. Everything is getting resolved tonight, one way or another.*

"*Bellerophon!*

*Archer laughs and more projectiles fly their way, but she deftly avoids all of them, feeling the way they slice through the air. She is going to ram him. The power of the Pegasus and its pure Divine might will obliterate the magic resistance of his armour. There will be nothing left of this smirking man she pictures before them: standing tall and arrogantly like an Achaean hero, hiding behind his gifts like Perseus, stinking of the very gods themselves.*

*They sail towards him. The air burns with power as they come closer ... There is the smell of a sword that materializes from Archer's direction, even as something clatters at the side of her Pegasus ...*

*She thinks she hears the Archer laugh, about how his armour had been built to withstand the Bull of Heaven himself ... that the namesake of his only friend is an anathema to gods. That she had never had a chance.*

*No ... The Rider's eyes widen beneath her visor. It couldn't be. She hears her Master call out her name, shrieking in terror. A golden net falls around her, around her Pegasus. Pegasus screams in agony as they plummet to the earth, lighter than they should have been.*

*He shrieks, but then his panicked, pained whinnying is cut off into a gargling rasp. She hears his wings trying to beat out of the chains, the golden chains ... They even burn her, but she had never been a perfect goddess. She isn't suffering nearly as much as her beloved mount, her child ... Feather burn, and cartilage snaps with the breaking of bones as they collide to the soil. There is a smell of metal, of negating, grounding alloy that is light but can bind gods. Rider collides against the net, even as something cold, familiar, and sharp moves in an arc and slices across her neck.*

*Of course, it would be Harpe. A weapon for a monster, not a god. Of course the gods and their treasures would come to foil her, even now.*

*As she senses the trajectory of the scythe-like weapon separating her head from her body, her last thoughts are of her Master, of promises owed ... and the fact that Saber had jumped off Pegasus before the net came down ...*

The doll feels the darkness welling up inside of it. It grows across the cavern walls, staining the Magic Circuits in there, the inner virulence in the system now spreading to a more overt infection. The palpitating force is overwhelming, clogging the inner workings of the chamber, covering everything as it starts to rise. It has become the new function. It has been the function since the third cycle of Heaven's Feel, waiting to become born, to be actualized, and materialized. Humanity's evil come back to grant it its real wishes. It is still tentative, in its rebirth. Still young, younger than the day the villagers consigned its mortal existence to pain and suffering that they did not wish for themselves.

But this time, it is welcomed. And soon, all it will remember is the sea of the curses that it has brought for its own birthday gift to the human race. Even so, something nags at the back of its unformed consciousness. There is one more thing it has to remember, one more guest left to greet before that happens.
Just one more thing ...
"Ten no Sakazuki."

This time, Norikata definitely hears Kiritsugu cock his fire arms in his trench coat pockets, but he gives no other indication that those words mean anything to him. Norikata sighs, feeling his son's lack of comprehension. "That is the name of this cavern, of the site of the Heaven's Feel Ritual enactment. Seriously, son. The Einzberns didn't tell you much, did they?"

"It was a job." Kiritsugu replies as he takes in the sight of the entire cavern.

The cavern is vast. The tunnels of moss, almost bloated with mana, led them down past the Bounded Field -- the inner Bounded Field -- that created this place under the Temple, under Fuyuki, under the very land itself at a confluence of energies created by the sunken leyline. Norikata had done research, in his time, with regards to Bounded Fields, and the forbidden magic that was a Reality Marble. It was believed that Reality Marbles were more advanced versions of internalized Bounded Fields -- similar to the ones their Family used for centuries with regards to their time magecraft -- made external by the sheer force of will of a truly alien personality. Certainly, in his time in Zelretch's ... care, he'd gathered from the Dead Apostle Ancestor and Wizard Marshall that Dead Apostles -- particularly of ancient longevity -- often had the time, and sheer practice of mental inhumanity and distance from their long lost human psychologies to develop Reality Marbles, presumably, from their practice with Bounded Fields. It may also have been a throwback to the functions of the True Ancestors themselves: powerful incarnated nature spirits created on Gaia by the Crimson Moon to protect it from humans before the majority of them were consumed by bloodlust or destroyed. As beings akin to elementals, it made sense for True Ancestors and their Dead Apostles -- who had freed themselves from their creators' wills -- to develop pockets of accepted alternate realities in the overall sphere of Gaia: perhaps even co-opting that force.

The phenomenon occurring in Ten no Sakazuki at this moment is reminiscent of these facts Norikata had uncovered. He can feel its power enveloping them, enclosing its through unseen tendrils of energies around the two of them and anyone, or anything else, that dared to come into its confines. Theoretically, as he had learned, there should have been a massive cliff-face and, situated on top of it, a crater with the large circle of Magic Circuits embedded in it from the archmagus Justeaze Lizrich von Einzbern, to create the Greater Grail System: an organic construct powered by colourless mana that would convert, and actualize, the energies of defeated Heroic Spirits summoned from the ethereal Throne of Heroes to manifest power enough to make a path to Akasha, allow a successful user to get close enough to the Root to rediscover the fragmented principles behind the Third Magic, or have their personal wish granted. That was the idea.

In practice, however, it didn't take one with vampiric senses or even magical ones to see the true result. It doesn't surprise Norikata that the Greater Grail system possesses, or developed, its own Bounded Field verging on a Reality Marble given its purpose, and ties into the Earth. But the corruption they had perceived occurring outside, at its fringes, existed in the centre. In fact, it is even worse. The entire cavern resembles nothing short of a desolate wasteland, seeming to stretch on forever into the abyss. Perhaps, once, it was lit by the same luminescent life growing outside near its entrance behind the river fall, but now the land even has its very own sun -- or black hole -- bathing everything in red and darkness from on top an organic phallic tower of eternal black bile. If the Greater Grail is a living being, then it doesn't take much imagination to consider that it has been
infected: its life functions co-opted and corrupted by Angra Mainyu itself. In essence, because of their incredible hubris and larger incompetence, the Einzberns had given their former Avenger a massive amount of cycling natural, focused mana to construct a Reality Marble based off of All the World's Evil that he never could have accomplished as a simple Servant during the Third War.

It is such an incredible feat of magecraft, lost for centuries, from a collaboration the likes of which would never happen again. And, all of it, wasted and spent, on a futile conflict between petty, small-minded magi and their ignorant spiritual familiars: each vying -- unknowingly, but ultimately -- to destroy the World. It's almost a shame, in Norikata's mind, that Kiritsugu didn't have a chance to utterly exterminate the entire line of constructs calling themselves Einzbern Family once they had fulfilled their purpose, if only on principle for how they ruined their greatest creation over such stupidity.

"Did you really think a few explosives, even tactically placed," Norikata waves a hand at the entire tableau, "could have destroyed something like this?"

Kiritsugu slowly, almost imperceptibly, shakes his head. "I never knew the extent of what the Three Families did. And now all of it is corrupted, just like a bad sector on a hard-drive infecting an entire motherboard."

"An apt comparison, at least." Norikata replies, in visible disgust. "Granted, an earthquake -- if timed correctly -- could have eroded the cavern ceiling and crushed the circle above, but the mana output alone could have made what happened in Shinto look like a small brush fire by comparison."

Norikata can feel Kiritsugu's focused thoughts shrugging away his criticisms. "We have the tools to do what we need to now. Only ..."

It doesn't take Kiritsugu long to smell it. The cavern is warm, practically a hot-house of corrupted life. It smells, not unpleasantly, of blood: though clotted with time. But not all of that blood or resonance is old. And even though the wasteland and its great, hollow enclosure echoes with the thrumming of pure power, these are not the only sounds that carry throughout Ten no Sakazuki.

It doesn't take much for Norikata to know that Kiritsugu's hands are clenching around his weapons. Hard.

Or that his red eyes are dilating, as though seeing something else directly, from a distance but right in front of him.

"Kiritsugu." Norikata says. "I can see them."

Kiritsugu's facial features do not change, but his eyes are practically burning. Norikata sees the figure standing above, with another smaller figure spread-eagled around the circle near the pillar of throbbing darkness leading to the abyssal orb in this twisted subterranean version of the firmament. And ... the cliff-side writhing in liquid, purple-red darkness ...

And another figure lying under it, their hands curling into almost claws, struggling ... Trying to escape. Burning in obvious agony. There is even a faint whiff of Fae magic coming specifically from that direction.

The priest truly is sadistic.

"Do you know how to disable the system?" Kiritsugu's tone is distant, all of his previous emotion compartmentalized in the moment.

"I think so." Norikata says. "You will deal with the priest. I'm ... well, not one for fighting. But
Kiritsugu ...

His son doesn't turn to look at him as he starts moving towards the cliff, but he stops, tensing his muscles. Norikata sighs. "This entire chamber, this cavern, is a Bounded Field. Our magecraft is an internalized Bounded Field. It's one thing if we had the Field of your former Servant's sheathe on our side, or even the age to possess our own Reality Marbles. But we are not Ancestors. I'm afraid the priest chose this ground well. Our magecraft will not function here, such as it is. Its Field cancels out our own, even with the power of the moon and our blood."

"I know." The Magus Killer says. "But I'll manage." He pauses. "Just take out the seals. I will neutralize Kotomine."

It is a logical plan. If Norikata can eliminate the strength of the Bounded Field around this area, their powers will not be at such a disadvantage. He also knows that Kotomine will be a lot more focused on Kiritsugu due to their history, and will count on Angra Mainyu and its ... defenses, that ... muck squirming around on the plateau, to deal with protecting the Greater ... and Lesser Grails. Even if Norikata could destroy part of the ceiling and let the moonlight down, it could bolster them significantly. However, without his magecraft, he can only move and possess as much strength as his vampiric nature possesses. The warmth of this place is suffusing him, making his cold body feel as though it's almost ... alive again.

But that's no matter. As his son races up the cliff to meet Kotomine, Norikata knows that he has other matters to which he must attend. The Dead Apostle turns his perception outward, unaffected by the cavern, out of its confines. And he sees that, indeed, it will be time. Soon.

*

Kiritsugu feels the disquieting parody of a womb's heat pulsating around him as he speeds up the cliff face towards his target.

The oppressive atmosphere here is worse than it had been under Rider's predatory Bounded Field back at Homurahara Academy, than the unclean air of Fuyki Central Park, than even the unholy fire summoned in Shinto ten years ago. If the disaster that he and Kotomine unleashed on Shinto back in the Fourth War were a storm that had a heart, had a furnace, it would be this place: the source of faded grudges made all too vital. Somehow even the hairs on his deceased body are on end, rippling differently than even the moonlight that suffused him no too long ago before he entered this hellscape: his personal nightmare writ large. It smells of rotting blood, and it threatens to make him ravenous, if that same feeling didn't also disgust him so much.

He knows that there is a way he can destroy this great Bounded Field. His expertise is usually in infiltrating such constructs, but with enough time he could disrupt it. If Kiritsugu is good at anything, after all, it is destruction by his mere presence: even when he doesn't want it to be. But his current opponent, his ... last real opponent won't afford him that opportunity.

And Kiritsugu knows he doesn't have much time left.

He will have to count on his father's self-interest in aiding him: in actually fulfilling his expressed interest in destroying the Grail to continue his work.

It's the black mud all over again. It's coursing down the pillar to the black orb hovering near the ceiling of this place. Of course the Greater Grail would be afflicted with the same cursed liquid that came out, like bloody bile, from the Lesser Grail cup that used to be his wife and spilled on both him and Kotomine a decade ago.
The priest stands there, the dark sun shining down on him with its blood-shine, seemingly bathing him in an unholy halo, holding an object in his hands. Kiritsugu saw him from a distance, and ... much closer, though not up close. In fact, what he had seen before he came up here was too much from Kotomine's perspective.

Kiritsugu leaps up into the air. He doesn't have his time magecraft, but he knows that he doesn't need it. His vampiric blood surges within him, accelerating his leg muscles, increasing his dexterity as he pulls both his Calico and his Thompson Contender out of his coat pockets. He does it all in a split second of human perception. In another second, he pulls both triggers: one after the other. He strafes the bullets from the Calico down on the priest, knowing that the cassock has Reinforced Kevlar woven into it, and he follows it up with a single shot from his Calico. He feels the curse within the Origin Bullet -- Binding and Severing -- sail out of his Contender, right towards Kotomine. He recalls the Fourth War. The priest has aged these past ten years. He's observed him from before the War, both when he still alive, and after his father had changed him. He's seen him jogging a lot more slowly through the eyes of his familiars, the stoop of his shoulders, the lines on his face. His body language gave him away that he's aged, and not aged well. When the two last engaged each other, Kotomine had been twenty-seven, and in the prime of his life: armed with a large collection of Command Spells. But now, after his Intel, Kiritsugu knows the man isn't in the same condition at thirty-seven: from a lack of training partners and missions, and years away from the Executors. Whatever resurrected Kotomine from the death he gave him didn't restore his vitality, nor arrest his aging. Still, the Sealing Designation Enforcer Bazett Fraga McRemitz -- his erstwhile ally -- had become a better fighter than he, and Kotomine had managed to kill her: though Kiritsugu suspects some treachery had been involved.

In those few seconds, as Kiritsugu lands in the muck in the surface of what Norikata had called "the altar" of the system -- hoping that his Curse of Restoration will protect him from the substance that killed him in life -- he anticipates Kotomine blocking the bullets as he had done ten years ago, perhaps one or two getting through, and the Origin Bullet hitting him. He doesn't think it will neutralize, never mind even kill the priest. He's viewing Kotomine's body heat more efficiently than any of his scopes ever did: perceiving his pulse, the movement of his veins and muscles, the tell-tale energy of his Magic Circuits, and the presence of his Command Spells. And ... something, something beating where his heart used to be ... Where Kiritsugu had turned it into pulp. At best, he hopes to force Kotomine to waste one or two Seals to save himself from the Bullet while maintaining his distance, keeping to his original methods, making the other underestimate him while gauging any capabilities he might have on hand.

Kiritsugu lands, with his weapons trained on the priest, in the seething muck even as he watches a tendril of black mud rise over Kotomine's head ... and consume his fire: including the Origin Bullet. They hiss as they dissolve, as though in acid, into nothing. Kotomine Kirei hasn't moved one inch, but regards Kiritsugu with the same twisted smirk on his face that he had the last time they fought ...

With the same unlined face and build he had ten years ago. But, somehow, the priest seems ... even taller now.

"Welcome, Emiya Kiritsugu. Still using the same techniques, I see." Kotomine says, holding the object he's been playing with since before this small exchange. "Though, even you have to admit, that these ... bats are a little over-theatrical given the current circumstances."

So. Kiritsugu thinks to himself, trying to pay attention to the current situation, his only target, and not anything else. That is why I lost all sight of the house after Caster. That's why ...

He watches as Kotomine casually rips off one of the wings of his bat familiar. The creature screeches in agony as Kotomine regards the Magus Killer. Kiritsugu keeps his weapons trained on the priest.
He either controls this mud now, somehow, perhaps due to his resurrection, or the Grail -- Angra Mainyu -- is protecting him. The way it countered my bullets, it's almost like El-Melloi's Mystic Code, but these concentrated curses just disintegrated them, and the Bullet...

"I noticed these ones lack cameras. Of course, you probably don't require them any longer."
Kotomine chuckles, ripping the creature's other wing off. "I merely kept this one alive as a courtesy. You've been gone for a long time." The priest smiles up at him, as he slowly wraps his fingers around the squirming, dying bat's neck. "Your children miss you."

Illya is lying on the floor, near the circle making up the rim of the pillar stabbing into the false sky. She's little larger than when he carried her on his shoulders back in Germany. He'd seen her through his familiars, but... She's naked, spreadeagled out around the inner part of the Greater Grail. Her red eyes are open and vacantly staring at nothing. Her entire small, thin, white body is stained in what Kiritsugu realizes are Command Spells. They writhe in and out of existence, squirming on her like serpents consuming her flesh. But they are darker somehow, like the trickle of black spittle drooling out of her open mouth, becoming the same colour as the muck around them, hissing under Kiritsugu's shoes, his own Curse countering the groans and screams of the grudges suffusing this area...

But not drowning out the screams of Emiya Shirou.

Kiritsugu's face remains impassive, but a trail of blood runs down his mouth from where his fangs bite into his lip as he sees his son up close, near him... He is submerged in the muck of the Grail, his face -- what little he can see of it -- twisted in agony. He can see bits of bone and ruined muscle around his eyes, tattered fingers trying to move out of the stream of curses. But even so, he can smell... Fae magics. He watches his son clenching his eyes shut as the seared off parts of his flesh begin to regrow, slowly, and arduously: a faint golden glow all that is holding him together between a bare minimum of life, and the flow of hell itself.

"Welcome back, Emiya Kiritsugu." Kotomine Kirei says, finally snapping the bat's neck in his fingers, throwing it aside to raise his arms out expansively, dramatically. "We have been waiting for you."

Chapter End Notes

It has been hard continuing this for a few reasons. I had to go back and read up on Kiritsugu's arsenal and adapt it to his new status accordingly. I also had to determine how many of Kotomine's Command Spells remained. Basically, I needed to find a way to make them both different, but balance them out. I added the proviso of the Greater Grail's Bounded Field being able to supersede any other Bounded Fields, save those of Divine origin or incredible power.

I mean, I know Avalon still functioned in Unlimited Blade Works, for instance. I also operate on the assumption that a Reality Marble is a more advanced form of Bounded Field as I've explained in the body of the story. Usually, as I interpret it, Bounded Fields can't function in other Bounded Fields unless they are purposefully layered, and I can't really see opening a Reality Marble in another Reality Marble: especially not with Mama Gaia already leery of just one. But that is just some academic pondering on my part, really.
Basically, I wanted this part to be longer but ... I suspect I needed this point to set the stage so that Kotomine and Kiritsugu can have their very *real* exchange. Yeah. I am sorry, though not sorry, about how graphic and horrible what's happening to Illya and Shirou is: but we both know that Kirei is an extremely twisted and sadistic man, and he would do something like this. I think his play, or rather his game, is becoming a little clearer now. But there will be more detail on that soon enough. Also, that poor bat. Those poor bats in general.

Also, I've been having some major laptop problems and I am typing from my parents' ancient Vista-running PC, so that is one major reason I've had issues writing and why I've been so slow in general. I also wrote another part to this but pressing the backspace key somehow took me back a browser and I lost some work, which is why I finished writing this so damned late into the night. But I persevered. And I hope this has whet your appetite for horror and violence. There will be more soon enough. Take care all.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Excalib-urr!

Saber falls through the air, swinging her golden blade downward on the King of Heroes.

It is all happening so fast. Jumping off Rider's Pegasus as the two of them were brought down by gilded chains and the rotation of an ancient scythe, Saber tapping into the prana given to her by Rin to release a Mana Burst, activating the power of her Noble Phantasm, using Lancer and Rider as that one, potentially fatal distraction against Gilgamesh ... She swings her sword down, with both arms, crying out the name of her blade, ready to end this threat. Excalibur explodes downward into radiant light ....

Against a shield.

She can't help but look at it. It's another ancient weapon, glowing golden from one of Gilgamesh's portals from the Gate of Babylon. It has nine layers. It is a land ... perhaps a small world. Earth, skies, the sea, the sun, and the moon ... even an arrangement of stars, two beautiful cities, a field in harvest, a king's estate, a vineyard, a herd of cattle being led by a bull fighting off lions and assisted against them by shepherds and their dogs, a flock of sheep being fleeced, a dancing floor where young men and women move with each other .... and an endless stream of Ocean. Okeanos, Saber somehow knows. She thinks she might recall Rider, Iskandar from the Fourth War so long ago, proclaiming to follow it, to find it, to seek its end two lifetimes ago ...

Gilgamesh arches his body back, leaning backwards, bringing this Shield Land, this Shield World upwards .... He is glowing with blazing golden light as more portals open, with more blades coming through ... Excalibur slices down, clashing against the other Phantasm, sparking against the surface of another land, turning the oceans, burning through the skies and the celestial bodies, burning the fields, destroying the estate, obliterating the dance hall and all the screaming, running people, blazing across the great stream ...

Shattering the shield, and cutting through the armoured limb beneath it.

Saber manages to see the forearm fly off into the distance, spraying a blood mist after it, even as the blades shoot out at her, impacting with her body, knocking holes and air out of her, everything exploding, red, and screaming as she is thrown back into sharp edges, the dirt. Saber thinks she hears someone screaming her name. Agony pulses through her shattered form, even as she is obliquely thankful that in her attempted swing, she managed to protect her head. The fae-energies of Avalon surround her, engulfing her wounds. For a few moments, she thinks she feels someone else surrounded by the light, and darkness ... screaming ... over and again. She grits her teeth and pulls out a blade from her arm, an axe from her shoulder, a sword from her thigh ... But by Merlin, the pain ...

"Heh ... heh ... heh ..." She hears a voice laughing, through gasps of its own pain. "Look at that .... an Anti-Fortress Noble Phantasm managed to kill an entire world. I knew you had it in you, my bride ...." "There is a gasping, mocking laughter. "Think of it as part of your dowry. A small price ... to pay ... Your ... submission will be worth a ... small world ..."

"Saber!" Saber blinks out the blood from her eyes, and sees Rin about to run towards her. Sakura is
holding her back with an arm.

"N-no ..." Saber coughs. "Both of you ... stay back ..."

And then, she sees it. There is a flash of golden light. Just one this time. Gilgamesh is still standing. One of his arms is gone, severed from below the elbow joint. It is bleeding, but ... not as much as she would have liked. She can tell it's affecting him. His shoulders are hunched, and his body language tense. But he's smiling. It is a twisted smile. His red eyes are wide and glittering. She remembers some of her days, hunting, so long ago. Some beasts, when they are bloodied cower back, or fight with desperation. Some give up and lie in the dirt, and others call out in fear and rage.

But some, she recalls ... some smell their own blood, their own essence ... and are aroused by it. Some beasts are brought to the height of frenzy at realizing their mortality, and wish to do nothing more than respond in kind to those that attacked it in the first place. It is this image in particular, combined with the rotating item in Gilgamesh's remaining hand, a golden key rotating with red glyphs, that feels the entirety of Saber's battered consciousness.

"I'm sure ..." Gilgamesh says, glancing briefly at his recent stump, shaking his head. "I have something .... somewhere .... that can bring back a limb. Snakes shed their skin ... and reptiles .... regain their limbs ...." The white of his long teeth remind her of fangs longer than even that of a vampire's underneath the madness of his crimson gaze. "A flesh wound, I believe your former vassals would have called it. I'm pleased .... my bride has bite ... but ... I feel like I must respond in turn ... A pity, Saber." He says, as red energies, form around a coalescing black pillar. Saber has no other word for it. It is a wound, a slash in reality itself. Even the golden glow of Avalon around her barely keeps her senses from reeling away from the primordial madness coming into non-being in Gilgamesh's hand. "That wasn't my dominant hand, my little *bitch.*"

"O-oh god ..." Rin gasps. "What is ..."

"The darkness ..." Sakura whimpers, in obvious distress.

"Rin. Sakura ..." Saber manages to shout, coughing a little more blood out of her lungs, realizing now, that this is Gilgamesh's true Noble Phantasm, one of the most terrifying things she has ever seen. "Run ..."

"E-numa ..." Gilgamesh enunciates, moving his blade back, ancient chaos from the dawn of existence growing around him, in front of him ...

Saber comes up to one knee, drawing on the energies of Avalon, of Excalibur, holding it up in front of her. "Ex-cali ..."

"Elish!" The King of Heroes screams as a pillar of black and red erupts from the rotating thing in his hand, until all light in Saber's eyes and consciousness is swallowed by pure darkness and the hell that exists underneath all things.

* 

Kiritsugu delves deep into the inhuman nature of his being, past the mask of the Magus Killer, and right into the unfeeling heart of a vampire -- detaching his mind from the entire situation -- so that he can actually assess the situation itself. It's hard. It would have been hard even if he had still been alive. There is a growl forming in the back of his throat, feeling parched even though he had fed from his blood packs well before this point so as not to complicate this situation any further than it already had to be. But it's not hunger making his vision red, or the twisted magic emanating from this cursed place.
It's rage. Pure, unadulterated rage.

As of yet, however, it is a cold anger. It is detached, analyzing, assessing the territory, and his opponent. His fury is building itself up: ready to exploit an opening, a weakness, in a concentrated blast of terminating power. Shirou is somehow still surrounded by the glow of Avalon, or something approximating it. If Archer is anything to go by, then Kiritsugu knows it's possible that Shirou is using a copy of Avalon, even though Saber has the original. It's the only thing keeping him alive. He knows this. He recalls it forming in the skies, and raining down, igniting into flame. He can see Shirou's exposed flesh knitting together, and being eaten away ... over and again ... He feels the blood running down his lip from where he was biting it.

And Illya ... She had been made to be part of the Grail system, a ... Justeaze-model homunculus created as the Lesser Grail to interface with the Greater Grail System, a part of its design. He thinks about her mother, Iri, having absorbed five Servants herself. Either more Servants had died at this point, which was more than entirely possible, or Kotomine -- with his Command Spells and his mastery of Spiritual Healing, which Kiritsugu recalls all too well from his dossier on the man from before the Fourth War -- converted her into the system prematurely. There is no recognition in her glazed, red eyes. No thought. Nothing. She isn't even a golden cup. She looks barely older than when he last held her, ten years ago, but he can see a little development around her mouth and eyes. Even the way she walked before, when he managed to view her and Berserker through his familiars, had the bearing of an adult. This is the closest he has physically been to her in a long time. Now, she looks just like a doll, worse than when he first met her mother in their Grandfather's Workshop.

The black ichor from the pillar above and its dark sun is using her as a Vessel, as a thing. And the man responsible for taking her here, for doing this to his little girl, is standing right in front of him.

The Magus Killer isn't stupid. He knows Kotomine did this, specifically, to hurt him. To distract him. They pace around each other, each one discern rying to what the other will do next. Obviously, the priest has some influence over the cursed mud, this amalgamation of all the waste of humanity's sins made incarnate. Or, perhaps it has sympathy with the man's actual nature.

But the man even looks younger. Is it possible, when the Grail presumably resurrected the priest from the gunshot wound through his heart, that it found a way to rejuvenate him as well? Perhaps it also gave him a growth spurt, or at least the Master-Servant connection may have done so. In his last days, Kiritsugu had done some brief study on the possible effects of a bond with a powerful spiritual familiar on a young or growing magus. Certainly, Lord El-Melloi II had grown very tall himself, and if Archer as a future incarnation of Shirou had been any indication, there seemed to be some correlation there. But the Grail do anything else to Kotomine?

Kiritsugu knows this isn't a good situation. Even without ... what this bastard was doing to his children as a factor, he sees Kotomine is at the peak of his fighting ability: back when he last fought him. At the very least, his youth has been returned to him by the Grail, or other means. Ordinarily, Kiritsugu knows with access to his Time magecraft and his vampiric reflexes, he could make up for that. But there is also the fact that Kotomine was an Executor: a man trained specifically by the Holy Church to hunt vampires since he was ten years old. He has Black Keys that can negate his regenerative abilities. Black Keys that he threw at him, around him, in their last fight that either would have pinned or sliced into him if he tried to dodge the priest's martial arts ... or kept his zone of evasion limited as one of the man's Reinforced punches obliterated his skull. It explained so much: just how Kotomine had been able to use an Art that caused only internal organ damage, to kill other Dead Apostles: using the Keys to pin them and temporarily revert their Curse of Restoration, their healing, just enough to destroy their brains, and end them permanently. He also potentially has holy water that can do something similar, and even corrode his body such as it is. And if he can pin him down, and use his Baptism Rite ... The link between his own soul and his dead animated body could
be compromised. That had been the plan against Matou Zouken, in luring the monstrous ancient so close to the Church on the Hill, to get Kotomine to eliminate one of their problems.

And those same skills, and resources, could actually kill Kiritsugu too at close range.

What's more is that Kotomine knows how Kiritsugu fights. The Magus Killer is sure as hell the priest remembers their entire exchange. He knows about the Time magecraft, which is why he chose this place to manifest the Grail out of anywhere, so that he could take away that advantage. He is aware of the Origin Bullets, and probably intuited that if they could negate Command Spells, they would do worse damage to Magic Circuits: if the priest even used his own magecraft. And he doesn't even know what Kotomine can do with the mud.

Perhaps if the Bounded Field in the cave were down, or compromised, Kiritsugu would have more options. Even so, he isn't helpless. He is still a vampire. He has his reflexes. He can sense Kotomine's bodily functions, and his Command Spells. The mud hadn't even moved fast. It was only like El-Melloi's Mystic Code in that one instance. If Kiritsugu can just use the rest of his arsenal on the priest, negate his Command Spells, destroy his Circuits, or successfully hit his head or chest, he would be finished. At the very least, he noticed that when the tendril of mud had connected to his Origin Bullet, it had dissipated too.

No. Kiritsugu needs to maintain his distance. He can read the other's body language. He is looks patient. Confident. Perhaps too confident. He's just waiting. Back in the Fourth War, he hadn't known what Kotomine's goals had been, but now he realizes that what he's facing is a sadist: in this case, a psychopath who utterly gets off from causing people pain and suffering. Perhaps there is more, but that is irrelevant to him. No, he knows Kotomine wants to manifest the corrupted Grail, and end the world. He recalls the wish of the man, when Angra Mainyu let them both see what it could offer them.

Kotomine wants to use his children to make him make a mistake out of rage, or desperation. To make him suffer ... and then end him. He just needs to wait for an opening, or an opportunity. And then, he will terminate him: him and this entire wretched nightmare once and for all.

* *

Kotomine Kirei watches Emiya Kiritsugu casually pacing around the other, the warmth of the Greater Grail bathing him in comfort and promises of the glory that is to come. Aside from that opening volley, most likely to attempt to either instantly eliminate him, or test out of his defenses, the Magus Killer is simply on alert, observing him with those new ruby-red eyes of his. It's enough to make Kotomine sick, really. He'd no intention, initially, of regaining his youth, or retaining his life beyond its normal span. That was for scum like Zouken, and other heretics to worry over.

But when he heard the news, that Emiya Kiritsugu ... still existed, he knew. He knew he had to be at his best. He and Gilgamesh had talked at length about many matters throughout the years, when the King of Heroes deigned to visit the Church from his travels, before this final confrontation: the finale to their play. He recalls how the King of Heroes told him about his myth, about seeking immortality, and how while the texts of the world -- those that remained -- said he failed in his quest to achieve it, he actually succeeded later. Only, Gilgamesh hadn't found immortality. Rather, he'd found youth. Eternal youth.

The King of Heroes had summoned the potion from within the confines of the Gate of Babylon, and Kotomine had a sip. Merely one sip. Aches, and pains had buzzed in his muscles and tendons, then vanished entirely. His eye sight became clearer, his breaths more sure. Even his posture had changed and straightened itself out. It hadn't been much of a change, as he hadn't been too old, but he can feel the distinction that can make all the difference between life and death in a fight such as the one that is
about to unfold. Yet he made his deal with the King of Heroes -- for this opportunity -- and, if nothing else, he intends to more than deliver on his promise. They will both get the show that they wanted, despite the last minute revisions to this conclusion of his final folio.

He recalls his last fight with Emiya, all too well. The man ... when he was a man, possesses Innate Time Control due to an internalized Bounded Field in his body, one gun with regular bullets, and another Mystic Code that targets Magic Circuits: something only confirmed to him by the other's father. Now, knowing what he does from the Magus Killer's father, he realizes the other once had a Noble Phantasm from the King of Knights that allowed him to regenerate. But he doesn't have it, or his link, with his former Servant anymore. Instead, as a vampire he possesses accelerated reflexes and healing from his Curse of Restoration.

Kotomine knows that his Keys of Providence would be enough to pin him, to even make him take damage and wounds like a normal man. Without Saber's Noble Phantasm, Kiritsugu's head and heart are vulnerable points. Kotomine has already strengthened himself with Command Spells and Reinforcement to fight on the level of a Dead Apostle, which Emiya wasn't even at if he was still taking orders from his father, and creator. Under ordinary circumstances, the vampire that was once Emiya Kiritsugu would have been far more powerful than him. But between the Bounded Field of the Grail interfering with his own internal Field, and his own Keys and Baptism Rite, along with the curses of the Grail at his side, the Magus Killer is at a tremendous disadvantage, and he knows it.

However, despite what Emiya Norikata also told him -- leading him to this current strategy -- he doesn't underestimate the Magus Killer. He knows the other must have other weapons or resources since their last meeting. He doesn't trust the Dead Apostle, and he trusts Emiya Kiritsugu even less.

Kotomine could end this even sooner. He could just threaten the life of the boy. Poor Emiya Shirou. The boy is a being that could only find fulfillment in a certain function: one moral action. Just like himself, but in opposition. If Kotomine were to be honest with himself, he actually looked forward to fighting Emiya Shirou, to see his determination, to witness his skills forming, to watch to him attempt a wish for the greater good on a tainted artifact, or to die in the process of realizing everything he fought for had been a lie. Or, if that hadn't happened, perhaps watching his own Servant turn on him -- his father's Servant -- when he got in the way of her adamant wish to use the Grail. Or maybe seeing the boy compromise his own ideals, perhaps even ... change, as Kotomine himself had failed to do, by forcing Saber to bathe in the mud of the Grail and incarnate ... just so he wouldn't lose her. One had to be deaf, dumb, and blind not to see the boy had feelings for the Servant, and that they were reciprocated. Kotomine never felt such emotions, not in the same way, but he could understand them.

Instead, Emiya Shirou had practically avoided him for the entire War up until this point. Saber herself seemed to no longer be fighting to get at the Grail. All of these alliances had formed between the Tohsaka, the Matou, and the Einzbern girls with the boy. Of course, he figured out soon enough when Emiya Norikata had told him enough. The Magus Killer had been interfering with his play, he and his father.

Kotomine finds himself almost feeling ... regret. He actually likes the boy. He had seen him, and his actions. If everything had gone according to plan, such as it was, they would have faced each other: both of them more alike than his adopted father had ever been. But the continued existence of Emiya Kiritsugu, of this thing that walked in his shape takes precedence over any other personal pleasure of indulgence he might have. This is duty. This is destiny. The creature must be destroyed. Yes, he could kill Emiya Shirou right now. He could stomp right on his head and kill him instantly. He could threaten his life. There was no point in offering to spare the homunculus, as her father -- her Magus Killer father -- knew she was a necessary part of the Grail, and Kotomine would not give her up for anything at this point. But he could threaten the boy's life. He could tell Emiya that he would let him
go, even heal him, if he just surrendered, if he just turned his gun on his own heart this time, or his brain, and killed himself.

But Kotomine knows how anticlimactic that would be in the grand scheme of things, what was left of such at this point anyway. Gilgamesh would never forgive him for something so crass: a novice's mistake. He can see, aside from the trail of blood down the Magus Killer's lip, that same impassive mask as ten years ago. Besides, he wouldn't even believe him if he made the offer. Kotomine knows he wouldn't in his place.

And even if that had been a viable option, it would too easy. Far too easy. Then Emiya Kiritsugu would have nothing left to lose. The homunculus is practically brain-dead now anyway, or lost in complete madness. It reminds him. It gives him an excellent starting sentence to his opening speech.

"I didn't kill you, after the War." He says, running with this thought. "And the reason is, at the time, there was nothing more I could do to you."

He smirks. He can't help it. The speech might be wasted on the Magus Killer. Certainly, it would not have been wasted on the boy. Such a shame, but he will not let his words to this final entry go to waste. Not for Emiya Kiritsugu. He gestures with his hands again, stained with blood. "You lost your accomplice. Your Servant. And ... your wife." Kotomine smiles. "Then, you killed all of those people. We killed them, together. When your wife died, when I snapped her neck with my own two hands ..." He shakes his head. "She told me that you wished for world peace, of all things."

Kotomine can't help it, as he laughs. He laughs almost as much as he had that day when he realized he still lived, and he saw Shinto burning. All because of him. All because of his wish. All because he realized what finally gave him true joy in the world. "You, a mass-murderer and assassin, doing all of this ... for the greater good? How ... crass. How utterly banal."

Then Kotomine's eyes narrow. Perhaps with the boy, he would have talked about the fascinating idea of something good and pure creating something so utterly abhorrent. Like his father, Risei, making him, and the Grail embodying All the World's Evil, while something truly beautiful can only be cherished when the maker and making of its purpose destroys it. He thinks about how he failed to kill his wife Claudia, who tried to make him see his purpose, and the vision of Emiya killing the image of his wife when he realized what the Grail had truly been. But there was no common ground between them. Certainly not now. "I was content to let a moral counterfeit like you live out the rest of your life, what was left of it, a broken man. To let you die in misery, and let you take as many people down with you into the depths as possible. Certainly, the boy was your best work. You really do destroy everything you touch, Emiya Kiritsugu."

It's a little petty, and Kotomine knows it. It's personal. Ad hominem attacks often are. But this is no fallacy. Kotomine has always prided himself, before and after his revelation from the Fourth War, on his ability and conviction to tell only the truth. He thinks about what he would have told the boy, what he would have expounded to Emiya Shirou. One of his greatest, truest, personal sermons. Instead, he improvises while also getting to the heart of the matter. "I'll save you the homily, except to say that I'm doing all of this not only to see why something like me exists, to see it be born writ large, but because I appreciate seeing -- overseeing -- everything taking its natural course. Doctrine teaches that Original Sin made the human condition, and sins have motivated humanity to pursue its dreams. The Grail is simply the inevitable result, the ultimate conclusion of this thesis. This is what humanity has truly wanted, from the very beginning, if you really think about. You, of all people, should know that the Grail only functions because of human motivations.

"There is a symmetry to all of this." Kotomine says. "Your daughter was always going to become the Grail. Your son is now returning to the mud that should have killed him ten years ago: that he knows, deep down, should have killed him with the rest of the people in that city. The Grail will
consume the world and every sinner in it, because of its own natural right to be born. But you." Kotomine glares at the vampire. "You aren't natural. You are a mockery. You pretend to be a natural born killer, when you just put on the mask for some arbitrary good that ultimately failed you. Failed everyone. And then, you have the audacity to embrace the Curse of Restoration, to become an undead abomination. You are against the natural order, the flow of things, Emiya Kiritsugu. Like Matou Zouken, you are an abomination that deserves to be exterminated."

This time, Kotomine doesn't even try to keep it back. He is feeling this emotion, more hotly than he had even before getting shot in the heart by this same man. It is intense hatred. Hate for this ... thing in front of him that dared to act like him, to pretend to be like him, to be brought back to life as if to mirror the process of the Grail resurrecting him for this true purpose. This blood-sucker. This ... parasite. "But I won't kill you. Not yet. First, I will make you bear witness to your sins, and hypocrisy. I will beat you within an inch of your existence. Then, I will make you watch me kill your son. I will let your daughter become the Grail, and let it come into the world. And only when Angra Mainyu manifests itself, spreading everywhere ... only then, will I let you die." Kotomine grits his teeth, his hands reaching into his cassock. "The King of Heroes likes to call your son a Faker. But you are the true fake, Emiya Kiritsugu. Sending others to fight and die for you. Hiding in the shadows, drinking the blood of living men. Attempting to stop the natural flow of things. But you are pathetic! Truly." He spits. "I'm going to enjoy tearing you apart."

There is a long silence in the throbbing darkness of the cave. Finally, the wraith that was Emiya Kiritsugu shakes its head. "You talk too much."

Then, the Magus Killer raises his guns, and opens fire. Kotomine Kirei grins as the tides of Angra Mainyu, its mud rise around him, and brings his Black Keys out of his pockets, materializing their blades.

And the battle finally begins.

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted to do this justice. I know a lot of stuff didn't really happen, aside from the battle that Saber is having with Gilgamesh. I thought just having her instant kill him with the sacrifice of Rider and Lancer, because we have all seen the fight between Gilgamesh and Saber before. I didn't want to rehash it. But the King of Heroes deserves better, and I really wanted to show just how sadistic he and Kotomine are in this context as you will hopefully see in the upcoming chapters of this fic.

The shield Gilgamesh summons is, or is a godly prototype to, Achilles' Shield: an ekphrasis -- which is a rhetorical device in ancient Greek poetry that provides a visual description in grand and dramatic detail. The shield itself was given to Achilles by his mother Thetis and made by Hephaestus when Patroclus died by Hector's hand in Achilles' original armour. I saw that Apocrypha Achilles doesn't have this Shield which was described in The Iliad as a animated microcosm of worlds. Now, Gilgamesh can't utilize the specific powers of other Noble Phantasms aside from some passive ones, and his own Enkidu and Ea, as far as I understand the matter.

Perhaps Achilles could have utilized it as a Bounded Field or even a Reality Marble, but Gilgamesh uses it -- or perhaps a prototype of it from the Sumerian deities -- to save his own life at the last minute. Can Excalibur, an Anti-Fortress Noble Phantasm made by
the Fae destroy the work of a god? I don't really know. I would argue, if I had to, that
the Sword was created by the World itself, and supersedes something made by a god: if
only barely, especially if said artifact weren't being used by its intended owner. I thought
of having Gilgamesh using a version of Rho Aias, but it might have actually saved itself
and his arm. I wanted *something* to have come from Lancer and Rider's sacrifices.
And Gilgamesh sacrificing a small world, even a mimicry, to stop Saber and save
himself seemed very appropriate and in keeping with the character.

But now, there is all this build up. I can't tell you how hard it was to come up with
Kotomine's The Reason You Suck. His and Kiritsugu's original confrontation was so
beautiful because of what they *didn't* have to say to each other. They just fought.
They fought to kill. Granted, Kotomine has had ten years to think about this. And I
couldn't not say anything. And then thinking about what he would say, what he would
*want* to say, and what he does say .... It was so hard. But once I got that opening
sentence ... It was all Kotomine from there.

Now I just have to figure out how they fight, even as I more or less know how
everything is about to go down. And go down hard. Thanks for reading everyone.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Distance is the key.

Kiritsugu focuses fire with his Calico and his Contender. A rapid series of bullets from the former, and a steady one shot from the latter barrage the priest in his circle of cursed mud. The Magus Killer immediately picks up on another detail as they begin their exchange. The mud isn't surrounding Kotomine entirely. It actually seems to take some cognition on the other's part to form the tendrils, not at all like the semi-autonomous response of El-Melloi's Mystic Code: a bad analogy in retrospect.

At the moment, the priest's Black Keys are out meeting every single one of his shots, deflecting the bullets. It doesn't surprise Kiritsugu. Even with the modifications he made to the weapons to keep up with his accelerated reflexes -- both with his usual Time magecraft and his vampiric reflexes -- the priest had been trained specifically to counter such things, most likely through sheer martial concentration, and his own augmented senses. But Kiritsugu does not want those blades anywhere near him. He is more concerned about the Black Keys than he is about the mud. The mud itself flings itself at him with each kick from Kotomine. It makes sense that he can't use both holy Conceptual items and something profane as these liquid curses with the same hands.

He avoids the mud for the most part, though parts of it splatter on his trench coat, hissing their silent blasphemies. Even some of the substance hits his skin, countering his Curse of Restoration, reminding his dead flesh of what it was before the corruption ever encountered it. Even the images that flash through his mind aren't enough to deter him.

Five hundred people in Shinto, screaming and burning as a dark sun opens above their heads, raining black ichor and fire down on them ... All of it from two Command Spells on the back of his hand, Saber obliterating the golden cup, spilling hell and damnation, as he searches for anyone ... anyone to save from his incredible folly ...

Kiritsugu had lived those memories, through his cursed last six years of mortal life, and post-traumatic stress. There is nothing Angra Mainyu can show him now. Not all the rape, rapine, murder, torture, plague, disease, insanity, fear, sadness, despair, and hatred of human kind that he'd seen and attempted to exterminate in all his years as the Magus Killer. Not killing his own father, who brought him back as a monster. Not all the collateral damage he accrued on innocents when destroying the truly evil. Not killing Natalia Kaminsky, the woman who trained and loved him as though he were part of her own flesh. Not abandoning Illya to her Clan and their experiments. Not using Maiya to ease himself into the inevitable betrayal of contributing to Iri's death. Not the despair of realizing his own daughter would be turned into a monster, against him, thinking he had left her. Not even leaving Shirou with an ideal that would threaten to destroy his spirit.

The crimes of the distant and recent past, the revelations of what he had really done, even years after his mortal demise, do not faze him. He can't afford to let them. He and Norikata went over this. After further analysis, the elder Emiya determined that there were vestiges of Angra Mainyu's curses in Kiritsugu, but if anything the vampiric Curse of Restoration co-opted them, these remnants of a dead man's sins, granting him great resistance to their full spiritual effects. Like a disease one suffered before antibodies developed in one's system to make sure the host never gets attacked the same way again.
And he suspects, as a Spiritual Doctor intimate with Angra Mainyu, that Kotomine knows this too. This is just to slow him down. Perhaps even to hold him.

He fires two more Origin Bullets from his Contender in his other hand. He's not moving as fast as he could if were simply able to utilize his Time magecraft, but he's still charged in his very cells by the full moon and the presence of his father's blood nearby. He should be able to take more damage, and regenerate far more quickly than usual. Two globs of curses cease to exist, while also neutralizing the Bullets. Just twenty-six of his Origin Bullets left now: of the original sixty-six that he and Maiya had hidden, and gathered together. He hadn't even used all of them during the Fourth War, having only twelve and then ten towards the end, but had retrieved all of them from the old storehouses they once kept as they waited for the Fifth to occur.

He can't let the mud restrain him, but he needs these bullets to neutralize the Black Keys. Kotomine's martial arts can damage his internal organs, but as a vampire that means very little: save that he needed to make sure the priest didn't pulverize his heart, and his skull housing his brain. Just as quickly, he raises his Contender, shattering a series of Black Keys flying at him with one more Bullet.

Kiritsugu also knows, as he watches Kotomine retrieve another collection of handles, materializing them into one of his hands as blades, that his ordinary bullets have already outlived their usefulness. He needs to get Kotomine to spend more Command Spells. He can see them, on his body, glowing with a warmth independent of his Magic Circuits. Ten Command glyphs on his arms altogether: including the three he most likely retained as Gilgamesh's Master.

He's been mentally counting the number of bullets he's used from his Calico. So far he's used twenty of his 9mm cartridges. His Contender can only fire one Bullet, at a time, though it is capable of firing .30-06 Springfield bullets at a force strong enough to pierce through anything short of a military grade armour, or an armoured vehicle. So far, his vampiric reflexes, and Kotomine toying with him has allowed him to hide behind rock outcroppings to reload, and fire his Origin Bullets against the mud projectiles and Black Keys alone.

But now that he's fired twenty bullets from his Calico, that might make the difference. At the moment, he doesn't need those piercing rounds. He needs something else he's been working on.

Kiritsugu breathes out air that he no longer needs from dead lungs, more of a focus than a necessity, and releases a stream of his new bullets at his enemy.

*  

Kotomine lets his opponent keep his space, hiding when he can, avoiding and obliterating the mud from the Grail. He lets the creature that was the Magus Killer slink away, wasting his rounds in a futile gesture to prolong the inevitable. There is a pain in one of his arms. It is ... considerable, but it doesn't distract him as he realizes it's not his own.

For a few moments, throwing the blessing of Angra Mainyu at the Magus Killer with his feet, the warmth suffusing him with its blissful glory as it baptizes his shoes and legs, he considers asking Gilgamesh if he needs a Command Spell. But when he feels the ravenous fury, and mad pleasure of the other through their bond, a sadistic need to put something, or someone, brutally in their place, he decides against it. It did feel like a considerable wound, but the King of Heroes shouldn't be in too much danger. Even the prana he's drawing from him, from this distance, isn't much: considering how he fed him with the agony of those mummified orphans from the Fire. It's a pity, in some ways, as Kotomine wonders if Gilgamesh can enjoy the show he's putting on for him through all that divine fury he's experiencing at the moment, and the sensation of a primordial force of destruction being unleashed in punitive response.
No matter. Kotomine remembers their arrangement. He will only use Command Seals on Gilgamesh if a Servant threatens him personally. No more, and no less.

In the meantime, Emiya is firing another round of bullets from his submachine gun. He really isn't moving as fast as he once did. Of course, Angra Mainyu's co-opting of the Greater Grail's Bounded Field is interfering with another other Bounded Field-based magecraft: making it impossible, or at least extremely difficult to utilize. He throws another batch of his Keys of Providence. It's true that the Magus Killer had not, nor never been, a God-fearing man -- probably not even a Catholic one -- in his life, but Kotomine believes more than enough for the two of them to make his Keys effective.

It's true. Kotomine does believe in God. Who else would have created someone like him who could only feel pleasure or accomplishment from observing, and inflicting, suffering? What other omnipotent and omniscient being, in the act of creating freewill, would make Lucifer, would guide and allow the corruption of the Archangel that would become the Devil? Or make humanity who, in turn, would embrace, inflict, and secrete Sin onto the world? Everything has an Alpha and an Omega. The magi that made Heaven's Feel, and the Grail, should have known that something that could potentially become the ultimate wish-granting artifact in this material world would, and could, reflect all the Sin of humanity's dreams in its depths, that is it simply a macrocosm of the lesser vessels of sin that were human beings. Perhaps this is just one tool in the Lord's arsenal, now, in their corrupted world to pronounce judgment: or bring it all to its natural state.

If anything, Kotomine's belief in the Lord and His plan has only been reaffirmed -- even reinforced -- after the events of ten years ago. There is no doubt now. No self-loathing. There is only the amusement, and the pleasure of seeing his role through to the end ... and making a counterfeit suffer as much as his disgusting body would allow.

The Keys miss Emiya Kiritsugu by a margin, but one slashes across his cheek: leaving a mark that takes a little while to realize that it shouldn't exist.

But then the submachine gun fires again and ...

Kotomine's eyes widen. The sound is different. There is something else in these new bullets. The bullets destroy the mud he kicks in front of himself, and Keys in his hands before he holds up his forearms, letting his Kevlar Reinforced sleeves deflect them. He calls on two Command Spells. His Keys swell, becoming makeshift shields as they had all those years ago before they dissipate, even as they shatter, another spray hits his sleeves directly. The priest grits his teeth in fury as he spends another Seal, keeping the Bullet from disrupting the Reinforcement around his vestment.

He jumps away from the Magus Killer, and further sprays of Bullets. More them. The Apostle told him he only had a limited amount! Again, no matter. Kotomine isn't amused anymore. The priest snarls, and kicks out his leg. The globs of Angra Mainyu miss the Magus Killer, but he isn't aiming for him directly. He knows the vampire is focusing on his bodily rhythms, using his kind's senses to see his heat signature and Seals. But just how far does his situational awareness span?

A tide of curses surges up behind Emiya Kiritsugu, a small tidal wave of hissing, moaning death. The vampire barely rolls out of the way in time as the dark tide surges down where he once stood. Kotomine kicks out his leg, to create another wave in the pool of darkness where they dance. It temporarily submerges the boy, causing him to gurgle in obvious distress, only making Kotomine grin more fiercely.

Once, he thought he had to physically touch or throw the mud to make this attack work. But it seems that since that time, from the Fourth War, and due to his ... modifications on the catatonic homunculus that the mud had sympathy, even synchronicity with his own movements and intent. He already knows Angra Mainyu detests Emiya for rejecting it, for surviving the curses of its grudges. It
wants his soul badly. And he is happy to oblige it.

He has eight Command Spells left. The same number he had years ago. He just needs to guide Emiya Kiritsugu towards him, as the dark shepherd that he truly is towards all wayward souls. Another wave, and then he will be ready. To finish this.

*

New Origin Bullets.

It wouldn't have been possible when Kiritsugu lived. Natalia had powdered two of his lowest ribs to make his crystallized curses. Kiritsugu recalls the six years of preparation after his father revived him. He remembers the two of them, under the Edelfelt Mansion, right before the light of a few full moons, performing surgery on his body. It hurt, a lot, to cut himself open, and extricate more pieces of his upper ribs to powder into the ammunition for new Bullets. But between the sympathetic quality he had with his father's blood, and the power of the full moons, his ribs had regenerated as though they had never been taken apart.

Theoretically, they could have made an infinite number of these, but there are only so many he could conceivably carry or use. And undead, at least at this stage, didn't make him resistant to pain, or the needs of a vast quantity of blood that was required to maintain his form after something so invasive. There was not nearly enough blood in the blood banks of Fuyuki, nor enough criminals that anyone would miss to meet that quota.

He sees two of the priest's Command Seals dissipate from his efforts ... even as something dark surges around his feet, and behind him ...

It doesn't escape Kiritsugu's notice that the waves move with the sweeps of Kotomine's stained legs. Or that Shirou is screaming, and choking, on the muck flowing over his face. Dammit ...

More of his new Bullets are being spent against the tides, keeping them back, letting them only sting his dead flesh and tatter his coat ...

Just as the priest is closing in on him ...

Kiritsugu holsters the Contender, forcing blood to flow through his hand, elongating his fingers, his fingernails, turning them into claws ... just as his father taught him, just he had practiced all these years ...

They slash against Kotomine's Black Keys, hissing and smoking. He sees blue flames playing across his altered joints. The arid smell of his burning flesh is nauseating, even as some animal part of him screams away from it, his undead flesh and being wanting to crawl away from this ... They exchange blows. The priest is close. Too close.

He leaps back and slashes his hand down, firing more Bullets with his Calico even as a Key stabs into it, knocking it out of his hand.

The Keys in Kotomine's hand are also fracturing. When Norikata taught him this limited form of shape-changing, he changed his fingernails to more than just extensions of what they were, but increased calcium and bone growth through the claws. His Severing and Binding Origin is more than just in his Bullets. They are in his being. They are like daggers made of his own personal curse, affecting anything magical they come into contact with.

Kotomine seems to see this as well, and leaps back, throwing more mud between them and Keys. Kiritsugu's hand hurts. Badly. The cuts on his skin, the burns, are healing even more slowly. If it
hadn't been for the full moon, he isn't even sure they would heal at all. Now that his Calico is gone, and knowing the element of surprise is over now. He focuses the blood, and changes, excruciatingly, his other hand into a bone-claw. Then with all of his power, he charges forward.

His claws slash through the mud, dissipating it. It hurts. It burns more than it did. But the blades aren't in him. If he can slash Kotomine, he can kill him. Perhaps against normal vampiric transformations, those vestments could remain resistant. But with Kiritsugu's Binding and Severing, he would at least have to utilize more Command Seals to save himself. Kiritsugu's mouth opens, revealing his fangs, as they also elongate by their own accord. They are the same material as his claws. He needs to end this.

He needs to end this now.

* Kotomine lets Kiritsugu lunge towards him, holding the empty handles of his Keys of Providence. He doesn't activate them. He kicks out and tries to tangle Kiritsugu in another tide of curses, disrupting his angle at him. But the Magus Killer leaps over it, utilizing his full vampiric reflexes and speed. Then claws and one set of Black Keys meet again. Sacraments and mutated vampiric bone burn.

The priest looks at the glowing red eyes of his undead opponent. Then, exhaling with the lung capacity long trained into his muscle memory, he spits into the Magus Killer's face.

The effect is almost instantaneous.

Kiritsugu's face erupts into blue flame. The vampire can't help it. He screams. His vampiric nature screams in the agony of being reverted back to a life it shouldn't possess, to a holiness and wholeness to which it can no longer coexist. Kotomine had been drinking holy water the entire day, before this point. Preparing for it. Hoping for it. Sacramental wine, prepared and blessed, by the Holy Church could have been just as effective, but one needed to be sober to deal with one set of spirits over another. The Magus Killer snarls, slashing his claws, rubbing at his ruined face, his flesh forgetting it could regenerate for a moment. It won't take long for it to recall itself being whole. But Kotomine doesn't need long. He breathes in, taking on his Bajiquan stance, before going in for the kill.

He grabs the other's attacking forearm from below, carrying it up, breaking it through his sheer strength and hold. As the bone cracks, he moves his face below, pressing his side to the Magus Killer's waist, then smashing his elbow into the other's heart, and sweeping his leg into the other's supporting leg. Blood splatters out of Emiya's fanged mouth. Kotomine knows the blow to the heart isn't enough to kill the vampire, but it has disrupted his Circuits. And he has knocked him down.

The Magus Killer falls under Kotomine's shoe, burned and broken, into the mud covering him. It flows over him in steaming streams. Six Grand Opening - Elbow Upright. Kotomine exhalates, materializing the Black Keys in his other hand. He points them at the Magus Killer gasping underneath him, under the mud, trying to struggle ...

The priest doesn't give him a chance, smiling viciously, as he lunges down ...

And stabs him through the chest.

* Emiya Norikata can feel the blows and exertions of his son through their bond.

The other is keeping the priest busy, as planned. The air around the source of the Greater Grail, the
crater itself, is heavier. The corrupted life emanating from here, traveling through its phallic tower to the dark sphere above is both oppressive and, somehow, utterly invigorating. Either way, the power here threatens to be overwhelming even to the Dead Apostle.

He thinks, through the tide of curses, that he can make out the seals of the modified homunculus Magic Circuits that make up this entire structure. It is a form of hybrid magecraft, if he really thinks about it. It's a combination of the geomantic power of the land, which is Tohsaka Jewel craft writ large, the artificial Circuits of fine Einzbern homunculi craftsmanship ...

And, more importantly for Norikata's purposes, it possesses something similar to the absorption crests of the Makiri. The seals around the System would probably only recognize its three creators, assuming Angra Mainyu hadn't overridden those protocols. Similar to Crest Worms. To Magic Crests. To Command Seals ...

The Dead Apostle opens up his Magic Circuits, channeling his Od into the object in the palm of his hand before he realizes ....

Fingernails charring ... Agony on his face ... Burning on his skin ... Blades shoved into his chest, into his body, not able to scream ...

Kiritsugu ...

Then mud bursts up from the pit, fountaining upwards. Before he can do anything, even scream, Emiya Norikata is covered by the ichor of Angra Mainyu, into its sudden eruption of hatred crashes down ...

And draws him deep into its depths.

Chapter End Notes

I do not know if I did this any justice.

It's frustrating in a lot of ways. As I wrote this part, I had to leave it part way through as I just couldn't write it on my parents' old Vista PC anymore. It took a lot of concentration even to do less than this.

And we aren't even going into the fight.

I find that breaking up action with dialogue helps it flow a lot better. But Kiritsugu and Kirei's last duel had literally no dialogue in it. They just went at each other. It also didn't help that my laptop has Windows 10 now and it closed all my tabs when I went AFK for a bit, and didn't even save the text I Copy/Pasted just in case. I was kind of pissed off. I won't lie.

But if there are issues with this chapter, it's not because of that. I took liberties with how Origin Bullets work. How they might interact with Black Keys. I also am not a gun-nut or expert. Perhaps Kiritsugu wouldn't have fought the way he did here. Maybe he would have gone all out earlier, or committed to another strategy. Likewise with Kotomine. But yeah. So many things went down here. And it took a lot of attention. I'm kind of tired, to be honest. But I wanted to finish what I started with this chapter.
I hope, if nothing else, it was at least entertaining. Next time ... we will just have to see how this all resolves itself. Take care everyone.
For the next few moments, seconds, minutes, centuries ... Saber is pain.

She is face first, in the dirt. Every part of her body, of her being, is in agony. The King of Knights can feel Avalon, of course: its golden energies working through her like Fae stitches, like elemental sutures ... Somehow, she knows that Gilgamesh's attack wasn't even at full power. It hadn't been the extent of his strength, and that wasn't even due to the wound she inflicted on him.

He chose to blast her with that amount of power. He did this, specifically, to hurt her. To make her suffer.

"I see you are awake, my bride."

Her breath is knocked out of her limbs as a boot smashes into her ribs, crushing them. Saber coughs, the metallic taste of blood filling her mouth again. She rolls over with the blow, onto her side, and sees the extent of the rest of the damage. Shirou's house is ... it's gone. Pieces of it remain, including what's left of the storage hut where she first appeared to him, all that time ago ... saving him from Lancer ... But that's not what concerns her.

A boot kicks her in the face, shattering her cheekbone. Then it kicks her in the ribs. Again. Red fills one part of Saber's blurred vision.

"I have to admit." Gilgamesh says, above her as she hears him pace around her. "Your sheathe is an excellent treasure. I can damage you as much as I want, and you will still be pristine, good as new, after the fact."

Saber can barely bite back a scream as two blades stab into her legs, pinning her to the ground. She growls, in pain, into the seared ground. She can see her sword, inches away from her, lying there as it had been knocked out of her hands: when that primordial blast of darkness overcame the sacred power of Excalibur. Of herself. Then, Gilgamesh's knees fill in that space. She feels his gauntlet pull her hair, almost yanking it out of her scalp. It pulls her head up, and she sees him. He's still missing his arm, but the stump isn't bleeding anymore. He's smiling, his red eyes glittering down on her battered form.

"I hate to inform you, however." The King of Heroes sighs. "That someone has tarnished your sheathe. An item I would have gladly accepted as part of your dowry, into my Treasury. I cannot blame you for it." He watches her as she feels the tingling of Avalon regenerating her broken nose, straightening it out, repairing the dent in the bone underneath her eye. "You see, Saber. When I was ... born, the gods specifically made me so that I could lead humanity into the future. Even then, before I accepted my dominance over the Throne of Heroes, I had a certain foresight." He shakes his head. "I've always seen more than what is simply put in front of me."

He lets go of her hair, dropping her face back into the ground hard. She hears him walking away, but his voice carries over as she tries, equally as hard, to move. To get up. To take the blades out of her legs. "Take Kotomine for example. Kotomine Kirei. My jester." He laughs. "The man is the most entertaining individual I've seen in a while. When I showed him how to be his true self ... he has done nothing but entertain me. When he learned that that ... mongrel was still alive, no ... that thing worse than a mongrel. Lesser than an insect. Than dirt itself ... Yes. When he learned your former
Master still existed, like a blood-sucking worm in the filthy ground, he asked me a favour. He actually knelt. He sought supplication." There is another chuckle. "You have to understand, Saber, that for all the deference my jester showed me he never knelt to me before. He never went on his knees before me. He never ... begged."

Saber feels the blades vanish from her legs. The wounds begin to slowly heal from Avalon's glow. She grits her teeth, and pulls herself, slowly upward, to sit up ... to rest on her knees ...

Gilgamesh stands over her a few metres away, an odd reflective light in his eyes. "It was so unlike him ... until I found out what it was really about. That same mongrel ... he took you -- and the rest of my property -- from me, in that Fourth War. And because of that, and the fact that Kotomine was doing something new, I was sufficiently amused. And I granted him that favour. That boon of the King. I allowed him to take a decade off his life. But," he points at her, casually, "in exchange, I wanted to see ... what he would do. What he would do with what I had given him. You know, by now, how most magi can use a scrying spell to see through the eyes of their familiar. Well ..." He points at his own eyes. "I allowed Kotomine to cast a spell on me, before he left ... so that I could see through his eyes. He is my subject, after all ... my entertainer. My fool. It is only right."

"Is ... there a point to this ... prattle ... Gilgamesh?" Saber grits out, reaching for her blade.

Gilgamesh almost isn't looking at her, though she knows he's aware that she's reaching for her weapon. He simply doesn't care. "My point is that I have been having a grand show. While dealing with those other mongrels, during our own ... diversion, I've been watching Kotomine have fun. Oh ..." Gilgamesh shakes his head, a wry smile on his face. "You should see it, Saber. Your Faker of a Master. Your ... former anchor. It's pathetic, really."

A chill runs down Saber's spine that has nothing to do with gaping, bodily wounds that have long since sealed themselves up. "What ... what is he doing to him."

"Oh, I'd say he's going easy on your Faker." Gilgamesh sighs, more annoyed than anything else. "While he is teaching the Magus Killer his place, and converted the homunculus to her intended purpose, the boy? Well ... He's in the mud. Somehow, though ... I don't think he will have the strength to accept all the Evils of the World."

Saber's eyes narrow. She can see out of both of them now. Something cold slithers through her chest. Shirou. "You ... you bastards ..."

"The best part isn't that, however." Gilgamesh says. "It's that he somehow found the ability to ... copy," he spits out the word, "He is copying your Noble Phantasm. Instinctively, like some kind of lower form of Phantasmal Beast." She knows he can see her eyes widen. "Yes, Saber. He is counterfeiting your beloved Avalon to save his own, lesser form of life. It's amazing what pain and anguish can do to really drive someone to the heights of self-preservation. There is almost nothing more honest than that."

Avalon ... Shirou can Trace Avalon ... It makes sense to her. It's like when he Traced Caliburn against Berserker, with her at his side. But she isn't there right now. She isn't at the Temple with him. She should be there. She doesn't even have a connection -- her bond -- with him anymore. Caster severed it.

Her Master ... Shirou is lying in filth, in horror, that she can only imagine, and she is right here, not able to do anything about it. Fury burns through her. And ... and tears. No, she won't fail another person, another person who trusted her, who entrusted his life to her ... her friend ... her ...

"But, you don't need him anymore." Then, Gilgamesh steps aside, allowing Saber to see what is
behind him. Two forms lie on the ground, breathing shallowly. Their clothes are torn, and some of their skin is burned. But they live. It answers Saber's question. "Yes, Saber. I wasn't going to kill your new anchor. The Grail is ready enough for our purposes."

"Rin ..." She gasps out, using her sword to prop her back onto her feet, leaning on it like an invalid with a cane. "Sakura ..."

"As a gift to you, my bride. I have spared both of them. However ... as with my jester, you will give me something in return." He lifts Rin up with his sole hand, holding her battered form out in front of him like a trophy.

"Saber ...

"Rin ..." Saber tries to ready herself, to get her energy back, to ignore the trembling in her body.

"Saber ..." Rin coughs. "Don't ... don't listen to him ... By the power of my Command Seal --"

There is a thin sliver of light as Rin releases a gurgling scream. Blood flows out of her throat, her hands trying to stifle it, staining it a deeper red than her coat.

"Rin!" Saber shouts, horror filling her as she tries to lunge forward, and stumbles.

As she goes back down to one knee, she sees a golden needle materialize near Gilgamesh before it vanishes into a bright portal. "An acupuncture needle. From ancient India." Gilgamesh says, throwing Rin to the ground. "It won't kill her, but an anchor doesn't need vocal cords. Or ... come to think of it, most of her limbs."

"Neesan!" Sakura shrieks, crawling over to her sister. She puts her hands on her head. "Neesan ... hold on ..."

"You utter bastard!" Saber is seeing red, but not blood. Not her blood.

"It's simple." Gilgamesh says. "You are already on your knees. Agree to be my bride, and we will go to the Grail and I will incarnate you into this World. Forever. In exchange, I will let these two mongrel girls live. That is my gift to you, Saber. My generous offer."

"Hold still Neesan ..." Sakura whispers as power flows around her. "Please ...

"What do you say, Saber?" Gilgamesh holds out his hand. She notices, for the first time, that he doesn't have his Noble Phantasm with him anymore. "Do you accept my proposal?"

Rin growls from the ground, writhing, but glaring up at Gilgamesh ... pleading at Saber.

Don't.

Saber looks at Rin and Sakura, and back to Gilgamesh. She clenches her fists. "You cowardly, evil piece of shit ..."

"That is not the right answer, my Queen." Then he looks down at Sakura. "Did I give you permission to heal anyone, you piece of worthless mortal trash?"

Saber gets to her feet as Gilgamesh grabs Sakura by the neck. He's holding her up, choking her in his golden gauntlet. Rin looks up at this, her throat filled with blood and muffled screaming. Tears are forming at the corners of her eyes. Sakura's eyes widen as the air is choked out of her. She is kicking feebly.
"Don't do this, Gilgamesh." Saber whispers, lowering her head. She thinks about Sakura always coming over to Shirou's house. She thinks about her helping him cook a meal. She thinks about the sadness in her eyes when she saw her there, with her Senpai. She thinks about Rin teaching Shirou magecraft. About her tongue-lashing him, but the absolute care and fear in her eyes whenever she talked to the two of them. Saber remembers Archer standing at Rin's side, seen and unseen, but almost never leaving her. Their banter back and forth. She thinks of Rider: the silent Servant always at Sakura's side, ready to do and sacrifice anything for her. She isn't sure Archer would ever forgive her for letting this happen to Rin. She isn't sure, if Shirou survives, if she can somehow save him after all of this, she can look him in the eye and say she let Sakura die.

"Saber ..." Sakura gasps.

"That all depends on you, Saber." Gilgamesh replies. "I know beating you, as fun as it is, won't be enough to convince you to embrace my natural majesty. My divine right. I know you have a fondness for weakness, for protecting the lesser born, and their mewling, pathetic existences. If this is the only way I can get you to join me, I will kill a thousand of them. Millions, if need be. What is your response, Saber? I am getting bored."

"S-Saber ..." Sakura coughs out as the golden fist clenches more tightly around her throat. "S-senpai ... Senpai would never want you to ..."

The King of Heroes rolls his eyes. "You know, I can take parts off of your anchor. I really don't need this one. She's just a spare."

"NO!" Saber hollers, rushing forward with her sword, the distance feeling like it is leagues away, miles away ... rushing through an onslaught of golden weapons opening around them. She hears all of it. The exploding of the ground. The sound of metal slicing through the air. Rin's panicked, muffled screaming.

And the sickening crack of bone being broken.

Gilgamesh throws Sakura's limp body onto the dirt, kicking it away. Rin scrambles over to it, clawing through the mud, grabbing at her sister. Saber feels numb, almost not feeling the blades in her limbs. Rin holds Sakura's body. She's rocking back and forth, burying her face in her sister's clothes, onto her chest. Sobbing. Gilgamesh holds his weapon in his hand again.

"I can make this easier." He tells Saber through the blood pumping in her ears. "I can just kill that other girl right now. Between that filthy vampire blood you drank, and her, you would last the better part of a day. Think about that ..." He points his weapon at Rin. "Before I --"

Saber thinks about Sakura. About all of them. About all of them sitting around the dinner table together. She promised Shirou, promised herself, that she would protect them. So that they would all be together. So that this War wouldn't destroy their lives. So that they could still have a life after this. But through the despair, she feels Avalon glowing. It is still there. But hope, and eternity are mixed with something else.

With a bottomless anger. With an endless fury.

She can feel Rin opening her eyes, filled with tears, but colder than ice. She doesn't need a Command Seal. Saber can't help it. She is draining almost all of Rin's reserves now. Saber can feel the prana entering her. There is just a gaze of red and gold around her, more pronounced than all of Gilgamesh's armour and toys. There is no time. And time has just run out for her enemy. Out of the corner of her vision, she sees Rin roll away with Sakura's body, throwing herself on the other ... this monster that dares to call himself a hero, never mind their King. He's not fit to be King of
excrement.

Gilgamesh leaps back, his face contorted into a grinning fury.

"Euma Elish!" He hollers, the power of his Noble Phantasm bursting forward towards Saber.

"Excallili --" Saber screams, not even caring about her survival instincts. She strides forward, leaping after him, feeling the vortex of primordial energy from beyond time hitting her. First, she gathers and releases her energy into a powerful Mana Burst. Then, she lets Avalon surround her as the dark winds threaten to buffet her, to tear her part. A part of her mind recalls Merlin stating that Avalon is a Bounded Field, a representation of another realm beyond humanity, beyond mortals. A breeze in the wasteland of a time before gods and the miasma of hell underneath the World. She summons the Field around her, her Dragon Core throbbing in sympathy, cutting through the blast ... expending that last bit of energy, taking the rest of it into the point of her holy blade.

Rin. Sakura. Shirou ...

Gilgamesh backs away as the dark energies from his weapon are deflected in all directions, watching the burning skin of his rival, of his ... bride regenerating and coming apart, and regenerating again, almost threadbare but somehow more beautiful than anything in his life, short of one other person he beheld.

"Euma --" He begins.

".... burrrrrrrrrr ...." Saber finishes as she unleashes the energy from her sword, and lights the entire clearing in radiance.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this was brutal.

Damn. I almost ... feel bad about this. I was going to have this be one part, and have another segment in this same chapter, but Gilgamesh really ... took up this entire chapter with his monologue. I'm sorry to do that to Rin. I'm not even sure Command Seals need a verbal component, but even if they don't, his threat was clear.

And poor Sakura. After all of that ...

It's only now that I decided this fanfic needed a Graphic Violence tag, even though I'd written similar instances of this earlier. I'm also sure that there are all kinds of things wrong with this fight, about Ea needing to make Excalibur struggle more first. But ... you know? It was just time.

Things are not looking good for our heroes, are they? So enjoy, if that is the word, this chapter if you can. It's only fair given how long it took for the last one. Because, next time, we will be going to a whole other point of view. If only for a while.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There is something ...


His neck constricted, broken by rope. Blades piercing through his body, barely leaving the scraps of a corpse behind them.

But the gears still don't stop turning. They never stopped. They do not stop. They never will stop.

So many swords. So many blades of all kinds smash into the hulking monster. It's almost everything. It's almost his all. He could do more. He knows he can. But even now, proving the fierceness of his spirit for the first time in this entire debacle, now knowing who he is as much as anyone can in this life and the next, he can't find it in himself. As it is, even in this World, he is too slow. The cudgel roars forward, about to collide with his head for the last time.

Well, he tried. Even now, despite everything and on his own recognizance, he still can't bring himself to fight her, to leave her defenseless ...

He still can't bring himself to hurt her.

"Stop."

The fire and swords vanish. The fading cogs stop. As does the cudgel. Inches away from his blood-soaked face.

Through one good eye, he can see her slowly, and with obvious hesitation, walk over to the giant. She stops, standing at the beast's ... no, not a beast ... the hero's side. He looks at them, remembering how diminutive she is, how small, but powerful she always was. And he recalls the day, in another lifetime or two, where she was gone, and it ripped the last of his heart out.

"Yeah." He says, with more resignation than relief. "Like I said, it's true. All of it."

She regards him for what feels like centuries in the ruins of the large interior. She slowly shakes her head. "What have you done?" She asks him, her eyes narrowing into a ruby light reminiscent of anger, but intermixed with a whole other series of emotions he can't completely name. She'd seen it. She'd seen his secrets standing in his personal World. Based on what she is, and what he had told her, and the fact that she'd always been smart -- far smarter than he -- she knows enough to put it all together. "What did you do to ... become ... this?"

"I was stupid." He says, remembering what he told the old man.

She purses her lips. "Not good enough."

He's exhausted, an understatement of the millennium if he had said it aloud. He channels what's left of the prana reserves inside of him. A jagged iridescent dagger appears in his hands. The girl's eyes open in shock. "Berserk --"

Then, they widen some more as she watches him stab himself. He feels the anxious, worried, scared
presence at the back of his mind disappear. Along with a good portion of his remaining power. It's not the first time he's had to cut into himself. Or the first time he'd have ever attempted a suicidal gesture. As being stabbed goes, as stabbing himself goes, it didn't hurt all that much unless he counted the guilt.

He pushes the emotion aside, as the dagger dissipates into motes. "I have three days remaining in this state, as you know." He tells her. "At best."

The giant snarls, about to raise his cudgel again, but the girl holds out a tiny arm to him. Stopping him. She turns to him. "Another trick."

But the tone behind the statement is halfhearted, and they both know it. She is more sensitive to Magical Energy than most. She shakes her head, furiously running her fingers up her face, through her hair. "Dammit!" She swears. "Dammit! It was supposed to be easier than this. All of it was supposed to be easier than this!"

"But it's not what you really wanted." He tells her.

She throws him a furious glance, furious tears in her eyes. "You have no idea what I want!"

"I have some." He replies, already feeling even more drained. "Look. I have no problem. Be angry with me. Hell, I deserve it. I took him from you. For that alone, I deserve it, and worse." He sighs. "I'm just a tool. One way or another. But, frankly ... I'd rather be your tool than ... well, be its tool anymore."

She regards him, as he kneels on the ruined floor, barely holding himself upright. She wipes at her eyes. He looks away, not wanting to anger her anymore than he already has. He knows how much she hates it when people see her cry. He remembers that much. She looks up at Berserker, and nods. Then, she steps forward.

"The deal." He says, suddenly, holding out his hand palm first, stopping her in her tracks. "I will serve you. I owe you that much. But I won't hurt them. And neither will you."

Her eyes narrow. "You are in no position to give demands." She hisses. "I can have you die, right here and now."

"But you don't want that." He tells her. "If you did, I'd be dead already." Again, is what he doesn't say. He doesn't have to.

"I can order you ..." She says, her tone a little less certain.

"It's true." He says, nodding. "You could. But you saw what I just did. And yeah, I know you could order me not to. But I know you can beat them on your own. With your Servant. You don't have to kill any of them. Although ..." He smiles, a cold smile. "If it makes you feel any better, I'll kill the boy."

She gives him a strange look. "No, I don't think so." She says, after a time. "That's something you want to do. You're not losing anything in this deal. And I don't think I want him dead ... either of you. I think I'll keep both of you. You're ... obviously powerful enough if you could do even half the stuff you've done to my Berserker. To even free yourself. You need prana, right? But tell me ..." She looks him, dead in the eye. "What can you do for me that I can't already do myself?"

"What use am I to you?" He clarifies. She nods. "Well ... There's still the Servants. Caster and Assassin. Lancer ... I can eliminate Rider too, unless you want to take care of that." It almost doesn't
occur to him that he hasn't even mentioned Saber, something he's sure she will pick up on. "That fucking priest also has his own Servant ..."

"Huh." She says. "Interesting." She shakes her head again. "No. That's not good enough. Again, what can you do for me?"

He sighs. It's already come down to this, and it isn't as though he wasn't going to tell her. "He's still alive." He stares up at her. "If you let me join you, I'll find him for you. I'll even take you to him."

This isn't about the others, not even the little idiot. No. He feels his mouth turn into a thin, grim line. This is about the old man. It was always about him. And, if he has to, he will answer for his own actions. He turns his hand over, reaching out to her own. And he means it.

There is more. There is always more. But as he reaches out his hand, he feels something reaching inside him ... even as her hand reaches his. It is another hand. Fingers. It is melding through his skin, his muscle, bone ... through his blood, around his heart. He gasps, as it grasps his organ, squeezing around it rhythmically, slowly. Power pulses into him. His eyes bulge as the scene melts away and he is back in the darkness, burning again, coughing, his vision blurred. As he struggles to remember ... to remember his ... promise ...

*

"No, Emiya Shirou. We can't have you succumb. Not just yet."

Kiritsugu blearily opens his eyes, and all he can feel is pain. A part of his mind is almost reminded of the constant agony in his bones that he felt towards the end of his life, before he closed his eyes for one final time on his veranda in the moonlight. It hadn't hurt anymore then. But now ...

If the former Magus Killer could describe having a vampiric body, it is a lot like having a phantom limb. One's mind can detect that it's there, even though it has long since been severed from life itself. At the same time, there is a hunger, a ravenous feeling underneath that distant, detachment that reminds the extremities that they are still animate. There is no pulsing within that form, internal organs have mostly atrophied over time. There is just an icy darkness that becomes hungrier with time, then a sluggish feeling similar to ennui if the body doesn't receive blood infusions from an external force, and then it begins to recall that it is dead and starts to rot. Ingestion, or infusion, of blood is a different story. The vampiric body becomes even more aware. Tactility is less distant and more immediate; making dead nerve endings feel ... to the point of even becoming oversensitive. It is a haze at those times, of hunger, and satiation. Perversely, it almost feels like natural human functions again with the pins and needles of a sleeping limb given blood flow once again.

But this is different. He begins to understand what is happening. His face is burned, presumably from the holy water the priest spat into it. He's splayed out on the ground, under a film of mud, not unlike his daughter but ... definitely unlike her are the Black Keys embedded into his limbs, hissing with smoke. He can see them. He can even feel them. Two through his palms. Two through his ankles. Two impaled through his shoulders. Four of them are in his chest, but he knows none have pierced his heart. Otherwise, he wouldn't be feeling this much pain. He wouldn't be feeling anything at all.

"Your son is remarkable, Emiya Kiritsugu."

Kiritsugu can see Kotomine kneeling over his son. He can see his limbs sticking out from the mud, and see a weak pulse of life buoyed by magical energy flowing through them. Kotomine stands up, removing his hand from the muck below his son's half-conscious, agonized face. The priest smirks down at him. "Truly. The ability to copy a Noble Phantasm is no mean feat. Perhaps that's why the King of Heroes hates him more than anything else I've seen in a while. Perhaps even more than the Berserker back in our War, who stole and tainted all of his precious treasures. Just how long did you
keep Avalon in the boy's body? That was how you saved him from the Fire, no? After all, a Spell-Caster such as yourself can't access healing energy that easily. It just isn't in your nature to fix things, Emiya Kiritsugu." He looks down at his own hands. "God truly has a sense of humour to have granted me such gifts instead."

Kotomine walks over to him. Kiritsugu knows it's pointless to struggle, that all he will do is tear off his own limbs. The energy in his Magic Circuits, in his cells, from the full moon is all but gone. And ... He can't feel that other feeling in the back of his head. No presence. Norikata ... where is he ...

"The truth is, manifesting Avalon -- even subconsciously -- is costing your son much of his Od. Eventually, he will burn himself out. I had to step in, and make sure that didn't happen. To stabilize his ... condition." He kneels down, to look at Kiritsugu in the face. "Do not worry, Emiya Kiritsugu. I won't let it get that far. His suffering will be over soon enough. At the moment, however, you and I still have some unfinished business."

He takes out a flask from his cassock. Kiritsugu watches him pour its contents on his hands. It's water, but it glows to his eyes. "I inherited the position of Overseer, for the most part, from my father. Kotomine Risei died during our War. Someone shot him. At point blank range." Kotomine washes his hands in the water before placing the flask on the ground beside him. "I was the one that found him, lying in the Church, on neutral ground, in his own life's blood. My own father. Can you imagine?" Kotomine shakes his head. "Tell me, Emiya Kiritsugu. "Did you kill my father?"

Kiritsugu glares up at the priest, and says nothing. Let this bastard think he killed his father. Or not. Let him ponder over it. This piece of human excrement can do whatever he wants, but he won't say a damn thing. He will die, and leave the priest with nothing but uncertainty.

"Hm." Kotomine grunts. "A pity. Either way, it hurt. It still does. You see, my father was perfect. He was almost saintly. It's true that we once worked together with Tokiomi to get him the Grail, but that was only to serve the Church and the greater good of humankind. He practiced our family Art everyday as a form of asceticism and meditation. To become one with God. And through it all, he believed I was God's gift to him. For his devotion. I tried to be the perfect son, and heir, but ... well ... He was a good man, Emiya Kiritsugu. And I didn't know how to show him, then, how much I loved him. But when the time came, when I finally did ... it was too late. I wanted to take that beauty, the same he saw in me, but was ultimately his own ... I wanted to take it with my own hands. My own two hands ..."

He places his hands on Kiritsugu's stomach, around the blades. Kiritsugu feels his skin beginning to burn. Despite his mind, his vampiric body tries to move away, squirming. "I wanted to take that light ... and crush it. Forever." He watches as Kotomine's hands glow ... and phase under his skin. "I wanted to kill him myself."

Kiritsugu screams as hands, soaked with holy water, enter his body through the magecraft of spiritual healing, and grasp his innards. Then, for eternities, the hands remove themselves from his body, from under his flesh. Kiritsugu jolts, writhing under the blades pinning him, negating his healing factor completely. Trying to fight off the animalistic urge to rage, or turn catatonic from the white hot pain pulsing through his dead stomach, he wonders how long these blades have been in him. Black Keys only hold vampires for so long. Even this many will not neutralize his Curse of Restoration forever. But without the moonlight in his being ... without his ... father, he isn't as strong.

"But it seems that I'm not the only one that failed to commit patricide."

Kotomine smiles at him. "Yes. I know. He brought you back from the dead. From everlasting peace.
He needed you: to eliminate the Grail and All the Evils of the World so that he could access Akasha. So that his experiments wouldn't continue in vain. He told me, Emiya Kiritsugu. He told me enough."

The priest rests his hand on the right side of Kiritsugu's chest. "Your plan was to puppet master these young Masters into alliances. It obviously wasn't possible with Caster or Assassin. It didn't work out with your daughter. You definitely piqued my interest when you and your father lured Matou Zouken to the Edelfelt Manor near my parish. You used me to eliminate him so that Matou Sakura and her Servant could work with your son. I'll admit that I was grateful. That disgusting worm needed to be put down, and not only did your father hand him to me, but he even softened him for his final confession as it were." The priest chuckles. "Your plan was to face me directly. To lure me to a place, away from the King of Heroes, so that you could eliminate me, and perhaps the Greater Grail in one sitting: to protect as many bystanders as possible.

"But your father betrayed you, Emiya Kiritsugu."

Kotomine sinks his hand into Kiritsugu's chest, and the burning erupts in his body. He writhes, the cuts from the Black Keys grinding, the black filth of the Grail entering his wounds. Kotomine grins as he moans, trying hard not to scream again. "Emiya Norikata was a heretic when he lived. He wanted the Grail for himself. You wanted to make it look like he was betraying you. That he would use Matou Zouken's death to ask for a Command Spell: to make him eligible for the Ritual. I didn't even have to ask him, and he offered your life. I suppose, in the end, you really were nothing but a tool to him. In both life and death." The priest rests his hand underneath Kiritsugu's burning flesh. "I promised to give him the mantra once I had eliminated you. I simply want to see Angra Mainyu be reborn in this World. Someone getting their wish would be irrelevant to me so long as that happened. And, really, did you think I would believe that you were willing to let your son and his friends face me while you destroyed the Grail system? For all you used them, for all you failed your son, you still love him. You wouldn't have thrown him into certain death, at least not knowingly."

Kiritsugu gasps as Kotomine removes his hand from inside his chest, leaving only a charred throbbing in its wake. "He resurrected you to clean up the mess before he could take the prize. That is the only reason your sorry, pathetic, shell of a self exists now. That's why he left you to die. He had no intention of disabling the Grail, or the Bounded Field here. He just became greedy and, well... it is not of the Seven Deadly Sins for nothing. I had no further use for a vampire. I suppose, if you did kill my father, I have returned the favour.

"But I am still not satisfied."

Failed ... you failed ... Death ... violation ... unending torment ... despair ... Your fault. Yours ... Yours ...

Kiritsugu shakes his head violently, gritting his teeth at the curses entering his body. His mind.

"Ah yes. Norikata told me you had resistance to Angra Mainyu and the way your two Curses bonded together. However, the Keys of Providence as sacraments, and Conceptual Weapons function as a form of radiation, lowering ... well, your approximation to an immune system. It makes it easier for the substance to enter you again. To slow down your Curse of Restoration. To affect you. To remind you of this pain. I don't think your father, sadly, was that lucky. I suppose, if you did kill my father, I have returned the favour.

"But I am still not satisfied."

Failed ... you failed ... Death ... violation ... unending torment ... despair ... Your fault. Yours ... Yours ...

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"Ah yes. Norikata told me you had resistance to Angra Mainyu and the way your two Curses bonded together. However, the Keys of Providence as sacraments, and Conceptual Weapons function as a form of radiation, lowering ... well, your approximation to an immune system. It makes it easier for the substance to enter you again. To slow down your Curse of Restoration. To affect you. To remind you of this pain. I don't think your father, sadly, was that lucky. I suppose, in the end, neither of us was particularly satisfied."

Kotomine takes out a blade. He picks up his flask and pours the holy water on it. "It's ironic. When Angra Mainyu gave me insight into your personal world, I realized that I never mourned. I never got to kill my father. I never got to kill my wife. But you did kill yours, your entire family, in a way."
Kiritsugu squeezes his eyes shut. He sees himself shooting Illya in the face. He sees himself strangling Irisviel. He thought he came to terms with these visions he had rejected the tainted Grail. But his face is stained with his daughter's blood. His hands are covered in the blood of his wife as she curses him. As she curses him forever. And he deserves it. He deserves her hatred for what she sacrificed for him, for what he threw right back in her face ...

**Traitor. Betrayer. Murderer. Hypocrite ...**

He can't keep his mind straight. But he has to. He has to get enough strength. Enough strength to ...

"Claudia, my wife ..." Kotomine says, holding out his blade. "She killed herself to show me that I could feel love. She sacrificed herself for me. I thought it had been a wasted effort, then. That I felt nothing. But I was wrong. She suffered, and died, for me ... to show me how it made me feel complete. It made me feel whole. The only tragedy is that I couldn't have strangled her with my own two hands ... like you had. But you didn't accept your wife's sacrifice, at all. It was wasted on you. To think I believed we were anything alike. You disgust me, Emiya Kiritsugu." He raises the blade above Kiritsugu's left arm. "I promised to kill everyone and everything you ever claimed to hold dear. And, as I said before, after I kill them and before the Grail destroys the World, I will make sure that you continue to exist so that you will persist in this new Fuyuki Fire, in your ultimate failure, in your own personal hell forever."

Kiritsugu narrows his eyes, his face twisting into disgust and loathing. "And ... I said before ... You are an insane, psychopathic ... piece of shit ..."

Kotomine shrugs as he slices his blade down. Kiritsugu's mind blanks out. He sees his arm. But it is separate from his body. Sluggish black blood dribbles from the stump. There is an inhuman wail coming from somewhere until, finally, Kiritsugu realizes it is coming from him.

The priest seems to be genuinely smiling now, as he raises the blade again, this time moving down to Kiritsugu's left leg. "And I also promised, before any of that happens, to tear you apart."

The rich baritone of Kotomine Kirei's laughter echoes throughout the cavern as his blade comes down again.

Chapter End Notes

Someone is not having a good night. In fact, aside from perhaps Kotomine, no one is.

As an aside, I learned not too long ago two things: that Sakura met Shirou after Kiritsugu was gone, and not through Shirou saving her from bullies. I also learned that Dead Apostle Ancestors do not exist in the Fate Universe, even though Type-Moon made Tsukihime. Some of the same Twenty-Seven Ancestors exist as just ancient and powerful Dead Apostles. But this is, as I said, an alternate universe that I'm writing. I can afford to fudge a few details I feel. And even if Kiritsugu hadn't known Sakura when he was alive, he would have seen her in watching over his son. That is my feeling on the matter.

But yeah. Things look grim and brutal right now. And I will say, the End Game is coming fairly soon. Hopefully in just a few more chapters. I hope you are enjoying this. Perhaps not as much as Kotomine Kirei, but everyone needs a hobby. Take care all.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It held them in check for a while.

The command to stay. The order to remain in the darkness. In the shadows. They had been dead. Frozen. But, somehow, still horribly aware. The death-bringer, with its long blood red spear, killed some of them before they could fully awaken, rendering their paralyzed forms into ashes, and dust. It wielded fire, too, destroying any trace of them after the fact: if anything was left.

With senses entirely too heightened, human smells emanating above them, they remained in their sleep paralysis, dreaming of dreams of crimson filling them after their own insides had shriveled away, their life forces stolen, the poison leaving them as little more than husks to power something greater than themselves. But then they had been found. Many had been found before the death-bringer and its cursed lance, and flame, found them first.

And it missed quite a few more.

They'd remained in basements. In old cellars. Under the earth. Even in some of the hospitals, and their homes. Everything moved around them, slowly, like molasses. Like the inside of a glacier. But they couldn't hear anything in themselves. Not their pulses. Not their heart-beats. Nothing. Nothing but the hunger. They'd been saved, though. They know that much. That impression remained with them. It stays with them even now. Something dark and soothing had been poured into their poisoned, ravaged forms that nothing could save, and left them with a new purpose. A vital one.

It feels like aeons since they have eaten ... anything beyond those last tinctures that saved them. They suspect, in some animal part of their consciousness -- which is the majority of it -- that they should have withered away ages ago. And they would have, if left to their own devices.

But the one that saved them, that took the time to find them all, took care of that. The cocoons of stasis, woven in and out of them, keep them existing. Keep them functioning. They did not require nourishment, in their sleep, in their stasis. But it does nothing to satiate the hunger.

In fact, it only makes it worse.

Even so, they obey. They have no choice. Between their saviour's compulsion -- and the power keeping them dormant -- they continue to exist, their would-be destroyer having been called away.

And so they waited. And so they wait.

They wait until the layers of stasis fray, these invisible strings of swaddling clothes around their impulses. Until the command to lie there, and think of the red fades away. Some of them don't make it. Some consume themselves, or shrivel into nothing. Some of them even go as far as to claw their own eyes out.

But the rest ... they dig themselves out. They climb out of the soil. They stagger, or smash through doors. Everything is red, and throbbing. Delightfully so. And they are so hungry. So thirsty. The power keeping them down is gone. The command in their heads has vanished.

They can pursue the pulsing energies around them, moving unaware in the night. They can fill up the liquid darkness left inside of them. They can spread themselves everywhere. They can chase and
hunt after the screams. Perhaps parts of them, if they were more aware, would feel like they are
gathering sustenance for something else -- for a larger organism, a network of life force spread
through them -- but even they did, it wouldn't matter in the end.

All that matters, now, is that there is no one, and nothing holding them back anymore.

They are free.

And they are ravenous.

* 

Gilgamesh, the King of Heroes, lies -- bisected -- on the ground. Dimly, through her exhaustion and
numbness, it occurs to Saber that Excalibur managed to cut through the other's golden armour and
leave him on the ground, bleeding out, cut roughly in half.

She hears a rasping, choking sound gurgling out of Gilgamesh's blood soaked mouth. Saber has seen
many a man die before, on the battlefield. His lower half has already dissolved into glittering motes
of dispersing prana. Even the hilt of his rotating weapon has, thankfully, dissolved out of his
slackened hand: knocked away by the power of her final attack. But that hideous sound keeps
burbling from her dying opponent. It's more than coughing up his blood and bile, staining his perfect
finery with the ugliness that she believes has always been inside of him.

No. It's not a futile attempt at breathing, or cursing. Not even a prayer to gods the deranged being
probably disparaged by his very vanity. No. She can see his lips above his life's blood. He's smiling.

More than that, she realizes that the King of Heroes is laughing.

"It's ... it's actually better this way ..." He gasps, hacking up another glob of his destroyed innards.
"... owning you would have tarnished your purity. Your ... deadly beauty ..."

Red eyes glitter up at her in an admiration, intermixed with genuine humour. It makes Saber sick to
her stomach. "No one owns me, Gilgamesh." She tells him. "And no one ever will ..."

"... that ... ugh ... isn't true ..." He says. Saber can see that most of his body has disintegrated. "... Kotomine ... he made a deal ... with something lower than ... mongrels ... one part of his ... his play I
had some ... issue with, but ... the results are ..." He coughs. "... so beautiful." He tries to reach a
hand, his remaining hand up, at her. She moves her head away from him. "Tell me, King of Knights
..." He whispers, his hand faltering, falling back to the ground, fading as the rest of his form
disappears into the night. "... do you trust your Master ..."

Saber almost doesn't come to herself as the King of Heroes disappears from the World. She shakes
off the stupor, as the immediacy of the situation jolts her back into reality. She takes Avalon. There is
still enough energy left. It's humming in her hands.

She staggers, as fast as she can, falling to the side of Rin and Sakura. Rin is still clutching her throat.
But as she nears, she shakes her head violently. Her hair is all over the place, matted and tangled
with blood and dirt.

Sakura. Please.

Saber nods, taking the other girl's body gently into her arms. Sakura's head lolls at an awkward
angle. It feels so light. So ephemeral. It's as though it's not Sakura anymore. Lifeless eyes, almost
artificial with a sightless gloss, stare up at Saber. A part of her tells her that she should take care of
Rin, that she is her anchor to this World. That Sakura is gone, and left this facsimile, this doll behind
her. But she is already lowering her sheathe into Sakura's chest, the bright light of Avalon drowning out the carnage of their battlefield: if only for a time. The King of Knights holds onto hope, holds it tightly.

She sees Rin crawling over to her side. She takes her hand, and grasps the other's. Rin clutches her gauntlet tightly, her swollen eyes shimmering with falling tears. She manages to sit up, her shoulders visibly shaking. Not a Master. Not a magus. Just a scared young girl terrified, praying that her sister isn't dead. That she won't remain so. Flesh knits back together. Bone melds back into place. Golden threads stitch it all together.

There is a sudden, hard gasp. Sakura jolts upward. Her eyes are wide. It's as though she is screaming, but no sound comes out of her throat. She's clutching at her neck. Saber smiles in relief. She did it. She saved her.

Rest easy, Rider. Saber thinks to herself. I will protect your Master in your stead ...

Rin throws her arms around the other girl, holding her tightly. Sakura blinks, and embraces her sister. "I ... this has happened to me before ...

Saber furrows her brow. "... this has?"

"Neesan ..." Sakura looks down at herself. Then back at Saber. "Oh no. Neesan. Her throat. Please, Saber ..."

Rin shakes her head, reaching for her hip. She takes out a Gem, and grasps it. It shimmers and cracks, infusing energies into her body. Saber recalls Rin complaining about using her pendant's energies to heal Shirou from death, before he had summoned her. It had enough stored mana to heal a destroyed heart, even one pierced by a cursed spear like that belonging to Lancer ... Lancer ... He and Rider had given their lives to help her defend Rin and Sakura. To defeat Gilgamesh. She didn't know her fellow Servants well, even Rider who had been in alliance with her, but she thinks about their battle. And she honours their sacrifices.

But Rin didn't receive a life threatening injury. If Gilgamesh had wanted her dead, she would have been long before. She can feel the healing energies entering the magus through their bond. However ... she feels something else as well ...

No. She thinks to herself. He wouldn't have done this. Why ... not even he would ...

Saber grabs both Rin and Sakura's hands. She pulls them up and takes a defensive stance in front of them. "Stay back."

"Saber ..." Rin rasps. "What ..."

And then her eyes widen. As she sees them too. The multiple eyes glowing in the darkness. So many of them.

Glowing feral. And crimson.

* 

"I've changed my mind."

Emiya Kiritsugu gasps as, every time, the priest takes another Black Key out of his body. He hisses as sharp, burning pain erupts from each point, as Kotomine takes his time. Out of one eye, his remaining eye -- before Kotomine extracted the other from his socket with more of his holy water-
soaked spiritual surgery -- he sees his severed leg consumed by Angra Mainyu's mud. His arm had joined it along time before. Along with his liver. His intestines. Kidneys. And other, as Kotomine and perhaps his father might have put it, "non-essential organs." And the priest made sure he felt it each time, and when he didn't Angra Mainyu seeped into his wounds, and reminded him.

"I was going to make a performance out of it." Kotomine says, yanking another Black Key out of him. "I would make you watch as I killed your son right in front of you. I was going to cut off all of your remaining limbs, except for your eyes. And make you see it."

Kiritsugu growls as the priest rips out the blade from his remaining palm. "But ..." Kotomine shakes his head. "I just didn't feel as satisfied with the idea as I thought I would."

"Go ... to ... hell ..." Kiritsugu spits through his fangs.

"I am in the process of doing just that." Kotomine says, as though assuring him that he is giving him the best of medical care. "I was going to send you there, too, but my inner critic. It sounds a lot like the King of Heroes. He would have looked that this ... well, he is looking at this, and probably imagining how ... droll my original plan was. But, as I said before, Emiya Kiritsugu. I am not satisfied. The truth is," he says as he stands back, "our final duel didn't take nearly as long as I would have imagined. Our last spat wasn't long either, but this was ... disappointing."

He walks away from Kiritsugu, towards ... Shirou.

"What ..." Kiritsugu groans, trying to sit up, trying to do anything now that the blades aren't in him anymore. He can feel his wounds slowly forgetting themselves, excruciatingly trying to revert back to what they were before inside and out. Everything hurts. Everything is wrong.

Then he sees Kotomine plunge his hands into the muck, around his son, and lift him. It's almost a parody of a birth, of a doctor holding a child, or a reverse baptism from the depths of the abyss. Kiritsugu sees every wound, sealing and unsealing in Shirou's ruined body. He sees the young man twitching, his hands grasping at nothing. His amber eyes are wide in sheer agony. But he's still alive. He's still alive, and his mouth is moving, and his pulse is still emanating from inside of him.

With a gentleness that belies everything the priest has done to him this entire time, in this twisted, horrible place, Kotomine walks towards Kiritsugu's prone form ...

And places Shirou right in front of him.

Something begins to well up inside of Kiritsugu. Something almost ... almost unnamed ...

"As an Executor, I know something about vampiric physiology." Kotomine says. "Your body has taken severe trauma. Your system suffers from the compromises between us. Of you wanting to exist, and me ... tolerating your existence just a little while longer. And this place, with its Bounded Field, represses your magecraft." He gestures around, a showman's posture far beyond the simple brutalist stance of his earlier years. "However, I know -- and you -- that there is a way around this. And I am willing to give you that way out."

Kiritsugu is broken. He's bleeding. He's alone. He can smell his own blood. Metallic and tinged with ashes. He is missing one arm. One leg. An eye. His insides are screaming. But something is shrieking, even louder, inside of him. No ... no ...

Kotomine grins. "I think we understand each other perfectly. You won't beg, even now. And you don't have to. You can defeat me. Avalon is a powerful Bounded Field. Even a copy of its energy would be enough to overcome the Greater Grail system's Field, at least on an internal level. Which
you need. But, perhaps even more than that: you need blood. You have lost just enough of it that you
are weakened, but not enough to succumb to your kind's ... state of degeneration. I was going to let
Emiya Shirou drown in the mud, in the flames he escaped because of you. But he survived because
of his own will. And I ... I can admire him. I think, what he deserves more than dying from whence
he came, is to spend his last moments with his father. In the arms of the one who saved him."

Don't ... A voice echoes in the back of his mind. Don't do this ... not this ...

"I've observed him throughout the War. From when he registered at the Church. He thinks his
greatest calling in the world, his only calling, is to sacrifice his life to save the lives of countless
others. It's the only thing that has ever given him any meaning in this arbitrary world. I know. I can
relate to it, in a way." Kotomine murmurs, looking down at Shirou's prone form. "I think, that if he
still possessed consciousness, or cognition at this juncture, Emiya Shirou would be more than
satisfied with sacrificing his life to help you save the entire world. To give you that chance."

No ... Kiritsugu says to the ache in his fangs, to the burning in his gullet. No ...

"You have no other choices, at this point." Kotomine says. "You are hungry. I can see it. The smell
of his blood, scented in Avalon, after being drained yourself must be infuriating. You have lost your
resources. Your magecraft. The power of the full moon. Your father. Your pawns are all too
preoccupied to come here, and finish your work. But I am giving you the opportunity to do it. He
will die a slow death in any case. He still fights for you. Even now. He still fights to live. To have a
purpose. End his suffering, Emiya Kiritsugu. Give him his function.

"Take. Your. Chance."

Emiya Kiritsugu the man feels himself stripped away, as the pulsing of the body in front of him, of
his son, of Emiya Shirou, fills his mind ... He lifts up his remaining hand, feeling his fingers elongate
into talons. He knows on every level that he can't kill this abomination, his natural enemy, in this
state. He couldn't even do it before. Then, he turns his talons ...

And puts them to his face.

"Like hell." Kiritsugu spits, blood-tears flowing down his sockets. "The world can burn before I hurt
my children."

It would be easy. To gouge his claws right into his brain, and end this farce. There is no compulsion
to stop him. No voice telling him what to do. And he means it. He stares into his son's eyes, and he
means every word. Then, he hears a clap. Followed by another. And another.

Kotomine Kirei is clapping. He is ... applauding him. "Oh, Emiya Kiritsugu." The priest says, lifting
his leg over Shirou's head, positioning his foot above his skull. "A hypocrite to the very end."

Kiritsugu tries to move. He tries to crawl to Shirou. To shield him. Instead, all he can do is look at his
son's face. All he can see is Illya's slackened visage overseeing them.

I love you. He thinks through the haze of hunger, and pain, and defeat. I'm sorry ...

"The old man's right." A voice suddenly booms out from the darkness. "I'd forgotten just how much
you like to hear yourself talk."

Then, as a series of bright slashes of light form in the air of the cavern ... Kotomine Kirei barely leaps
back as everything around them explodes.
I was thinking that I was going a little overboard with Kotomine at this point. Even over the top. He was not supposed to have this much screen time, but the character himself just ... requires it with his larger than life presence. And that voice and manner. And I just had this idea, and it wouldn't go away. He is really that sick. He would totally do something like this. But now ... now, some things are going to go down. They are already going down even as I write this.

I only hope that you are prepared for the ride.
Chapter 22

Shirou sees that she's pissed.

He can't blame her. After all this time, the old man was supposed to be dead. And now, right after
the idiot showed her the letter, he springs this on her. It was a dick move, on his part, but he couldn't
think of anything else.

"Change of plan." She says, her small voice full of a cold fury he'd never heard from her, not even
when she had been trying to kill him -- several times, in different incarnations -- or when Berserker
was about to lose to him, and the others in the other timeline. "Your group can live. I'll get my ... other
onii-chan later. But him ..." He's been dead for a long time, sent through countless timelines to
kill countless lives, but the grin on her face is anything but cute. It even manages to force a chill
down his spine. "You and Berserker will take me to him. You will take me to him now."

She hasn't even made a contract with him yet, and yet the tone of her voice jolts into him as
effectively as any Command Seal he has ever attempted to resist. "There's more. He --"

Her small hands are balled into fists. He's almost afraid that she is going to have Berserker tear him
apart just for speaking back to her, just for being the convenient target for her ages-old rage. He still
can't blame her. She's been through hell. And, as far as she knows, until she met him she believed
her father had abandoned her. And now, to find out, he is still around ... He's almost surprised that
she believes him. But whatever his other faults were, as stupid as he has always been, she always
knew that he was incapable of lying. And even less capable of lying to her. And not about something
like this.

"I. Don't. Give. A. Fuck."

She has rarely, ever, sworn. Not like that. It really does take him aback. But he knows that tone. She
is not going to listen. "Fine." He says.

It's another gamble. As she chants the aria, to formalize their bond, as he feels the magical energy
forming between them, he thinks about what he can recall about the mechanics of the War. The
Makiri created the Master-Servant bond system and Command Seals. The Tohsaka established the
leylines of their land to power the Ritual. And the Einzbern allowed for the crystallization of spirits
into semi-physical forms as well as the creation of a Vessel that would become the Grail. She is the
Vessel right now, where so many Servant spirits will cycle until she isn't even remotely humanoid
anymore. He also recalls the dream cycle between Master and Servant, but also the Einzbern
capacity to transfer the souls of others into constructs of their own design. But there is something
else ...

There is a rush of energy: coursing right into him. A part of his mind feels ... full. It isn't a voice, or
words, but he can feel her there, where it was once empty after stabbing himself with his copy of the
dagger. He sees her red eyes widen, the hatred and pain sloughing off her face, into a mixture of
emotions. As her prana cycles into his being, granting him more power than he ever had before --
even with Rin -- he can feel hints of her emotions, and a sense of recognition.

"So that's why you don't want me to find him." She says, simply.

He sighs. "Yeah. It's ... complicated. He's the Apostle's familiar. I think you know what that means."

She scoffs, making a show of closing her eyes and up turning her nose into the air in an all too
familiar gesture. But he knows it's just a way to save face from her display earlier, to get away from the obvious pain inside of her. He recalls, dimly, a few strong women in his life doing something similar. "I know how Dead Apostles work." She takes a moment to compose herself. "He's been spying on us. This entire time."

"Yeah." He grits his teeth. "I mean, the old man's been watching over us. But his ..." Master? Creator? Father? "The Apostle's been observing us. He knows about Berserker. He'd see him a mile away. Even if you used a Command Seal, he could get the old man to --"

To end his own existence. Vampires are more complex familiars to Dead Apostles. They can think and feel. They can reason, and make familiars of their own. But they aren't free. And they both know that. Nothing they have -- not their powers, nor their sustenance, nor their bodies, nor even their very minds -- were theirs alone.

"I could kill him." She says, defiantly. "Before he even gets the order ..."

"It'd not even have to be an order." He tells her. "Just an impulse. Just a thought. Like a limb doing what the brain tells it to do. Like we've established, the Apostle's been keeping an eye on us. The old man uses bats. I figured that out quickly. But I don't know what his old man uses ... though I ... have my suspicions ..." And none of those suspicions are good. Not one bit.

Her eyes narrow in her own kind of suspicion. "So that's why you freed yourself from your Master. He's already seen you. He can read everything from his mind. As far as he'll know, you're already dead."

"Taken out by Berserker." He points at the giant, who growls back at him. "To get the old man back, we're going to need to play this out carefully. Like I said, if the Apostle has what I think he does, not only is the old man in danger, so's this entire city. And even more if the Association and the Church get involved. And they will. Especially with that fake priest not officiating anything." He shakes his head. "You see it now, right? If we do anything tip off anything, to that golden bastard, the priest, or the Apostle, this gets all fucked. Because you better believe I don't trust that Apostle. Not with this. He will kill the old man. I read enough about him to know that's exactly what he'd do ..."

"What about the Counter Force?"

He doesn't say anything. She sighs. "Seriously, onii-chan. It is that bad, huh?" She shakes her head. "Is that what this is? Is the only reason you joined me to do your duty. Or to run from it?" There is hurt, but also something akin to pity in her eyes.

He has none of it. "I'm doing this to save you. To save all of you. I guess I'm still that same dumb idiot I was lifetimes ago." He scratches the back of his head in exasperation. "I just need time. I need to help him. The old man has no one else."

"Ok."

He blinks. "Ok?"

"Yeah ..."

The two of them regard each other. "You know," he tries, "Berserker could really help --"

"No."

He is about to say more, but she sweeps her hand down. "No, that's what ... he wants. Berserker
is my Servant. He had his own. Saber. Two Masters allying, it makes sense. But three? If what I saw from you ... happens or happened ... no. It might be all over, but they won't give us time to do anything else. Besides, they took my onii-chan from me. He ran from me. I won't kill him." She repeats, pointing at him very directly. "But they have to learn a lesson."

"Il --"

"No, you listen now, onii-chan." She interrupts, her eyes as hard as when she hunted him, once. "Between your Marble, and my Berserker, we will win this War. No one can stand against us. Not Assassin. Not Caster. Or Lancer. Or any of them. We'll deal with Goldie too. We don't need the Makiri's Rider, or the Saber that failed my family."

He notices how she didn't say her House, or her Clan. Even so, after all this time, he just can't let it go. "Saber didn't ..."

"It doesn't matter. Onii-chan is a terrible Master, and keeping her around will only get him killed. Again. And I'm not letting a peasant like Rin get her either. No." She keeps pointing at him. "I know what you're thinking. That their energy will ... change me. I can handle two of them in me. Even more. I know you have the means. I want to find him. I don't want anyone to kill him. Only I get to do that. Understand, Archer?"

"I do," Shirou finds himself saying.

"Do you?" She glares at him as he continues crouching, kneeling in front of her on the ground.

"Yeah." He says. "It's between you and him. It's always been between you, and him. I won't ... get in your way."

"... you really mean it, don't you."

He looks down. "You went through some terrible shit. You deserve answers. More than just second-hand ones. I only ask that ... you give him the chance to tell you himself. To give yourself that chance. The rest of it ... that's up to you."

He feels a soft touch on his forearm. He raises his eyes, and sees her looking down at him. Her gaze is softer now.

"Go." She tells him. "I won't hurt onii-chan or the other girls. Their Servants will be enough. You have my word, as the older sister." She smiles, and aside from the hurt in her eyes, it almost seems like her again, the way he remembers. "Find him for me. That is the only thing I want. And ..." She bites her lip. "Come back to me."

"I will." He replies. "I promise."

"I ... promise ..." Emiya Shirou murmurs again, his arm twitching on the ground, in the surrounding muck, trying to find something, trying to wake up, to remember ...

*

"Shit." Archer swears under his breath, continuing to Project his over-edged copies of Kanshou and Bakuya against the tide of mud that Kotomine is swinging around himself.

There is so much of the black mud here. This place is actually interfering with his concentration. It's like the Park, but so much worse. Comparatively, the grudges in the Park were sedate compared to the utter, seething fury permeating this entire place. The infection in the Grail is polluting the natural
ambient spiritual energies -- the mana -- of the sunken leyline, secreting this disgusting fluid of amalgamated curses around them. It looks like hell: like the horror of the Fuyuki Fire writ large and over an entire world ...

And he knows, if left unchecked, it will take theirs. Before another power has to intercede.

But it's seeing the rest of it that makes him curse himself. He took too damned long.

It's a horror show. Archer's seen some fucked up shit: both in his War and in his service to Alaya. The Dead Apostle is nowhere to be seen. He can't even sense him, though it might be the sheer presence of Angra Mainyu distracting him from finding one particular vampire. But ... Illya ...

He stayed away from Emiya Norikata's familiars. Most of them hadn't even been on the field, but there was no way he could risk the Dead Apostle knowing he still lived. Him, or any of the other bastards still in the War. He had ways of hiding and, with Illya's prana, he had more options. She stayed in contact with him, telling him to continue his mission: even after Saber and the others managed to take her Berserker down. It was such a waste, but there was no talking to her. He almost regrets telling his idiot younger self to imagine something that can defeat his enemies. But, even now, he still cared about Saber. He knew, he had to believe, she could take care of herself.

And she had. Probably due to, or in spite of, the idiot.

She told him to lay low. She even ... felt different through their bond. Illya had been so sad that Berserker was gone. He remembers that sadness well, from her, and from when he ... lost Saber as well. Most of the blood lust and cold rage inside her had mellowed, becoming more reflective. He reported to her, telling her about what was going on. As far as the others knew, Illya lost her only Servant. He felt bad about taking her prana, knowing how much of a strain that would be for even someone like her, but it was necessary. She would have rebuked him, asking if he had underestimated her power.

No. The problem was that he overestimated his past self's ability to protect her.

After he made some stops, finding the sites for more of the Dead Apostle's familiars, he found Lancer. Illya's prana really did give him many more options than he would have had originally, even with Rin. It had been a lucky strike, or Lancer's Luck rank was just as terrible as he recalled. Rule Breaker broke him away from Kotomine's control. Archer used all three of the Command Seals he stole to empower the Servant of the Spear, to get that showoff to a level where he could protect Rin and the others. Lancer was supposed to protect Rin, Sakura, and Illya as he continued his own mission.

It'd been hard ... traversing Caster's wards around the Temple, and then the Temple's own natural Bounded Field. But then ... then Illya's presence became muted in the back of his mind. He feared the worst.

And this was worse than what he thought.

_I should have been there._ He growls internally, simultaneously angry at himself for not materializing another more powerful Noble Phantasm fast enough to kill Kotomine outright as Angra Mainyu's essence surrounds him, even knowing the mud is aware enough to intercept anything he throws at him. _I should've killed that useless boy when I had the chance ..._

But he knows it's pointless. He thought taking Lancer would make sure Kotomine couldn't get to Illya easily, especially if Gilgamesh were engaging the team in his own grandstanding way. He underestimated Kotomine. A few Command Seals and his own experiences as an Executor fighting
magi, and the Overseer could easily overcome Illya and the idiot. Kotomine had always toyed with him. Even back then, he knew that. So if the man had reason to be serious, he would never have stood a chance. And just as he never had a chance to kill the boy himself, with Rin and Illya stubbornly keeping him alive, with Saber threatening to kill him if he tried, he also knows he didn't have a choice either.

A choice between saving Illya or Kiritsugu ... It is no choice at all. Illya ... she wouldn't have wanted him to make that choice.

And now, he is running out of prana. He can't take more from Illya, not when she is ... in this state. Compromised. Tears burn at the corners of his eyes. He wants to tear that disgusting piece of shit apart for ... violating her like this. He almost wants Alaya to take him, to possess him, to give him the power to obliterate this entire, repulsive abomination of a place. He can't Project demonic or many divine weapons on his own. Even a copy of Avalon couldn't do anything on its own here and Excalibur Image ...

The old man is in bad shape. He leaps to the other's side, crouching down at his prone body as he continues his sword rain on the priest and his protective mass of darkness.

"Damn, ji-san." He says, lapsing into his Japanese endearment at seeing him. "You've seen better days."

Kiritsugu coughs up blood. He squints up at Archer with his one good eye. "Shirou ..."

Archer knows they don't have time. "Found some of your storehouses. I got some stuff for you."

He takes a blood pack out of his pocket, under his shroud. He'd had the presence of mind to fill it with his own blood beforehand. He knew the old man might need it, but he had no idea ... He rips a tear into it, bringing it to his father's lips. "Come on, Dad." He hisses. "Drink up."

Archer looks away as Kiritsugu's fangs close on the torn, bloody plastic. He hopes it helps him. He infused it with some energy from an inferior copy of Avalon. The magical energy should replenish him, but the damage the priest did to him ... It's extensive.

"Can't ..." Kiritsugu says, between gulps. "Use my magecraft ... place's Bounded Field ... negates my own ... if you can ..."

That's what it was. He recalls it from finding him the first time. Time Manipulation. Kiritsugu's, possibly even his own father's, magecraft utilizes Bounded Fields. This place is a world of hell onto itself, a series of Bounded Fields created by at least three master magi and corrupted by Angra Mainyu, and ultimately superseding any others. However, while it can override other Bounded Fields, something like the true Avalon could interfere with it ... or ...

He doesn't have a lot of energy to do this. But he recalls researching Kiritsugu after his own War. He heard the stories about the Magus Killer, and how Lord El-Melloi I had lost the use of his Magic Circuits before he died, a great shame that cost his Family their ancestral Magic Crest, and standing in the Association for many years. How a few powerful magi had been found in a similar state if someone looked into the matter hard enough ... There isn't much Archer can do himself, other than provide support. But he has enough power. Just enough to ...

Hold on, Dad ... He stands over Kiritsugu, and thinks about the last night they spent together, as father and son, recalling the soft light of the moon, the same moon that revealed him to Illya, before he made a promise to her, before he failed her too. Before he failed himself.
"And so, as I pray," Archer intones, fire surrounding him, surrounding everything. "Unlimited Blade Works."
A Reality Marble.

Even through his pain and distress, Emiya Kiritsugu can't help it. The hole in his stomach, where his innards had been methodically pulled out by Kotomine, only distantly burns with the feeling of his son's augmented blood slowly, but steadily reminding his body that it had always been whole. The cavern of the Greater Grail system, Ten no Sakazuki, was a vast expanse of desolation.

But this place ... this is place another realm entirely.

It is a barren desert, yet it isn't empty. The skies are filled with smog, or smoke. There is fire everywhere, but situated below the turning of giant cog wheels in the distance. And the sands are filled to the horizon with ... swords. No, not just swords, Kiritsugu realizes. There are also axes, halberds, lances, spears, arrowheads, daggers, and blades of all kinds. They glow with an energy that belie some of their appearances. It doesn't take a master magus to realize what they all are.

They are Noble Phantasms. All of them.

For a moment, just a moment, it really hits Kiritsugu. In another time, another life, his son dedicated himself to his dream so much, trained so hard, retained such an alien world view for a human being - or someone born from humanity -- that he managed to embody, and express his own inner world to overlay a part of Gaia itself: if only for a time. It doesn't matter to the former Magus Killer that Archer can probably summon it with ease given how he is a Counter-Guardian in service to Alaya compared to how he must have struggled in his mortal life. He sees it. All of it. He sees the flames that erased his son's previous life, and name. He sees the scouring of his son's soul after the Fire into a unyielding purity: one so bare it hurts him even to look at it. To desecrate it with his filthy, broken presence. He sees the way Archer fires his weapons, similar to Gilgamesh, but without the lazy, arrogant, gaudiness, and carelessness of a spoiled tyrant. They are precise shots, as though each blade is fired from the barrel of a gun. It's just like the pulling of a trigger from the metaphorical gun that Shirou began to envision when he attempted -- and failed -- to teach him magecraft so long ago.

The smoke is that of a thousand battlefields, and the Noble Phantasms everything Emiya Shirou must have seen, and attempted to replicate with careful, and almost loving care. This place is a crucible, a tomb, and the forge of a blacksmith. Kiritsugu finds himself weeping blood, again as he takes in the beauty, and the horror, of this desolate place that grew from a small boy's heart, and earnest desire to help all others over himself: until that wish betrayed him.

That wish, that beautiful desire, that had been born from him. That had been his doing. His inspiration. The gears and cogs an extension of the killing machine that used to be Emiya Kiritsugu. That became Emiya Shirou. The Archer that survived this War after all. A Counter-Guardian clearing away evil before it begins.

His fault.

Kiritsugu forcibly opens his own Magic Circuits, his mind practically ripping them open. Archer's blood pumps through him, reinvigorating him, but it isn't enough. Not yet. Not to do what he needs to. He crawls over to the components his son brought him. But first things first. The former Magus Killer draws on the blood in his body, still in the process of kickstarting his Curse of Restoration. It
occurs to him, belatedly, that Kotomine's torments had not been arbitrary. Kiritsugu had thrown a knife into Kotomine's leg. Kotomine cut off his leg. He had destroyed the priest's arm with a shot from his Contender. The priest had removed his arm. He recalls blinding Kotomine's eye with blood from a shot he managed to get by grazing his temple, blinding him in that eye. Kotomine had taken his eye out. All of them had been on the same sides he had wounded the priest back in the day. Even removing his innards had been reminiscent of the internal damage the priest's martial arts had done him before it had been reversed by the power of Avalon.

It was so petty. For someone with grandiose words, Kotomine Kirei was truly a small man. This is just one more reason, aside from never hurting his son, that he would not have taken the other's offer. He didn't have to look in the wasteland. Most likely the remnants of his Contender and Calico were buried in the sand and ashes of this place. There was no way Kotomine wouldn't have destroyed his weapons, hoping his former ruthlessness and blood thirst would overcome him, make him kill his ... Just so the priest could see the despair of him realizing that he had no intention of giving him any chance to fight back. To kill him like a mad beast.

Kotomine Kirei is sick. And while he might be the Spiritual Doctor of the two of them, it is Emiya Kiritsugu who is going to perform some medicine in the form of euthanasia, followed by a retroactive abortion.

*Meanwhile, doctor, heal thyself...*

*"Time alter,"* he growls, *"Triple accel!"

The blood must have regenerated his throat as he feels it ripped raw again from another scream. It makes Kotomine's dissections feel like gentle caresses as bones, muscle, sinew, nerves, and skin voraciously stretch and meld, outwards. He can swear that he is sweating blood from the effort, biting into his own flesh against the agony of using Time Manipulation to accelerate his Curse of Restoration.

*Dad...*

*"Ugh..."* Kiritsugu grits. "I'm fine ... Shirou. Just ... hold out a bit more ..."

He doubles over the objects that Archer brought him. If he had tried this, when he was alive, without Avalon he would have been dead many times over. Hell, even as a vampire this would have burned him out. He is young, by vampiric standards. This regeneration would have ordinarily taken weeks. It isn't so much the internal damage, given how most of the organs in him are useless now, but his limbs ... They ... 

*God, the pain...* For a few moments, Kiritsugu can feel his stumps on fire, his eye socket burning. Then, he looks up. He blinks. The smoke in the heavens clears. There is a patch of darkness, and glittering lights. And ... 

*"I want to be a Hero of Justice..."*

The smog is gone, revealing the night sky, and the gentle luminescence of a full moon. He can feel the glow infusing his cells, his Magic Circuits, even his Crest ... Emiya Kiritsugu screams as his vision is completely restored, as his new arm, and leg reform out of his restored body. He is breathing hard. He shouldn't be breathing, but old habits die as hard as his smoking. He did it. The Marble got rid of the Bounded Field of the cave, but the Time Manipulation and its internalized Bounded Field could only do so much, even after all of his training these past six years attempting to apply the theory. But the moon -- the full moon -- reinvigorating him, the light of the celestial body that he died under, that his son made a solemn promise that night so long ago ... All of that, in this...
place that is his son's world. It has saved him.

Just as he saved his son years ago, his son saved him. Again.

"Dad ..." Archer grunts, holding out his hand palm first at their enemy, standing tall. "I ... I don't know how long I can ..."

And then Kiritusgu sees it. The muck around Kotomine is set aflame. There are fewer blades hitting it. The air around them wavers. The ground is covered with the same mud as the chamber, with most of it concentrated around the priest. He is wasting his son's time. He is wasting all of theirs.

He invokes his Time magecraft again, assembling the weapon his son brought him. It was too heavy to use before. It took time to modify, even more time than his Calico. But it was clunky, and awkward. He would not have been able to move it fast enough without his Time magecraft, or maneuver it through climbing the tunnel to the cavern. It would have taken too long, under ordinary circumstances to assemble, and Kotomine and the Grail would not have given the chance. But they aren't in the chamber now. They are in Shirou's -- his poor, battle-scarred son's -- world, with its own rules: a place that can still remember dreams. That can still remember hope. There is enough ammunition. He made sure of that. He always left contingencies, even if he thought he hadn't needed them.

The Magus Killer puts the gun together. Loads the strip. And aims it.

*

Kotomine Kirei doesn't know whether to be angry, or extremely elated.

This is a Reality Marble. He has never seen one before, though he knows through Gilgamesh that they exist. An extremely forbidden form of magic, bordering on True Magic, in which a magus overwrites a part of reality with their own. All attempts to make them often incurred the wrath of Alaya, if not courting the displeasure of Gaia itself. The Church would have considered it an ultimate blasphemy to the natural laws of God Almighty, something that the most powerful Dead Apostles and the Ancestors would attempt to unleash on their foes.

But Kotomine finds it glorious.

Because, now, it makes so much sense. He had seen Archer through his familiars, and Lancer. There had been something about Rin's Servant that perplexed him. And he never really quite put his finger on it. Until now. The bearing, the swords that the wielded just like the boy, and then ... this place. This beautiful sculpture wrenched out of the clay of hell itself. It is a lightly embossed tracing of the destruction he and Emiya Kiritsugu wrought on Shinto ten years ago! He sees the fire. It was the fire that brought him rebirth under Angra Mainyu's blessing. And now, he realizes, it is the same fire that led to Emiya Shirou's own resurrection!

It makes so much sense now. He had always known the boy had tremendous survivor's guilt. For all the boy attempted to avoid him, he still had to register with the Church, and he had read enough of the other to know what he was. The Throne of Heroes had influence over Heroic Spirits from all of space and time on this world: past, present ... and future.

The pendants they both wore. He recognized a Tohsaka heirloom when he saw it. There was no way Tohsaka Tokiomi had made two such artifacts: especially not for the daughter that he had traded to the Matou. The red colours of the Servant's shroud matching the red of his own former student's colours. And his involvement with Emiya Kiritsugu. Kotomine can almost smell the brutal asceticism of this place of a barren heart carved inside out. It feels almost as familiar as his own black one.
Hollow, and empty and making up for its aching lack of meaning by creating, and repairing everything around it. The lack of happiness in this place pulsates in sympathy with the lack that haunted him most of his adult life.

This place and its multiple Noble Phantasms was a plane of good intentions, of hard work, of even love -- a space of solitude -- away from all others forged slowly, and painstakingly over time in search of a miracle: not realizing that it is its own miracle! Expectations subverted. Ideals destroyed. A youthful hope turned to a sublime despair.

A beautiful road to hell.

Kotomine laughs. His laughter carries on through the scouring winds. He laughs as the blades explode against his shields of mud. He made this. He helped make all of this. In another timeline, he just knows he was the antagonist that made this boy into such an interesting man, into an ideal achieved that ultimately detested itself by its very contradiction, its intrinsic paradox. Wasn't the most beautiful art, after all, that which one could shatter? And, if so, wasn't it even more divine to collaborate in the creation of art that seeks to destroy itself? A saviour eaten by the machinery of the father. Like Cain tainting Christ. It is so perfect. Its purity of nihilism is so perfect that it is almost a shame that he can see it wavering around him. That he knows it won't last long.

And then, Kotomine Kirei feels as though he's been cut in half.

He gasps as three of his Command Seals, on his other arm, burn out, and dissipate.

He blinks, a momentary lapse that almost costs him his life as he has to spend another Seal to reinforce the mud and keep an exploding blade from killing him. The King of Heroes ... He's gone. For a few moments, he feels something. An emotion. Kotomine is sad. The Servant, the King, that showed him his true purpose, who he really was all those years ago ... who saved him from a lifetime of misery, waste, and self-loathing ... Who drank wine with him. Who plotted with him. Who he made this play, in large part for ...

He's actually gone.

Kotomine has just lost four Command Spells. He has four left. He has no Servants. It occurs to him, now, that he's actually feeling tired. He is still young. The Potion of Youth hasn't worn off. But even as he sees the swords are fewer now ... He is still fighting a Servant, no matter how weakened the other is ... he will eventually lose. Maybe if he had still possessed his full complement of Command Seals, if he had started this conflict fresh ... if he still had a Servant ...

And then, Kotomine feels it.

His black heart, the one that Angra Mainyu gave him ... It pulsates. On its own. And he hears it. He hears a voice he hasn't heard in a decade. It speaks to him: a combination of a woman's voice, and burbling rot.

Make a contract with me, Kotomine Kirei ... Let us bring forth the new world ... together ... 

And, with that, the priest grins. Of course. Of course you would not abandon me. Rejoice Emiya Shirou. Emiya Kiritsugu. Let us solve this last mystery, together ...

Kotomine begins to pray ... as he receives his final Servant ...

And it doesn't come a moment too soon.

*
Archer's outstretched arm is trembling. He hates this. Even as a Counter-Guardian, with more power than he ever had when he was alive, it still isn't enough. Even against this fucking priest.

And then, he sees it.

"Oh. Fuck." He gasps.

The sands of the desert and its flames are drenched in a rising wave of red-black slime. It rises to the surface. Oh no. He thinks. Oh fuck no ... Archer remembers now. That gold bastard always had more power than any other Servant. Of course, his essence would have the equivalent of a few Heroic Spirits. The Grail itself already had energies from being blue-balled by Kiritsugu from the last War. And now, it had six spirits -- including that of a veritable insane god-king ...

The air around them wavers. A tower can be seen in the distance, with an orb ... and something, something black and curled within it.

Something that shifts.

Now Archer is the one jumping back, in his own world. The mud runs across the ground, burning in hellfire, consuming, hissing through his swords, Noble Phantasms made into sign posts, into grave markers. He watches as they melt ... and dissolve into the darkness ... He'd seen something like this before. But not on this scale.

And Kotomine ... The priest is laughing. His baritone voice is cackling in euphoria, as if he's been told the greatest joke in the entire world. And, perhaps, he has. His cassock is tattered, and Archer can see it. His arms ... They are ringed. They are covered in masses.

Of Command Spells.

New Command Spells.

By Archer's count, there are at least twenty-one extra ones. But how ... How is this possible ...

*Because, dumbass ...* His own voice tells himself. *He's linked himself to the Grail through Illya. But more than that, he has a new Servant. He's made a contract with Avenger. With Angra Mainyu.*

Gilgamesh wasn't the only extra Servant from a previous War. All the World's Fucking Evil itself. It did it. It made a contract with Kotomine. That's why it's surging like this. And with Gilgamesh's power inside of it, it's overflowing. He can feel it surging forward, eating his Reality Marble. And its surrounding his feet. It had just been a distraction before. But now the hisses are roars. He sees his feet blackening. Fucking blackening!

"Shit fuck crap!" Archer shouts, gritting his teeth, sweat breaking out on his body as raging pain courses through him, violating his very spiritual existence. It's compromising his very being. It's ... it's corrupting him. This is bad. This is very bad. If it spreads to his core ...

"Shirou!" He hears someone shouting at him. "Hold on!"

Then, Archer watches, his amazement almost drowning out the horror of being compromised by this darkness eating at his spirit, telling him to die, to kill himself, to destroy everything ... He almost forgets all of this as he sees his father.

His suit is ruined, baring his abdomen, a new arm, and leg. His eyes are a blazing red. His face, painted on his own blood, is twisted into a grimace of utter fury, and pure determination.
Emiya Kiritsugu is definitely a vampire. No ordinary being, aside from a Servant, could carry a XM556 Microgun on his shoulder like it was nothing. A modified machine gun with some serious Reinforcement spells woven into it. And an ammunition belt of 5.56mm NATO bullets. But they aren't ordinary bullets. He's neither that dumb, nor foregone. Archer can see the curses emanating off them, similar to the energies coursing through his father right at this moment.

"Time alter." The Magus Killer shouts, pulling the Reinforced trigger, enveloping the Bounded Field around himself, his gun, and the bullets. "Square accel!"

* 

Everything around Emiya Kiritsugu slows down to a snail's crawl. His body moves at normal speed as he lobs the Microgun on his shoulder. It almost takes on a life of its own, as it attempts to take the life of another, firing multiple rounds of bullets, made from his own body, at the tidal wave of blackness looming towards them, at the mad priest being lifted above by its force, lunging down, trying to end this.

"Eat shit, Kotomine." The Magus Killer bites out, his fangs rattling against the constant vibrating recoil, as accelerated wave after wave of Origin Bullets counter the tides of Angra Mainyu.

Chapter End Notes

Dear god.

It was never supposed to go this far.

I'm serious. This should have ended several chapters ago. But both characters, all characters, just wouldn't let it go. Especially Kotomine. Damn, I mean ... *Zouken* didn't take this long to die. So much for the elegance and short, concise battle of Kotomine and Kiritsugu in Fate/Zero. But everything just ... it was all coming to this point.

I've probably screwed a lot of stuff up here. But sometimes you just have to let the story tell itself. I admit, I was stuck. There was just no way Kotomine would leave Kiritsugu with his weapons after capturing him. And even if Kiritsugu hid a grenade or explosive in his body, Kotomine would have dug it out of him. He isn't stupid. So I had to figure out what Archer found in the storehouses. How it could be beneficial.

And how to, well, get it to relate to the title of the damn fic.

But that last line? So. Fucking. Satisfying.

Next time, on Fate/Stay: Unlimited Bullets: All hell can't stop us now.
Emiya Shirou feels himself being eaten by darkness.

It's coming for his ... his core? He sees the fires around him. He groans. There is dark rain again, unleashing the flame down on him. There are screams. So many screams. There is no reason for him to keep going. He's finished. He was always weak. Always powerless. But something in him doesn't listen. It ignores the voices that tell him to stay down. To give up.

He tries to get to his feet. But stumbles. He falls right on his face into the dirt. Something warm is surrounding him. It flickers, letting in the pain again, but it's still there. It seems ... familiar. As though it's been in him, with him, his entire life. His vision wavers. He can make out ... shapes? Shirou manages to blink. His arms tremble hard as he tries to drag his body over to them.

It doesn't make sense. This place ... with swords and darkness ... it's familiar, but it isn't. There is a man standing on the crest of a massive wave of shadows and hate. He's laughing. Laughing with an insane joy. But then ... Glittering sharp points of light. Everywhere. The dark man's laughter stops. There is a figure. A flickering series of red silhouettes of a man. It moves around the darkness. A part of Shirou wonders how he can even see this, how he can perceive something that fast ... unleashing metallic, shining death from all angles.

The darkness shrieks. It's deathly rain all over again, but this time it is attacking the blackness. The dark man lands on the ground and holds his hands in front of him. Red lights glitter off of his skin. One by one. The blackness surges and waxes around him, rising forward ... but the sharp lights keep the edges of it at bay. The figure moving at inhuman speeds, unleashing the unforgiving lights, shreds encroaching parts of the dark, and it hates it. He can tell it hates it so much.

This World ... it calls out to him. It's being consumed, even as the darkness and the ... bullets keep each other at bay. And there is someone else ...

Shirou keeps crawling. He can't do anything else. Something is drawing him closer. There is a man in ... red. He knows this man. He doesn't like him. In fact, he thinks he hates him. He hates him a great deal. He also hates the dark man who is crouching on the ground, fighting the blurred figure with the darkness. This ... bastard has caused so much pain and suffering. But the red man ... he's done nothing but belittle him, and his dreams. He ruined them. He mocks them by his very existence. He doesn't ... a part of him almost understands.

But the red man is stained in black. He's falling to one knee against the muck. The World around them shakes, and something massive and churning begins to materialize in the air. It's oppressive. It's always been there.

Emiya Shirou! Listen, you are not "one who fights." You are nothing more than "one who creates." Don't think of irrelevant things. There is only one thing you can do, master that one thing. Do not forget.

Do not forget ...

The World ... it's speaking to him. Shirou can hear it talking to him in the grinding, and chiming of metal. Of blades. He doesn't know it, but he feels it like it is his own heart. He sees them then. Saber waiting for him in the dojo. Rin wagging her finger at him. Sakura waking him up in the storage shed. And Illya ... He promised to be with her, when Berserker was gone by his and Saber's hands.
Illya ... His hand doesn't have Command Seals. A fist shattered his ribs. He was carried here.

He remembers.

Every part of his body, of his being, is crying out as he drags himself towards the others. To the dark man. Avalon is somehow with him. It is staying with him. Perhaps it was always with him. He recalls a hand reaching inside of him. Massaging his heart. Mana flowing into him as the darkness almost claimed him.

You are nothing more than "one who creates." Don't think of irrelevant things. There is only one thing you can do, master that one thing.

Shirou's mind repeats the words over, and again. Like a mantra. And he keeps moving. He keeps living. Just like that night, in the Fire.

*

Kiritsugu feels his body ripping apart, and remembering its wholeness over and again. But he doesn't release his magic. He can't afford to. The recoil from the machine gun dislocates his shoulder a few times. But he isn't human anymore. He hasn't been for a while. Not even when he was still alive. He sees the tell-tale sign of Kotomine's new Command Seals dissipating as he blocks the Bullets coming from all directions.

The mud of Angra Mainyu consumes some of the Origin Bullets, but retreats each time. He doesn't know how long he can keep this up. He doesn't know how long Kotomine can keep this up. For all his Time accelerated Bullets keep coming, moving faster than a normal second, he only has so many of them left. So many before Angra Mainyu grows, and consumes them.

Archer ... His being is compromised. He can see that. He can see the darkness fighting to take a hold of his spiritual body, to break him down, to feed the Grail with another Heroic Spirit. He's trying. He can see him struggling to maintain the Reality Marble around them. If it falls, the Bounded Field of the Grail will return, and Kiritsugu's Time magecraft will be greatly diminished once again. It's a war of attrition now.

He just needs to hold on a little longer.

*

Archer is dying. He knows this. It has happened before. Many times.

Masters that thought being Lancer was suffering had obviously never met, nor been, a Counter-Guardian before.

He knows that Angra Mainyu will break him down. The Grail will process his energy. Maybe it would be enough to get Alaya's attention. Probably not, though. It'd just send another cleaner to deal with this, and take him back: to deal with the next mess. And the next.

He maintains his concentration. This is still his World. The Grail's filth is powerful, but he can slow it down in his system. He can do this. He has suffered worse than this before. When he has, he can't quite say. But he knows he has. He knows this has to be enough. Instead, he looks at Kiritsugu as he moves throughout the field around them. He is a series of blurred, red after-images of death. His machine gun keeps firing. He isn't stopping. Not once.

The truth is, the Spirit that used to be Emiya Shirou always knew his old man was cool.
He just didn't realize, up until now watching him as a Time-accelerated vampire armed with a machine gun with a seemingly infinite number of magic-destroying bullets, that he was also an utter bad ass.

If this is the last image of his father that he has, before he dies again, Archer can almost live with that.

* 

Angra Mainyu snarls in Kotomine's mind as it keeps being hit by the Origin Bullets.

The priest spends Seal after Seal. It had been an excellent gamble: to utilize the Lesser Grail to access the deepest parts of the entire system. Kotomine understands it now, more than even before. He's accessed the Grail's auxiliary reserve system and, with Angra Mainyu's intercession, he has gained all the Command Seals that another seven Masters would have been granted: minus their potential Servants, and other functions. Not even he, as the Overseer, had been given these extra mantras. Until now. Prayer only goes so far on its own. The Lord only helps those who help themselves, after all. And he is needing everyone of them to keep from being riddled by the cursed, metal rain flying around him.

He can't really see his foe, but there are hints, and the mud blocks the Magus Killer every time. It's like their game from years ago. Trying to land a decisive hit on him where he is blind, or unawares. But it's more than that. He can see the vampire getting tired. The Time magecraft still takes its toll, apparently. Between it, and the regeneration from the Servant having been spent getting his body to reverse the injuries he'd inflicted on him, he can just start to make out the Magus Killer's form again.

It is only a matter of time. Kotomine has the Grail on his side. Angra Mainyu will soon awaken. It will take this seventh Servant, thanks to Gilgamesh's sacrifice, and then it will finally be complete. He won't have to do anything more than let Angra Mainyu consume them. It will devour everything. The Magus Killer's paltry resistance and Curse of Restoration will only prolong the inevitable at that point.

Kotomine will see this birth, will witness and bear this child, to term. At last, his life will find its ultimate, promised meaning.

* 

Emiya Norikata jolts awake, his old wooden chair nearly falling over, tipping him backward. He stops himself. Barely.

He is back in his Workshop on Alimango Island. He can hear the sea gulls crying out outside of their mansion. He blinks, noticing that his glasses are all but dislodged from his face. He must have fallen asleep during his work. It wouldn't be the first time and, he suspects, it won't be the last. He's feeling hot. It's then that he notices the blanket draped over his shoulders.

Ah. Kiritsugu knows better than to interrupt me in my studies. He thinks to himself, in some bemusement. Or my nap. It must have been Shirley.

Silly girl. Shirley is smart, but Alimango Island is far too temperate this time of year to expect comfortable sleep with a woolen blanket. He sighs, and rolls up his sleeves, preparing to see if he can successfully stagnate the flow of past decay in the flower in front of him, while hoping its cellular structure can gradually be restored once he releases it ...

It's then that he sees it.
There is ... something on his hand. It's on his forearm. He recalls compressing something onto it: something strangely soft, and silken. He looks at the pattern of it. Then he closes his eyes, adjusting his glasses back to the bridge of his nose.

"You were the only one who believed in what I could do." A voice behind him speaks. "Even more than Father Simon."

Norikata turns around, and sees Shirley. She looks at him with a sad expression in her light, golden eyes. She is carrying something in her hands. It is half of a watermelon. Shirley always loved watermelons. Noritaka even recalls melons on Alimango being the juiciest he'd ever had.

The girl shakes her black-haired head, raising the fruit to her lips, and taking a bite out of it. "You wanted me to drink the potion, didn't you, Emiya-sensei."

He regards her, his student, his assistant. "No. In fact, I distinctly recall telling you not to touch it. That it wasn't working as planned."

Her yellow eyes stare into his, as juice drips down her chin. "I heard what you told Kerry." She steps towards him, speaking her endearment for his son. "That you hoped we could continue your work. That Kerry could continue your research, and I could assist him. That I'd always be there for him."

She leans towards him, and Norikata sees a light glitter in her eyes. "And I promised him that, sensei."

"And you would have been." Norikata says, slowly, remembering. "If you had just listened to me the first time."

"No, sensei," She replies. "They were already looking for you. You knew they would find Alimango. I think ... you did hope that I'd come with you, and Kerry. You involved me in so much. You knew I couldn't leave it well enough alone. I remember your lessons. Your ... tests ... But you couldn't test your potion. Not on yourself. Not on your heir. Besides," her eyes turn red, and feral, "you wanted to see what would happen when a mundane human tried to become an Apostle. You hoped I would. I was always your experiment. We all were. We have always just been tools to you. And now, you want a new one."

Blood drips down her fanged mouth from the mellon become a decapitated human head in her hands as Shirley laughs. Norikata jumps to his feet, his non-existent heart thudding in his chest.

And then, the girl is gone.

"Even if I am to carry all the evils of this world, it won't matter. If that can save the world, then I'd gladly accept it." A very familiar feminine voice intones.

He sees her. He hasn't seen her in years. She strokes her hand over her swollen belly. Her face is wan, and careworn. She rubs her pregnant stomach, with a fond, distant smile on her face. "You always said he had such a strange Affinity and Origin. Severing and Binding. That's why you named him Kiritsugu."

Norikata's lips press into a thin, grim line. His hands clench. The sun is shining softly on them, in this study, where she never set foot before the Executors got her first, when their son was just an infant. "So ..." He says. "This is how it is. It's just like my son's memories told me." He looks at her, tries to look past her image. "This is how you attempt to communicate with those inside of you. In this dream-like state."

She sighs. "You were always too direct, Norikata. Trying to bury that sentiment under distance, and
... time." She smiles distantly, sadly at him. And he can't lie to himself. It makes something leap into his throat. "But that detachment never fooled me. You were always passionate, my love. So passionate, and so driven that you left me to die: so that you could survive, and take our son, your heir, and finish what the Clan started."

"You ..." He starts. "You sacrificed yourself for me." He shakes his head. "If this were really her, she would have remembered that."

"Perhaps." His wife comes forward, and takes his balled hands in hers. She smiles up at him. "I did see the value in your work. But you gave up on helping others. You gave up on me. On us. You knew that you would be hunted, and perhaps I did sacrifice myself." She sighs again. "But you never looked back, did you Norikata." She steps back. "In the end, I know why you named him such. Severing and Binding ... Isn't that the fate of all children after their leave their parents? Even if we don't leave their memories ..."

Briefly, just briefly, he sees her broken body on the ground again as it had been all those years ago.

He blinks.

"Perhaps this suits you, Emiya Norikata."

There is a pale woman in a black dress in front of him. She is slender, with long white hair, and red eyes not unlike that of a vampire's. But the albino woman isn't a vampire. He knows that much. She looks like his son's wife. But this isn't Irisviel von Einzbern. This one looks ... older, somehow. More distant. More solemn. And yet, something older broods behind the alchemically created eyes of this artificially-created humanoid being. Norikata analyzes her image with his gaze, recalling everything he has learned thus far.

"So it is true." He says, simply.

The form of Justeaze Lizrich von Einzbern ... or Irisviel, nods. "I died a long time ago. And you should already be dead."

Norikata chuckles dryly. "Under normal circumstances, you would be correct. But my familiars, well ... they are keeping me alive." He can feel them, their hunger being satiated, even as it rekindles, starting the cycle again. When they feed, he feeds, as they are his extensions. She doesn't say anything else, as though waiting for him to continue. "If you must know, as well, I performed some experiments on my son, when I revived him. We determined that our Curse negates yours, to an extent. He had a natural resistance. I simply took some of his blood, and injected it into myself. I'd hoped the process would be not unlike magical antibodies. That and combined with my familiars, and ..." He looks at his arm. "The rest of it, has brought us to this place." He stares at her, trying to see right through her to the real power behind it all. "But you already know all of that."

"Yes." The homunculus form says, after a time, and continues to return his stare with exact dispassion to which he is regarding her.

They stand there, analyzing one another, waiting for the other to add something more.

Finally, Norikata sighs. "All right. What do you want?"

"That is not the question." She replies. "The question is, what do you want, Emiya Norikata?"

"Please." He tells her, waving a dismissive hand. "You already know the answer to that."

"Perhaps." She says. He notices a black spot appear on the side of her face, at her mouth. "You do
know that the Second Magician has attempted to mislead you."
Norikata slowly nods. "I ... suspected as much."

"And what do you intend to do about it, now that your suspicions have been confirmed, Emiya
Norikata?"

The Dead Apostle looks down at his arm again. "I'm going to do exactly what I set out to do." He
looks at her. "I'm going to fix this situation."

"I see." Norikata watches as the black spot grows, blotching part of her porcelain face. It's as though
he is watching one of his old white flower experiments beginning to wither. "I've read two souls
before this moment. One of them was your son's. The other, my current advocate. I use the
methodology of the person that immerses themselves in me to ... understand them. That is the reason
for the rest of this." She gestures around the facsimile of his Workshop. "Your actions, Emiya
Norikata, reveal exactly the kind of person that you really are.

"Your son rejected me, Emiya Norikata. I wonder what you will do."

He watches as black ichor runs out of her mouth, down her face, leaving only glittering red eyes in
the darkness.

"Dad?"

Norikata turns around. It's his son. Kiritsugu just came into the room. He is small, his skin tanned by
the sun of Alimango. He's sweaty from the summer air outside, his dark hair a tangled mat when left
to its own devices. Wide dark eyes look up at him, brightly. There is interest there, and fascination.
Norikata always supposed that his son looked up to him as though he were some kind of wise, gentle
giant, or an adult sage -- or compassionate guardian deity -- that dispensed knowledge sternly, yet
fair. He recalls many days, in a few places in addition to Alimango Island, showing Kiritsugu all the
different sorts of flora and fauna. Their insect-collecting. His little brief displays of magecraft for his
son's edification.

There is curiosity in Kiritsugu's eyes now, tempered with innocence, and an open adoration that ...
Norikata almost forgot existed. Deep down, in a place Norikata hates to go, but cut open almost
always by a mental scalpel of pure ontological truth, he knows that he is the one responsible for
taking that away from his son. For dimming that love in his eyes towards him.

"Dad?" Kiritsugu says. "Are you ... okay, Dad?"

Norikata steps forward. Kiritsugu doesn't move. He leans down. Then, he kneels down in front of
his son. He takes his hands, putting them on both of the boy's shoulders. "Kiritsugu."

"Am I ... in trouble Dad?"

Norikata should know better. He knows the nature of all of this. He's seen it through his son's eyes.
But even as he knows the truth, there is a part of him that sees his son -- his boy -- come back to him.
Even though it's been years. Past life and death. Even though he knows he doesn't deserve it.
"Maybe you are." He decides to be honest with him, direct. "But not with me. Kiritsugu ..."

Then, Norikata wraps his arms around him. He holds him. He hadn't always done this for Kiritsugu.
For them. He was busy towards the end. He feels small arms tentatively surrounding his neck too.
Kiritsugu smells of the outdoors, and youth. Norikata holds his son in his arms as he hasn't almost
since the boy had been born.
"Kiritsugu." He tells him, squeezing his eyes shut. "I want you to know. I did a lot of things. Some hard, terrible things. They were never easy. They were never going to be easy. But I sacrificed so much. We both did. And, worst of all, I sacrificed your love. And I didn't even know it. I didn't even consider it, then. My son ..." He holds him tighter, resting his face on the boy's cheek. "I can't, in good conscience, make all of those sacrifices, all of that pain, be for nothing. I will make it up. There will be meaning in all of this. I'm going to see this through."

Norikata buries his face in his son's shoulder. "I'm going to end this." He murmurs into his son's neck, staining his T-shirt with the red of his tears.. "I'm going to end this ..."
Kiritsugu can feel the grudges shrieking against his body.

It doesn't hurt nearly as much as blessed Conceptual weapons, and with the Avalon-laced infusion of blood he gained from Archer, Angra Mainyu's infection has been expelled. But it is, as they had already established, a battle of attrition. Even his regeneration is slowing down as he moves, strafing the wave of Angra Mainyu with his gun and its Origin Bullets. And the Reality Marble, Unlimited Blade Works, is fading.

This is bad on a few levels. He realizes what is going on now. The Reality Marble is actually containing the mud. It is keeping it from spreading outwards. In temporarily suspending the seals that make the cavern's Bounded Field, its reality has superseded the other's, and is somehow managing to surround all of them: Illya as the Lesser Grail, Kotomine and his link to the system ... and even the Greater Grail itself with its restless embryo. He is amazed at his son's strength, at being able to do even this much with so little power. If he could just feed him some of his own blood ... If he only had energy to spare.

Because, when Unlimited Blade Works dissipates ...

Archer is in a bad way, but he's still holding on. He watches as Command Seal after Command Seal blinks out from Kotomine, expended from the priest's body, but there are still quite a few of them. He suspects some are being used to increase his own speed. Others are being utilized to increase the tide of mud under his control. Ironically, given his family's magecraft, Kiritsugu realizes that whatever happens next will ultimately only be a matter of time.

* 

Shirou crawls across the ground. The mantra is still repeating in his mind, but it has become his voice.

*If you can't defeat it, it tells him, visualize something that can ...*

The dark figure is standing on the ground, its back to him as it deals with the slivers of light firing down at it. At him. Shirou's vision corrects itself for a few moments, the golden energies in him clearing away the disorientation, and delirium of his current state. It's that fake fucking priest. He's surrounded by moving, black mud. He's facing away from him, focused on ... Archer? Yes, Archer, and whatever else is firing that attack on him.

Only the mud is between him, and the bastard in front of him. Shirou grits his teeth as he drags himself through the mud. He doesn't even have the energy to scream as tides surge over him, threatening to drown him.


Shirou growls in agony, forcing his thoughts into his core, letting ... letting Avalon warm him, in the place where Saber used to be. He remembers Einzbern Castle and the Forest. The arrows. Then Caliburn. Then, after, Avalon forming in him ... even here, away from his Servant. Saber ... he
knows, deep down, though he can't feel her that she is still alive. Why would Avalon be with him otherwise?

He focuses, the World around him talking to him with its scraping steel in his mind. So many blades. So much ...

Shirou's hand begins to glow with magical energy, his tormented Magic Circuits cycling the remainder of their Od. But it's easier here, somehow. He tries to keep his head above the muck even as it burns him, and his skin reforms.

"T-Trace ..." He rasps as he moves, closer and closer. "... on ..."

Kiritsugu fights against the pain, and keeps moving, his body wanting to revert back to its own normal time, the injuries from his magecraft and the movement of the gun on his shoulder, taking more and more time for his vampiric nature to forget. And ... the redness. The red feeling is coming back. It's at the corners of his being. He realizes, now, that has expended too much energy.

He realizes he's getting hungry again.

Hunger, for a vampire, does more than just weaken it. It makes it more ravenous, less able to think. The link between spirit and body, brain and form, becomes more tenuous. The bestial instincts begin to take over. It happens under extreme pain, or duress as well unless the vampire has a considerably strong will. And even then, it isn't foolproof. He has no blood packs on him. He doesn't dare try to feed from Archer. He is still empowered by the full moon here, bolstering his endurance far beyond that of a young vampire. But the moonlight is only making him hungrier. Kiritsugu finds that he wants to feed. He wants to consume blood badly.

It is breaking his concentration. And he can't afford that. He needs to maintain his mind. He needs ...

Suddenly, he feels a surge of something inside of him. Something he didn't know he was missing. 

Kiritsugu. His father's presence speaks through his mind. You can do this.

Destroy him.

Kiritsugu feels his blood begin to rise. There is no other way to describe it. Suddenly, the monster inside of him, the thing he had been attempting to suppress rips out of him. But his mind isn't gone. It has gone to that place of cold detachment. To that place of direct attack. It has one focus. One goal.

The fading Reality Marble seems to turn completely red as Kiritsugu charges forward, no longer circling around, or attempting to keep his foe on guard from all angles. He takes the machine gun, and fires directly in a forward, frontal assault, howling into the carnage, calling for his enemy's blood.

Kotomine is simultaneously in two places. In one, he is dealing with the Magus Killer who is, suddenly and without warning, moving even faster than he was, towards him and his defense. In the other, he sees Emiya Norikata, his conversation ... and his choice.

The Apostle should have been dead. Kotomine had had no intention of giving him a Command Seal, and would have either killed him after dealing with his son, or destroyed him along with him. Angra Mainyu consumed him as he attempted to get to the core: to tamper with the seals there. Or perhaps
he just thought he would be safe there, until the Grail decided otherwise. Norikata said he wanted the Grail. And Kotomine gave him exactly that. But ... what is happening now ... why would ...

_Damn the Emiya!_ He curses. _Why can't they stay dead!?_

He focuses all of the mud in front of him, to buy him time, to engulf the vampire ...

"Kotomine ... Kirei!"

Something stabs into his leg. It doesn't even hurt. In fact, it's done no damage to him at all. For a few moments, time seems to stand still for the priest. He's felt this sensation before. No ... _he_ didn't feel this. But he recalls it. It was Lancer. Lancer had been told to leave the rest of Caster's victims alone, after dealing with the majority. He was about to summon him back, to order him to accompany him to the Emiya residence, and take the Lesser Grail and the boy before ... feeling that prickling sensation ... and the absence of Lancer in the back of his mind ...

Along with his Command Seal.

He thought, perhaps that Caster and her forces had gotten to him first, in retaliation for what he ordered him to do at the Temple. But the Seals were ... gone. Perhaps he should have looked into it, but he had far more important matters to deal with it. Lancer had been a tool, at best. And it was the end game.

The mud falls around Kotomine before he realizes what has actually happened.

The boy is on the ground. He looks up at him, through a blood-stained, battered face with a defiant expression. Kotomine sees a jagged iridescent dagger in the boy's hand. It is in his lower leg ... before the blade shatters and dissipates. It feels as though it had never been there to begin with. But then he feels it. His Command Spells. They are gone. They are all gone.

He can't feel Angra Mainyu anymore. He can't feel its warmth, its promise of destruction, its glorious return ... His contract with Angra Mainyu, with the Grail, is gone ...

And then, his heart stops beating.

Kotomine turns pale as his mouth opens into a wide, mute O. He staggers back, clutching his chest. His black heart.

It's gone.

It's been destroyed! He can't breathe. He can't --

And then, Kotomine Kirei feels the Bullets enter his body. They riddle it. The protective spells around his cassock dissipate like wind. The Kevlar is shredded around his torso and chest. His body is literally shaking from the impact of each rapid fire Bullet hitting it. It's strange. There isn't any blood, in particular. No. But even though his Circuits aren't open, as he never had to do so, he feels something spreading through his nerve-endings. Dull and encompassing. He can literally feel the necrosis setting in. So that's what the Bullets do to a target that isn't using its full power ... He thinks to himself, as he falls to his knees.

The life is knocked out of him as he is about to fall over ...

Until something grabs his throat. Kotomine looks down. He sees the hate-filled face of Emiya Kiritsugu, the revenant that the Magus Killer has become, glaring up at him with fury of hell itself.
Then, the vampire pulls him towards him ... and sinks his fangs into his neck.

After that, Kotomine Kirei sees only blackness. And nothing more.

* 

The moment he saw the Command Seals fade, and the black void where Kotomine's heart used to be, he smelled weakness. He smelled death. And it was intoxicating as he struck hard, and fast. First, the bullets. He can see the splashes of necrotic energy spreading across the internal parts of the priest's body. But that isn't good enough. Kiritsugu grabs him, twisting him into the air ... and rips into Kotomine's throat: drinking his blood. It courses down his throat, burning with the power of Reinforcement and the expended energies of wasted miracles. The fact that it was defiled by Angra Mainyu means nothing to him now. It is rich, bitter blood imbued by relatively unused and healthy Magic Circuits, Command Spells, and some other fluid -- some ancient, primordial golden substance of youth -- that Kiritsugu can't name.

And it is invigorating.

He drains the priest dry. He can't even feel his heartbeat. He can't even see it. He was going to die soon anyway. The energies taken from the bastard's body more than satiate him. The dryness in the back of his throat is completely gone. The Od in his body has replenished itself. Even his Magic Crest isn't cycling anymore. Finally, there is nothing left inside of Kotomine Kirei. The man is left as hollow, and as rotten, as he had lived.

Kiritsugu remembers Iri. And Maiya. He thinks about Illya's dead eyes, and Shirou's broken body. This bastard hurt his family in every possible way. And now, he's dead: as he should have been ten years ago. He throws the man's corpse on the ground, shattering every bone in its body. Kiritsugu raises his foot to the body's chest, pauses, and shifts: stomping his foot down on its head ... squashing it into a bloody pulp.

He isn't going to make the same mistake twice.

"J-ji-san?"

Reality comes back to Kiritsugu, as he sees not Archer but ... Shirou. His son is lying on the ground, not far away from Kotomine's body. Kiritsugu realizes that his son has just seen him. More ... he just saw what he did.

He just saw what he is now.

Shock and horror fills Shirou's face, as his eyes roll back into his head ... and he closes eyes. Kiritsugu shakes away the punch to the gut of seeing fear, on his own son's face, at what he is now, and goes over to him. He can see the young man is still breathing. But barely. His copy of Avalon has protected him, but in this muck, and after everything the priest did to him, it is a miracle he is still alive, never mind having been conscious.

Kiritsugu drops the gun out of his other hand, as he lifts his son into his arms ... even as Unlimited Blade Works vanishes. He walks over to Archer, who is still standing. The Heroic Spirit is stained with blackness. But it isn't spreading. It's mostly in his legs. But he looks exhausted. They regard each other grimly. They did it. They finally did it.

And then, Kiritsugu notices something.

He isn't surprised that the mud still exists. But ... it isn't moving. In fact, nothing is moving. Archer
seems to notice this as well. He moves, to come towards him, but his movements are slower. It's as though his ... the alternate version of his son is attempting to walk through molasses.

"It is still contained Kiritsugu."

Kiritsugu looks up. Emiya Norikata is standing ontop of the cliff, where the core of the Greater Grail resides. And then he really looks at him. The Dead Apostle's Magic Crest is glowing with a tremendous cycling of Od, converting, and interacting with the mana around them. The former Magus Killer realizes that the older vampire is using his Time Manipulation. It's Time alter stagnate. No ... it's more than that. It's Time alter square stagnate ... on a massive level.

Norikata looks down at him expectantly. Waiting. And then Kiritsugu also feels it. He opens his Magic Circuits.

"Time alter." Kiritsugu murmurs. "Double accel."

His hand moves fast. And then, just as quickly, he releases the spell. He also realizes that he is moving at normal speed, even without his magecraft. He can't help but marvel at this. Norikata, for all of his genius and knowledge, never displayed this amount of power, or control before. Angra Mainyu is moving, but slowly, fitfully. He doesn't know how much time this has bought them. But he starts to figure out other details.

"You've taken over the Bounded Fields." Kiritsugu says. "Converting their frequency to our magecraft."

Norikata nods. "Yes, son. It took some doing, but aside from what lies in the Grail, this place is a series of seals made from Magic Circuits. I just linked into the system. You can say I ... suspended all functions. Don't worry, Kiritsugu. We have some time yet."

Kiritsugu walks over, towards Illya's prone form. "I'm surprised you survived."

"No." The other replies. "You're not."

Kiritsugu nods, kneeling down next to Illya's form. He places Shirou next to her. Then, he puts a hand on Illya's forehead. My sweet little girl ...

"It worked." Norikata says. "The priest honestly thought I was going to betray you. Exactly as you said."

Kiritsugu doesn't even have to nod. They had discussed this plan beforehand. Kiritsugu was the one who had told Norikata to tell Kotomine that he would betray him for a Command Spell: for the chance to use the Grail. Whether or not Kotomine could even give someone not chosen by the Grail a Command Spell, was irrelevant. As long as Kotomine believed that Norikata believed this was possible, it didn't matter. And even if Kotomine didn't believe it, he still couldn't resist the opportunity to rub as much salt in Kiritsugu's wounds as possible. Kiritsugu had known this. In fact, he'd counted on it. He'd hoped to lure the priest away from his son, and his friends: to deal with him, and the Grail once and for all. But ... it didn't go completely as planned.

The former Magus Killer looks up at his father above him. He can see a splotch of blackness at the corner of his mouth, where his fangs are. As though he fed. But on what? He had been submerged in the Grail. He ...

"Archer." Kiritsugu tells the slow moving Servant, not knowing if the other can hear him, but he suspects the other's senses work just fine. "If you can help me disengage Illya from the system with anything you have, I would appreciate it. And Dad ... now that you have control over the Bounded
Field systems, once we remove the Lesser Grail function, you can ..."

And then, suddenly, Kiritsugu realizes he can't move.

He's on the ground. He's still kneeling in front of Illya, and even now can make out her vacant expression but he can't rise to his feet. And he is frozen into place. Like the limb ordered by the brain to remain still. He's still looking up at Norikata. The Dead Apostle looks down at him, a sad expression on his face.

"No, Kiritsugu." He tells his son. "I'm afraid that I still have to attend to some ... unfinished business. Of my own."

Chapter End Notes

They finally did it. The priest, that should have been dead in two or three chapters -- who decided he wanted several more to make people's lives more horrific -- is finally gone.

But ... at what cost?

And what is going to happen now?

I was tempted to leave it at Kotomine's death. To give the protagonists something, briefly, to celebrate in their epic take down of this psychopath, and this ancient evil caught in the Grail. But, now ... now things are going to get interesting. Thank you for following me on this journey. I think it will be over soon. But damn. What a ride it has been. See you all fairly soon.
"You --" Archer lifts his hands. But the Servant is slow. Far too slow.

Emiya Norikata concentrates on the massive amount of Od gathering inside of his Crest, through his Magic Circuits, and into the Bounded Fields of the cavern. He's been granted the basic amount of access to be able to reactivate the wards protecting the Greater Grail against spiritual bodies: especially those it has helped materialize into being. Perhaps Archer could have resisted it. However, Norikata can see right through him. His spiritual core still exists, but it is weaker, pulsating at a more feeble frequency. The Servant has spent most of his prana summoning his, admittedly impressive, Reality Marble: amongst other pursuits, the Dead Apostle is sure.

He can also see that Archer has been compromised by Angra Mainyu, at the blackening of his lower extremities. Either way, without access to a Master to replenish him, and having spent most of his power in combat, and perhaps even resisting the curses attempting to break him down into prana for the Grail, he is no longer an issue. Information flows through his mind, the bitter taste of the System's fluid still on his palate from the vision ... once he had made his choice with the Grail, and the entity harboured within it.

Kiritsugu is kneeling on the ground next to the catatonic Lesser Grail, where the Dead Apostle has compelled him to stay indefinitely. His progeny, his son, can't move. It's an unfortunate, but necessary fact. The boy, given their family name by his son, remains unconscious, and near death judging from the flickering of his life energies. There is no one here that can interfere now.

He thinks about releasing his alter spell through the Fields of the cavern enough to have the mud completely consume the Heroic Spirit. But, ultimately, he decides against it. There is still much work left to do, and it would just set him back. Even at this stage, the Servant could resist, and potentially break free enough to do some damage. And he can't risk that. Not after he has come this far. No. Once the process is complete, the Servant will automatically be atomized, and converted into the magical energy required.

Should it be needed.

But one thing at a time. First, he has to recalibrate some aspects of this system. He begins work, kneeling down himself to pass mana and magical energy into one the seals around the Greater Grail's core. Yet, even now, he can see his son's gaze on him. His red eyes are piercing. Cold.

"I know you can still hear me, Kiritsugu." He tells the other, as he works. He has enough concentration to complete these changes, and talk to his son. "Again, I'm sorry. I would release your vocal functions, but you are incredibly resourceful -- as I have always known -- and I just can't take that particular risk. Not at this stage."

He moves on to the next node, channeling energy into it. But he can still feel his son's silent stare, filled with accusation, and venom. Norikata sighs.

"I didn't want to do this. In an ideal world." He shakes his head, at the irony of that statement given what he knows about Justeaze Lizrich von Einzbern and Zolgen Makiri's original goals in creating the Heaven's Feel Ritual, at his own son's former dreams. "You would be at my side, right now. Or, perhaps, none of this would be necessary at all. We could have had all the time in the world to discover the final product of our Clan's Mystery together."

He squeezes his arm, then lifts it, showing it to Kiritsugu. "This is how I did it." He looks up at it,
briefly, and sees the grafted, textured skin taken from the Book of the False Attendant, and the Command Seal embedded within it. "This was why I helped you save the Matou girl. Not merely to use her, and her Servant, to deal with your daughter, Caster, and Kotomine but to get ... this. Without this, this would have been a complete waste of time. I'm sure you can figure out how I did it. Yes. Somehow, I feel that you do understand.

"It is the same principle of time alter stagnate I used to make Makiri's Crest Worms enter into a state of hibernation. Into a state of near-death. As you recall, I utilized this similar technique on the girl's systems to keep her alive, and to extract the Worms from her body. I also used the same to preserve Makiri's true body for his ... disposal. I did destroy the Book, but I extracted the Seal. I fed it ... and its surrounding Crest Worm material with my blood." He smiles, dryly, to himself. "In a sense, kept in stasis and then doing without Zouken's governing intelligence, I converted it to my essence. It is a part of me now. And the only way I could interact with the Greater Grail's systems in any meaningful way. Ah, we are making some progress here. One moment.

"Yes. Right. So: the conversion of the Blood Worm tissue and its Command Seal. As you know, the Makiri created the Command Seal system, as well as the Master-Servant bond. Masters function as a physical anchor for powerful spiritual familiars ... such as the alternate version of your son. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Emiya Shirou. I apologize that it couldn't be under more ... ideal circumstances, but I suspect that you, and Kiritsugu both understand, intimately, just how difficult that can be. No. The Command mantras are, while crystallized miracles of colourless mana, a variant of the same homologous material that the Makiri worked with, and bred, to make their familiars. However, the Command Seals themselves are not merely Makiri creations, but also the result of Einzbern, and Tohsaka collaboration. Otherwise, Zouken could have created the Seals en masse: something I can't do, unfortunately, given how Kotomine spent all of them from the system before you neutralized him. It was actually derived from a fail-safe, an emergency measure, should all seven of the Servants in the Ritual cooperate. There was even another class, different from Avenger, that ..."

Norikata closes his eyes. "No. You are not interested in any of this, Kiritsugu. So I will get to the point." He moves to the next seal. "Zelretch lied to me. He told me that Angra Mainyu's presence in the Grail keeps anyone from accessing Akasha. But that isn't true, is it Kiritsugu? Ah. This mechanism requires ... here we are. Good. So yes. Alaya and Gaia have not, in fact, closed all pathways to the Root. By that logic, Zelretch would probably not have any access to parallel worlds through his Magic. The World, in its different refractions, would not allow it. And it would defeat the purpose of sending a Counter-Guardian to obliterate a threat before it begins, such as sending one to head off a magus coming to the Root, if either aspect of the World -- Alaya or Gaia -- could simply close off access to a power unnatural to itself.

"I'm not sure why he told me that. I'm not sure why he even saved me. To be honest, I don't know he expected would happen, beyond the obvious. Zelretch once told me, long ago, that to be a Dead Apostle meant constantly fighting the forces of pure ennui. Maybe that is why he started all of this. Just to see what would happen." He gets up, brushing his hands on his pants after recharging the last node. "Not that I can blame him. For all he is a Magician and a Dead Apostle Ancestor, he is still a magus. And we all have our experiments. We all need our goals."

He can feel the Bounded Fields now fully attuned to his Time magecraft, now taking energy from the sunken leyline, now surrounding Mount Enzou. "As you can no doubt sense, I am using my bond with the Command Seal, as a Master, to integrate into the Grail system beyond co-opting Makiri magecraft. But in order to have accomplished that, I needed to be immersed in the core. It was a risk." He sighs. "It could have gone either way." He looks at Kiritsugu. "Oh, I know you were hoping that it consumed me. That I didn't have your resistance. That the curses melted me down, and ate my corrupted soul? Or perhaps you were hoping that Kotomine and I would neutralize one
another for you." He chuckles wryly. "You are not only my familiar, of sorts, Kiritsugu but you are also my son. I know you a little better now. And I haven't forgotten Alimango Island."

*Saber will stop you.* Norikata freezes into place, not even blinking. He sees Kiritsugu looking directly into his eyes. *She and Tohsaka are going to come here, and destroy the Grail.*

Norikata smiles. He can't help it. He is genuinely impressed. "You have a strong will, son. That you can even communicate with me at all ..." He closes his eyes. "You don't even have any familiars, and you know that the Second Owner, and your son's Saber still remain. But they won't make it here." He opens his mind, and lets Kiritsugu see through his own familiars. He lets him see what is happening. "I knew there was a chance they could make it here. That your former Saber could find another Master.

"So I was forced to give them a choice. A difficult one."

*

Saber slices the head off one of the vampires.

Excalibur cleaves through its neck, and kills it instantly. She has felled several of them. Feral, literally blood thirsty beasts. They fight them mindlessly, their claws and fangs trying to find an opening of any kind. And they are not ordinary vampires. They have been empowered, maddened, by the power of a full moon. Saber doesn't worry about herself. She could destroy an army of them, even scrounge up enough prana to unleash the power of Excalibur, and have its holy energy obliterate their regenerative abilities.

But it's her charges ... and Fuyuki that she is worried about.

An Excalibur blast, enough to destroy all these beings would also be powerful enough to obliterate a good part of the city, and the people in it. In effect, the vampires are using their people as human shields, keeping Saber from going all out. And they are scattered. She doesn't even know if she can get all of them at once. As for the others ... Rin manages to obliterate another vampire's head with one of her Gems. Saber doesn't know how many more jewels the magus has left, but she is still going strong, having recovered fairly well from Gilgamesh's attack on her throat all things considered.

"Still ... have ..." She coughs, as though reading her thoughts, her healed vocal cords still adapting. "... my Reinforce ... ment. Can attack close quarters ... if I have to ..." She takes out her Azoth Dagger. "And this."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that, Rin." Saber shouts.

"This ... this is horrible." Sakura cries out.

The King of Knights watches as Sakura's shadow familiars attack the vampires. She is actually impressed. The creatures, shaped by her Hollow element and honed by her sister's training, rip through the vampires. Saber can see the threads of energy tenuously connecting their unnatural souls with their undead bodies snap. The shadow familiars seem to actually hurt these strands, and the souls themselves. But she can see the other young woman is getting tired. She has never fought like this before, never mind having two battles in one night.

"Can't ..." Rin gasps. "Can't ... let them ... kill ... any more ... They'll ... spread ..." She angrily stabs a vampire in the head with her dagger with Reinforced strength. Tears are flowing out of her eyes. "My god ..."
Saber can hear the screams. The vampires aren't just attacking them. She can hear, and sense them now: assaulting people in the nearby neighbourhoods. She knows enough to realize what's going to happen. They are feeding. They are very hungry. And when these ones feed, they will spread their curse. It's an infestation. Ordinarily, at this point, the Mage's Association or the Holy Church would come to deal with this. And that's what terrifies Rin. It's bad enough that these creatures are here, and taking lives, even potentially increasing their numbers. But if the Association, or the Church come here ... It will be like Britannia all over again. Saber tries not to remember some of the plague-ridden villages, infected by sickness of mundane or ... supernatural origins, that she and her Knights had been forced to burn down. When she had to make some hard choices.

As it was, the Church already had a presence here. But Kotomine was obviously not trustworthy, especially not if he had known about this. He had to have known. There was no way he couldn't have been aware, as a warrior of Church, that there were vampires here. He let them grow here. Let them feed. Saber is absolutely sure of it.

Did Kiritsugu make these abominations? Did he create them, just as some kind of distraction? As collateral damage of something even worse?

No. Saber can't believe that. Kiritsugu is a lot of things, but she honestly still believes he wanted to do the right thing. That he wanted to avoid hurting innocents as much as possible. She detests the man, and the thing he's become, but this doesn't seem like his work. It's too sloppy for the Magus Killer. Too ... uncaring. Like starving a pack of dogs, and beating them, only to turn them on weak, and terrified captives.

I can't leave my territory. Rin says in her mind. I can't leave all these people to die.

Rin ... Saber can feel the agony emanating from the other woman.

I'm Second Owner ... I should have protected them. Damn Kirei! Damn him to hell! Damn ... me ... Rin destroys another vampire with a Gem, tears streaming down her face. But the Grail ... we need to get to it ... to Shirou ...

Yes. Shirou is in the Mountain with Illya, as Kotomine's captives. Every part of Saber wants to obliterate these monsters, and get to them: to save them. But Kiritsugu is there too. He is fighting. Gilgamesh all but told her. They need to get there. If what Kiritsugu said in his letter was true, Fuyuki ... perhaps even the World is in danger. But if they leave now, the vampires are scattered. There is no one hunting them. No one but her, Rin, and Sakura. She can't leave them here. She can't leave all these innocents here, people whom the Overseer had been supposed to protect, to become victims of the vampires and eventually the Enforcers and Executors that would come here with fire and sword. It's another hard choice. She knows how torn Rin is. Even Sakura is devastated. Saber knows they have friends and loved ones here. Taiga and her family are also at risk.

She thinks about Shirou. She thinks about going to him, and having to explain to him that they left all of the people of Fuyuki to die: just to save him, or stop the Grail. Perhaps destroying the Grail will save Fuyuki, but many lives will be lost. And Fuyuki may fall anyway. Rin is all but asking her what to do. It is a far cry from the usual confidence of the Tohsaka magus. It is a terrible choice: save her Land, or the World.

Then, Saber recalls something else.

"Tell me, King of Knights ... do you trust your Master ..."

Of all things. To remember his words, and their double meaning. Saber grinds her teeth. The three of them have mowed down most of the vampires around them. It is time to make a decision.
"Come on." Saber says, at last. "We need to help the people. Shirou is there. And he isn't alone."
She raises her sword into the air. "They have this."
Kiritsugu squeezes his eyes shut. It is all he can do.

No ... no. Not again ...

He glares at Norikata, as the Dead Apostle is inscribing something on the ground in his own blood. You bastard. You utter bastard. Alimango wasn't enough? How many more people have to die for you?

"I am truly sorry, Kiritsugu." Norikata sighs. "It is ... regrettable, but it can't be helped. I needed their blood to survive Angra Mainyu. And to keep Saber and anyone else from disrupting my progress."

Kiritsugu doesn't know what sickens him more: the fact that his words mirror what he said several decades ago, or that his tone almost genuinely sounds apologetic. The Magus Killer wishes he could move. He wishes he take out his Contender, and blow the Dead Apostle's brains out. Caster's victims. He suddenly realizes, remembering their conversation from earlier. You turned all of her victims into your familiars ... That's where you were when you said you were at Matou Manor ...

"I was at the Manor, though admittedly I already knew enough of the Ritual that I didn't need all of the Makiri books." Norikata replies. "And I didn't turn all of them. Most were dead by Lancer's hand. The rest were fairly forgone. I merely ... re-purposed them before placing them into time alter stagnate ..."

We're all just tools to you. Kiritsugu wants to spit in his father's face. You use everyone. You have no regard for human life whatsoever. Just ... why?

"Why?" Norikata pauses, then resumes his scrawling. "Don't be foolish. You know why."

No! Kiritsugu's mind cries out. You have time! You have actual time! You are immortal! You could perform your ritual to see the end of existence anytime you want. Centuries from now ... fucking thousands of years from now! Why do you even need the Grail? Isn't the Family craft supposed to help you attain Akasha? Doesn't this just ... cheapen it?

"We were talking about Zelretch before." Norikata says, after a while. "About the pitfalls of vampirism. I never wanted to be a Dead Apostle, Kiritsugu. It was going to, theoretically, be our Family's last resort. I need to make my familiars --"

Those people!

"My familiars," Norikata repeats, patiently, "to survive this situation. Even with you. But as a Dead Apostle gets older, they require more blood. More life force to keep from degrading. It's manageable now, since I am relatively young, but it won't always be this way. Eventually, I will need to feed. More and more. Perhaps over time the blood lust will overcome my reason, and I'd be little more than an animal. Or, that doesn't happen, and without Zelretch's capricious patronage, the Association or the Church will hunt me. They will try to stop my experiments again. The fact of the matter is, everything right now -- at this moment -- is in the perfect place.

"You are here to increase my power through our blood affinity. We are both charged with the power
of the full moon thanks to your son's Reality Marble. As my ... more powerful familiar, you ingested his blood with Avalon's essence. I am more powerful now than I have ever been, thanks to you. And two hundred years worth of research and Ritual has been left here by the Three Families. They squandered it. They failed to use it so many times." The Dead Apostle looks, almost beseechingly, at him. "I cannot let this resource go to waste. Several generations worth of ambient mana from the land and Spirits from the Throne of Heroes can help me expedite the process of my research."

Norikata's eyes begin to glow, and Kiritsugu can see his Crest cycling even faster. "Everything is ideal now." A hate-filled grimace forms on the Dead Apostle's visage. "Zelretch told me I should learn from my mistakes." He spits out. "And ... I did. When he left me, thirsty ... mindless in my hunger in his basement ... I learned that starving familiars will do anything to survive! That they will keep going! They will consume anything they can find. Just to live. Just to keep existing. Including him! How dare something like him condescend to lecture me about morality! I'm not doing anything that any other magus wouldn't do in my place ... I hope they see this moment. Those vipers! Their last ..."

Kiritsugu always knew this. Just as he'd known that his father would betray him. But as the mask of calm confidence melts away, revealing the thing underneath it, the anger and the bitterness, a cold feeling creeps down his insides. If you do this, this entire World will die ... "Not necessarily." Norikata's features melt back into a blank expression of contemplation and concentration, as though remembering himself again for a moment. He stands up from his circle, and Kiritsugu can feel his full attention now. "Some might survive. We will see if Angra Mainyu, if All the Evils of the World, can survive until the end of Time. And even so, Alaya will come in and deal with it. There will be ... some survivors."

You don't ... Kiritsugu's mind flounders. You don't know that ...

"Things have a way of balancing themselves out, in the end." Norikata says, dismissively. "Besides, while the Counter Force deals with Angra Mainyu, if it survives, I will have already achieved my goal."

And it is then that it finally hits Kiritsugu. Emiya Norikata is willing to sacrifice an entire World to Angra Mainyu. To destruction. All so he can gain Akasha. This man, who described in meticulous detail all of his observations and work, as he used to do when Kiritsugu was a child, when it still enchanted him to hear his father talk, before everything had gone to hell: this man ... this ... this monster is completely, and irrevocably insane.

But then it really occurs to him. It's far worse than even that.

You ... Kiritsugu tries to find the words in his mind. You don't even care.

"For you, I care a great deal, my son. But this World." Norikata waves a dismissive hand in a gesture of disgust. "It is a crass, material, debased thing. One of a multitude if you believe Zelretch. It has other timelines. Other realities. It doesn't need this one. After everything that has happened ... I owe it nothing."

So you lied about freeing me. Kiritsugu tries again, trying to buy some time for ... for something ... About letting me live.

"No, Kiritsugu." Suddenly, there is a softness to Norikata's features. "This World will not die. I will leave it, through the rift at the end of Time. But you and others can still live. You can still have a chance. There will be more than enough beings left to keep you fed. Alaya will allow for that. It will not let humanity die. And I will free you after this. And then you can do what you want. You can
even save your son."

He looks down at Shirou's battered body. "You have the means."

By turning Shirou into what they are now? Kiritsugu bites down that thought, on the revulsion, even though the other can sense it. *And what about Illya?*

"What about her?"

There is a long tense silence between minds.

"I'm sorry, Kiritsugu."

Norikata says, at last. "But Illyasviel is gone. Kotomine has lobotomized her. She has been too integrated into the Grail's systems. You and I both know that. I may not need all seven Servants to be absorbed into the Grail, to draw on this power, but she is too vital a component to tamper with at this stage. As the Lesser Grail, she now functions as the backup system, to focus the power needed to open the rift. Even if you could save her, at this point, I'm afraid I can't let you."

Kiritsugu's vision goes red. He isn't hungry. He isn't ravenous. He isn't even injured, or exhausted. The being that is Emiya Kiritsugu, the Magus Killer, father of Emiya Shirou, and Illyasviel von Einzbern is filled with pure, unadulterated rage. His mind struggles: not to keep his bestial nature at bay, but to unleash it, to break his creator's binding.

*She's your fucking granddaughter!* is all he can scream, from the silence imposed on him. *You're killing your own granddaughter, you sick fuck!*

"She's nothing of the sort." Norikata replies. "I know ... she means a lot to you, but she is a construct. She was created with your genetic material, in another homunculus, another construct, to fulfill a function. If she doesn't, she has a year at best, to exist. I didn't do this to her. She was made this way. Kotomine further integrated her, which is probably how he could utilize Angra Mainyu in the fashion that he did. If I let you have her now, even if you could save her, there is no guarantee you can restore her sentience one way or another. It would be cruel to make her ... exist like this. And all of this would have been for nothing." The Dead Apostle shakes his head. "It is regrettable ..."

*Regrettable ... Regrettable ... The vampires consuming the villagers on Alimango Island. Shirley ripping the throat out of a chicken in the coup with her teeth. The Executors and Enforcers setting vampires, and people on fire. Kiritsugu shooting his father. The creatures attacking Fuyuki. Illya's blank eyes. Shirou's battered form. And this ... this monster looking at them all as objects. As things in the way of, or made towards, his final goal.*

Something that Kiritsugu didn't think he still had dies inside of him when he looks at Emiya Norikata turning his back him. He always knew, again, that his father would betray him when he got the chance. That he was just a tool to him, like everything else. Maybe once, long ago, Norikata had been different. Maybe he genuinely wanted to help people. But even then, reaching Akasha became more than just fulfilling their Family's dream. Kiritsugu hoped to appeal to his sense of enlightened self-interest, but in the end even that is just obsession. Just cold, hard greed. All that the Dead Apostle, that the man once known as Emiya Norikata ever cared about, or cares about now is Akasha: losing one's sense of ego, the obliteration of the self, to the Swirl of the Root.

And everything else.

"As I said, Kiritsugu." Norikata straightens his shoulders, set in his convictions. "I wish you could have joined me. But all I can do, now, is leave you with the chance to live. It is a lot more than you left me. Farewell ... son."

Kiritsugu barely hears his father chanting a series of arias. He knows what's happening. He wants to shout. To scream. He wants to stop this. And, all the while, something cold, and dark, and still
begins to grow inside of him. For yet another time in his existence, perhaps even in his last moment, Emiya Kiritsugu feels the bitter taste of despair.

* 

Archer struggles, but he can't move. But he heard the seemingly one-sided conversation between father, and son. But he's hunted Apostles before, long ago. He knows about their bonds, and telepathy. It is similar to the Master-Servant dynamic, save that the vampire is a familiar to the Dead Apostle, and thereby an extension of their will. At least Servants required Masters to use Command Seals to make an action against their will.

For all the old man's helplessness, he knows he's chewing his old man out.

And then, Archer senses it.

The energies of the system are travelling into Emiya Norikata. Or, rather, he is directing that power throughout the chamber ... and beyond. The blackness underneath their feet sits there, slowly flowing, remaining patient. It can afford to be. It is disorienting as the Bounded Fields around them spread, and increase in different polarities. Time is ... turning into a narrow point. There is no other way to describe it. Archer has been in many different states of existence, many of which he cannot possibly retain in his mind. But he understands it, to an extent.

Even second that goes by seems to ... slow down. Time just flows slowly behind them, gathering some kind of momentum. Simultaneously, ahead of them -- and Archer knows these are relative terms of comprehension -- the seconds to come are traveling more quickly. It's as though he's back in the Academy, and sitting at both an extraordinarily long class that never seems to end, and being rushed to do last minute food preparation for an extremely cranky Taiga. It's such a ridiculous thought that Archer almost laughs, that he would remember all of this right now of all times. Because he isn't a complete idiot. He knows this is a bubble of two forces: that one is pushing the other. The stagnated time will be released into the accelerated time: streamlining them into ... into Alaya only knows what.

Fuyuki will be fucked for sure. Possibly Japan. Maybe even ... more ...

Would the World let this spreading area of space and time revert back with destructive force? Or would it just erase it from its collective existence, especially as it contains something as malignant as Angra Mainyu. Or will Angra Mainyu be spring-launched out in the past and future of the World? God only knows that the Grail has enough power to affect space-time. It's a clusterfuck. All to rip a theoretical rift into the continuum so that an insane vampire can move beyond the confines of reality, maybe even use the momentum and power he's built up to barrel through any other Counter-Guardians in his way ... leaving the rest of them dead, or in ruins.

Jeez. No wonder the old man never talked about his father.

Even as a Counter-Guardian, Archer doesn't know what will happen once they hit the singularity. But he knows enough, by this point in his existence, to realize that it can't possibly be good.

* 

Kiritsugu has no choices. No choice.

He can feel Time building, and spreading. He knows that Norikata is going to bring them to the end of the World. Of the universe. Or he is going to try. But he can't move. He can't even think without the other knowing what he's thinking. Or feeling. And that is the worst part of all this. Kiritsugu is
kneeling in front of his daughter, looking down at her stained, vacant face, and his own father is making him do it ... and simply doesn't care.

Emiya Kiritsugu knows that, in some ways, he is a hypocrite. He became the same way before the Fuyuki Fire, before Shirou. He sacrificed countless lives for the chance to achieve a dream. He gave up on being a Hero, and gave into the cynicism that led him to more killing, sacrificing the personal worlds of countless others for his ideal of the greater good. How much collateral damage had Kiritsugu unleashed on the world. He probably, up until now, killed more people, and destroyed many more lives than his own father ever did.

He betrayed everyone he ever believed in, even those that believed in him, and his own ideal. Perhaps, in a way, all of this is karma. As if the Fire at Shinto hadn't been punishment enough for his sins. A part of him just wants this to be over. He just wants this to end. He hopes he won't survive this. He hopes that when this is finally over, he can just remain dead.

But his little girl is lying in front of him, brutalized by one of his worst enemies, and he can't do anything to help her ... or her brother. And it just.

It just.

It just ...

It. Just ...

Isn't happening.

Kiritsugu had only studied the basics about vampires before he died. Even when he was turned by Norikata, he had only spent most of the time trying to compensate for his new weaknesses, and adapt his new powers: those gained from no longer having human limitations. He knew, from the very beginning, that Dead Apostles created the Dead, Ghouls, and even vampires, as extensions of themselves in other form to allow them to keep feeding, to maintain their bodies, to give them time. At best, an ordinary vampire is a more advanced servitor of the Apostle: allowed to develop their consciousness, and condition to better serve their master. But almost no one knew how a vampire could free themselves from that bond. It did happen. Most believed that it was only when the vampire became more powerful than their creator, that they could break away. Or that the vampire needed their creator to die, or even kill them themselves in order to become truly independent.

With Emiya Kiritsugu, it is pure, cold determination that finally breaks him away from his father.

* 

Archer watches Norikata's head snap around, almost immediately. Suddenly, he can move.

"So ..." Norikata says, as Time flows around them, one step forward, two steps back. "You finally did it. You --"

Kiritsugu looks at Archer. There is an expression in his eyes he's never seen before. An intense pleading as he looks at Shirou, and Illya.

Inwardly, Archer sighs. I get it ji-san.

With the last of his strength, Archer materializes his bow and arrow. He moves fast. Faster than he has for this past while. He summons Rule Breaker, and immediately converts it into an arrow. Then, he aims and shoots it.
At Illya.

*

Norikata can't hear Kiritsugu's thoughts anymore. He can't even sense him in the back of his mind. He's gone. He's completely gone, even as he continues to kneel on the ground. They regard each other levelly. Each one sizing the other up. He hadn't noticed it before, but Kiritsugu has one hand in the pocket of his tattered trench coat. And then, he realizes what is happening.

"No--" He shouts.

But by then. It is too late. It is far too late.

*

Kiritsugu almost can't believe that Kotomine didn't take this from him.

It is a cigarette lighter. A silver one. During her time with Saber, Irisviel bought it at a market in Fuyuki in the early days of the War. She got it for him. It was one of her first purchases, for herself outside of her Family's Castle, and for him. It hurt. It hurt a lot after knowing what he was going to do to her, after spending time with Maiya to get him used to the idea of betraying his wife, that she bought him this tiny little keepsake. It was one of the few items that survived everything the War threw at him.

He flicks it up. But there isn't a lighter underneath the top. It is a button.

*I'm sorry.* He says, in his mind, at no one, knowing no one will hear him now

His eyes narrow at his father, staring him down, as he pushes the button on the detonator.

Chapter End Notes

I attempted to show what Noritaka was attempting to do with Time magecraft: to see the end of the universe, and see Akasha. I don't know if I fully grasped it, but I tried. And I brought an apocalyptic spun to it as per the Grail it will complete this goal in the most destructive way possible. By taking everyone with him.

And then there is this other part of me that thinks, head-canon wise on this otherwise non-canon item, that Kiritsugu's silver lighter should have the inscription "Fuck Communism" on it. If you get the reference, congratulations. If not, it's still a pretty bad ass inscription, don't you think?
Emiya Kiritsugu never quite knew where the Greater Grail resided, not until shortly before the Fifth Holy Grail War.

He knew it had been situated somewhere in Mount Enzou, and its surrounding regions. He suspected, back then, and based on each place the Grail could potentially manifest, that the system itself depended on a greater, sunken leyline to function. At the time of the Fourth War, all the Magus Killer had cared about was the function performing its function, and for he, and his wife to make sure that the miracle happened. But when the miracle turned out to be a catastrophe which, in the end, culminated in the destruction of Shinto and the end of five hundred lives, Kiritsugu -- now widowed, having lost access to his daughter, and broken in so many fundamental ways -- decided to make sure that a disaster like this, should never happen again.

It didn't matter that Angra Mainyu's curse ate at his body in different ways, or that most of his Magic Circuits eventually became as useless as those of his previous victims. His mind was just fine. Perhaps that had been another part of Angra Mainyu's vengeance, keeping Kiritsugu's cognitive functions intact, making sure he would never have the safety of dementia, or brain-death with which to retreat from the constant pain it had marked him with for his rejection. But this allowed him a little more time. While Shirou convalesced from his injuries and trauma from the Fire, watched carefully by the Fujimura Clan and Taiga in particular, Kiritsugu had scouted out other leylines. It had been easy, then. The Second Owner was killed during the War, and his daughter was far too young to fully grasp the scope of her duties just yet. With her mother mentally impaired, and her legal guardian perhaps specifically negligent over her Family's holdings, there had been no particular oversight beyond basic familiar monitoring of these leylines.

Even then, it had been simple for Emiya Kiritsugu to find the most prominent leyline, and plant his ordinance. It had been specifically timed, and placed through his various measures to go off in thirty to forty years time. It would cause a strategic closing off of the line, blocking off the mana going into the Greater Grail, and block it in its spot. In addition, it would form a localized earthquake: nothing out of the ordinary on an island like Japan. Internally, it would instigate a series of cave ins: several of which would compromise the Greater Grail chamber, and destroy it.

It was supposed to happen years after Kiritsugu succumbed to his curse: when he was long gone, and Shirou was a grown man living his own life. Unfortunately, the War started ten years later instead of sixty due to the excess mana, and the presence of a wish-granting entity like Avenger in the Grail as well as Kiritsugu's own -- admitted -- incompetence it neutralizing its spread.

But Kiritsugu never removed those explosives.

In fact, when his father revived him, Kiritsugu modified them. Now that he knew where the Greater Grail system was, he used his remaining resources to plant more effective devices at the leyline: in a more strategic place. And he made sure that it was connected to a detonation device on his person at all times. Kiritsugu isn't surprised, even now, that Norikata let him do this. He'd known about this before: had even berated him about it. He still let him do this, as a last resort: to contain the mana of the Grail in one place, and prevent the spread of another contamination, or so he said. At the time, Norikata hadn't been concerned. In fact, it was a good counter-measure should Kotomine or another enemy capture the location, or utilize the Grail. It wasn't the Dead Apostle's preferred plan, Kiritsugu knows, but it was there. Besides, he could always override Kiritsugu's body, and stop him from
detonating the explosives ... or force him to do it.

Just another tool in the arsenal.

The ground shakes violently. Kiritsugu jumps towards the cliff at full speed. He doesn't look at Archer, or his other children. Archer understands. His son knows what he wants. With Norikata's attention elsewhere, the wards will only prevent a spirit from attacking the Grail: not from leaving the cavern.

The rocks are crumbling around them, falling down on them. Norikata's face is twisted in rage and ... fear. His glasses have been knocked off his face, shattered on the ground from the impact of a falling stone.

"Time alter square stagnate!" The Dead Apostle hisses, his fangs dripping with blood and ichor.

Another Bounded Field activates, even as Norikata's greater aria continues. The oppressive feeling of Time about to burst behind them remains, but Kiritsugu can feel that it won't hold: that it is going to hit the acceleration peak far earlier than the older vampire anticipated ... or wanted. Kiritsugu growls, his own fangs barred, as he lets his own Crest cycle.

"Time alter square accel!" He shouts.

Two fields of space-time clash against each other: the Dead Apostle's to slow him down, and his own power increasing his speed. He almost seems to hang in the air, inches away from the other vampire. Technically, Norikata is the elder. But they have both been charged by the full moon, and they gain their affinity to each other. But Kiritsugu isn't a vampire servitor anymore. He has freed himself from his creator's control.

He is a Dead Apostle in his own right now.

He sees their bodies ripping apart from the strain, as one attempts to keep the other way, to immobilize him, while the other seeks to land on the cliff: where the core resides. Norikata's eyes glow in red fury, as something begins to tear at the Magus Killer's mind. Mystic Eyes. Even so, Kiritsugu resists it -- the new cold strength inside of him throwing off the interference -- as he snarls in pain, letting his blood elongate his claws once again. He hates what he is, but even now, amid the chaos and the struggle, he has to admit to himself that actually does feel free. That he can do anything. That at last he has come into his own powers: such as they are. To exactly what he needs to do.

Kiritsugu finds himself almost hovering over Norikata's invisible sphere, before he cuts through both with his talons... causing the two implode, throwing both vampires away from each other.

However, Kiritsugu drains more of his Od, and speeds up the cliff ... until he has a claw-hold. He is on the top of the cliff. He can see the dark organic structure of the core of the Greater Grail, spreading, thrumming with power. He and Norikata make eye contact. Seconds, days, years almost seem to pass as their ruined bodies hasten to regenerate. Perhaps it is their Time magecraft, or maybe it is just this moment. Norikata isn't a fighter, but even in his state injured by time reverting inside his body, he shrinks his Bounded Field around himself, ready for Kiritsugu to strike.

The Magus Killer raises his talons into the air just a little faster than Norikata can react.

Kiritsugu could have detonated the cavern before during his fight with Kotomine. He could have done it any time. But all it would have done was cause a cave in. He realizes, based on what he has seen of the cavern and the structure grown inside of it, that the core may well have survived
Regardless. And even with the damage done on the outside leyline, on that geomantic artery, enterprising magi from the Association could just repair, and revive the process all over again. The explosives, in and of themselves, aren't enough.

The thing that Norikata drilled into Kiritsugu's mind, with information he had already gathered, was that the Greater Grail was a lot like the so-called Lesser Grail. Justeaze Lizrich von Einzbern, the Sage of Winter, sacrificed her body -- her Magic Circuits -- to create the Greater. The system is like a great living organism infected with Angra Mainyu, but when looked at on a basic level, it is still made of Magic Circuits. Magic Circuits that are powered with the energies of several Heroic Spirits, Norikata's Time Manipulation ... and the geomantic force leveled into the cavern from Kiritsugu's explosives. They are open Magic Circuits. Magic Circuits filled to the brim with mana.

Kiritsugu sinks his talons into the ground, piercing its fleshly surface, while opening his own Circuits to their nth degree. They are bone claws. Origin Talons.

Of Severing, and Binding.

*  

Archer carries both children under his arms as he runs. He doesn't look back, his last view of his father being one of intense determination. He feels Illya's prana flowing through him again: no longer co-opted by the system of the Greater Grail with which she was linked. She is still unconscious. It will take a lot to heal her from Kotomine's violations. The boy, too, is light. A part of Archer wonders if he had always been so thin, but he recalls feeling worse in his time.

The tunnels shake violently as he sprints down them. Rocks and debris fall all around them. And then ... as he turns a corner, there is an explosion. After that, the entire area is filled with heartrending shrieks. Something giant, something bigger than all of them is wailing in great agony and loss. Archer watches the blackened walls of moss shrivel, then bloat, and then burst into something not unlike pus and bile. Then there is an internal rumbling as the inhuman screeching continues, reverberating throughout the tunnels, the mountain ... perhaps even the Temple itself.

The ceiling is collapsing. Archer grits his teeth as he is covered in more filth: shielding Illya and even the damn boy from the garbage raining down. He keeps moving. He can't think about the gratitude in the eyes of the man he left behind. He can't think about that brief moment of joy in his eyes. Of the incredible relief that echoed those last moments he saw him alive in his lifetime.

Archer feels something dripping down his face that he thinks is more ichor from the dying structure of this place. He angrily turns his face, and wipes it on his shoulder. He is breaking his promise to Illya. But his loyalty had been to that old man first.

He has to get his family out of here alive. At all costs. It's the least fucked up thing that Archer has done in his entire existence.

It feels the most right.

*  

All emotion flees from Emiya Norikata.

Suddenly, his mind is dispassionate again, his fear and anger gone. Distantly, in the midst of the carnage Kiritsugu has unleashed, having cut through his Bounded Field with his own power, and with his own application of their magecraft, he sees the other's claws embedded into the organic surface around the core.
It is more than enough.

He sees the crests and wards around the core bloat, and shrivel. Some explode. Some deflate. The necrosis of Kiritsugu's attack spreads, destroying and rupturing every altered Magic Circuit at the Grail's, at Angra Mainyu's disposal. Perhaps it isn't enough to kill Avenger, but Avenger is still a Spirit, and the Grail the closest it has ever had to possessing another body after the Third War. And its body's Magic Circuits have been injected with Severing and Binding.

When he thinks about it, in this brief period of retrospection, Norikata realizes that his son's explosives on the Grail system's leylines, and its resulting effects, were simply the nature of his Origin Bullets writ -- crudely -- large. The rest of this is just a formality: to make sure that what might have remained entrapped and starved would be obliterated altogether. First, Kiritsugu isolated the site of the infection. And then, by turning its own natural defenses against itself, he excised its heart. Norikata definitely appreciates the rough and effective artistry of that.

Suddenly, the power being fed into Norikata surges. It jolts through Norikata as he locks eyes with his son. His circle is disrupted. The grafted skin of the Blood Worms smokes with a lick of flame as its stolen Command Seal is destroyed. The Fields around him oscillate: completely out of control. Time is stretched out: the past to one side, and the future on the other. And then, they snap back into place where Norikata stands.

The results are devastating. Time itself seems to rip apart ... along with every aspect of the Dead Apostle's being. He finds that he can't even scream. Not even his mind can comprehend ... whatever is happening to him. The darkness inside the core explodes out, and swirls around him. He thinks he sees a trace of a humanoid figure in the core, shrivel, then swell up into blood, and dissolve away. The screaming isn't stopping. Somehow, Norikata knows despite the situation, it isn't his own. There are ... tears opening up everywhere. Not just in the mutated homunculus tissue, but in the air ... the fragments of what was once Emiya Norikata, along with the oily blackness from the Greater Grail swirl through. He is still aware. His body is still trying to regenerate, but it keeps growing and shredding ... elongated, and contracting.

But, for the first time in ages, a peace has entered inside of his very being: what's left of it. Perhaps it is just because it is the heart of the storm. Perhaps it is just resignation. Maybe he's found what he has been looking for, despite all of this ... or because of it.

He keeps looking at Kiritsugu, at his son as he is reduced to something else entirely, as he feels himself thrown into the cracks between the World, between timelines, between realities. For some reason, he thinks he can feel himself smile.

For whatever it's worth, he's proud of his son.

Then, the consciousness that was Emiya Noritaka is spread apart ... and vanishes into the lights.

* 

Emiya Kiritsugu watches his father get ripped apart, his pieces or ... filaments spread throughout tears in space and time, sucked into a void along with the darkness of the Grail. While his face is whole, he thinks he sees Norikata's lips move. Perhaps he's saying something.

Kiritsugu sighs inside the maelstrom he's created.

"Goodbye, Dad." He whispers, in the noise. Then, he closes his eyes, and lets himself go as the ceiling implodes downward, and everything is sent into oblivion.
There are so many versions of how these battles could have gone down, and I can't even begin to tell you all of them. They never really made it into words, beyond scenarios in my head. Between Kotomine actually managing to defeat Kiritsugu, holding him captive, and then thinking about what Kiritsugu was going to do even after Archer saved him.

And that's not even going into Archer's role. His role changed a lot. He was originally going to pull a Snipe Gilgamesh in the Head Technique on Norikata after Kiritsugu dealt with Kotomine: using Shirou to do it. And Shirou ... there was a chance Shirou wasn't even in the Greater Grail cavern. Saber was supposed to kill Gilgamesh in one blow with Lancer and Rider's help, but if the priest was going to have his due there was no way in hell the King of Heroes was going to settle for anything less than pure representation.

You can only plan for so much.

And also, for the record, Kiritsugu was never supposed to have a machine gun. But then, he did. Writing is a very fascinating process. Now that everything has been destroyed, let's see how it all gets sorted out, shall we?
Chapter 29

It was all over the news.

According to reports from the government, the area of Miyama Town, off Fuyuki City had been the site of an earthquake. Luckily, the damage had mostly been confined to the place where Ryuudou Temple used to stand before the Mountain collapsed due to tectonic stresses. None of the Buddhist monks, including the Ryuudou Family, had been on the grounds however, having apparently gone -- en masse -- to an ecclesiastical convention before hand. Unfortunately, there had been some injuries, and even civilian casualties from the earthquake, as well as flooding from the Mountain’s nearby lake, and a few minor rock slides. In addition, several patients in the City's hospitals -- some of whom had been suffering from poisoning due to gas leaks -- passed away when electrical outlets were shut down, and their life support equipment had been compromised.

There had also, according to some eye-witness accounts, been some violent rioting on the streets during the natural disaster. However, local authorities quickly took matters into their own hands and, with international aid, stopped the looters and attackers while creating evacuation centres for the rest of the civilians closest to the area affected by the compromised tectonic shift.

Unofficially, government forces have been investigating the site of the Temple and the ruined Mountain -- having stationed troops there earlier due to a bomb threat -- for signs of terrorist activity. There may have been heavy grade explosives involved, as well as chemical weapons in Miyama in a coordinated attack by some kind of group. Certainly, survivors seem to indicate the riots and looting may have been instigated by foreign agents. These, however, are only rumours, and as of right now - without proof -- are being kept under wraps as a strictly internal matter.

Fujimura Raiga holds his granddaughter's hand, as she lies in the hospital bed. The Academy had been hit the hardest by ... whatever had happened. They'd closed it down for a while after they found the Matou boy's body, but Taiga insisted on doing work there with the administration. He arranged it, with his formidable resources, that the young lady have her own private hospital wing: while making sure the establishment, and others remain open for other survivors. It is on his Clan's yen. The few of Taiga's contemporaries, who had been there when the school was hit, hadn't been so lucky, having died in the rubble of the Academy, or from complications due to their injuries, but he has helped provide care for those that still lived: and plans, with Ryuudou, and representatives of the Catholic Church in the absence of Father Kotomine, to pay for the funerals of those that were not so fortunate.

The old man squeezes his eyes shut, trying not to grip Taiga's hand too tightly. A lot of traditional buildings and other homes were damaged, or destroyed, in ... whatever it was that happened. He lost many men dealing with the ... rioters. Raiga can't remember what happened to all of them. They fought back against ... someone. He knows, in his bones, that is was more than just a natural disaster. And his Clan had dealt with more than just looters, and opportunists in the chaos.

But for the life of him, he can't ... recall the details. Raiga had cooperated with the authorities, many of whom were long time associates, and even the ... foreign aid. They had been going around, interviewing and assisting all the survivors and witnesses they could find. He remembers hearing a few of them ranting about seeing things during what he believes to be an explosion: of demons with red eyes, and long teeth, like vengeful yokai preying on the weak. The old man thinks a lot of it is superstition brought on by the stress of the moment, and the post-trauma afterwards. He, and the others, will do whatever is in their power to help those poor souls. Even so, the words remind him of the dream he had after his nightly sake, before Taiga -- his poor Taiga -- woke him up in a fury for
drinking too much.

He's grateful, however. The Tohsaka and Matou girls have visited, bringing Taiga flowers. Even the foreigner, the cute Einzbern child, paid her visit: though she looked withdrawn, and pale even for an albino. He knows the first two Families to an extent. A part of him wonders if they were involved whatever ... But they are just children. Just like Shirou.

Young Shirou had come in the most often, let through by the staff and his men by his command. The boy looked like hell. If the Einzbern was fragile, the circles under Shirou's eyes haunted Raiga. He'd only seen his old man with an expression like that. He himself had to get the boy to leave Taiga's side. They'd lost a few classmates and teachers this past while, including the Matou boy, and possibly Kuzuki Souichirou -- who went missing before the Disaster -- during a serial killer spree ... or maybe one of the attacks from these supposed damn "foreign terrorists." It's just like ten years back. But worse.

At one point, he'd seen the boy crying. Even after knowing that Emiya Shirou survived the Fuyuki Fire, the old man can't for the life of him recall the boy ever crying: never mind weeping the way he was over Taiga. She is practically his sister. He is more, or less, family. No, Shirou is family. He got him to go, so he could get looked at, and at the very least take care of himself. And where Raiga may have had to keep arguing his point, the girls -- including the Einzbern girl, and a blonde foreign woman -- managed to pull him away. It was almost as bad as him threatening his son to get the rest of his Clan on him if he didn't get something to eat while pining for his daughter.

Raiga smiles despite the situation. He can already tell that, whatever else, that boy is going to have a lot more on his hands sooner rather than later. To be young again ...

*He's grown up right, Emiya-san.* The old man pats Taiga's hand. *Taiga will be all right. I'll look after them. Just as I promised.*

At one point, Raiga must have dozed off. When he wakes up, he is still at Taiga's bedside. But there is something in his hand. It is a piece of paper. Blinking warily, and wishing not for the first time these past couple of days that he had a good sake, or that Taiga would open her eyes and berate him for his sentimentality, he unfolds the paper.

*The threat has been taken care of.* The paper reads in stark kanji, written in unfamiliar handwriting. *You, and yours will be safe now.*

Raiga doesn't know what to make of this. He certainly doesn't know how to feel about it: about someone getting past his men, or intimating that they were involved in all of this. He sighs, crumpling the paper, and putting it in one of the folds of his yukata. He remembers his dream.

*Ah, Emiya-san.* He thinks. *You are still watching over us.*

Raiga doesn't see the figure in a red-coat standing outside the hospital window. In fact, no one aside from perhaps those with keener vision could sense him. He sees the old man read the message, and return to looking after his granddaughter. Then, with one more backward glance, he jumps off the ledge, and hovers into the distance.

*Tohsaka Rin rubs her red-rimmed eyes with the back of her hand. Her throat is feeling better now that several days have passed, but that is about the only uncomplicated good thing she can say.*

Matou Sakura sits to one side of her, rubbing her back, her eyes also tired. She is grateful for her
sister's presence, for her being there for her despite everything that has happened between them. On the other side of her, her body language relaxed but vigilant is Saber. Right now, she is sitting up straight, and looking every inch the King of Knights from legend: stern, impassive, but open to any words entreated to her. Rin finds that she is grateful for the bond between them, even though she can feel the other's emotions gravitating towards worry ... and other matters with regards to Emiya Shirou.

It had been an absolute clusterfuck. The three of them had fought the vampires in Miyama for as long as they could. Despite the numbers, they'd had an easier time when the moon passed, and their powers were more manageable. Even then, she understands now just how terrifying vampires are. They have superhuman strength, and reflexes. Their regeneration is unreal. If not for hers and Sakura's Reinforcement, and Saber's holy sword, they would have long since been overwhelmed. Even so, she hopes to never encounter them again: never mind in what should have been her Spiritual Land.

Her responsibility.

The Mage's Association, and the Holy Church only came at the tail end of the infestation ... right before ... the explosion, and the absolute wild magic of a disrupted leyline system, followed by the vampires screaming, and falling down comatose: those that weren't immediately dissolved by the running water that hit them, and everyone else, from the flooding of the Mountain lake, and the Mion River. She knows enough to realize that the vampires had practically been part of a psychic link with, and the limbs of, their creator: the Dead Apostle who had infiltrated her land. On her watch.

The two organizations then agreed to damage control, hypnotizing the afflicted residents under the guise of foreign and domestic aid organizations. She had just been in a conversation with both bodies. It had taken some doing on her part, but she shrewdly dealt with the Church first. After she found out about who Gilgamesh used to belong to in the Fourth War, and looking at Kotomine's subsequent actions ... and thinking about her father's death ... There had been enough to come to some incredibly disturbing conclusions. The Church representatives didn't want the Moonlit World to realize that one of their own had been a murderous psychopath and heretic: that their supposedly neutral Overseer, or Supervisor of the Holy Grail War, had been corrupted as all hell, and threatened the safety of the entire World. She'd already known that the Church was in no way hands-off as they claimed, and that there had been something morally wrong with Kirei, but she had no idea that it had been to this extent.

Certainly, finding the remains of the children and Enforcer Bazett Fraga McRemitz in the basement of the Church on the Hill with the testimonies of Sakura, and Illya as well as Shirou, had convinced the Church to side with her in her conversation with the Association. And the representatives of the Association, understanding this incident wasn't worth renewing a war between it, and the Church -- along with the discovery of their own observer having been killed by their late Enforcer -- became more receptive. And neither organization could ignore the threat of the Dead Apostles, especially with the Twenty-Seven Dead Apostle Ancestors potentially taking advantage, along with other forces, of any conflict to which the other two organizations might engage. At the very least, both the Association and the Church had to minimize the damage to their image, and fallout, done to a Ritual they supported by traitors, fools, and at least one Dead Apostle. As such she, with Illya's consent, allowed Association Enforcers and agents to investigate the site of the Greater Grail System.

What they found there were the remains of a ruined organic structure. According to the official reports, the remainder of the artificial Magic Circuits that created the Greater Grail had been destroyed, and bound together in such a way that the energy within them had shorted them out. They also seemed to suffer from some kind of fast-acting necrosis -- a final curse -- that ate at what was left of their biological matter. In other words, the collaborative efforts of the Tohsaka, Makiri, and
Einzbern, had been rendered absolutely useless. There had also been evidence of mundane charges detonated on a nearby leyline that shunted power to the underground cavern at some point.

Rin can feel just how wounded the land is. The circulatory system of Fuyuki's spiritual system has suffered a great and obvious trauma. If left to its own devices, all wildlife will die where Ryuu dou Temple used to be. And to think, Issei always believed that Rin of all people had been a danger to their Temple, to their land ... She would laugh, if it weren't for the fact that so much of her Family's legacy has been damaged.

So many people had been hurt, and lives lost.

Someone has to answer for this.

Archer stands across from her in the living room, with Illya sitting in a chair at his side. Even now, it makes Rin feel ... angry. On so many levels. But she swallows it down. Illya had been hurt in so many ways by Kotomine, again, under Rin's watch. The priest had done something to her cognitive functions that took her days to speak without slurring, or staring off into space. Even Avalon, now in Illya's body, took enough time. It had been a mess. Rin is still supporting Saber's prana, but she will need another resource to keep her materialized as a familiar. She isn't a great Magic Circuit like the homunculus, keeping her Servant -- her Servant -- whole with ease.

But back to the matter at hand.

"I ..." Even though her vocal cords are better, Rin still finds them a little stiff. She coughs, clearing her throat. "I understand why you did what you did." I still haven't completely forgiven you for it, not by a long shot, is what she doesn't have to say. "We've been to the Edelfelt Mansions. The agents found some evidence of vampiric activity at the one near the Church." Again, something that the Holy Church will need to live down. "And the one near ... our territory. The Association knows that a Dead Apostle interfered with Heaven's Feel."

"Yeah." Archer says. Illya clutches the Servant's hand, an action that doesn't escape Rin's notice, making her teeth clench. "Between that, the remnants of some Territorial Fields, the vampires, and what's left of the Grail, and the Church vouching for you -- as far as that goes -- the Association can't hold this over you."

"Oh, they can. If they want to." But Rin knows that her ... former Servant? She knows that he is factually correct, especially given the ... person who apparently spoke up for her, who is going to come here to personally inspect the damage to her Land, and even do his best to rectify it. As a favour to your Clan, as he put it. "But that's not what this is about. And you know it."

"Onii-chan did nothing wrong." Illya says, her red eyes narrowing in sheer defiance. "It's not his fault that you were an absolutely incompetent Master --"

"Illya-chan." Archer looks down at her, in a familiar way that makes Rin's heart lurch in her throat, making her wonder how she never saw the resemblance before. "Stop. Please. Just ... stop." He turns back to Rin, and she actually sees some regret in his grey eyes. "I'll accept whatever punishment you give, Rin. But you said it. I did what I had to do."

"You'll do no such thing!" Illya snaps. "You are my Servant now! You and ... and onii-chan promised me. When Berserker was gone! It's not your fault that Rin failed at being a Second Owner! She wouldn't have known what to do about the situation!"

"I." Rin puts emphasis on the word, pointing at the other young woman. "I would have made my own decisions on the evidence given me. From the Servant I should have been able to trust." She
hears the hurt enter her voice, and she can't help it.

Archer closes his eyes, even scratching the back of his head with his free hand. How in hell hadn't she seen it? Even with the other pendant, and how he summoned his swords ... "Rin, I'm --"

"Archer. Just ..." She sighs, her anger suddenly dissipating, burning itself out. "Just don't. Not ... not right now."

She doesn't need their former bond to know that her disappointment hurts him more than any hurt on her part. There is a reason why they are having this meeting away from Shirou, right now. He is in the guest bedroom of her place. Resting under some friendly hypnosis before he killed himself. His Circuits had been absolutely empty when they put Avalon in him. It terrified her to think that he could have well died, even with Avalon inside of him again. It's the least she can do for him ... especially when it became apparent that he was integral in helping to avenge her parents. He was just glad they could help Illya ... his ... sister. He didn't seem like he knew the rest. And for all people said she was hard, Rin knows that she just doesn't have the heart to tell him the rest of this. Not right now. Possibly, not even ever.

"How long did you know?" Saber asks, her gaze still impassive. "Rin said you told her you lost your memories when she first summoned you."

"I did ... but ..." Archer shakes his white-haired head. "Once I fought Lancer and saw the boy --"

"You mean ... you." Saber interrupts.

Archer pauses and, for the first time ever in their association, she actually sees Archer avoid Saber's eyes, looking down at the floor. "Unless you mean the old man. That was at the Academy."

"That's how long you kept this information from us." Rin says. From me ...

"Like you said, you know why I had to do it."

"I do." Rin sighs. "I just don't agree with it."

"It isn't as though I didn't know either!" Illya says. "Or Saber, for that matter."

This time, Rin feels the shame emanating from the King of Knights. She had told her that she had met him later, after the battle with Berserker, offering her the extra prana when she was still connected to Shirou. Rin can't help but feel incredibly played. She doesn't like it. Not one bit. But Saber had volunteered it after their battle. She hadn't told Shirou. Somehow, she feels like they are on the same page there. And Illya has always looked down on Rin. She came into this War on her own agenda, as most Masters often did. Her loss was Illya's gain. Still, even that deception hurts as she was starting to get used to the girl. To all of them, if she is honest with herself.

Archer had been her Servant. She had expected better from him than this. Especially ... given who he really was. At the same time, she can't completely fault him. What would she do if her father had still existed, even as a Dead Apostle, trying to help her? She wants to believe that she would do what she had to, and obey the strictures of the Moonlit World such as they are.

She sighs, realizing that she's tired of all of this. "Here's what's going to happen." She tells them. "Illya, you'll keep Avalon in you. Kirei screwed you up badly, and I'm sorry for that. I really am. I also know given your ... nature ..."

"I have a year to live." Illya states, bluntly, actually making everyone in the room visibly flinch. "Just say it Rin."
"Right. You will go back to your Castle here. You'll still be in range of Saber until we can ... figure that out." Then, she points at Archer. "And you will stay with her. I don't want to see you, either of you, for a while."

"Fair enough." Archer replies, nodding, but she can see the hurt. But right now, she doesn't really care.

"And as for your ... guest." Her voice becomes cold. "He stays with you. And when he's ... better, he's out of here."

Illya's eyes glitter with fury. "You dare --"

"You listen to me, Einzbern." Rin says, in a cold tone. "You may be part of a greater House, if you still are at this point, but the Tohsaka own this Land. You stay here because my Clan allows it. That ... man." She grinds out. "He has hurt my Land. He has used, and manipulated us. He made my Clan look weak to the Association. I will have to spend a lot of time, and resources to get this Land to what it once was. And people have died ..."

"He didn't make those vampires." Archer says in a low voice.

"I know he didn't!" Rin feels her temper flare again, against her better judgment. "But he made the earthquake! People died in that explosion! In the flood! Ayako died, Archer! Crushed under rubble! Some of our friends ..." She lets herself breathe as Saber holds her hand, as Sakura rests her hand on her back. She feels like crying again, and that is the last thing she needs to do right now. Rin needs to remain strong.

She waits for them to retort. That all those lives were just collateral damage to save Japan, perhaps even the World. The magus part of Rin accepts that. Even if it was crudely done, she's not sure she could have done any better in that situation, under the Temple, under the Mountain. She doesn't want to think about that. But neither of them say anything. They aren't defending him. She can see that they just can't.

"Just ..." Rin rubs at her eyes again, her voice becoming a hoarse murmur. "Just go. And tell him, when he's ... recovered that, as Second Owner, I don't want to see him on my Land again. Ever."

"Fair enough." Illya says this time, her tone hard. "As I said before, I will deal with him."

Rin gets up. She blinks, the toil of exhaustion weighing on her. Saber holds her up, and she can see her regarding Archer with a very unreadable expression on her face. She can feel a mixture of emotions under the surface amounting to condemnation. Whether of him, or herself, Rin isn't entirely sure. Rin knows just how weighty her decision is. What this might mean. The secrets she will have to keep. The people she might not see again.

"Senpai."

Everyone, including Rin, turn to Sakura. Her sister has been quiet during this whole exchange, only offering her a silent support. Archer is facing away from her, with Illya at his side.

Rin sees Sakura visibly swallow. "Was it ... was it Caster that really took me? Did ... she really kill Grandfather?" She breathes out, slowly, and it breaks Rin's heart. "Did you and Rider heal me, Senpai?"

Archer turns his neck, the profile of his face looking at her. There is a sadness in his gaze that Rin has never seen before. "We will keep in touch ... Tohsaka." He says, his soft voice like a knife in
Rin's heart.

As the two of them leave her house, she looks over at Sakura. Her eyes glimmer. With tears. "Thank you." Sakura whispers. "Archer."

This time, Rin finds herself taking Sakura's hand. It will take some time, but hopefully, they will get through this. They will figure this out.
"Really, Norikata. I don't know which of you is more troublesome: you, or your son."

Zelretch sighs, surveying the damage in the remnants of the cavern. Poor Nagato, Justeaze, and Zolgen. They had good intentions, as noble as any magus could be especially given the inclinations of the last two Clans, and it all amounted to a hazard to this World, and a slagged heap of nothing. Worse, the leylines of this Spiritual Land have been severely compromised. When a magus Family's ancestral Land is damaged, to this degree, it can actually affect their Mysteries, and perhaps even the quality of their bloodline's Magic Circuits. It was one theory with regards to how the Makiri degenerated so badly towards the end of their biological line, when they were forced out of Russia, and had to settle in Japan, though Zelretch also suspects that even then Zolgen's originally well-meaning and promising experiments with Blood Worms and Circuits might have also had something to do with the decline.

At least Zolgen had been put out of his misery, however brutally, before remembering just how far he had fallen in helping Justeaze improve the human condition through reclaiming the Third Magic. At least Justeaze's brain-dead husk at the core of the Greater Grail was finally at peace despite the terrible way it had been done. Say what you wanted about the methods of the Emiya. At least they brought results. But Nagato ...

The magi crew had done their best in dismantling the Greater Grail, at least what was left of it. The fact that it had been so utterly devastated was one of the few blessings out of this timeline's entire debacle. It took them less time to get around to do it, at this point, than in other variations of the timeline. And there would be no other magi eager to profit off of the Tohsaka's "failure" in protecting the Land, and far fewer vultures to trouble the young lady as a result.

This makes Zelretch's task easier as well. He has sent the Enforcers to collect the specimens left behind by Norikata's actions, for further study, after he had taken over the investigation. The Vice-Director, obviously, had her reservations about letting him of all people come here, but he has the background: both with regards to the Heaven's Feel Ritual, and vampiric activity. There had been factions at the Tower that wanted to erase Fuyuki City off the face of the world map, just to be sure that the world would never know what happened here, but luckily between the young lady, her Servant, her sister, and the Emiya, the threat had been contained. It also helped that he and the Director had a well-known understanding among the Twelve Lords, and it just wasn't worth the headache of pursuing the matter further. In the end, it was honestly far easier to simply get the Church and Association to do their jobs and use hypnosis, and cover stories, to deal with the issue without the unnecessary loss of further life. This Land had suffered enough.

"I'm sorry, old friend." He says to the memory of Tohsaka Nagato, for more than one reason. "Let me get back on task."

Zelretch draws out his Jeweled Sword. Really, it is little more than a dagger. But it is the model that all Azoth Daggers, in this era, are made after. He isn't as young as he used to be, and he only holds a shadow of the power that he used to possess when he was a living man, and whole. This is what he got from burning himself out against the Crimson Moon, and having the latter's essence spilled over his weakened body so many centuries ago. Even so, as he focuses, calling on the Second Magic he sees every variation of the sunken leyline in a multitude of different Worlds ... He draws on the mana in each refraction of the leyline that still exists everywhere other than here ...

And begins the process of restoring this one. Usually, it would take years. With the Kaleidoscope, it can be repaired in considerably less time. It is really the least he can do.
Emiya Kiritsugu sits, cross-legged, on top of Miyami's half of the Fuyuki Bridge, as the sun begins to rise.

He inhales the smoke from his cigarette, trying to embrace the tang of the tobacco and the nicotine, but tasting only ashes. The former Magus Killer looks at the Bridge. It is falling apart, with the middle and far end near Shinto sunken into the water, glimmering with the purple, pink, orange, and red of a dawning sky. It's a beautiful view, this burgeoning sunrise. There is still a little bit of time left.

Kiritsugu takes his cigarettes out of the silver case, the one given to him by his wife so long ago now. He spits his current cigarette out across the side of the bridge. Then, he dumps the rest of the pack right after it, and his last burner cellphone. He'd used that cellphone for two things before throwing it into the water. First, he'd gathered all of his father's financial resources -- which he'd had access to -- and donated them all to the Fuyuki Disaster Relief Fund.

Then, he called the local Einzbern Castle. He recalls still having a phoneline, and an old answering machine there. He left a note where they had been keeping him: to find it. Illya might not know how to use it, but Archer would. His son ... and daughter are at Tohsaka Manor at the moment, discussing his fate.

He already suspects what it will be. The fact that Sealing Designation Enforcers hadn't already come to the Castle to pacify and neutralize him -- either taking him back to the Clock Tower to be dissected, tortured by the families of some of his past targets, or summarily executed -- means Tohsaka Rin hadn't turned him over to the authorities. Likewise, no Church Executors had come to eliminate him on the spot either. It is fairly ... generous for the Head of a magus family like her Clan. As it was, not only had he lived here with his son illegally, without the permission of the Second Owner, but he had maneuvered her Servant away from her, destroyed her Clan's two hundred year old goal to access the Root, and damaged her Spiritual Land: possibly irreparably. Not to mention all of the lives that were lost because of his final gambit.

Exile is a light sentence, all things considered.

Kiritsugu's hands clench around his empty cigarette case, with its depressed internal detonator, and puts it back in his ruined coat. All he could offer was blood money, and hollow consolations. He has, to the very end, broken everything that he sought to fix. In retrospect, perhaps it is his Origin that had been his first curse before all others.

There is only one last thing to do now.

It's peaceful, this stillness before the dawn, even though he has left this place in hell. Again. When the sun comes up, it will be one of the most gorgeous things he has witnessed in a long time. In at least six years. In ten. In ... most of his life. He doesn't deserve it. Illya hadn't seen him. He'd been taken into the Castle, given blood packs from Archer: regenerated and replenished, apparently, by Avalon, but Illya wouldn't even see him. Perhaps he should have stayed, and waited for her judgment. Maybe, he didn't want her to stain her hands with his blood. Maybe her ignoring him terrified him even more.

Maybe, at the end, the former Magus Killer truly is a coward.

It's fitting, in a way. Even as he feels his skin begin to burn, he realizes he will finally get the cremation that his father had denied him, and his family. And, just as his last moments as a man were to look on at the full moon with ruined vision, his last moments as a Dead Apostle will be to gaze at
the rising sun with eyes clearer than they had ever been: erasing all trace of the mistake that used to be the Magus Killer from the World. Forever.

Emiya Kiritsugu smiles as the warmth comes, and he closes his eyes ...

"Kiritsugu."

He opens his eyes. Irisviel is standing over him. She is smiling at him. It's as he remembered her in Germany, when she, he, and Illya were together. When they were a family. She isn't dressed in black, or veined in darkness. She's in white, as she had always been, her red eyes filled with soft understanding. His heart leaps into his throat.

They regard each other for feels like eternities. "Iri." He manages. "You're ... you're here."

She reaches out one pale hand, made golden in the sunlight. "My love, remember your promise." She tells him. "Go ..."

"Iri ..." Kiritsugu rasps, jolting back to the world, his heart breaking all over again, as he opens his eyes ... and feels a shadow covering him. He looks up, and sees a hand being offered to him. Emiya Shirou is looking down at him. There is something in his son's eyes, still golden and amber, that brings Kiritsugu back to himself. They are filled with tears. And he ... he is smiling. Smiling as though he has saved him. As though he has saved him again.

The young man keeps his hand out. Kiritsugu fights down the urge to sob, as he reaches up ... and takes his son's hand.

* * *

"Everyone forgot to hypnotize me, for a change." Shirou says, as he maneuvers them, under the giant shield he's Traced, into a path of trees to further block out the sun, trying to get them back to Illya's Castle.

Despite everything, Kiritsugu feels a wry smirk tug on one corner of his mouth. He walks, slowly, next to the redhead. His skin hurts, but that is to be expected from exposing himself even to that much sunlight. He feels hollow, and drained. He doesn't try to resist his son's hand on his arm. It occurs to him that, even now, that in addition to an improved sense of dark humour, Shirou is taller than he is. If Archer is anything to go by, he will be taller than even this.

His ghost of a smile disappears. "How did you ..."

"I thought it was a fever, or a hallucination at first." His son replies. "I didn't ... remember that much. I was pretty messed up when ... that man ..." Kiritsugu can see Shirou trying to spit out his aggression at Archer, but even he can see it's halfhearted at best. "When he brought Illya and me to the others." "I heard you were out for a few days. Even with Avalon." Kiritsugu says quietly as the trees surround them.

"Yeah. I was in rough shape." Shirou says. "But I ... got better. Saber's been with me." He pauses. "Today, there was some kind of meeting. I wasn't asleep like the others thought. Saber came back in. We talked, and I told her about what little I could remember ..." Shirou stares at his father. "She didn't say anything. Hell, we don't even have our bond anymore. At least not ..." He shakes his head. "But when I saw the look on her face, when I mentioned seeing you, I knew."

Kiritsugu doesn't say anything else. He feels the shame eating him from the inside.
"I was pissed. I'm not going to lie, ji-san." He tells him, his endearment for him somehow hurting more than one of Kotomine's Black Keys through the gut. "She kept it from me. Tohsaka did too. Maybe even Illya-chan, and everyone. And you."

"I didn't want you to know." Kiritsugu whispers, having the other conversation he wasn't looking forward to, the one that he didn't think he was ever going to have. "The letter said everything I needed to."

Shirou stops. He turns to him, suddenly, and jabs one finger at him. "No." He scowls at him. "No. I know you were helping us during this War. You should have told us ... told me, that you were still ... still here. This," he points at him. "This doesn't matter to me. I know you are a good man, ji-san. This ..."

"This will get me hunted. Everywhere." Kiritsugu speaks, quietly, hating himself for saying what needs to be said. "This will make me need to feed more and more over time. I will hunt. And keep living. No, keep existing. You know enough about the Moonlit World, son, to know this isn't a blessing. I just did what I could with what I had to protect you ... and I almost failed at that anyway. Just being here is a danger to you, and your sister. I ... shouldn't have survived this long." He doesn't know whether he means that he shouldn't have been turned, or escaped the entire Mountain crashing on him and on his skull, but the intent is the same.

To Kiritsugu's surprise, the young man laughs. He looks at Shirou, and sees the other rolling his eyes. "I shouldn't have lived either. People die when they are killed, right?"

It is such a ridiculous statement, but Kiritsugu marvels at the humour his son is taking ... all of this. But he won't have it. "Shirou ..." He says, pleading, feeling weak and vulnerable next to this beautiful young man he had no right claiming he raised. "I ... I didn't want you to see me like this. Like a ... a monster." He sighs. "I just wanted your last image of me to be as your father. For all I don't deserve it."

"Well, that's just bullshit."

It sounds so much like Archer, it almost gives Kiritsugu mental whiplash to hear the words coming out of Shirou's mouth. His son is glaring at him, mostly in exasperation. "Ji-san." He says, his glare softening. "I saw a man who saved my life. Again. From a bastard who got exactly what was coming to him. Yeah. It wasn't pleasant. I wouldn't want to have to go through it again, but ... honestly? I think you did what you had to. And you were a hell of a lot more effective than me."

"No." Kiritsugu shakes his head as they continue walking, feeling Illya's Bounded Fields envelop them. "If you hadn't Projected that ... blade ... Kotomine might have won. I was running out of ammo and power fast. You saved me."

"I think." Shirou says. "I think we saved each other, ji-san. I think ..." He smiles, a lopsided grin that makes Kiritsugu's heart ache. "I think we always have."

Kiritsugu lets his son's words sink in. They are quiet for a few more minutes as the path begins to clear towards the Castle. "How much do you know, Shirou?"

"About Archer, you mean?" Shirou sighs this time, exasperation in his tone. "Everything. I guess ... it kind of followed from the rest of it. Especially when we were in his World. And it really explains a lot."

"And ... how do you feel about it?" Kiritsugu asks, partly because he wants to take his mind off of returning to the Einzbern Castle, and because he really wants to know if his son is going to be all
"Honestly?" Shirou replies. "I think I can do better than him."

Kiritsugu can't help it. He laughs. He actually finds himself laughing. Shirou also begins chuckling. They make it into the clearing through the woods, stumbling a bit under the laughter, and Shirou holding a shield over both of them. "Shirou ..." He says. "Just ... how did you find me ..."

"Well ..." Shirou gasps, catching his breath. "It's funny you mentioned Archer. He --"

"I phoned his sorry ass after finding the voice message, Dad."

Kiritsugu looks up to see Archer scowling at the both of them ... alongside one very angry white fairy in the form of Illyasviel von Einzbern. She would have looked cute, his daughter, with her hands on her hips and the pout on her lips, if it weren't for the coldness in her eyes. Perhaps, Kiritsugu thinks to himself as they come towards them, when everything is said and done, the sunrise would have been more merciful.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If someone had told Emiya Kiritsugu that, one day, his greatest fear would be a little girl in a pink skirt, he wouldn't have even bothered to laugh at something so ludicrous.

Several decades later, after dying at least twice, and losing his physical humanity, he finds himself at night -- in a guest suite he never tried to look at when he and his wife had control over the Castle as their base of operations a decade ago -- sitting up in bed, healing from the ravages of the sun's fire, as Illyasviel von Einzbern sits across from him on a chair.

Emiya Kiritsugu had been the Magus Killer. He had assassinated, and eliminated many powerful magi and Dead Apostles in his own right. More often than not, he never even had to use his Thompson Contender, and its Origin Bullets to complete his missions. Even high-ranking members of the Association tread around him and his reputation with caution, and the few that didn't -- counted on one hand -- didn't live long to regret meddling with a lowly Freelancer like himself, and when they did, death was a mercy. He had been wounded, captured, starved, beaten, tortured, and killed more people than he can even count: even if he remembers all of them. Six years ago, he had been denied the sweet embrace of death by the man who was father to use him as a tool to gain personal enlightenmnt at the cost of billions of lives. He helped exterminate an ancient, and insane monstrosity that used to be a magus. He had been brutalized, and managed to kill a sadistic former Executor -- who arranged the death of his assistant and personally killed his wife -- in his plan to destroy the World: perhaps the greatest enemy he had ever faced in his life as a Dead Apostle, and as a man. And he faced down his callous, inhuman Dead Apostle father and creator in a gamble that should have ended both of their lives.

But none of them scare him more than this little girl regarding her with piercing red eyes.

It isn't because of her aptitude with Einzbern alchemy, which he saw as superb: her constructs surpassing even her mother's in combat. It isn't that she has more Od in her pinky finger through the mana of the World as a high-grade homunculus than he has in his entire body: even now in its altered state. It isn't that she knows how to place someone's mind in any object, destroy and alter their original body, and keep them as a toy. It isn't that she once controlled one of the most powerful, and brutal Servants in this entire War, and another strong Servant at the same time with relative ease. It isn't even because she knows many ways from sunrise and sunset to torment, and dispose of him.

No.

It's the fact that he essentially killed her mother. It's that he let her Grandfather and her House perform experiments on her, shortening her lifespan to become a tool. It's that he failed to stop that from happening. It's that he never made it back to her: to live out his life with her.

It's the fact that he broke his promise.

He almost wishes she would kill him. But, as he knew before, he didn't want his blood on her hands. He'd already taken enough from her. And he knows, from first hand experience, what happens to a person who kills their own parent: even if they hated them.

Especially if they hated them.
But she doesn't do anything. Just as, these past couple of days, she left him here in this room for Archer to come and feed him with blood grown with Avalon. She avoided him. He knew she had sent Archer to come after him, to bring him to her during the War before her own abduction. But her absence didn't surprise him either. Perhaps it is her way of punishing him. If so, it did a good job. He had a lot of time, while regenerating these past couple of nights after Archer retrieved him from the waters of the lake -- where his body had been melting away due to his condition's vulnerability to a running body of water -- after having been crushed by the many rocks of the cavern before it flooded, and took him out with the tide. Perhaps the residual energy of the moon had been the only thing keeping him from completely succumbing.

Yet Kiritsugu also believes that once Illya found him, once the others had healed her from her own complications, she just ... didn't know what to do with him. She didn't know what to say. He knows she has been watching him through the scrying devices she has set up throughout the Castle. Silently watching. Judging.

Her silence is far worse than any torture, or terrible words she could inflict on him. His failure of Illya hurts just as much as how he also failed Shirou.

He coughs, more of a habit than anything else, as he no longer requires air. He is about to apologize, whatever happens next. Kiritsugu wants his daughter to know that he is sorry.

Suddenly, she is at his side. Crimson eyes meet crimson eyes. They never really looked like each other, with Illya taking after her mother, but now that he isn't human anymore, he can say that he almost has his daughter's eyes.

She places her hands on either side of his temples. It's as though she is staring right into his soul. It doesn't take him long to realize what she wants.

"Illya --" He is about to say, trying to warn her away.

"Kiritsugu." She says, as she said his name so many years ago when he held her hand collecting walnuts in the snow, before he left, when he carried her on his shoulders. But there is an adult intent behind that intonation now that was never there before. "You will let me in. Now. I'm going to find the truth. Or I will kill you."

"You can just ask." He whispers, not wanting to meet her gaze. "I never meant to --"

"I mean it."

There is no vulnerable little girl staring at him. Rather, it is an adult woman forged her entire life as a weapon, lonely, and furious, and hurting. He doesn't want her to see this. He doesn't want her to look at any of it. With a tone of derisive bitterness in his mind, he hopes to somehow protect her from that much. Her eyes are all but glowing. It doesn't surprise him that she has Mystic Eyes at this stage. Both of his children are remarkable despite him.

He can resist them, but it isn't worth it. He lets his mental barriers down. For all of her hostility, Illya's fingers are gentle as she places them on his temples. Her eyes cease to glow, as she realizes she doesn't need them. Kiritsugu lets his daughter in his mind, similar to how he used to let Iri go through his memories a few times to show her the world when video failed, or when she needed clarification: anchoring her through them, using an image or a thought or an emotion as locus points. But this time it is far, far different a circumstance ...

*She sees him. She is the crab that Kiritsugu sees from the corner of his eye on the beach as he plays*
with Shirley and the other children. She is the moon that he and Shirley watch when she promises to never leave him. She is the terrified chicken fluttering away from Shirley as her skin becomes pale and lined with black veins. She is Kiritsugu's heart when it breaks, and he runs away. She is his anger when he shoots his own father in the back as the other plans to leave the Island to be infected by vampires, and purged by Enforcers and Executors. She is one of the bullets taken from his ribs under Natalia's tutelage. She is a seagull in the air as Kiritsugu launches a missile a boat that destroys an airplane, and the other woman who has ever been a mother to him. She is his pain as he gives up on being a Hero of Justice when he kills Natalia.

Years and images and feelings pass. She is the dust on the battlefield as Kiritsugu saves the woman that will be Maiya. She is the smell of her the sweat that he recalls when they seek mechanical release into each other from the adrenaline of battle, and pain. She is a whole series of wars, and battles of the mundane and Moonlit Worlds. Then she is there, back at Einzbern Castle in Germany, as Kiritsugu sees her mother as a blank doll from a decanting tank, as one of the other homunculi. She is there as one of the wolves when he rescues her from the Forest, when her mother is thrown out there to die ... as she had been tested.

Then she is the love Kiritsugu feels when he teaches her mother, and starts to feel again. And the greater love when she is born. When she sees him holding her in his arms, and the guilt, and the unworthiness of holding someone so tiny and fragile when he killed so many people, and destroyed so many dreams. She is his tears when he cries in her mother's arms about knowing that he will kill her, and the darkness in the room when her mother says she is sacrificing herself for him and his dream: so that he will be with Illya, with herself, when the world has been brought to peace by the Grail. That is how he can make it up to her.

But then ... She is her father's self-loathing in Maiya's arms as he is in her again, trying to use the betrayal, the affair, as a rehearsal for what he thinks is his ultimate treachery of his wife. Illya wants to look away. But she can't. She's too invested now. She needs to know the answer. She needs to know the truth.

And the truth is Irisviel giving Kiritsugu Avalon that he gave her to keep her as functional as possible. She is the light in the room of the storage shed, that will become her onii-chan's Workshop, when the Noble Phantasm passes between them. She is his anguish at knowing this will be the last time he ever sees her mother as Irisviel.

And then, she is the room being filled with the mud from Angra Mainyu, the red-black bile from the golden cup her mother has become. She is the darkness that swallows Kiritsugu. And the gun in his hand, in the dream when he kills ... he kills her ... and strangles the thing that took her mother's form. To save the World. His dream become a nightmare. How his real dream had been to be with both of them.

She becomes the Fire that destroys Shinto, watching her father scream, his eyes wide in madness at what he has done. She is ashes in the wind watching Kiritsugu save her onii-chan's life. She becomes the years they were together. She is the aches, and lameness forming in his limbs. His deteriorating eyesight. His rotting Magic Circuits. The self-recriminations hissing through his mind. The constant suffering.

But more than that ... more than all of that ...

She is the wolf watching Kiritsugu come, time and again, the Bounded Field around her ancestral Castle. She is the tree that watches him attempt, and fail, to infiltrate the Bounded Field: to get to her. To get her out ...

And she is the despair when he screams her name over, and over again into the howling wind. Illya
Illya:

And Kiritsugu feels, before she extracts her mind from his memories, that she is the love for Shirou that is the only thing that keeps him pulling the trigger of the gun, its barrel in his mouth, that last lonely night when he just couldn't get into the Bounded Field for the final time...

*

Illya retreats from her father's mind, breathing hard, looking away from him. She's shaking.

Her eyes are watering. They won't stop. She jolts her hands away from Kiritsugu's face, and buries her face in her palms. She can't help it. She's crying. She doesn't know if it's with his pain, or hers. Or if they are tears of rage, loss, or relief. Or shame.

Finally, she looks up from where is sitting on the foot of her bed. Her father... hasn't moved. He looks so... small now. So old, and broken. And done. She feels so ashamed for looking into something the deepest, darkest parts of him. Those adult, private spaces that should have remained his. And when she found what she was looking for, and saw it was there, she just can't...

"All those years..." She murmurs. "I thought you abandoned me... Even when onii-chan read that letter... I thought they were lies. I thought..."

And she had been wrong. She thought he had given up on her. But, in the end, she was the one that gave up on him.

"Don't."

She almost flinches when he touches her face. The look he gives her, it's as though she just punched him in the face. He withdraws his hand. "It wasn't your fault, sweetheart." He tells her. "None of this is."

Suddenly, Illya just doesn't care anymore. She's buried in his chest, holding him for dear life. She can smell cigarette smoke, which she had never smelled on him before, but she doesn't care. She holds him tightly, and cries. "I-it's not yours either."

"Maybe not." She feels her father's arms surround her, embracing her once again. "But I will always be responsible. For this. For you. Illya..."

She can't hear his heartbeat, but it doesn't matter. She cries. She cries hard. Then, she pushes off of him. She wipes at her eyes, angrily, and glares at him.

"There are two things, and two things only that you can do make this up to me."

She pokes him in the chest, where his heart is supposed to be. "The first, is that I'm dying. And you are going to make me like you."

Kiritsugu's face falls flat, streaked with tears of red from his crimson eyes where they used to be so dark. "No. Illya. You don't know what you're asking..."

"I do, Kiritsugu." She retorts. "I know exactly what it means!"

"No you..." He shakes his head. "If you do this, you will be hunted. You won't be... human anymore..." He sighs. "You are still so... I can barely handle what this means..."
"I was never human, Kiritsugu. And if I could handle the essences of Servants in me, and keep Berserker under control I can deal with vampiric blood lust." She pokes him again, much harder. "And ... as I have high quality Circuits, I won't be some stupid, mindless Ghoul. I'll skip all that nonsense. I know you did, with your father." She puts her hands on her hips. "And when I'm old enough, I can actually grow this body. I can change it to be a real woman for onii-chan."

"I ..." Kiritsugu's face goes blank. It literally has no expression. Illya has no idea why her father looks like he has just gone to an extremely far away place. "Look." His voice becomes placating. "You have Avalon in you right now. Saber's nearby. You have ... you have time, Illya. Time for us to find another option. I want to save you too. I want us to be a family again. Please."

"You owe me, Kiritsugu." Illya glares at him, the harshness returning to her eyes in a manner that she knows doesn't take after her Mama. "You owe me that much. This chance."

He sighs, then. "Look. If there are no other choices, I will ..." He pauses, and shakes his head. "I will do it. I will do it if you still want it. Just think about it. Please."

This time, after another pause, Illya sighs. She decides to let him off the hook. For now. "Fine. But." She points at him again. "There is my other condition."

He looks at her warily. "Go on."

She breathes in, and says. "There is a series a ... manga called ... Pocket Monsters. And some video ... games. Anyway, there is a Pocket Monster called Clefairy." She glares at him. "I want it."

He looks at her for a few moments, and then nods. Slowly. "Ok."

"I want the stuffed toy! I have no patience for figuring out ... video games." Illya continues, coming towards him.

"All right, Illya."

"I want you to win it for me at a festival. One you will take me to."

"I ..." Kiritsugu furrows his brow. "I don't know if I can. My condition ..."

"There are night festivals." Illya interrupts him. "You will come with me and onii-chan. Both of them."

"I'm ... pretty sure Tohsaka exiled me from Fuyuki."

"Hmmm!" Illya turns up her nose. "That damn commoner. Onii-chan will talk with her a bit. But like you said, we still have time."

"Yes." She can see the palpable relief on the man's face. "Yes we do."

She gets back on the bed, and holds him again. "Papa ..." She murmurs.

She feels his hand stroke her hair. "Y-yes Illya?"

Illya cuddles into him. "I-I ..." She sighs, suddenly all spent, years lifting off of her heart, feeling safer than she has been in a long time since Berserker, since even onii-chan ... the both of them. "I still want that Clefairy. I'm ... serious ..."
The final boss of this game. Illya.

Maybe this was rushed. Maybe it would take longer for Illya to accept Kiritsugu after everything that has happened. But that anger towards him was just bitter disappointment of waiting for a father that never came back. And this may be one of the few sweetest chapters in this whole fic. There has to be some levity here after all. At least, that is how I feel on the matter.

I also don't know if her power -- this Spell of Transformation -- works the way I wrote it. I got it from the Heaven's Feel Route when she used it on Shirou. I changed some details but, you know what? I don't really care. I think this was effective. And I am keeping it as is.

And you know that a Clefairy would complement Illya. Assuming she isn't the psychotic Jigglypuff with a marker instead.
He walks through the snows of the Black Forest, leaving the Castle to smoulder behind him. His body armour does little to keep him warm. Even his cowl, and face mask are more for concealment than insulation against the windchill. He doesn't feel the cold anymore, not really. The dissipated remnants of evil spirits haze the air, destroyed by curses far more potent than themselves, even as the claw and fang-marked carcasses of wolves litter the snow. Surprisingly, for anyone else who could have come across the scene, there is no blood anywhere.

It is a long way back to civilization, but he is well sustained now -- more than usual -- and he will make the trek.

"Ah." An old, rugged voice says from behind him. "I finally caught up with you."

He pulls out his guns, training them on the large, grey-bearded old man standing there as if he had been watching him this entire time. The old man holds up his hands, a somewhat puzzled expression on his face. "Goodness, did Alaya have to do something about the Einzbern?"

The masked man inclines his head, slightly, towards the fire in the distance. "What?"

The old man blinks his red eyes. "Oh, pardon me." He shakes his shaggy head. "You are wearing the wrong colour. He usually wears red. From what I've observed at any rate. You are all greys and blacks."

The masked man isn't sure if the old man is playing with him, or if he's insane. Or both. But then his eyes, behind the mask, land on the Azoth Dagger at the old man's belt. That would have been a clue in and of itself, it hadn't been for the sheer amount of power and coldness emanating from the other's very presence. Even a mundane, magic-blind idiot could see what kind of being is standing before them, even if they didn't have the words. And the man has a lot of words for this old man, but doesn't feel inclined to say any of them. He doesn't even know where to begin.

"Please," Zelretch says, stroking his beard. "Can you take that mask off. It's somewhat ... confusing."

It isn't as though he needs it right now. Emiya Kiritsugu removes the face mask. The Second Magician squints his eyes a bit. "Ah, black hair. Pale skin. Red eyes. You are definitely the man I'm looking for."

Zelretch doesn't proffer a hand. Emiya Kiritsugu doesn't either. Despite this, the Dead Apostle Ancestor smiles. A benign expression. "In case you were curious, your daughter was the one who directed me to you. Illyasviel ... She addressed me by my full title. Just like her ancestor. You know. For a few moments, she even sounded like her. It must have been some of her memories surfacing."

He sighs. "It's nice to know that something good of Justeaze still lives on, in a way."

Kiritsugu narrows his eyes. "What do you want?"

"Right. To the point. I can respect that." Zelretch says. "I knew your father."

"I know." The words are colder than the winter around them.
"Yes. I ... suspected he would resurrect you, though I wasn't certain given how the two of you ... parted last." Somehow, the Second Magician and Wizard Marshall of the Mage's Association looks ... sheepish. Perhaps even a little embarrassed.

Kiritsugu might not be affected by the cold, or the snow, but his patience is gone. He has officially had it. "Why did you help him!?" He shouts over the wind. "You knew what he was! What kind of person he really was!"

"I didn't turn him."

"Yes, I figured that out!" Kiritsugu growls, not caring that he is shouting at one of the most powerful beings in the World ... and others. "But you fostered him. You took him out of Association custody! He sacrificed so many lives to escape. First, Alimango Island. And then what he did in Fuyuki ..."

"To be fair," Zelretch replies, looking meaningfully at the fire behind them, where Einzbern Castle used to be, "you probably took more lives than Emiya Norikata ever did."

Rage distorts Kiritsugu's features, filling his being. "I tried to save lives! He only did what he wanted for himself!"

"He did what he thought was right." Zelretch says. "Just like you have."

"Are you defending ... what he did?" Kiritsugu sweeps a hand through the air. A part of him is furious at himself for losing his cool, after all of this time. But the words just keep coming out. "I thought you detested evil, Zelretch. I thought ... the stories said you only observed."

"For the most part." The Second Magician says. "But sometimes, I do interfere."

"But why ... why god why ... would you have interfered with this?" Kiritsugu yells, his fangs bared. Then he remembers something his father told him. Something he has been dreading in the back of his mind. "Where you ... just bored? Was ... was all of this just a curiosity to you? Some kind of sick experiment? Just ... what was this, Zelretch? What was any of this?"

The old man regards Kiritsugu, scratching the side of his beard. He blinks once, or twice. Then, finally, he sighs. "To tell you the truth, part of it was because of curiosity. Do you know how the Second Magic works?" Then, he shakes his head slowly from side to side. "Well, that isn't a fair question. Let me be more specific. Most timelines do not radically differ from each other. They are just slight variations of others. Of course, there are the radical timelines that diverge completely, but for the most part there are certain cosmological constants. For instance, in most timelines your father does experiment with Time magecraft, and then vampirism. But in most of them, he dies before he can get any further. Just as in a great deal of the Kaleidoscope, you become the Magus Killer. Or the Holy Grail War becomes tainted by Angra Mainyu. And so on.

"But this timeline is, obviously, one of the different ones."

Kiritsugu waves him off, abruptly. "He told me you lied to him: that the World was keeping the paths to the Root closed because of Angra Mainyu."

"Do you know about the Theory of Relativity, Emiya Kiritsugu? Specifically the observer-participant element?"

The question takes Kiritsugu aback. "It's that the observer, through perceiving phenomena actually affects the outcome of said phenomena."

"Hmm. That is a good answer." He stares back at Kiritsugu, marveling a bit. "You really would have
made a good magus."

"No." Kiritsugu grinds out, the Second Magician's words too much like Norikata's for his liking. "I would not have. And what does that have to with any of this?"

"Perhaps, not that much." The old man admits, shrugging his shoulders. "The Second Magic allows me to look at many possibilities. That is what the Kaleidoscope ultimately is. A series of possibilities and potentials. However, I've noticed that when I travel to one of these, directly, it becomes more distinct. More ... of a reality. When I saw this timeline, the start or premise of it, I saw the potential for something new. Something that just didn't quite exist in the multiverse. Perhaps it's hubris on my part." He shuffles one foot in the snow. "Maybe it would have happened without my assistance. All I know is that Norikata's potion, his other one, worked in this timeline. And he decided to drink it. And he survived.

"And it's true. I could have left him to be dissected. Perhaps he even deserved it. But I didn't lie to him. The World did know about one path to the Root being infected. It generally doesn't want anyone to get to Akasha, and flout its laws. I know that through ... personal experience. This was one of those timelines, the rare ones, where the Counter Force took a more ... defensive approach to the issue. However, well ... If you remember your definition of the observer-participant, then you know your perception can influence the premise.

"Norikata's experiments, while under my supervision, didn't fail because of the World's barrier -- the one unique to this timeline, which I have been observing myself up until the end of the Fifth War -- but rather, because he simply didn't have enough power. I think, at this point, you know the truth: about why he truly revived you."

"That still doesn't answer my question." Kiritsugu says. "Why did you do this?"

"Because the Grail was an obstacle, in this timeline, to reaching the Root. And for the balance between both sides of the World, and beyond." Zelretch explains, his features becoming grave, and serious. "For instance, the Fifth Magic hasn't been discovered in this timeline which ... is an oddity, I have to say, and somewhat awkward given that I ... know the Fifth Magician in other planes. But ...

The old man taps his fingers on one side of his cheek. "In most timelines, your son and his friends that attempt to deal with the Grail. Saber is often the one that destroys it, properly. But other times ...

Comprehension dawns on Kiritsugu. "Illya ..."

"Yes. You probably didn't have occasion to meet Illyasviel's maids during the War. But Leysritt was supposed to be the Dress of Heaven, to allow Illyasviel to access the Gate to Akasha. Or ... close it." Kiritsugu looks down at the ground, the implications of it weighing on his unbeating heart. "I see."

"The good news is, she didn't have to do anything this timeline. Or Saber. Or ... your son with a Noble Phantasm he couldn't control ..." Zelretch actually looks sympathetic. "However, there are quite a few other timelines where it isn't enough. Where ... Saber is destroyed, or corrupted before she can deal with the Grail properly in any capacity. Or your son suffers death or ... worse before stopping Kotomine Kirei and Gilgamesh. Or Matou Sakura is completely converted by Zolgen into the Grail and unleashes Angra Mainyu. And sometimes ... your daughter doesn't survive the War."

"Was this going to be one of those timelines?"

"It's ... hard to say." Zelretch replies, after a time. "I do know that there is a slightly growing percentage of the World, in its refractions, implementing this barrier to the Root, and doing nothing to stop Angra Mainyu unless it grows too far. But it has been ... known, sometimes, to spread to
other timelines. Like a virus, or a cancer. Often it's when Alaya steps in, and its destruction isn't enough. Gaia surprisingly reacts far more slowly, and all sentient everywhere should count themselves fortunate, whether she has her Beasts, or True Ancestors, or no. All I know is that the fact that this closure took place in this timeline ... it didn't seem favourable. So, I had to see what else was different here: beyond the lack of the Fifth Magic. And then, there was your father. A gifted magus. A Philosopher heretic, but with a brilliant mind and specializing in Time Manipulation. At first, I thought given his link to you, that I could teach him how to use his knowledge more responsibly. I taught him what it was like to be nearly mindless, and hungry, and helpless. I'd hoped, perhaps like you did, that he would embrace enlightened self-interest."

Kiritsugu doesn't say anything.

"Obviously, I was wrong. So I ..."

"You hoped he would turn me. To bring me back based on what you know I can do."

"Or what you could do." Zelretch amends. "You were both unique factors. If Saber couldn't destroy the Grail, or Illyasviel couldn't close the Gate ... I'd hoped that someone could, shall we say, chemically destroy the source of the tumour. Given the terrible analogy of chemical and radiation therapy, and its effects on the body, I suppose what happened after makes an unfortunate amount of sense."

"Why didn't you fix this problem yourself." Kiritsugu bites out, mental exhaustion winning out over anger. "You have the power."

"I may have ... once." The Second Magician says. "But even if I did ... all I did was preserve Norikata, and tell him about the metaphysical situation of this World. Sometimes, when I have interfered more ... overtly, more bluntly ... even in my youth, often it could actually make things worse."

"But who ... what are you," Kiritsugu says, "to think you can play God like this."

Kiritsugu knows he is dealing with a greater power here, but he just doesn't care. So many peoples lives suffered because of this old man's decisions. A part of him wonders if the Second Magician can actually eat an Origin round. Even knowing he would be obliterated by Zelretch, he thinks about it. Then, he recalls that he spent the last one -- his last one from before this War -- in the back of Jubstacheit von Einzbern's head after shooting his kneecaps, after failing to give him any useful information in helping Illya's condition.

"I ... don't know." Zelretch sighs, turning his hands over. "I just know my limitations. And factors. You needed to be the Magus Killer. You required the experiences that shaped you into such. By the time I looked at this reality, it was past the Fourth War. The elements were in place. The constants are hard to interfere with without severely compromising matters. Unlike magecraft, True Magic not only isn't a precise science, it isn't a science at all despite me bringing up the Theory of Relativity as a reference point. I feel ... You were where you needed to be. And didn't you save the people, this time, that you wanted to save Emiya Kiritsugu?"

These philosophical quandaries and implications hurt Kiritsugu's mind. So he tries to stop the rest of this awkward conversation from derailing further. "Again, what do you want from me?"

"I want to hire you for some work."

This answer totally takes Kiritsugu aback. "You ... what?"
"I wanted to give you a year to yourself. To figure things out." The old man says. "I know Tohsaka Rin exiled you, and I wanted to give you an opportunity to travel. To other places."

Shirou and Illya had been quite adamant about him. In the end, Tohsaka Rin relented on his exile, to an extent. He was allowed to stay at the Einzbern Castle and his old residence so long as he was under supervision by his children, or Saber, or even Sakura. Unofficially, he could go wherever he wanted. He recognized when a magus, or a young girl, was trying to save face. It helps that he rarely ever sees her. Rin never stays in the same room as him, and he often makes a habit of visiting the City when she is off at the Clock Tower, furthering her studies. Saber is still stable, in this world. Apparently, Rin and Shirou had come to some kind of arrangement to feed her prana. Or Sakura. Or ... really, it is none of Kiritsugu's business, nor his issue. His son ... both versions of him are grown men who need make their own decisions. She still doesn't like him, but he sees a grudging respect in the King of Knights he'd never had before. Never earned. Even so, Kiritsugu rarely goes back to Fuyuki unless to meet his children, too haunted by his deeds there, and often he mostly stays in what is now Illya's domain.

Illya's Castle was considered by Rin to be Einzbern land, by the agreement. And Kiritsugu didn't trust the Einzbern. They lost all chance they ever had at gaining the Third Magic. But it was their own fault. He just came here, after a year, to make sure they would no longer be a factor: that the only Einzbern would be Illya. He didn't even want Shirou or ... Archer along with him. The eighth Head of the Einzbern Family had lived too long. He could forgive the House for punishing him, even exiling him for his part in the Fourth War, despite their tampering of the Third that caused all of this ... But what they did to Illya was unforgivable, and it was one of the few times Kiritsugu ever took his time with his work.

So he had gone back to what he knew best. Not often, and definitely not without his mask. Strangely enough, Archer had joked that Kiritsugu should wear red: the "family colours." But Kiritsugu had none of that. Darker tones are better. But this ... offer? He has no idea what to make of it.

"For dealing with the ... barrier? In other timelines?" He narrows his eyes. "I don't think so. My father may have been your tool, but I won't be yours."

"Not just to deal with the barriers, or obstructions. The tasks I need for you are more in your area of expertise." Zelretch says. "And regardless of whether or not you help me, I know it's hard being back here. Being ... what we are. Your son kept you from a sunrise. If that's what you want, I can respect that. But I also know you can do so much more good. I want to give you that chance. It's the least I can do after all of this. Look." He holds up his hands. "I will, regardless, help Illyasviel. I will work with you. I'm sure we can come up with something. And ... there is something else too."

Kiritsugu narrows his eyes, considering this new information. Having the Second Magician find a cure for Illya's condition could be a boon. But there is that other sentence, that other consideration. "And what is that?" He asks, finally.

The Second Magician nods, smiling gently. "This is irregular, but I would like to invite you to my Workshop, of sorts. There is someone I want you to meet. Someone who very much wants to meet you."

* * *

And then, Kiritsugu is in the Workshop.

It isn't the Workshop proper. He knows this much. Even now, with his senses being those of a Dead Apostle, the entirety of this place is ... beyond empirical description. It suits a being like the Second Magician. The former Magus Killer heard enough stories about Zelretch, more than a few rumours in
general, that suggested that the Wizard Marshall's mind doesn't function on the same level as those of other people: even other magi. He wonders, now, if he would have been so open with him as he had been back in Germany if he had taken them here first.

He does remember the bodies, though. They are held in suspension. Apparently, after his father had been ... dealt with, his servitors had met some kind of unique brain death. According to Zelretch, he had taken over investigating their forms, which hadn't dissolved or deteriorated, or regained even their bestial faculties since Norikata's defeat in Fuyuki. The Second Magician explained that these were actually immature vampires. Not quite Ghouls, though their behaviour suggested otherwise, but more cunning, quieter beings that didn't attack mindlessly, but had enough patience even through their hunger, and awareness of their surroundings to ... take advantage of them. They drank blood, and only attacked when their victims attempted to flee. And, they functioned as his father's familiars.

Zelretch told the Association that he was studying them: to make sure they could identify another outbreak of their strain, and to make sure that their creator's soul didn't flee into one of their bodies. Magi can send their souls into their familiars, or puppets, but if their original body is destroyed, they will die no matter where they are. Dead Apostles of a certain age, and skill, do not have this limitation. But Zelretch assured Kiritsugu that no trace of Norikata's soul could be found in any of the surviving vampires, and that -- technically -- the survivors are only living in a paranormal clinical sense. Their own souls had been either subsumed, or released a long time ago. In reality, it is Zelretch's plan to perform euthanasia on the rest when he's done. When he told him this, the Second Magician actually had the graces to exhibit something akin to guilt. Their blood, even if taken by Caster first, and Norikata after, is also on his hands as far as Kiritsugu is concerned.

But other, lesser magi have done worse.

All of his father's creations, those that remain aside from himself -- whom he had managed to break away from, a considerable feat of will according to Zelretch -- are all in this state.

Except for one other.

When he mentioned who it was, before agreeing to anything else, Kiritsugu told the Dead Apostle Ancestor to bring him here. And then, Zelretch left him. He left him here, without taking any of his weapons. He can't sense any Bounded Fields beyond ... the strangeness of this place, but he doesn't rule them out. Still, if he has to, he can deal with this one particular being.

She stands in front a Bunsen burner, her back to him. She wears a white lab coat, and gloves. He knows that she, technically, doesn't need them. But he suspects that she wears them a lot like he used to smoke. Out of habit. Besides, she can't contaminate the substance that she is attempting to form. He can see around her very familiar white flowers. Some of them are in different states of withering, and decay. Some appear fresh. Some emanate with a version of temporal magecraft that is eerily familiar to Kiritsugu's senses.

His heart would be struggling if it still worked. Something makes his hands want to tremble. He isn't really sweating, not in this state, but long dead nerves seem to tingle anxiously inside of him. She stops working. He sees that she can sense, or smell him. Slowly, she turns around.

She is wearing a face mask, and hood over her head. He can see a flash of red eyes behind the visor. They widen. Then, she takes off her gloves. Kiritsugu notices that her hands are pale. When she takes the visor off, and rolls the hood away from her skull, she steps away from the chemicals she's been working with. Kiritsugu feels himself choking on nothing. He actually has to remind himself that he no longer has to breathe.

Her dark hair is longer now. It almost covers her face. She is pale. Almost white. Her skin is no
longer tanned by the sun, yet there are no dark veins in her flesh anymore. Just red eyes where they used to be ... a golden yellow. She doesn't resemble Taiga anymore. They look at each other over a span of distance. Of years.

She finds a simple wooden stool, and sits down. Kiritsugu realizes that she looks just as shaken as he does. She looks up at him. Still short. Still in the body of an adolescent young girl. But if he had doubts before, they are gone now.

"Kerry?" She asks. "I-is that ... is that you?"

"Shirley." He says, and can almost hear another tone, a boy's voice under the gruffness of years, and pain.

They look at each other for what seems like ages in different Bounded Fields of time.

"Master ..." She starts, looking around her. Then she shakes her head. "Zelretch said you would be coming. I ..." She gazes at her hands, in her lap. "He told me about you." She finishes, in a small voice.

Kiritsugu sits down on the floor. He doesn't have the natural blood flow to faint, or pass out. But he needs to sit down. He needs a cigarette. He just ... "That ... makes one of us."

Shirley smiles tentatively. "Zelretch is always full of surprises." She fidgets, kicking her feet out nervously. "He thought my soul had left my body after ... after everything ..." She isn't looking at him now. Her gaze is almost faraway. "When ... after I drank that potion, after I ... I saw you." Her brow furrows, and her can see the obvious signs of remorse on her face. "I spread it. I ... I couldn't control them. They were like Ghouls but ... we were all so hungry. We didn't know what to eat, except ... when we found out. And then, it just ... the hunger didn't stop. I ..." She brings her hands up to her face. "I think one of the Enforcers got me. I was glad." She looks up at him, her face streaked with blood-tears. "They stopped the pain, and I was so glad."

Kiritsugu doesn't say anything.

She continues. "Zelretch brought me here. Apparently, he claimed me as a specimen of Dead Apostle. A rarity. A ... one without Magic Circuits that skipped the process of being a Ghoul. But the hunger and the power were too much ..." She shakes her head. "It took a while. He fed me blood. It took ... I think years. He told me that for a while he wasn't sure if I was ever going to get my mind back. My soul never ... it never left my body. It wasn't just ..." Her shoulders start trembling. "It wasn't just the vampiric condition."

"Trauma." Kiritsugu murmurs.

"Yes." Shirley whispers. "I should never have drunk that potion. I should've listened to Emiya-sensei. And I killed ... everyone I ever knew, because of it. Kerry, I'm ... I'm so sorry." She laughs, bitterly, wetly with the blood in her throat. "I've ..." She gestures at her equipment. "I've tried to make up for it. Somehow. I still remember what I learned. Zelretch brought me copies of the notes. Some of them were mine. I really do want to help people get better. Maybe not to conquer death, but to alleviate the suffering of people. The aging process. I just want ..." She looks down again. "I just want something to show for it. To make up for what I've done."

"Did my father know you survived?"

"... no." She says. "Zelretch told me he ... never told him." She sighs. "I technically didn't. I wasn't ... me, anymore. Not then. Hell ... I don't even know if I am me now. Whatever that means."
Kiritsugu just stares at her. There are so many things he wants to say to her. So many things he wished he had. So many things he'd even forgotten about it. And then, there is nothing.

Shirley gets up, standing in front of her stool. "You've really grown, Kerry." Her smile matches the sadness in her eyes, and it stabs the former Magus Killer in the gut. "You ... Zelretch told me you became a Freelancer Enforcer. You hunt down heretics and ... monsters. You were married too."

"Yeah." Kiritsugu says, his voice a whisper. "I was."

"And you ... you have a daughter?"

He turns to really look at her. "Her name is Illya. I also have a son. Shirou."

"Illya ... Shirou ..." She crosses her arms around herself, still very nervous, but smiling a little more. "Those are nice names."

"Yeah ..."

Kiritsugu doesn't know what to do. Even when Zelretch told him about her, he still didn't know.

Shirley relaxes her arms, and lets them hang down limply at her sides. "I know what we are, Kerry." She tells him. "I wanted to ... get better, you know. I wanted to spend the time figuring out what this is. What this ... means. Before, I was just hungry, and in pain. When I regained my sanity, I ... wanted to die. I didn't want to be this, you know. I never planned to. I don't think a lot of us do. Not us. I wanted to see if I could use these powers for ... a better purpose. I have Circuits now. Apparently that was a side-effect to all of this. Maybe I had recessive ones before I ... changed. And the potion just brought them out. I wanted ... time. To work on this research your father abandoned. But I also wanted to develop these powers. I ... I have to say that being a teenager for decades has been getting tedious." She looks down at her body. "But Zelretch tells me that as I keep existing, I can change my body. I can make it eventually look like how I want to be. But ..."

She shakes her head. "That isn't fair. Not to my village. Not to you." She smiles up at him, a pale shadowy contrast to the manner in which she used to grin down at him when he was four years younger than her on Alimango Island. But it is no less poignant or sincere. For a few moments, Kiritsugu can also fool himself that he is seeing that one final time again, near the ocean with the moonlight playing, pallid and luminous, on her skin. "If you need to kill me, I understand. I accepted I'd have to pay for what I did, a long time ago. I'm just sorry ... I'm sorry it had to be you, Kerry. For what it's worth, I'm just ... I'm glad I got to see you again."

Shirley closes her eyes. Kiritsugu is at a loss. He thinks what Zelretch told him before he came here. About how in most timelines, Shirley had been killed by Executors or Enforcers. How in some timelines, she survived as a lab specimen in a Clock Tower Workshop, but never regained her faculties. In even a few more, she did regain her mind ... and the magi holding her just didn't care. Either way, he never knew what happened to her. And now ... what are the odds ... in this terrifying reality that doesn't make sense that he would find her again, here ...

And then, the words just come out.

"I'm sorry too."

Shirley opens her eyes. He knows he's crying. He can practically see the red streaming down his face. "Kerry."

"I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough ... then ..." He tells her. "I should have killed you. Then you wouldn't have had to suffer. And the village wouldn't have been destroyed. I ..." Bitterness fills him.
"You may have hurt people. But I've done so much worse. I've destroyed so many more lives than you could ever even imagine. All for a lie. And that was before Dad turned me into this. I just ... I can't ..."

He feels slender arms wrap around his head. They are cradling him. Emiya Kiritsugu cries. He has been doing this a lot lately, but nothing like this. These deep, wrenching sobs. Not even with his own daughter.

"Kerry ..." She murmurs. "Kerry ... it's all right ..."

She strokes his hair, just as she used to, when he was just a boy, and she was little more than a girl herself.

"I did it to avenge you." He groans, into her belly. "To avenge all of them. Everyone hurt. But all I did was make it worse. Until I became what I hated. I'm sorry, Shirley. I'm sorry for everything."

Kiritsugu wraps his arms around her. They hold each other tightly, sharing their mutual pain.

"Is Emiya-sensei gone?" Shirley hisses through her own tears.

Kiritsugu puts his mind enough together to recall the details. After their last confrontation, and coming into Zelretch's Workshop and seeing the others, he told Zelretch what happened to Norikata under Mount Enzou. Zelretch, too, had been at the site when repairing the Fuyuki leyline. The two of them were observing the brain-dead remains of Norikata's vampires. That was when Zelretch told him that there was no trace of Norikata's mind, or soul in his surviving familiars. That perhaps he had been destroyed by his own Time magecraft going awry, or spread throughout the cracks between realities with the power that had surged out of his control. Zelretch actually went as far as to say that, for all his knowledge of reality and plane-travel, he had no idea just what happened to Emiya Norikata: just that it was incredibly unlikely that he would ever return.

"Yeah." Kiritsugu says. "He's gone."

"Good."

Even now, the hard conviction in Shirley's tone, and the clear set of her eyes actually gets his attention. They regard each other, with a mutual understanding. Kiritsugu suspects that his eyes also have that same edge to them when they talk about his father. And then, the moment passes. The tenseness is gone. They do not talk about Emiya Norikata again.

Shirley continues to stroke his hair. "Kerry." She tells him. "It's so weird now. You really are taller than me. I remember when you used to look up to me. And now ... you're a grown man. I guess ... you would have been, if everything hadn't ..."

"Hadn't gotten so fucked." Kiritsugu replies. It has been a while since anyone has touched him like this. He can almost hear the waves of the ocean against the Island, the wind through the palm trees, the feeling of the sun, and the call of gulls in the air. Shirley has changed, but somehow he can still smell the crab and watermelon on her even after all this time.

"Kerry."

"Yes, Shirley."

"I made a promise to you, long ago." She tells him. "You can do whatever you want. You don't have to help Zelretch. But ... I want you to know, that when I promised you, that I would be there, for you, I meant it. And." She puts her hands on either side of his face, making him look at her. "I still
Emiya Kiritsugu regards the girl he thought was lost decades ago. It is too ridiculous to be real, this entire scenario. He doesn't deserve this. He knows what he is, despite what he has tried to be. He failed as a hero. He failed as a Master. As a husband. As a father. He's killed the people he loved the most. He failed to kill those that were his enemies, and those that begged for death. He's ruined lives. He tried to do the right thing, and only managed to make things worse for everyone. He deserves a bullet to the head, or a sunrise. But all he can think about, looking up at those eyes that look like his, at the person who may well know him the most now, who wants to help him, who needs to help him, is that there is still time. One day, he might get tired. One day he might walk into that sunrise. But he still has to save his daughter, one way or another. He still needs to be there for her. There are still ways he might be able to help others. Even just introducing Avalon's abilities to replicate the blood alone could make a major difference for humans, and ... people of their condition. And perhaps he does need other places to go. Not for Zelretch, or some greater good, but for himself.

And he realizes now, for the first time in years, that he doesn't have to do it alone.

"Okay." Kiritsugu tells her.

*What do you want to be when you grow up?* Shirley's voice seems to echo from a time where the both of them were still innocent, where they had no idea of the horrors, or the challenges waiting for them.

*Better.* Emiya Kiritsugu replies in the present, in his mind, as he rests his head on Shirley's stomach, smiling. *I want to be better.*

Fin

Chapter End Notes

Zelretch has been said to be a convenient plot device. But I would also add that, his presence, tends to complicate a story even more if you really think about it. I almost wish I hadn't included him directly into this, but I'd like to think that I modified his interactions, and the dynamics with him just enough that they make sense. I see why a lot of fans compare him to God: because why does God allow evil to exist? Or even make it exist? There are so many implications about Zelretch and the Second Magic that it is a writing in, and of itself. And I am not going to take up any further space on that.

I'll bet you didn't see this conclusion coming. I didn't either, for a while, to be honest. Not just because it is a Good Ending, a Happy one even. Emiya Kiritsugu's life has been so filled with blood and gunsmoke, it's kind of amazing he didn't the die the way he lived. And as a vampire ... maybe it would have been more poetic to have him sit out during the dawn, and peacefully disappear into healthy fire.

But then, I think about those left behind. His strength, his greatest regret, was that his real wish was to protect and be with the ones he loved forever. In Fate/Zero, that was what he realized with Irisviel and Illya, but by then it was already too late. *That* was his perfect world. At this point, he has gone through a lot of stuff. And he still has decisions to make even now. But I think, he doesn't have to make them alone. He has to live with what he has done, but there is still much more work to do.
Just as I had to solve a story plot I made from the very beginning of this nine month old fanfic, I've gone through a lot of shit since I wrote this. I had a breakup of a six year long distance relationship. I've realized a lot of people faded out of my life during that time. And I have been dedicating way too much time between brooding, and writing like a workaholic. I do plan to get back to my Fate/Stay Life fic, which is marginally more positive and less dark than this one. But damn ... for a while at least, this was a focused, impressive experience.

I would like to thank Maximus for being the first person to comment on this fic, ever. Maximus, wherever you are, you helped keep this fic going. You were the first, and I am glad not the last. And everyone of you here that wrote comments, gave this Kudos, or even Bookmarked it: you are all the best. And I thank you for your valuable time.

As I've said each time, this has been quite a rush. And I think I might take a bit of a break before continuing to FSL. And you are all welcome to read that, if you are so inclined, or aren't there already. This has all been worth it. Thank you.

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