Fate/Harem Antics
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Fate/Harem Antics
by kamenhero25

Summary

Irisviel von Einzbern may have been stuck in the Greater Grail, but at least she had her wonderful adoptive son to watch over. And with a Holy Grail War fast approaching, maybe it was time to give him a little poke to finally start giving her some grandchildren. He just needed a girlfriend. Or two. Or three. And who better for her son than the greatest heroes in all of history and their Magus partners?
Chapter 1

“Kiri~”

The spirit of Kiritsugu Emiya turned his attention from the material world and back to the strange spiritual space that he now inhabited. How? Who cares, he was happy. Which was a rare enough state for him to be in as is. He wasn’t going to question it. “Iri,” he said with a soft smile. “Sorry, I was just checking on Shirou.”

His wife’s spirit smiled at him and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Hmmm, so how is our handsome young man?”

Kiritsugu smiled. “You first. How’s Ilya doing?”

Irisviel pouted. “The old man is still pushing her too hard,” she said. “She only wants to go the Grail War so that she can meet her little brother. But he’s pushing her to claim the Grail for the Einzbern family. He keeps trying to convince her that it’s your fault that the Grail was lost last time.”

The former assassin scowled. “Iri, no offense, but I should have murdered Acht while I had the chance.”

His wife shook her head. “I don’t blame you,” she said. “He wants Ilya to summon her servant in two days.”

Kiritsugu’s eyes widened slightly. “But that’s…”

“I normally wouldn’t be able to support him for months. She would have to bear the burden all on her own.”

Kiritsugu actually growled. “That’s it. Iri, do you think you could manifest me when she tries to summon? I want to blow the old man’s head to pulp.”

She shook her head. “If I could, I would, but your spirit doesn’t have the same composition as a Heroic Spirit. You would just dematerialize and be drawn back here before you could do anything.”

Kiritsugu sighed. “Then… what if you sent her a servant that could protect her from him?”

Irisviel smiled. “I was just thinking something along those lines. Nothing says that I have to use the catalyst he provides. I can use anything in the room when the summoning takes place.” Her smile grew wider and Kiritsugu felt a drop of sweat forming on his neck. That smile was never a good thing. “Yes, I think I have an excellent idea who to send her.” She giggled happily and Kiritsugu felt a shiver run down his spine.

“Well, I suppose Acht is only getting what he deserves,” he said, trying to convince himself.

“Exactly!” Irisviel said happily. “Now, how has our other child been doing?”

“Shirou’s fine.” Kiritsugu couldn’t help feeling a little pride as he spoke. “He’s eating right and he’s still practicing him magic. Even if he’s not very good at it. He’s doing fairly well in school and he’s actually managed to get Taiga to be a little bit responsible on a good day.”

“A miracle in and of itself,” his wife agreed. “Oh, our boy is so manly! Putting all that work in at the café, and training, and school. If only he put aside a little time to meet some nice girls… Mama wants
Kiritsugu knew better than to argue with his wife when she went on one of these tangents. “Well, the Matou girl is still coming around every day. And the Tohsaka one keeps watching him, even though he probably has no idea who she is. And there’s the archery girl, what’s her name…” He searched his memory for a moment, then gave up trying to remember.

“And how is Sakura doing?” Irisviel’s eyes hardened a bit.

“Well, Zouken is still an immortal, raping, murdering, worm, but Sakura is still hanging on.” He scowled again and pulled a cigarette from… somewhere. He’d long since stopped wondering where things came from in this place. He lit up and took a deep inhale before he continued. “He’s someone else that I should have killed when I had the chance. Sakura seems happy when she’s with Shirou though. So they’re still close.”

“I see…”

Kiritsugu felt his deep seated combat instincts stirring. “Iri, I know that look. Whatever you think is a good idea, please be careful. I know she’s going to be a master, but please don’t do something too crazy.”

“Oh don’t worry dear,” Irisviel said. “I know just who to send her. And just what to do about the older vampire.”

Kiritsugu’s finely tuned assassin’s instincts were screaming at him now. “If you’re sure…” He took another deep inhale, very glad that he could still feel the relaxation of the nicotine without feeling the effects of tar and smoke.

“Oh don’t be such a worrywart Kiri,” Irisviel said with an adorable pout that she only used when she wanted something. “I’m the all-powerful Holy Grail. I know exactly what I’m doing.” She pulled a pad and paper from… wherever and began to rapidly take notes. “Now let’s see… we’ll need Sakura of course. And Tohsaka. She just doesn’t realize that she’s in love with him yet. And we can use Ayako too. I’m sure I can work out how to get around the no magic circuits thing. And Ilya will be there too. Now who else should I…”

Kiritsugu elected not to ask and went back to checking on his son.
Chapter 2

Ilya hopped down off the private jet with a huge smile on her face. “So this is Japan,” she said, looking up at the sky. “It… really doesn’t look that much different from home. It’s a little warmer at least.”

“It’s still good to be home,” a voice said behind her. A tall woman with long, flowing black hair carefully stepped down from the plane, her heels clicking against the stairs and the coat of her pale grey power suit thrown over her shoulder. “And you’ll get to meet your brother for the first time.”

Ilya did a little twirl, her long silver hair whirling around her. “I know Obaa-san! Oh, I hope onii-chan has summoned his servant already. We’ll be the best team ever! I bet we could win the Holy Grail easy!” She trailed off, her smile shrinking a little bit.

Her servant smiled softly. “It’s alright Ilya. You said that your mother is watching over you, right?”

Ilya looked up at her servant. “Yes! Mama has been watching me ever since she left.”

“And you trust her, right?”

“Of course!” Ilya actually sounded a little offended at the thought that she might not trust her beloved mother.

“Then have faith that she won’t let something bad happen to you just because of the Holy Grail.”

Ilya’s smile widened again. “You’re right obaa-san! Everything will work out in the end. Sella, Leysritt, take my bag and deliver them to the castle. Berserker and I are going out to explore the city.”

The two put-up homunculi bowed. “Yes mistress Ilya.”

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One runway over, completely unknown to the smallest Einzbern, another European magus was getting off her own private jet. “So this is Japan. What a quaint little country.” Luvia Edelfelt absently pushed her beautiful curls back off her cheek. “To think that the miraculous Holy Grail is found all the way out here in the Orient.”

“Mistress…” The blonde haired foreigner turned to see her purple haired servant poking her head around the doorframe of the plane.

“Yes Caster~”

“Are you sure this is appropriate for me to wear?” Caster said, blushing slightly. “I know that I’m your Servant, but this seems…”

“Oh, don’t worry so much,” Luvia said, bounding back up the stairs in two quick hops. “I assure you, this is the height of fashion for servants in the modern era.”

Caster blushed deeper and hesitantly stepped out of the plane. One hand came up to hold on her headband as a breeze made her maid’s dress flutter. “Yes ma’am.”

Luvia squealed. “You look so cute!” She bodily lifted Caster up and spun around with her in her arms. “I knew that was the perfect outfit for you!” She put her down. “But that’s not the proper
way to greet your mistress.”

Caster was blushing so much that a small cloud of steam seemed to be forming above her head. “Yes…” Dipped low in a curtsy and bowed her head slightly. “Yes mistress.”

Luvia’s squeal of delight could have shattered glass. “I have the best servant!” she declared proudly. “Now let’s get the bags and get to the hotel! I can’t wait for Tohsaka to see just who has the best servant in the Holy Grail War.”

“I see.” Kirei Kotomine sighed and rubbed his temple with his free hand. “Yes, I see… Miss Edelfelt, I’ll make sure you’re on the record as Caster’s master… Yes, yes you can come down to the church whenever you want… No, I can’t tell you if Tohsaka has summoned a servant or not… Yes, I can tell you how many masters have declared themselves… You’re the third to announce yourself… Good night Miss Edelfelt.” He hung up the phone and groaned, dropping down on to the chair in his office. “God help me if any of the other masters are like her.”

“You know,” a woman said from the doorway. “It’s funny hearing you talking about rules.”

Kirei sighed again. “I take no particular pleasure in helping the church manipulate the Holy Grail War.” He wasn’t really lying. If he actually was trying to prevent someone with any sort of interesting wish from winning the grail, he certainly wouldn’t be enjoying it. “But after the fire resulting from the last war, we’ve decided to take measures to attempt to prevent such collateral damage from occurring again.”

“And you need someone to be the one out in the field,” Bazett finished. “Don’t worry Kirei. I’ll make sure that no one goes around doing something crazy again. Like kidnapping kids or blowing up half the town.”

Kirei absently patted his pocket to make sure that he still had the key to the basement safely in hand. “I’m relying on you Bazett,” he said with a slightly fake smile. “How are you getting on with your servant?”

“She’s nice enough. I mean, I got crazy lucky. Objectively, I got someone even stronger than who I was trying to summon but…” She shrugged. “I really wanted to meet Cu Chulainn. Eh, I guess getting his master isn’t so bad though.” She absently rolled her shoulders and adjusted her gloves. “Well, I’m going to go scout the new competition.”

“Best of luck.” Kirei relaxed a bit as the Enforcer finally left him in peace. This would have been so much easier if he’d been able to go through with his plan. One hand came up to his chest as he felt a jolt of pain where his heart was supposed to be.

Everything was going to plan. Bazett, trusting little Bazett, was completely absorbed in her summoning ritual and… yes! The servant was manifesting. He smiled as the Black Keys manifested in his hand. Now he just had to…

Oh god, pain!

He doubled over, the pain keeping him from even crying out. It felt like his chest was on fire, like his heart was trying to tear its way out of his chest. He managed to look up as the woman materialized. Wait. A woman? Granted, King Arthur had turned out to be a woman, but he doubted that every servant was actually female.

“Hmmm, interesting,” the woman said. “So you’re my master.” She gave a shallow bow. “I am
Oblivious to the man struggling to breath behind her, Bazett’s shoulders slumped. “You... you’re not Cu Chulainn are you?”

“The Hound? Ha! So you were trying to call my favorite student! Sorry to disappoint, but you got me instead.” The woman pulled down her dark half mask, revealing her cat-like grin.

“Student? Wouldn’t that make you...”


Bazett looked torn between excited and disappointed. “Really? I wouldn’t have thought that I could call you.”

“Ah, I know that look,” the servant said with a wicked little smile. “You don’t have to be so disappointed that you didn’t get a chance to get in Cu’s pants. Don’t get me wrong, it’s so worth getting in his pants, but I promise I’m fun too.”

Bazett’s face instantly turned bright red. “I didn’t want to summon him for that!” she shouted. “I just wanted to fight by my ancestor’s side!”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Lancer said. “I’ve done him too.”

Bazett turned even darker red. “I said it’s not like that!”

“Oh, so are you more interested in someone like me then?” Lancer half turned, showing off her curves.

“No!”

Lancer laughed. “Relax, I’m just teasing. Oh, and is there supposed to be a guy over there? Because it looks like there’s something wrong with him.”

Bazett turned around and finally realized that something was wrong. “Kirei! Are you alright? What happened?”

Kirei shook his head, the pain finally starting to fade. “I may be starting to feel my age. I believe I may have just suffered a small heart attack.”

“Jeez Kirei, you should take it easy. Lancer, help get him to his room while I call a doctor.”

Kirei rubbed his chest again. He didn’t have a heart anymore. Not in the traditional sense at least. Which meant that the Holy Grail had elected to intervene in his plans for the Fraga girl. Why? Why did the grail desire for her to live? Did it see something in her that he did not? He sighed. Now he was going to have to rely on her for intel if he wanted to bring about the birth of the curses deep within the grail. His plan would have been so much simpler without her around. He rubbed his temples. “I wonder if Gilgamesh left any wine. I need a drink.”
Chapter 3

Sakura Matou was standing in the basement of the Matou Manor. She hated this room. It was everything about her family that made her miserable and couldn’t do anything about. “Hello grandfather,” she said with a slightly detached tone as her grandfather and adoptive brother both descended from the first floor.

“I suppose you’re wondering why I brought you down here tonight,” Zouken said with his usual, slightly demented, grin. “It’s not extra training if you’re worried about that. In fact, you won’t be having any more training for the next week or two.”

Oh, so it was one of his false hope spots again. These had gotten so blasé over the years. “I see.”

“No, today will be the day that your adoption into the Matou family bears fruit.” Sakura’s eyes widened slightly and darted over to Shinji. Surely he wouldn’t… “The Holy Grail War comes again, and as the magical heir of the Matou family, you will be summoning a servant tonight.”

“Wait, what?” both teenagers said at the same time.

Sakura immediately shut up, but Shinji wasn’t so smart. “You promised me that I would represent the Matou family!” her brother shouted. “Why is she summoning the servant?!”

Shinji finally shut up when Zouken turned his hollow, sunken eyes on his grandson. “You are just like your father,” Zouken said. “You lack any ability in magecraft what-so-ever. Any attempt for you to perform the ritual would end in failure.” Shinji looked like he was trying to work up the courage to complain more, but Zouken’s gaze kept him silent. “However, you will be representing the Matou family in this war. Sakura will perform the ritual then use one of her Command Seals to transfer ownership to you.”

Shinji calmed down a bit with that. “Well alright then. Let’s get this show on the road then, shall we?”

Zouken smiled again. That smile always made Sakura’s skin crawl. “Yes, let us begin.” He gestured as a dozen worm familiars crawled from the shadows of the room and began to dissolve, their slime forming a perfect magic circle on the ground. “I have just the catalyst to function for Sakura, so there’s no reason to wait any longer.” He drew out a book from somewhere in his robes, old and leather bound, with frayed edges and stained pages. “And here is the ritual. All you must do is recite it and channel your mana. The Holy Grail will do the rest.”

Sakura took the book and the paper with shaking hands. She set the book down at the heart of the circle and began to channel her power. She winced as the worm familiars in her body twitched, reacting to the flow of mana, but ignored the familiar pain. “For the elements, silver and iron,” she began. “For the foundation, stone and the archduke of contracts. For the ancestor, my great master, Schweinorg. Close the gates to the cardinal directions. Come forth from the crown, and follow the forked road to the kingdom.” The circle at her feet began to glow with violet light and she almost screamed as the worms withered and dug through her flesh, the mana flow going wild as it was drained into the ritual circle. “Fill,” she gasped. “Fill, fill, fill, fill. Repeat five times. But when each is filled, destroy it. Now, heed my words.” She felt… something reach out to her and the worms suddenly calmed inside her, going completely still. With the moment of relief, she pushed forward. “My will creates thy body and your sword creates my destiny. If you obey the Grail’s call and obey my will and reason, then answer my summoning!” Her voice rose and the air began to blow through the chamber, making her hair swirl and her skirt dance around her legs. “I swear, that I
will be all the good in the world! That I will defeat, all evil in the world!” The light began to build and build, streams of energy swirling around her as everything but her and the circle was obscured by the vortex of energy. “Seven heavens, clad in the three great words of power, come forth from the circle of binding Guardian of Scales!”

Then the room exploded. Sakura screamed as the massive pillar of violet light blasted straight up, cracking the stone ceiling and causing a shower of stone fragments to rain down on her. As the smoke cleared, she could see a woman standing in the center of the circle. Long purple hair hung down almost to her feet and a blindfold covered most of her face. Yet somehow Sakura knew that she was looking straight at her. “I ask of you,” the woman said in a soft, lyrical voice. “You who summons me to this vessel, are you my master?”

Sakura swallowed hard. “I…”

“Very good Sakura,” Zouken interrupted. “You have summoned a fine servant. Now…” And that was all the further he got before a loud crack rang out. All four people in the room looked up to see the cracks spreading from the point where the energy vortex had damaged the ceiling. Zouken had half an instant to realize what was happening before a chunk of stone roughly the size of a pick-up truck smashed him flat. Quickly followed by a large portion of his bedroom.

The other three people in the room looked at the large pile of debris burying the ancient mage. “I believe we should go mistress,” the purple haired woman said. “It is not safe for you here.” She looked over at Shinji, then scooped Sakura up in her arms and jumped up through the hole, through Zouken’s favorite window, and out in to the night.

“I… I don’t know your name,” Sakura managed as her servant carried her away from that hated house.

“I am servant Rider,” the woman said. “And I am at your service mistress.”

“Then… please put me down Rider,” Sakura said after a moment.

“I apologize, mistress,” Rider said, setting down on an abandoned street. She carefully set Sakura down on her feet. “I simply felt something… wrong about that place. I wanted to take you away as quickly as possible.”

“It’s alright Rider,” Sakura said. “I just… I’m not sure where to go.”

“Surely you have a friend who could take you in for a night.”

Sakura blushed furiously. “I… I don’t have many friends. And I couldn’t impose on Emiya-kun like that…”

“At the very least, you should ask,” Rider said. “Allow him to make the decision if he will help you on his own.”

Sakura blushed deeper. “Alright. Can you… can you take me there?”

“Just point the way.”

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Shirou Emiya was getting ready for bed when he heard a knock on the front door. “If Taiga locked herself out of her own house again, I’m making her sleep on the porch,” Shirou grumbled as he went to answer. Much to his surprise, Sakura was standing on the front porch. “Sakura! What are you
“I’m sorry to impose Emiya-kun,” Sakura said, bowing deeply. “I had a… problem at home. And I don’t have anywhere to stay tonight. I hoped…”

“What? What happened? Was it Shinji?!”

Sakura flushed at Shirou’s sudden passion. “No! No, it’s just… my grandfather isn’t well and we had a fight and… I can’t go home tonight.”

“Then you can stay here,” Shirou said without a moment of hesitation. “You just come in and sit down. I’ll make you some tea to calm you down then I’ll set-up a futon in the guest room.”

Sakura nodded. “Thank you so much Emiya-kun. I’m in your debt.”

An hour later, Sakura was lying back on the comfortable futon in Shirou’s guest room, staring up at the ceiling. Despite her exhaustion, she kept thinking about Shirou asleep in the next room and getting all flustered and waking herself up again.

“I told you he would help you,” Rider said, materializing from her astral form.

“I didn’t want to push myself on him,” Sakura said.

Rider smiled. “I don’t think he would mind if you impose on him a bit. He cares about you Sakura. It’s obvious from the way he looks at you.” She sat down against one wall. “Just rest Sakura. Shirou won’t mind you allowing yourself some rest. And I’ll watch over you.”

Sakura nodded and rolled over, trying to relax so her exhaustion could overtake her.

“Finally!” Irisviel shouted as Sakura drifted off. “That went much better than expected. Now just one more little thing to take care of…” She had really wanted to do this before, but her connection to the lesser Grail fragments in Sakura’s body was far too weak to influence them normally. The servant contract bound her closer to the Holy Grail, and to Irisviel. The spirit smiled as she reached inside Sakura’s body and disintegrated the crest worms, and the last fragments of the whiny little bastard who had tried to use her form to seduce her Kiri.

Her work done, she went to find her husband so they could… entertain each other until she needed to summon up the next servant.
Chapter 4

It took Zouken Matou hours to put himself back together. What? It wasn’t like having half a ton of stone and wood dropped on him was anywhere near the most lethal thing to ever happen to him. As he managed to draw in enough of his worm familiars to regrow his body, he took stock of the situation. Sakura and that troublesome servant had run away while he was indisposed and that useless boy was nowhere to be seen. Now he was out one valuable puppet and one valuable servant. And no doubt the servant would be protecting his pawn from him. He might be ancient and knowledgeable, but he didn’t fancy his chances against Medusa. “Fine,” he muttered. “I’ll do this myself.”

Summoning without a specific catalyst was a risky trick, but he was there when they’d made the god damned Grail. He could make this work. He went about fixing up his summoning circle, his worms crawling across the ground and leaving trails of slime and pus to fill in the gaps caused by the ceiling falling in. “Now then. Let’s see if I’ve still got it.” He began to chant, the familiar mantra rolling of his tongue. After all, he’d been around for every Matou summoning since the very first Grail war. The explosion that heralded his servant’s appearance was much smaller than the one that had revealed Sakura’s. Zouken couldn’t help a small smirk as he recognized the black shrouded figure in the center of the circle.

“I am Servant Assassin,” the woman said, her voice low soft. “So, you are to be my master?”

“Indeed,” Zouken said. Ah, Assassin, his favorite of the servants classes by far. Yes, he could work with this. “Now, there’s no time to waste. I have a mission for you.”

He scowled as the Assassin hesitated. “Of course,” she said evenly, her voice only slightly stilted.

“What was that?” Zouken said. He was in absolutely no mood for games.

“There is a foul air to this place master,” Assassin said. “It’s… disconcerting.”

“What my home feels like is not relevant to your orders,” Zouken snarled. “You will obey me, is that understood?”

“Of course,” the servant said again with the exact same tone.

Zouken had enough. He stepped forward and backhanded Assassin across the face. It didn’t really do much, but it made him feel better. At least until his skin began to bubble and the horrifically powerful phantasmal poison that coated Assassin’s entire body began to spread through his worms like a virus. Assassin watched dispassionately as her master’s entire being began to bubble and warp as her lethal toxins spread through his body. Zouken tried to reach out to Sakura’s worms, trying to boost his mana levels enough to resist the poison, but he found that connection severed. He lasted just long enough to scream before his very essence dissolved in to sticky purple goo on the floor of his basement.

Assassin looked down at the mess that used to be her master. “That’s not normal,” she said, more curious than worried. It was still slightly disturbing to watch someone succumb to her poisons, but usually they didn’t melt. Perhaps she could find another Master before her skills could no longer support her without help. She took a moment to check the Grail’s knowledge of this time period before shapeshifting in to a more discreet outfit and leaving the basement behind.

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“Well that went better than I ever could have hoped,” Irisviel said as she looked down at the results of Assassin’s summoning.

“What happened dear?” Kiritsugu asked, peaking over his wife’s shoulder.

“Well, Zouken tried to summon another servant, and I sent him one of the less awful Assassins. I figured he’d eventually piss them off enough to get himself killed.”

Kiritsugu looked down at the puddle of purple slime that was once Zouken Matou. “And I’m guessing he outdid himself.”

“Oh you have no idea,” Irisviel said, trying not to sound too happy. “That’s what happens when you try to slap a servant with a body entirely covered in deadly poison.”

Kiritsugu sighed. “Iri, this whole scheme of yours is about giving our son a harem, right?” He had long since decided not to argue with his wife’s crazy ideas. Most of them even turned out fairly well. Well, some of them did.

“Of course.”

“And he’s expected to sleep with this harem, right?”

“Of course! How would I get an army of grandbabies otherwise?”

“And this servant’s entire body is covered in deadly poison?”

Irisviel trailed off as she realized what had just happened. “I’ll fix this,” she declared. “Just give me a minute. I’m sure I can fix it.” She pulled a book from… somewhere. One that Kiritsugu recognized as being the manifestation of all the rules that Zelretch had put in to place for the Grail.

“Let’s see… I can de-summon her. And she’s one of only a few female Assassins anyway. Not that there’s anything wrong with Jackie, but Shirou will get weird looks if he has too many lolis around… Oh!”

Kiritsugu shivered as his wife smiled. “I assume that means you found something.”

“Oh, did I ever.” Irisviel shut the book. “Now let’s see. Who should I have…” She giggled wickedly. “Oh, she’ll do nicely. And I might actually manage to make Kotomine kill himself before he does something that forces me to explode that poor excuse for a heart that he has.”

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In a graveyard halfway around the world, an exorcist who for some reason wasn’t wearing anything below the waist other than tiny shorts and stockings felt the back of her hand burn and a set of three red marks appeared on her skin.

“What?” Caren Hortensia muttered. “I guess I should go ask what this is all about.”
Kirei Kotomine was sitting at his desk, trying to fight off an encroaching headache. It was becoming an increasingly common occurrence for him over the last few days. Unlike his last three headaches, this one wasn’t caused by Bazett, Lancer, or Gilgamesh. No, this time his headache was caused by the letter sitting on his desk. A letter from the holy church in Rome.

*Father Kirei Kotomine,*

*Given the events surrounding the last Holy Grail War, we find that simply having an overseer present to monitor the activities of the mages engaged in the conflict may not be sufficient to ensure the continued safety and secrecy of the mystic arts. Fortunately, God has blessed us with our own master, whom may be able to compete in said competition and prevent another unstable individual from claiming the Grail and causing an incident such as the one ten years ago. We trust that you will provide her lodgings and any aid she might require. Discretely, of course. We must maintain the fiction that we are neutral in this affair.*

The bottom was stamped with the seal of the church, but unsigned. He groaned and pulled a bottle of wine from the bottom drawer of his desk. He hesitated for a moment, then simply popped the cork and drank straight from the bottle. On one hand, this made his little fiction to keep Bazett in line less of a fiction. On the other, now he had to try to carry out his plans while a representative of the church was looking over his shoulder.

He took another long drink and stored the bottle away again before he straightened his vestments. At the very least, he could make a good impression. With a little luck, he could use this representative as another tool to get what he wanted. The Grail’s birth would happen regardless of who won after all. The sound of someone hammering on the front door echoed through the church and Kirei went to greet his new… guest. He pulled the double doors open. “Greetings and welcome to…” His voice caught in his throat and all the color drained from his face.

“Greetings Father Kotomine,” the silver haired young woman dressed as a nun bowed her head. “My name is Caren Hortensia of the Exorcist division and currently a master in this Holy Grail War.”

“You look just like your mother.” Kirei scowled, biting his tongue before something else slipped out. Another man might ask what he’d done for God to punish him like this. Kirei was fully aware of exactly what he’d done to earn God’s ire. But surely this was excessive, even for divine retribution.

“Pardon?” The girl cocked her head as if she had no idea what he was talking about, but Kotomine recognized the momentary searching look in her eyes. She wanted to see how he’d react.

“Never mind. Welcome to Fuyuki Church Sister Hortensia. Please, make yourself at home.” He stepped aside, holding the door open for her.

“Of course. Bring the bags Shielder.”

Kirei glanced past his… the representative to see another silver-haired girl behind her. Really? What was with all of the silver hair all of a sudden? “I’m sorry, did you say Shielder?”

“Oh yes,” the apparent Servant said, bowing her head as well. “I am Shielder, the servant of defense. It is an honor to meet you.”

Kirei was rather proud that his only change in expression was a raised eyebrow. “Pardon me, but I
wasn’t aware that you’d already summoned your servant. And I’m fairly certain that there isn’t a Shielder class.”

“I… am not certain myself,” Shielder admitted. “From what knowledge the Grail has provided me, I believe that I am an extra class of some sort.”

“I see…” That made sense, after a fashion. “Does that mean that there are eight servants in this war, or have you replaced one of the previous classes?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know.” Shielder bowed her head again. “I’m sorry.”

“I see. Pardon me, but I believe I need to make a phone call.”

“Just a moment,” Caren interrupted.

Kotomine fought the urge to sigh. “Yes?”

“Where are the baths? It’s been a long day and I require a bath and a room to stay in.”

This time, Kirei did sigh. “Of course… right this way…”

Rin Tohsaka groaned as she tried to wipe the sleep from her eyes. Why did school have to start so early? Couldn’t it start at a nice reasonable time to be awake? Like ten? Or noon? Noon would mean she could actually sleep. She’d spent all night preparing her ritual to for the summoning. Still, she had to be on time. It wouldn’t be proper for a member of the Tohsaka family to be late for anything. But as she approached the school building, something seemed… wrong. There weren’t any students around except for a few she recognized as members of some of the school clubs. That meant… “I’m going to punish that alarm clock when I get home!”

“Good morning Tohsaka!” a voice called out behind her

Rin turned and smiled. “Good morning Mitsuzuri-san,” she replied, fighting down a yawn. “Tell me, do you have the time?”

Ayako Mitsuzuri looked at her and chuckled. “It’s about seven AM. Are you still not awake?” She waved her hand in front of Rin’s face.

“All of the clocks in my house were fast. How on earth did that happen?” She shook herself. “I’m fine Mitsuzuri-san.” She frowned as she realized that a fresh white bandage was wrapped all around the other girl’s hand. “Are you okay? That wasn’t there yesterday.”

“Ah, yeah, I’m fine,” Ayako said with a causal wave. “I just caught my hand when I was stringing one of the bows yesterday and cut myself. No big deal.”

Rin’s eyes narrowed slightly. “If you’re sure… Are you on your way to morning practice as usual?”

“Yeah…” Ayako sighed. “The archery club has a bunch of problem students and our best member quit. Now I have to try to get them in good enough shape to attract some new members in the spring. At least Matou stopped showing up…”

Rin’s head came up immediately, her eyes suddenly alert. “Something wrong with Sakura?”

“Huh?” Ayako looked mystified for a second. “Oh, sorry, I guess I should be more specific. No,
Sakura’s fine. She’s been doing better than ever actually. Her brother hasn’t been to club in a few days. Honestly, I’m kind of glad. He’s the one who drove out our ace.”

“I wonder if something happened to him.” It was always a good idea to keep an eye on the Tohsaka family’s rivals.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Ayako said with a shrug. “For all I know, he might not have been to school at all the last day or two. Want to come and watch? I’m sure the guys will appreciate it.”

Rin was more the used to ignoring such comments. “All right. I’ll go if all I have to do is watch. I’ve got nothing else to do this early…” And maybe Sakura could tell her something about Shinji. For him to suddenly drop out of sight at a time like this… Maybe the Matou family magecraft wasn’t quite as dead as she’d thought.

“Great,” Ayako said with a huge grin. “Then let’s go!” She took Rin’s hand and all but dragged her off toward the archery dojo.

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Rin tugged her shoes off when she arrived home. Overall, it had been a rather good day. A bit tiring, but good enough. She was about to head down to her workshop when she noticed a light blinking on her answering machine. Only a handful of people had her number so it had to be… She pressed the button.

“It’s me,” the voice of Kirei Kotomine said through the speaker. “I’m sure you know, but tomorrow is the deadline, Rin. It’s a problem for me if you don’t do anything and there are only two remaining seats. Or maybe one. Or perhaps three. There are some… irregularities with this particular contest.” Before he could elaborate, a feminine voice said something in the background that Rin couldn’t make out. “What? No Caren I… I am one the phone with one of the Masters. What? The Tohsaka heir. No! Let me finish my phone call!” The priest’s loud sigh rattled through the device. “My apologies Rin. I have a guest that… what? The female voice interjected something again. “Not now! Alright. Rin, either summon your servant before tomorrow night or come down to the church and formally renounce your right as a Master so I can find a replacement. Goodbye.”

That was strange even for the fake priest. “Right then.” She was already ready for her summoning, she’d just been putting it off until she could unlock her father’s will in hopes that he’d have left a catalyst for her to use. Now, she’d just have to wing it. “Whatever, I don’t need a catalyst anyway.”

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“I should have taken the time to find a catalyst.” Rin thought, standing in the destroyed remnants of her living room. It seemed that she had managed to summon a servant. Because there was a pink haired woman with a long red coat that showed entirely too much of her unnecessarily large cleavage practically lounging on top of the rubble. The ticking of the wall clock seemed to mock her. “Of course I managed to forget to reset those…” She sighed, her shoulders slumping. “What’s done is done, I guess…” She looked up at the woman. “So who are you?”

The woman chuckled and pulled a pipe from somewhere inside her coat. “You don’t know me? I’m hurt.”

“I hate this woman already.” Rin sighed. She just knew that this wasn’t going to end well, but she couldn’t deny the sheer amount of power pouring off the figure in front of her. “You are my Servant, right?”
“I would assume so,” the woman said, chewing the end of her pipe. “You made a real mess of the summoning, didn’t you? This place is a wreck. Or is it supposed to look like this?”

Rin’s eyebrow twitched. “No, it’s not,” she said. “I may have gotten the astrological timing slightly wrong when I performed the spell.”

“Ha! What an amateurish mistake! Don’t worry, the stars are a specialty of mine. I’ll make sure you don’t screw up like that again.”

Rin’s eye twitched again. “I see…” On an intellectual level, she knew that physically attacking her Servant wouldn’t do any good. But it would feel so good to pick up a piece of rubble and fling it at her. “So which Servant are you?”

“I am the scourge of the high seas! The devil of England! But you have the honor of calling me Servant Archer.”

Rin gave her Servant a flat stare. “Not Saber then…” She supposed that was what she got for making a mistake with her summoning. “I guess I can work with that.”

“Splendid!” Archer declared. “Now there’s only the matter of me fee.”

“Your fee?!” Forget throwing something at her, Rin was going to strangle her Servant.
“Senpai?”

Shirou Emiya stirred, his eyes slowly opening to the pale morning light. “Huh?” He raised a hand to shield them for a moment before he realized where he was. “Oh, good morning, Sakura.”

“Good morning Senpai,” Sakura said with a smile.

“I’m sorry, I guess I slept in.” Shirou sat up, yawning and stretching to work out the kinks in his back. He really needed to stop falling asleep in his workshop. “You shouldn’t have to wake me up like this.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble,” Sakura said. “I don’t have to wake you up very often. You’re usually up before I am anyway…”

Shirou chuckled. “Yeah. Still, I think I like having you wake me up more. When Fuji-nee does it, she just hits me.”

Sakura’s cheeks colored slightly. “Please, don’t mention it.”

Shirou chuckled. “Alright, alright. Just let me change my clothes and I’ll get started on breakfast.”

“I can help with the cooking,” Sakura said. “What are you making? I’ll start getting things ready.”

“Don’t trouble yourself. I can do it.” Shirou stood up, stretching again and rubbing the sand from his eyes.

“Oh no,” Sakura said. “You’ve already lent me one of your rooms, the least I can do is help around the house where I can.”

“You’re my friend Sakura. I’m not going to ask you to work for a place to sleep at night.”

Sakura blushed again, but Shirou didn’t notice, as always. “Please, I don’t want to feel like I’m being a burden on anyone…”

Shirou smiled. “Well, then could you get out some eggs and rice? I think an omelet with white rice would be good this morning. Something to warm us up.”

Ten minutes later, Shirou walked back in to the kitchen to find the stove already started and Sakura wearing an apron over the rest of her clothes. “Oh, you already got started.” He quickly grabbed a second apron and tied it behind his back.

“Well, it wasn’t really much to do…” Sakura looked down, like she was expecting to be scolded.

Shirou smiled. “It’s fine. Let’s start the rice first…”

As the two teenagers prepared breakfast together, an unseen third party hovered just behind them, her eyes firmly on the pair’s backs. Rider smiled as she watched Sakura and Shirou working together. Sakura took instruction without a word of complaint, but her eyes lit up every time Shirou reached over to show her how to do something, their hands occasionally brushing against one another when they reached for the same utensil. “I can’t tell if Shirou is the smoothest operator
since Zeus, or if he’s just that nice and that oblivious at the same time.” Rider sighed as the smell of a perfectly cooked meal drifted to her nose. She was extremely glad that Shirou couldn’t hear her as her stomach rumbled. “I wonder if it tastes as good as it smells…”

Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the infamous tiger of Fuyuki. “Shirou! I’m here for breakfast!”

“Good morning Fuji-nee,” Shirou said, leaning back to see Taiga pulling her shoes off at the door.

“Good morning Sakura,” Taiga said as she took her usual spot at the table. Her eyes narrowed and she looked between the two teens in the kitchen. “Shirou’s been behaving right?”

Sakura blushed bright red and Rider could almost see the steam pouring out of her ears. “Senpai has been a perfect gentleman,” she almost squeaked.

Shirou dope slapped Taiga as he set breakfast out on the table. “Don’t make bad jokes like that,” he said. “You’re embarrassing Sakura.”

Taiga pouted as she took her bowl. “Hey! As your guardian, I allowed you and Sakura to share a house, but it’s my duty to make sure that nothing sketchy happens while you’re under my watch.”

“It’s not anything like that Fuji-nee, and you know it.” Shirou set the rest of the food down on the table and took a seat. “Come on Sakura, let’s eat.”

Sakura’s brain finally rebooted and she quickly took her seat. “Right. Thank you for the food.”

“Thanks for the food,” Taiga repeated eagerly before she dug in to her food like a wild animal.

“Be careful that you don’t choke,” Shirou said as he ate at a much more sensible pace.

“I’ll be fine,” Taiga said. She shoved a large bite of omelet in to her mouth and immediately began coughing. Rider giggled silently at the matching sweat drops on Shirou and Sakura’s faces.

“I warned you,” Shirou said, offering her a cup of tea to wash it down.

Taiga downed the entire cup in one go and took a deep breath. “Don’t be mean Shirou,” she said. “I have to eat quickly. Otherwise, I don’t have time to finish the delicious breakfast Shirou made before I have to go to school.”

“Speaking of which,” Sakura said, her face the picture of innocence. “Don’t you need to go if you’re going to get there on time, Fujimura-sensei?”

Taiga looked at the clock and jumped to her feet. “Ah! I’m going to be late!” She grabbed her bowl and finished her food in a matter of seconds before she rushed to the door, jamming her shoes on and racing outside. The teens heard the sound of her scooter starting up. “I’ll see you at school!”

Shirou sighed. “Fuji-nee never changes…” He picked up the dirty dishes and carried them over to the sink.

“Oh, let me help you with that senpai.” Sakura picked up the rest of their dishes and joined him in the kitchen.

Shirou smiled at her. “Thanks Sakura, you’re a big help.”

Sakura didn’t say anything, but a small smile played across her lips as she set the dishes in the sink. “I’m happy to help senpai. I’ll dry while you wash.”
“The stock room is sorted!” Shirou called out. “I’m heading home, alright?”

“Sure, no problem,” Otoko said. “Just be careful out. There have been some weird things going on the last couple of days.”

Shirou frowned, looking out the front door. “What do you mean?”

“You know,” she continued. “Ghost story type of stuff. Like there’s been this story of a ghost girl wandering around town with a demon guarding her.”

Shirou laughed. “You don’t seriously believe stories like that, do you?”

“Not usually, but I saw something kind of weird last night. A woman dressed like a ninja jumping around like she was in an anime.”

Shirou just gave her a blank look. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Otoko said, rubbing the back of her head. “Just watch out going home, okay? It’s probably just a bunch of crazy cosplayers or something, but I wouldn’t want my best worker to get mugged on his way home.”

“I’ll be careful, I promise.” Shirou zipped up his jacket and shut the door behind him with a last wave. He absently rubbed his hands together, trying to ward off the winter chill as he walked home. “I wonder what Sakura has planned for dinner tonight.” Part of him felt bad about letting Sakura do the cooking on her own, but it was kind of nice to think about having a warm dinner at home waiting for him.

Suddenly, a chill ran down his spine. His eyes shot up and his breath caught on his lips. Standing just up the hill from him was a girl. Her skin was pale as snow with hair to match and her blood red eyes stared down at him. He felt sweat form on the back of his neck despite the chill of the night. He froze as the girl started to walk down the hill toward him. “I’ve been waiting to see you,” the girl said. “Onii-chan.”

Shirou shivered. “Who… who are you?”

The girl ignored his question. “Mama told me so much about you. I’m so glad that I finally met you.”

“I think you might have me confused with someone else…” Shirou said.

The girl pouted. “I know exactly who you are, Shirou Emiya.” She giggled softly as she walked past him. “You need to summon her soon, or you’ll be in big trouble onii-chan.”

“What?” Shirou was beginning to worry that this girl was a bit out of her mind.

“Obaa-san and I will see you tomorrow onii-chan. Just make sure that you’re ready next time I see you, otherwise I’m going to be mad at you.” With that, the girl skipped off, leaving Shirou very, very confused.

“The hell just happened,” he muttered to himself.

Ilya was all smiles when she made it back to the Einzbern castle. “Good evening mistress,” Leysritt
“said as the silver haired girl walked in. “Did you enjoy your walk?”

“Please don’t go out on your own mistress,” Sella added, joining her doppelganger. “You know that it’s dangerous to go out on your own. If you must go in to the city, at least take Berserker with you.”

“Didn’t wanna,” Ilya said stubbornly. “I can go out walking on my own. Mama taught me all of her tricks! No one could possibly sneak up on me, much less hurt me, and if a Servant attacked, I have my command seals to call Berserker. Besides, I wanted to see onii-chan on my own once.”

“Oh, did you find him Ilya?” Everyone in the entryway looked up to see Berserker descending the stairs from the second floor. “I thought we were going to go visit him together.”

“Sorry Obaa-san,” Ilya said, looking a little ashamed. “But meeting onii-chan for the first time is special. I wanted it to just be the two of us.”

“It’s alright,” Berserker said. “Was he happy to see you?”

“I don’t think he recognized me at first,” Ilya said, sounding a little put out. “But he was super cool, just like mama always said. I tried to play it cool and gave him some advice, but I don’t know if he listened. I didn’t sense much mana on him though, or see any command seals though. He needs to hurry up and summon a Servant if we’re going to team up and dominate the Holy Grail War!”

“I’m sure he’ll summon his Servant in due time,” Berserker said, placing a hand on Ilya’s shoulder. “If not, we can show him how it’s done properly.”

Ilya smiled. “You’re right. If onii-chan can’t do it on his own, we’ll make sure to help him. I told him we’ll see him tomorrow, so we’ll just have to tell him then.”

“Of course,” Berserker said. “Now, you need a bath if you’ve been out all day, you need to get cleaned up before bed.”

“I’ll draw you a bath mistress,” Leysritt said. “Please wait just a moment.”

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Ilya sank down in to the warm water. “Ah, this is so nice.” She leaned back and closed her eyes, soaking in the luxurious tub. Her eyes snapped open as there was a knock on the door.

“Can I come in Ilya?” Berserker’s voice said from outside.

“Oh, of course. Come right in.”

The door slid open and Berserker walked in, wrapped in only a towel. Her generous bust nearly spilled over the top and it was barely long enough to hide the important bits. “I hope you don’t mind if I join you.”

“Of course not,” Ilya said. “The bath here is huge.”

Berserker smiled and let the towel drop then stepped in to the warm water. “Ah, that’s wonderful. Heated baths were such a pain back in my day. Modern plumbing is so much more convenient.” She scooped up some water and poured it over her body, letting it run down her pale skin. Ilya frowned, staring at Berserker for several long moments. Berserker cocked her head curiously.

“Something wrong dear?”

“It’s not fair,” Ilya said. “How did you get your breasts so big? I haven’t grown in six years.”
A hand came up to Berserker’s mouth and she fought down a giggle. “I wasn’t busty in my life,” she said. “But I suppose those sort of things come with time.”

“But I’ve had tons of time!” Ilya crossed her arms and slumped back in the water. “Stupid grandpa, messing up my body…”

Berserker fought her urges for a moment then decided not to bother. “You know, I’ve heard something interesting…” she said, licking her lips. “If you let someone massage your breasts, they’ll grow faster.”

Ilya’s eyes narrowed. “Have you been watching anime while I was out?”

Berserker laughed and tried to look innocent. “What makes you think I would watch something like that?”

“Because that’s silly,” Ilya said. “You’re just trying to get me to let you do naughty things.”

“Oh dear, I didn’t mean anything like that,” Berserker said. “I just wanted to help you feel better about yourself.”

Ilya smirked. “Well, I might let you rub my breasts… if you let me play with yours too.”

Berserker blushed, but her eyes lit up. “Oh my. Of course you can.”

Ilya grinned like a cat and pounced.
“Hey Emiya!”

Shirou looked up at the familiar voice. “Hey, Mitsuzuri. How are you today?”

“Good,” the club captain said. “I wanted to ask you a favor.”

“I can’t come back to the club right now Ayako. Sorry, but I really don’t have time right now.”

Ayako visibly deflated. “Oh come on. At least come by and watch us practice. Maybe give the newbies a few pointers.”

Shirou sighed at the look on her face. “Well, I don’t have work today, but…”

“If you’re worried about Shinji, don’t. He’s not even at school today. I already checked.” Ayako grinned, crossing her hands behind her head. “And good riddance to him too.”

“You shouldn’t talk about other people like that,” Shirou said half-heartedly.

Ayako scowled. “I know he kind of used to be your friend, but he’s been nothing but a complete pain in my ass for months. I keep losing freshmen because of his attitude and then he acts like hot shit. If it keeps up like this, we’re going to get shut down by the time I graduate.”

“Alright, alright,” Shirou gave in. “I’ll come by after class, but I can’t promise how long I’ll stay.”

Ayako grinned, and pumped her fist. “Yeah! I thought I might have to play the ‘Sakura would appreciate it card’ before I’d get you to say yes.”

Shirou felt a sweat drop form on his forehead. “It’s really not like that,” he said, a little too quickly. “I’m just coming by to help a friend.”

“Surrrreee you are.” Ayako sighed and turned on her heel. “Man, Sakura’s so lucky. She beat me and Rin without even trying.”

Shirou’s face went bright red. “It’s definitely not like that!”

Ayako just laughed as she ran off.

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“You’re too tense,” Shirou said as he adjusted the posture of one of the freshmen. “You’ll never hit the target if you’re wound up like that. Take a deep breath and let yourself relax. Then let yourself focus on the target and the arrow. If you’re trying too hard, it won’t work.”

The girl, who barely came up to his shoulders, blushed rosily as he moved her hands. “Y-yes sempai.” She swallowed hard and looked down range, focusing on the target and letting her shoulders loosen up a bit.

Off to one side, Ayako leaned against the wall. “The hell…” she muttered. “He shows up once and suddenly he’s super popular.” She sighed and took a drink from a water bottle. “If it was anyone other than Shirou, I’d think he was trying to be suave.”

“Shirou just likes helping people,” Sakura said, setting her bow aside and wiping her forehead
“Yeah. But you might to watch out. Otherwise half the club might decide they want a piece.”

Sakura blushed bright red. “I’m not…”

“Sakura, everyone with a fraction of a brain can tell what you think about Shirou,” Ayako said with a flat voice. “Shinji can tell how you feel about Shirou. And you’re living with him now too…”

Sakura looked like she was starting to overheat. “H-how did you know about that?”

“Miss Fujimura was complaining about it yesterday when she came in to check on the club.” Ayako resealed her bottle and tucked it in her bag. She shook her head at Sakura’s expression. “Relax, I’m not going to tell anyone else. It’s your business if you and Shirou are having a thing. Or if there’s something up at home or whatever.”

“Thank you Mitsuzuri,” Sakura said, bowing her head.

“No need to thank me,” Ayako said. She glanced down at her phone. “And I think it’s time to wrap things up anyway.” She stood up and cupped her hands around her mouth. “Alright everyone! That’s it for today! Let’s get cleaned up so we can all head home!”

Shirou let the rest of the students go as he walked over to the pair. “Sorry, I guess I got a little carried away. I hope I wasn’t being a bother to anyone.”

“Nah, you were great. You know, if you hung around more often, I bet we’d get way more people to come in and take a look.”

“I don’t really have time to come around too often,” Shirou said, absently rubbing the back of his head. “And I don’t want to be a bother.”

“Trust me, you’re the furthest thing from a bother. Hey, could you do me one more favor?”

Shirou shrugged. “Sure, what do you need?”

“Well… since Shinji skipped out again, I kind of need someone to help clean the dojo now that things are done.”

Shirou sighed. “Did you ask me to come today just for this?”

“Now why would you think that?” Ayako grinned. “I just need a little help.”

Shirou’s shoulders slumped. “Alright. I’ll get the dojo cleaned.”

“Thanks! You’re the best Emiya.” Ayako patted him on the shoulder and grabbed her bag.

“Mitsuzuri means well,” Sakura said. “I’ll be waiting for you at home. And I’ll try to have dinner started when you get back.”

Shirou smiled at the purple haired girl. “Thanks Sakura, you’re the best.”

Sakura blushed and quickly left with a hint of a smile on her face.

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Rin didn’t want to admit it, but she was bored. In theory, scouting the city for enemies and looking gently.
for potential threats was a good plan. In practice, all she’d managed to do was introduce her servant to the concept of a shopping district. “I must not waste my command seals stopping my servant from spending my money. I must not waste my command seals stopping my servant from spending my money.” The rather… loud woman had happily spent more than an hour looking through clothing stores before Rin had managed to get her back on task. At least they’d made it back around to the school.

“There’s something wrong,” Archer said, looking up at the sky. “The stars are in a bad position tonight. We’re in for trouble.” A grin split the Servant’s face from ear to ear. “Tonight is going to be fun~”

Rin fought the urge to face palm. “We’re about to fight in a war. How are you happy about this?”

“A battle between the greatest warriors in history… Why would I not be excited?” Her hands drifted down to the matching flintlocks on her hips and her fingers twitched. Her eyes darted out over the field. “Tell me, are you excited too?”

Rin followed her Servant’s gaze, her eyes rising up to the roof of the school. A woman was standing on the roof, a dark silhouette against the moon. “Oh, I guess I didn’t hide myself that well, did I?” Rin could feel her now. A shiver ran down her spine as the other Servant calmly jumped down, landing lightly on the ground. She wasn’t very intimidating looking. Her body was rather slender and she wasn’t wearing more than tight leather armor. But her entire presence radiated power and she absently twirled a blood red spear in on hand.

“If you wanted to hide, I bet you would have,” Archer said, smoothly drawing one of her guns and leveling it at the black clad woman. “No, you’re here to play. Lancer, am I right?”

The cloth covering Lancer’s mouth twitched and Rin realized that she was smiling. “You are. And I think you’re… hmmm, I’m not certain. You feel a bit like a Rider, but the way you hold that gun makes me think you prefer to fight at range, so perhaps an Archer.”

“Oh, you’re a clever one.” Archer cocked her pistol. “Well, shall we play a little then?”

Rin barely had time to blink before both Servants exploded in to action. Lancer burst forward, her spear aimed straight for Archer’s chest. The red clad Servant leaned to the side, letting the thrust pass her by. She smacked the shaft aside with one hand and brought her pistol up, firing at Lancer’s chest with two quick shots. Lancer vanished moving faster than a human eye could follow as she dodged the lead balls. “Good, good,” she purred. “You’re not going to be as easy as you look.”

Archer laughed. “I’m plenty easy. You’re just not my type.” She drew her other gun and fired a barrage, though Lancer ducked under the shots with ease. Rin covered her ears as the flintlocks rang out again and again, forcing the Lancer to keep her distance and move to avoid the storm of lead.

“I’m hurt,” Lancer said. “Maybe I should try a little harder. You might be more impressed.” Archer just grinned and leapt up as Lancer charged in under her next shot and buried her spear in the ground where Archer had been standing a moment before.

“Darn, thought I
might have had you there.”

“What just happened?” Rin asked.

“I’d like to know that as well,” Bazett’s voice whispered in Lancer’s ear.

“Just a little trick I picked up,” Archer said. “Not every bullet that misses has to be a waste.”

“You knew that I’d dodge your shots, so you aimed them to ricochet off something behind me. The sports equipment I’m guessing. Then aim to come back at me when I tried to take the easy shot at you in the air when you couldn’t dodge properly.”

“You read me that fast, huh? You are a quick one.”

Lancer calmly adjusted her stance, one hand sliding down the shaft of the spear and coming to a rest just below the head. “I think that’s enough sparring. Let’s get a little serious.” A red glow began to form around her body.

Archer leveled both of her guns as mist began to form around her body. Rin could smell salt in the air. It reminded her of the sea somehow. She wisely decided to hide behind the corner of the building rather than stay anywhere near the potential blast radius.

*clink*

Suddenly, everything stopped and both Servants looked to see a human shaped shadow running for its life around the far end of the building.

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Shirou ran like his life depended on it. Which it most likely did. He had no idea who those crazy women were, but the way they moved was impossible for a normal human. They had to be mages of some kind. Or spirits. Something like that. All he knew was that they definitely wouldn’t appreciate someone spying on their fight. He just had to hope that they wouldn’t catch up with him fast enough.

“Hello there.”

Son of a bitch.

“Sorry about this kid.” The woman in black appeared out of nowhere in front of him. “But my master’s kind of strict about this whole magic staying secret thing. Don’t worry, I’m not a cruel person. I’ll make sure that it doesn’t hurt.”

Shirou felt his blood run cold. Was he going to die here, without ever having done anything with his life? He… he couldn’t die yet. “No!” He turned on his heel and ran, rounding a corner and diving through a door in to the nearest classroom. He ducked behind a desk, hoping that she’d overlook him when she passed by.

“Nice try,” the woman said as she walked in. “But you’re hardly the hardest to track person I’ve ever had to hunt down.” She spun her spear around. “Just hold still and it will be quick.”

Shirou grabbed the legs of the desk and swung it down, putting it between his body and the spear. He felt fire surge through his arms as he forced a magic circuit in to being and pushed the power in to the desk. The woman’s eyes widened slightly as the spear glanced off the reinforced material, taking a large chuck of wood with it. Shirou lifted the desk and hurled it at the woman. She raised an arm
to block it, forcing her to break eye contact for long enough for Shirou to rush out the opposite door.

“Shit.” Lancer reached up and touched one ear. “Hey boss. The kid kind of might be a magus.”

“What?”

“Yeah, he used a reinforced table to block and attack from me.”

“A reinforced table stopped you?”

“Hey, it’s not like I was trying that hard. I didn’t expect him to actually be able to fight back at all. So, what do you want me to do now?”

There was no reply for a minute. “Could he be a master?”

“No clue. I wasn’t really paying that much attention. Since he didn’t call his Servant to defend himself, he’s either not a master or he hasn’t summoned a Servant yet.”

“Follow him. If he turns out to be a master, take him and his Servant down. If not, we’ll be able to keep an eye on him. Just in case.”

“Got it.”

Just then, the door behind her slammed open. “Where are they?!”

“Hello to you too Miss Master,” Lancer said. “You look a bit winded.”

“Not now,” Rin snapped. “I’m not going to let you murder someone on my territory.”

“Oh, your territory. Good to know.”

“Shut up.” Rin looked around the room. “He’s not here. Then he must have gotten away from you.”

“Yeah, the kid managed to surprise me with an interesting reinforcement trick and the boss called me off.”

Rin went stiff. “They were a mage?”

Lancer raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t know there was another mage in town. Not very impressive for it being your territory.”

“Who were they?”

“Uh, you might not want to stand that close to the enemy Servant,” Archer said from behind her. Lancer blinked as she realized that Rin was getting rather uncomfortably close to her. “Just a thought.”

“Nah, I’m not going to hurt your master tonight. That little interruption killed all the fun.” She swung her spear up over her shoulder. “Call it a draw and try again some other time?”

Archer grinned. “Mmmm, alright. Next time I’ll make sure that you don’t finish early.”

Rin groaned and rubbed her temple. “Who were they?” she repeated, annoyance creeping in to her voice.
“I have no idea. Some red haired guy.” Lancer shrugged. “Not really my problem right now. I’m heading back.” With that, she faded in to astral form and vanished.

Rin stared at the air for a moment. “Red hair… it can’t be…” She suddenly looked up. “We need to hurry. I think I know who it was.”
Shirou didn’t bother to hide his panic as he raced home. After all, someone had just tried to murder him. They had to be mages, and ones that were *much* better than he was. He had to get home before they tried to follow him. For the first time, he began to wish that his father had installed a few more defenses in the house’s Bounded Field. He rounded the last corner to his street and stopped to catch his breath, leaning against the outside wall of the house before he pushed himself forward and the gate slide open. “Good evening Shirou.”

Sakura. The purple haired girl was standing in the kitchen, leaning back so she could see Shirou at the door. Shirou went a little pale. He’d been so panicked that he’d completely forgotten that she was here. “Oh no…”

“Is something wrong Senpai?” Sakura asked.

“No, nothing’s wrong,” Shirou said a little too quickly. Crap, if they managed to follow him home, she’d be in danger.

“You look flushed.” Sakura set aside her spoon and walked over to him, absently pulling off her oven mitts and pressing her hand to his forehead.

“You don’t have to worry about me.”

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“There’s only one other person in the house as far as I can tell,” Lancer projected to her master. She crouched on the opposing rooftop, watching the boy in the doorway. “A girl. Maybe a sister, but she doesn’t look all that much like the kid. Girlfriend maybe. Or a fiancé.”

“He seemed a little young for that,” Bazett replied dryly. “But you never know with magus families. If they’re an established family, that increases the chance that there’s a Master in the house. Any sign it’s her?”

Lancer kept her eyes on the boy as the girl came to greet him at the door. “I’m not… wait. Yes. I can see something on the back of her left hand. Might be an injury or a tattoo, but that would be a hell of a coincidence.”

“If you’re wrong, we can apologize later. Confirm it. If she’s not, we’ll keep an eye on them from a distance from here on out. If she is, try to convince her to give up her command seals. If she won’t, either take her command seals or deal with her.”

“Her Servant is going to intervene if I show my face.”

“I doubt that will stop you.”

“You are correct, but we’re in a residential neighborhood.”

There was a moment of silence. “If things look like they’re going to attract too much attention, withdraw. We know where they live and their faces. That’s a good advantage, even if we can’t take them out of the game now. And try to keep the fight restricted to the property if you can.”

“Understood. I’m going in.”
“Nice place you got here.” Shirou went pale as he spun around to see the woman in black behind him, spear held loosely in one hand. “Big and fancy, but it’s got class.”

“Sakura, get back.” Shirou pushed her behind him. Maybe she’d be satisfied just taking him.

“Actually…” The woman vanished in a flicker and appeared in the middle of the room behind them. “She’s the one I need to talk to.” She grabbed Sakura’s arm, pulling her hand up to look at it. “Yeah… that’s what I thought.”

“Let go of her!” Shirou didn’t think, he just acted. Sakura was in danger right in front of him. This was no time for thinking things through. He grabbed an umbrella from the stand by the door and sent his mana flooding through it. His body burned as he forced the reinforcement through the thin metal shaft and he slammed it down on to the woman’s shoulder. Where it immediately shattered like glass.

The woman laughed. “You have guts. Not a lot of brains, but guts. I can respect that.” She knocked Shirou’s legs out from under him with the haft of her spear and released Sakura. “And you… you’re really not ready for this. This place is completely open to anyone who knows where to look for you and I got close enough to watch you at the front door before the alarm went off. Give up the command spell while you’ve got the chance and we can all walk away from this in one piece.”

“Command spell… what…” Shirou rolled over and tried to get back on his feet but the woman rapped him on the back with the haft again and he hit the ground hard.

Suddenly, a chain shot out of thin air, wrapping smoothly around the woman’s wrist. She had a moment to realize what was happening before she went flying through the air and smashed through the unfortunate back door of the kitchen and out into the yard. Shirou’s eyes widened as another woman materialized in his kitchen. She was tall, slim, and pale. A blush bloomed on his face despite his best efforts. Her clothing was very revealing, with her shoulders and bust completely exposed. From his position lying on the floor, Shirou had to hastily avert his eyes before he caught a glimpse of some very personal places under her tiny dress. “Sakura, run!”

Shirou snapped out of his daze as the woman spoke and Sakura reached a hand down to help him to his feet. “Who is that?!”

“I’ll explain later,” Sakura said. “We need to go.”

“Oh, interesting,” the woman in black said as she got to her feet. “I get two good fights in one day. Looks like today’s my lucky day~” She grinned savagely as she slid in to a fighting stance and charged. The purple haired woman intercepted the first thrust with some kind of chain dagger, turning the blow aside with a twist of her hands.

“Now!” she shouted before she counter attacked, stabbing at the woman’s side with one end of her odd weapon. “You need to get her to safety.”

That snapped Shirou out of his stupor. “Right.” He grabbed Sakura and tried to run for the door, only for the woman in black to dash straight past her opponent and block their way.

“Not going to be that easy. For what good it does, I am sorry about doing this the hard way.”

“Rider!”
The purple-haired woman, Rider, leaped past and intercepted the woman in black again. “Stop standing around and go!”

Shirou grabbed Sakura and ran the other direction, half dragging Sakura as they rushed down the hallway away from the brawl, slamming the door behind them. Behind them, Shirou’s dining room table suffered the force of Rider’s body being hurled through it. “She’s actually going to kill us…” Shirou gasped. He heard another smash as the spear woman obliterated the door between them.

The woman spun and jumped to the side, leaping out in to the yard as Rider followed her. “You’re pretty good. I guess that I’m going to have to take care of you then make sure I get the girl’s seals before I leave.”

“You can try Lancer,” Rider said. “But I will not die easily.”

“Good. Easy fights are no fun.” She lunged again, this time managing to move fast enough to cut across Rider’s upper arm before she could defend herself. Rider growled and retaliated, the ring of steel on steel echoing through the air.

Shirou threw himself in front of Sakura and pushed her against the wall as Rider slammed through the window, sending glass shards raining all over the hallway before she charged back through his house’s brand new hole and attacked the spear wielder again. “Crap.” He completely missed Sakura’s blush as his body shielded hers, pressing again her tightly. “We need to get to the back gate. But the back gate is through… that.” He bit his lip, trying to think of the best way around. “Come on. We’ll go out past the bedrooms.”

“Bedroom…” Sakura murmured before she shook herself and recovered a little. “Right.” They both ran down the hall and Shirou threw the door open, letting Sakura run ahead before another window fell victim to Rider being thrown through it.

Shirou peeked out the door, seeing Lancer heading back toward the broken wall before he gesture for Sakura to follow. “This way. We just have to go past the shed…” He took Sakura’s hand and they both bolted across the open ground. To their credit, they made it half way before the inevitable happened.

“You two are pretty sneaky.” Shirou cursed under his breath as Lancer emerged from one of the destroyed rooms of his formerly nice house. “But I’m afraid I can’t let you do that.” She launched herself forward, spear aimed straight for Sakura. Shirou grabbed her and tackled her back, sending them both tumbling into the shed as Rider charged to defend her master again. Just then, Lancer spun the spear one-hundred and eighty degrees and stabbed through Rider’s side. “You got careless and too focused on defending your master to block properly.”

“Rider! No!”

Shirou felt his heart hammering in his chest at Sakura’s anguished cry. He rolled sideways off of Sakura and looked at the crimson stain coloring Rider’s left side. Damn it. He had to do something. She was right in front of him. He couldn’t be helpless to protect someone now. How could he be a hero if he couldn’t help one person? He needed… he needed power. He needed to be stronger. He needed something to help him protect everyone.

The magic circle on the floor beneath him, long forgotten beneath a layer of dust and dirt, began to glow.
Chapter 9

Blue light erupted from the circle, forcing Shirou to try to shield his eyes from the glare. From the center of the circle, a figure began to rise up. His eyes widened and he felt a lump form in his throat as he stared. It was a woman, clad in shining silver armor and a swirling blue dress. Her hand clutched something that he couldn’t quite see, but something in the back of his mind instinctively told him that it was a weapon. Her eyes snapped open and she looked down at him with deep blue eyes. “I am Servant Saber,” she said. “So I ask you, are you worthy to be my Master?”

Shirou stared open mouthed at the blonde woman, his voice caught in his throat. “Your… master…”

“It is by your summons that I am here,” Saber said. “Our fates are now bound as one. And my sword shall be yours to command. Now, what orders do you wish of me?”

Sakura shrank behind Shirou, glaring at the blonde over his shoulder. “Senpai… she’s here to help.”

Shirou snapped out of it as he felt a burning on the back of his hand and he looked down to see a strange red mark carving itself in to his flesh. “What is this?”

The sound of steel on steel outside caught all of their attention and Saber spun on her heel. “I see. I will deal with these interlopers immediately. Please stay back master.”

“Wait!” Saber ignored him, leaping through the doors faster than his eyes could follow. There was a visible shockwave as she collided with Lancer, her unseen blade clashing with Lancer’s bloody spear.

“Another one?” Lancer scowled and lashed out. The two servants exchanged three blows in an instant, their weapons ringing out as each blow was turned aside without either gaining the upper hand. “Two Servants in one house… interesting. Alright, I can handle these odds.”

“You’re very confident,” Saber said evenly. “Perhaps even arrogant.” She charged forward, her blade clashing with Lancer’s spear again.

“I feel like I’ve earned a little arrogance,” Lancer replied smoothly. She jumped to avoid one of Rider’s daggers coming straight for her side and kicked of Saber’s blade, clearing some distance between herself and the two others. “So, you must be Saber. That’s an interesting sword you have there.”

Saber took advantage of the space to attack Rider, forcing the purple haired servant to try to hold off the blade with one of her daggers before they both disengaged, sliding backwards and studying each other. “Perhaps. It could also be a dagger, or an axe, or even a spear.”

Lancer laughed. “Nah, it’s a sword. You fight like a swordsman, and a pretty good one. Not enough thrusting to be a spear and your style doesn’t fit an axe. It’s nice to see someone with a normal weapon.”

Saber’s eyes narrowed slightly. “I would hardly call any weapon in this contest normal.” She flashed forward, forcing Lancer to deflect her strikes with a few quite thrusts. The corner of her mouth turned up as Lancer took her first injury, a small cut across her forearm.

“Oh, you know what I mean,” Lancer said, not even slightly fazed by the injury. “Blindfold over there is using twin daggers chained together. Unusual weapons make for an interesting challenge, but sometimes you just want an old fashion duel.”
“I’ll be sure to indulge you before your death then.”

Lancer laughed. “Wow, you are taking this seriously. Alright then.” She shifted her stance, one hand sliding up her spear and her posture had her low to the ground. “Let’s stop playing around then.”

“Enough. We’re at a disadvantage and you’ve already had two fights today. Pull back and we’ll work out a plan to deal with them.”

Lancer groaned. “Really? Fine. I want a proper fight with her later though. I can tell that she’s going to be fun.” Aloud, she just sighed. “Well, it looks like my master’s putting a stop to this little scuffle. So we’ll have to finish this up some other time.” She stood and spun her spear, letting it lean over her shoulder. Then she disappeared in to her astral form.

Saber scowled as the black clad servant retreated. “Are you going to retreat as well?” she said, turning to Rider. “Or do you intend to continue fighting with that injury?”

One of Rider’s hands, pressed against her still injured side. “I can’t withdraw.”

Saber calmly adjusted her stance. “So be it.”

“Wait!” Shirou finally found his voice again. “She’s not your enemy.”

“Master, she’s an enemy Servant!”

“Who saved my life before I summoned you! I won’t watch you two try to kill each other.”

“But…” She hesitated then her shoulders slumped. “Very well. But don’t think that I’m not watching you. I…” She trailed off and both servants turned toward the front of the house. “There’s another one? I’ll deal with this quickly. If she attempts something, do not be afraid to call me back.”

“What are…” That was all Shirou got out before Saber leapt over the front wall. “Damn it! What the hell is going on tonight?!” He grabbed Sakura’s hand and half dragged her behind him as he rushed after the strange woman in blue. They reached the front gate just in time to see Saber attempting to cut a rather… well-endowed woman in red in half. “No! Stop right now!”

The back of his hand glowed and part of the strange symbol faded away. Saber froze in place, her sword caught in mid-swing. “Master! This is an enemy. You can’t seriously…”

“Hey, we just came here looking for Lancer,” the woman in red snapped. “You might have seen her. Tall, black ninja suit, big fucking spear.”

“Well, isn’t this interesting.” Shirou blinked as he realized that there was someone else behind the woman in red.

“Aren’t you…”

“Good evening Emiya,” Rin Tohsaka said, a rather unconvincing smile on her face. “Sakura.”

“Wait, aren’t you…”

“Rin Tohsaka,” Sakura said softly. “So you’re also a master.”

Rin’s eye twitched ever so slightly. “Both of you? I see. So you are a magus after all.”

“I… wait, does that mean that you’re also…” Shirou could feel a painful throbbing building up in
his forehead. The last twenty minutes of his life had long since stopped making any sort of sense, even for a magus.

“Yes. There’s no reason to hide it, seeing as we’re all the same.”

Something about that sentence nagged at Shirou. “We’re all…” He turned to Sakura, but the guilty look on her face answered his question before he even asked. “I think I need to sit down.”

“You have absolutely no idea what’s going on do you? Shall we go talk inside then?” Rin asked with her smile unnaturally stiff. Without waiting for Shirou to actually reply, she turned and walked right past him to the entrance to his house.

“What?”

Rin cocked her head slightly. “Really, I didn’t think you were this thick. It’s fine to be surprised when something unexpected happens, but you really should learn to roll with it. Otherwise, you might end up dead.”

“Did I do something to make her angry?” Shirou decided to stop thinking about it and followed Rin inside, with Sakura, Saber, and Rin’s servant following closely behind.

Shirou poured tea for everyone in his newly repaired living room, trying very hard to pretend that it wasn’t likely to get wrecked again the instant someone said the wrong thing. The tension around the table was almost visible. Rin and her Servant, Archer if he remembered correctly, were sitting on one side while Sakura and Rider were sitting on the other, Rider’s side still marred with a very visible blood stain. Saber sat between the two groups, one hand on what Shirou assumed was the hilt of her sword. “Should you have that looked at?” he asked as he set the tray of cups in the middle of the table.

“I will return to my astral form to heal once I’m certain that Sakura is not in danger from anyone here.” Rider looked pointedly at Archer and Saber.

“It’s cold in here,” Rin commented, trying to change the subject. “I’m guessing the hole in the wall is from that annoying Lancer.” She picked up the tea cup, absently letting the warmth soak in to her hands before taking a sip. “Why don’t you fix it?”

“Ah, sorry,” Shirou said, sitting down directly across from Saber. “I don’t really know how to do that kind of magic.”

One of Rin’s eyes twitched. “I see… you’re something of an amateur, aren’t you Emiya?” She snapped her fingers and wooden splinters and glass shards leapt in to the air and put themselves back together.

Shirou managed to keep his mouth from dropping open. “Wow, that’s incredible Tohsaka. You must be a top class magus.”

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“This is easy,” Rin said dismissively. “Really, how bad are you if a simple repair spell is beyond your abilities?”

Shirou chuckled awkwardly. “Uh, I’m only really good at Reinforcement and Projection magic. Anything else just doesn’t work for me.”

Both girls looked at him, dumbstruck. “Really Senpai?” Sakura asked. “I didn’t realize you were
having so much trouble…”

“This complete novice is the one who summoned the most powerful Servant,” Rin muttered, a dark cloud forming over her head as she slumped forward. “Why me?”

“Err… what exactly is a Servant?” Shirou finally asked.

Rin’s head slammed against the table hard enough to shake their tea cups. “I don’t deserve this…” she muttered. Shirou could tell that Archer was trying very hard not to laugh as she hurriedly covered her mouth and gave a rather unladylike snort. “Okay, you know absolutely nothing, right?”

“Well, they’re clearly not ordinary humans. I’d have to guess that they’re something closer to a familiar, but I know I can’t create familiars properly so…” He shrugged.

“They’re only loosely related to familiars,” Sakura said. “Servants are spirits called to take part in the Holy Grail War.”

“The what now?”

“The Holy Grail War is a competition between magi,” Rin interjected. “Where the spirits of ancient heroes are summoned to do battle over the greatest prize in existence, the Holy Grail.”

Shirou absently rubbed the back of his head. “That’s a Christian thing, right?”

Rin sighed. “In mythology, yes. This isn’t necessarily the Holy Grail of legend though. It’s a vessel that holds the spiritual energy of the heroes summoned. Once each is defeated, they’re sent in to the Grail where they wait until only one Servant remains. When there’s only one remaining, the Grail manifests and the remaining Master can wish for anything that they desire.”

Shirou’s eyes widened slightly. “So… it can give you anything?”

“Pretty much. I know someone who can explain it a little better, but…” Rin groaned. “I really don’t want to talk to him right now.”

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“Rin, I didn’t expect to see you so late,” Kirei Kotomine said with one of his patented insincere smiles. “Don’t you have school tomorrow?”

“Cut the act fake priest,” Rin replied. “I’m here with the last Masters so we can finally get this thing started.”

“Truly? Then I suppose we should make this short and simple then.” He looked past his ward and toward the group gathered around the door. One was rather obviously the Matou heir. She’d vanished off the face of the earth, along with most of her family, a few days ago. She must have been hiding out until things got started. Though he would have thought Zouken would have tried something by now… Perhaps he should send Bazett, or even Caren, to check on what the old fossil was doing. The second was clearly a Servant. Even under the abomination of a raincoat she was wearing, he could see incredibly fine, if a bit archaic, armor and a blue dress. Ah, yes he remembered this one. That would make the last one… He fought the urge to smile at the red haired young man who was giving him a glare.

“My name is Shirou Emiya,” the boy said. “Apparently, I’m the Master of Saber. You’re Rin’s… friend?”
“I am her legal guardian, technically,” Kirei said with a dismissive wave. “But she’s rather independent. Most of the time, I am the priest at this church, but I also serve as the overseer of the Holy Grail War, just as my father was ten years ago, and a member of the church has been since the first War two hundred years ago.”

“Wait, this happens every ten years?” Shirou’s eyes narrowed. “Does that mean…”

“Actually, it happens every fifty years,” Kirei corrected. “But the events that ended the last War have resulted in the timeline of this conflict being accelerated.”

“The events…” Shirou’s eyes widened and he trembled slightly.

“Yes.” Kirei smiled a small, almost unnoticeable smirk. “A black hearted Master by the name of Kiritsugu Emiya lay claim to the Holy Grail and with its power laid waste to the surrounding land, leading to the event known as the Great Fuyuki Fire.”

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“I’m going to skin him alive!” Irisviel screamed. Kiritsugu pulled out a cigarette and just lit up, letting his wife get it out of her system.

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“That’s awful,” Shirou said. His voice was flat, but Kirei fought the urge to smile at the boy’s obvious discomfort.

“Kirei~” And there went that good mood. “What are you doing at two in the morning I need my…” Caren stepped out of the door to the rest of the building, wearing only a rather short night gown and absently rubbing her eyes. She blinked in surprise when she saw their guests. “Oh my~ It looks like we have some interesting visitors.”

“What the…” Rin recoiled slightly at the woman. “So much for a vow of celibacy, huh fake priest?”

“This is Caren Hortensia, a nun from the church here to serve as my assistant,” Kirei interjected before Caren could say something unfortunate. “Considering the fate of the last Overseer, it was decided that I should have a little help.”

“I see…” Rin stared at the girl suspiciously. “I’m Rin Tohsaka.”

“Oh, I know who you are,” Caren said with a smile as she crossed the room to look Rin right in the eye. “The heir of the Tohsaka family, one of the three founding families as well as the second owner of Fuyuki City.”

Rin leaned back slightly as Caren got very very close, leaning over and looking her straight in the eye. “Yes! Now will you please take a step back!”

Caren giggled. “Oh, she’s going to be fun.”

“What did he wish for?” Shirou’s voice silenced the conversation before Rin could blow a gasket.

It took Kirei a moment to regain his train of thought before he realized what Shirou was asking. “I’m afraid I don’t know. All I know is that his wish cost five hundred people their lives.”

Shirou’s fists clenched. “I see. And could it happen again?”
“Well, that would depend on which Master won the Holy Grail.” Kirei kept his face neutral, but on the inside he was smiling ear to ear. “If another Master with evil in their heart laid their hands on the Holy Grail, then an even worse tragedy could occur.”

“Right,” Rin chimed in. “All of the Masters will be fighting for their own reasons. If you don’t have the resolve to fight with all your heart, then you’re just going to die. You should just give up your rights as a Master now; otherwise you’ll be putting your life on the line.”

“You don’t have to give up Senpai,” Sakura said softly. “But you could get hurt. Or worse…”

“I don’t have a wish for the Grail,” Shirou said after a moment of silence. “The one thing that I want is something that I have to claim with my own hands.” His eyes came up, hard and burning with inner fire. “But as long as I’m here, I can’t allow people to get hurt while there’s something I can do about it.”

Kirei actually let himself smile this time. “Very well. Then go forth and claim the Holy Grail Shirou Emiya. And your wish shall be granted!”

“...”

“You’re an idiot,” Rin said flatly as the entire group walked away from the church. “Fighting in the Grail War because you want to keep people from getting hurt is foolish. You’re only going to get yourself hurt.”

“While I admire your courage, she has a point,” Saber said. “If you go in to battle without the determination to win, it will only end in disaster.”

“I promised something to my father a long time ago,” Shirou said. “That I would be a hero. But I could never call myself that if I let innocent people get caught in the middle of a battle when I had the chance to do something about it.”

“I think Emiya is being very brave,” Sakura cut in. “It’s very noble to want to protect people.”

Rin scowled. “He doesn’t even have a wish in the end. He’s just going to end up throwing himself in to danger.”

“So… what’s your wish?” Shirou asked. “If you think it’s so important, you must have something you want.” He glanced over at Sakura. “Come to think of it, you both must have a wish.”

“I don’t really have one,” Sakura said. “I… my grandfather wanted to have a representative in the Grail War. Because we’re one of the three families that founded the system. But I don’t have a wish of my own.”

“I just want to fulfill my father’s wish,” Rin said after another moment of silence. “He wanted to reach the final secret of magecraft, the Root.”

“The Root?” Shirou just stared at her blankly.

“The Root of the World, the font of all knowledge. It’s the final goal of all mages. Anyone who finds it could learn anything. It’s been my family’s goal to find it for generations.”

“So, what would you do when you have all that knowledge?” Shirou asked.

“I… don’t actually know,” Rin admitted. “I could do anything I guess, but it’s been my family’s dream just to reach the Root. I’ll figure out exactly what I’m doing with it once I get there.”
“That sounds like a reasonable wish,” Shirou said. “Say, why don’t we work together?”

“What?” Both girls asked at the exact same time. Even Saber looked startled.

“Well, I don’t have a real reason to claim the Grail, and Sakura just wants to win because her family told her to. Neither one of you have any reason to hurt other people and your wishes are harmless. So I’d rather work with you to keep anyone from getting caught in the middle of this than fight you over something I don’t even want.”

“Just a moment,” Saber interrupted. “You might not have a wish for the Grail, but your Servant also has the right to claim a wish.”

Shirou flushed slightly. “Ah, I’m sorry. I’ve been completely ignoring your feelings about this.” He bowed his head. “Please, forgive me.”

“The Grail only appears once there’s only one Servant left,” Rin said. “So even if we did work together, we’d have to fight eventually.”

“So… how about a truce,” Shirou suggested. “Until we’re the only ones left, we agree to try to work together and prevent the ordinary people from getting caught in the middle.”

“I think that sounds like an excellent idea,” Sakura said quickly.

“I suppose that I could work with that,” Rin admitted reluctantly. “But don’t think that I’m going to go easy on you when we get to the end.” She offered a hand to the red head. Shirou smiled and reached out to take it.

“Well well.” Everyone froze at the new voice. Shirou turned to see the girl he’d met the night before standing in the middle of the road. “To think, that I’d find my onii-chan cheating on me.”

“Uh… what?” Shirou looked completely baffled.

“Berserker!” Shirou shivered as he felt power building and another woman materialized from thin air, a slightly disturbing smile on her face. “Kill those skanks who are trying to steal my onii-chan!”

"Oh dear." Iri flinched slightly as Berserker began to radiate power. “I think that Illya might be just a little yan yan for her brother…”

Kiritsugu sighed. “I swear, it’s a family curse to never have it easy with women…”
Chapter 10

What happened next happened very fast. Shirou had just enough time to process the girl’s words before the tall woman was on them with a manic grin on her face. Saber flashed forward, her raincoat blowing away as her invisible sword clashed against the much taller woman’s katana. “Master, get back!” Shirou stumbled backwards as the sheer force of the impact nearly blew him off his feet.

“This is bad,” Rin muttered, grabbing both Shirou and Sakura and dragging them back from the fight as their blades both rang out again. “Berserkers are supposed to be weak servants who get a power boost from going insane. That one’s way more powerful than normal. Archer. Can you help Saber?”

The red clad woman faded in to existence. “Shouldn’t be a problem. Give me a minute to get a good angle and I’ll take care of everything.” She leapt up and skirted around the edge of the battle, trying to get a clear line on Berserker while she and Saber were trading blows.

On their other side, Rider appeared in a shimmer of light. “Please, allow me to help as well mistress.”

“Rider, you’re still hurt. Please, let Saber and Archer handle this.”

Rider shook her head. “I can’t do that mistress. Not while my Master is also in danger.” She drew her daggers, letting one dangle loosely from the chain. “I’ll be careful.” With that, she leapt forward, her chain lashing out to bind one of Berserker’s arms.

Berserker growled and jerked her arm forward, forcing Rider to give her a little slack or be pulled off balance. Saber took that moment to lash out, her blade aimed for Berserker’s shoulder. Berserker twisted her blade and repelled the strike, then pressed forward with a powerful slash.

Shirou flinched as Saber was driven back a few paces by the sheer force of the blow. “What can we do?”

“We don’t do anything,” Rin replied. “This is a battle between Servants. Getting in the middle of that would just get us killed.”

“That would be such a shame, wouldn’t it?” The group turned as the little girl stood on the hill just about them.

“You… you’re the Einzbern master, aren’t you?” Rin said, her posture shifting into a defensive stance and one hand sliding down to her pocket. “You’d have to be from a powerful family to support a Servant like that.”

The girl giggled. “Indeed. And you’re the Tohsaka heir, Rin Tohsaka.” She smirked and performed a mocking little curtsy. “And she’s the the one who was given to the Matou family, correct?” Rin visibly flinched and Sakura shrank a little. “You may call me Illyasviel von Einzbern. To think, that the heirs to the most prestigious magus families in Japan would be so uncouth though…”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Rin snarled. “But if you think you’re going to kill us without a fight, you’re going to be disappointed.”

Ilya grinned. “Oh, I don’t think you won’t put up a fight. I want to see you struggle against the
inevitable before Berserker punishes you for trying to take onii-chan away from me.”

“You’re awfully confident,” Rin replied. “For someone who’s Servant is outnumbered.” Shirou looked over to see Berserker slowly losing ground as Saber continually clashed with her and Rider leapt in and out of the fray, taking pot shots and leaving long gashes along Berserker’s arms and shoulders. A gunshot rang out and Berserker stumbled as the shot grazed across her side.

“Oh, that’s not a problem.” Shirou really didn’t like the look on Ilya’s face. “Do it Berserker!”

Berserker jumped back and magic began to swirl around her. The other servants were forced to jump back and clear the space as her power surged and two more figures began to take shape beside her. Archer had just enough time to register something wrong when a glowing green arrow blasted past her and disintegrated the tree she was standing in front of. Rider leapt back as one of the figures flashed forward and collided with her, sending the injured Servant flying backwards. The two figures solidified, revealing exact duplicates of Berserker, save for the one engaging Rider carrying a naginata and the one firing at Archer carrying a longbow as tall as her body.

“Now that’s just cheating,” Rin muttered.

“Rider, get back!” Sakura shouted as the spear wielding madwoman rushed forward again, sending Rider straight through a fence into the graveyard beside the street.

“Your trickery doesn’t impress me,” Saber said as she reengaged, locking blades with the original Berserker. “And it will not be enough to defeat me. I’m more than capable of taking you down on my own.”

“That’s good,” Berserker said, her voice a low purr. “Then I will punish you for daring to hurt my precious Master’s feelings.”

“Leave that one alive!” Ilya called out. “Onii-chan is going to need his Servant.”

“Why do you keep calling me onii-chan?” Shirou finally snapped. “I’ve never even met you before yesterday!”

Ilya pouted. “Really? How could you have forgotten about me onii-chan?! I’ve been waiting for years to meet you.”

Shirou just looked confused.

“Ilya stomped her foot. “Stupid onii-chan! How could you forget your only sister? What would Papa think?”

“OH dear…” Iri said. “I think I might have given Ilya a few slightly unrealistic expectations of her
brother…”

“I have a sister?” The idea that he still had surviving family seemed to shut Shirou’s brain down.

“How is your sister an Einzbern?” Rin asked pointedly.

“My father was Kiritsugu Emiya,” Ilya explained slowly. “The man who was allowed to marry into the Einzbern family almost twenty years ago so he could serve as their representative in the last Holy Grail War. After the war, he was forbidden from coming back for me and adopted another child in Fuyuki City.”

“Kiritsugu’s daughter…” Shirou had never even considered that his father might have other family, much less another child. “He… he never mentioned you. I thought… I didn’t know he had anyone else.”

“What?” Ilya did not look happy. “What do you mean papa never mentioned me?! You must be lying! Papa would never forget me!” She ground her teeth together and looked back at Berserker. “Berserker! Finish this up so I can take onii-chan home and make him remember me!”

Berserker nodded. “Apologies, but you heard her,” she said as she rushed forward, slamming against Saber at full force. The blue clad woman braced herself as she slid back a few feet from the force, but managed to keep her guard up. “Don’t worry. I would never hurt mistress’s brother. Your master will be perfectly fine.”

“Forgive me if I don’t take you at your word.” Saber’s eyes darted around, trying to find some advantage. As much as it pained her to admit it, Berserker was stronger than her. She could match her for a brief stretch if she burned through her mana with her Prana Burst, but Shirou wasn’t providing very much and she’d run out of power quickly. To her left, Rider was darting between gravestones, keeping the stone markers between her and the lightning fast spear wielding copy. To her right, Archer was jumping between trees, taking pot shots while the bow wielding copy continued to fire glowing green arrows between the branches. She wasn’t going to get any help from them. “But I will win this battle. That, I promise you.”

“Then come at me,” Berserker said, adjusting her stance and narrowing her eyes. “And show me the full extent of your skill.”

“You’ll regret those words.” Saber darted forward then veered off before she got within striking range of her enemy’s blade. Berserker followed, jumping over the fence in to the graveyard and smashing a stone as Saber dodged back. The swordswoman dodged back again to avoid a smooth follow-up strike, kicking off one of the graves and launching herself straight up. "I hate Berserkers that keep their fighting skills…” Berserker brought her blade up and they collided again. This time, without anything to brace herself again, Saber was thrown back by the blow, flipping through the air and landing smoothly a few yards away. "It seems like I’m going to have to use a little bit of power to level the field.” She adjusted her stance, her blade pointing directly behind her and her hands firmly gripping the hilt.

“I see,” Berserker said. “Very well, give me your best shot.”

“I plan to. Strike…” Saber began to channel her mana into her sword’s magic covering. “Air!” Berserker’s eyes went wide as Saber’s weapon erupted in a massive tornado, sending her hurtling forward like she was launched out of a cannon. Berserker barely had time to start moving before Saber was on top of her.
Shirou stopped and stared as he saw Saber’s weapon for the first time. He couldn’t take his eyes off shimmering blade. It was beautiful. And powerful. Terrifyingly powerful. Something deep inside him was certain of that. Any doubts he might have had about Saber’s combat prowess disappeared as a spray of blood arced through the air.

“Berserker!” Ilya’s scream almost made his heart stop and the absolutely terrified look on her face made his blood run cold.

“I’m alright,” Berserker said, struggling to stay upright with one hand pressed tightly against her bleeding side. “Something like this won’t even slow me down.”

“You’re quite lucky,” Saber said, turning to face her opponent again.

“I’m simply that tough,” Berserker replied, taking a fighting stance again. “But that little trick won’t work on me again.”

“Enough!” Both Servants turned toward Ilya. “We’re withdrawing for now!” Berserker sighed and sheathed her blade.

The other two copies shimmered and faded like mirages as the tall woman leapt clear and landed beside her mistress. “Hey!” Archer cried out. “I wasn’t finished yet!”

“We’ll be back to deal with you another time,” Ilya said. “But I think we’ve done enough for tonight.” She turned to Shirou. “And you had better remember me by the next time we meet!” With that, Berserker vanished in to her astral form and Ilya turned the corner and walked away.

“Wait!” Shirou ran after her, one hand outstretched. But by the time he reached the corner, she was already gone.

The street was entirely silent for a few moments as the remaining Servants and Masters gathered under an intact street lamp. Saber was mostly uninjured and her sword was once again hidden beneath the invisible barrier though she looked exhausted. Rider hadn’t sustained any new injuries, but it seemed that he side was bleeding again. Archer had a rather unpleasant looking hole in her shoulder, but she didn’t seem too bothered by it. “The hell just happened,” Rin asked.
Chapter 11

The walk back to the Emiya house was quiet. Sakura and Rin were both distracted in silent conversations with their servants. Rin kept muttering under her breath and shaking her head, while Sakura had a constant worried expression on her lips. Shirou didn’t want to interrupt either of them, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to try to talk to Saber instead. The blue clad Servant was silent, walking almost stiffly just behind him. He couldn’t help glancing back over his shoulder to glance at her every few seconds. Her face was absolutely calm under the moonlight, though not the same calm that she had while she was fighting. Shirou couldn’t quite place the difference, but she seemed incredibly focused while she was fighting. Now she just seemed… reserved. Like she was troubled by something.

“I think this is where I leave you,” Rin said as they reached the corner of Shirou’s street. “Normally, I’d tell you to find somewhere safe to hole up and get ready for the war, but with half the masters agreeing to a truce and going to our school, I doubt we’ll have to worry about getting attacked there. So I’ll see you at school tomorrow.” She turned on her heel and walked off into the darkness, presumably heading back to her house.

Shirou and Sakura looked at each other for a moment then Shirou opened the door and held it. “After you.”

“Thank you senpai.” Sakura stepped inside and slipped her shoes off. “I’m sorry for all the trouble I caused tonight.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Shirou said. “I almost wish I’d known sooner. I could have tried to find some of dad’s work on Bounded Fields. I’m pretty terrible at basically everything, but it would have been worth trying if it kept you safer…”

Sakura tensed up. “Why?” she murmured under her breath.

Shirou blinked. “What?”

“Why are you so worried about me? After I lied about being a mage, and I put you in danger by hiding here with Rider…”

Shirou rubbed the back of his head awkwardly. “Well you needed a place to stay. I wouldn’t have turned you away just because it might put me in a little danger.”

“I don’t deserve your kindness senpai,” Sakura said, her shoulders slumped and her eyes downcast.

Shirou gently set his hands on her shoulders. “Don’t be silly. Everyone deserves a little kindness. It would be wrong to leave you with nowhere to go just to make things easier for me.”

“He’s right,” Saber said, finally breaking her silence. “Only a dishonorable cur would abandon a friend out of fear for their own safety.”

“No,” Sakura said. “I mean I don’t deserve it.” She looked even smaller, and Shirou could see tears welling up in her eyes. “I’ve been using you senpai. All this time.”

Shirou looked bewildered, but Saber’s posture shifted slightly, her eyes narrowing. “What exactly are you implying?” she said evenly.

“Let her talk,” Rider said firmly, appearing from empty air. “Please, hear her story out.”
“I… I wanted to stay by your side, no matter what,” Sakura continued. “Even knowing that I was putting your life in terrible danger. You were… the only bright spot left for me. So I wanted to stay here. With you…”

Shirou may not have been the most socially aware person, but he felt a cold sensation twist in his gut. Sakura sounded so… wrong. He’d seen her on bad days, days that made him want to punch Shinji, but she’d never given up. Now she just sounded broken. “Sakura…” He put his arms around her impulsively. He didn’t know what to think, he just knew he didn’t want to see someone in pain right in front of him.

“Stop,” Sakura whispered, almost too soft to hear. “Please…”

“What?” Shirou panicked. Had he been too forward? Was he not supposed to touch her?

“Stop being nice to me,” Sakura said, a little louder. “Stop forgiving me for everything. Stop… stop…”

“Stop what?” Shirou looked her in the eye.

“Stop making me love you.” Shirou’s eyes went wide as her lips pressed against his.

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“And Matou makes the first move!” Kiritsugu covered his ears as Irisviel pulled an air horn from somewhere and the sound rang through their little space. “Yes! Don’t screw this up now Shirou, otherwise mother is going to be very cross with you!”

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Shirou’s eyes bugged out of his head and all sense of reason abandoned him. He made a few stammering sounds, trying to make sense of what was happening in front of him. “I…” When had this happened? When had Sakura started having feelings for him? Suddenly the thought of her gently waking him up in the morning and having a warm dinner on the table took a whole new light.

“I’m such a selfish girl,” Sakura murmured. “Pushing myself on you like this…”

“I think this is a conversation that you two should have alone,” Saber said stiffly. Shirou sent her a desperate look not to leave him alone. “I’ll find some place to sleep tonight.” Which she promptly ignored as she turned and headed down the hall toward the bedrooms. Rider simply nodded in agreement and slipped out, trying to smile encouragingly in Shirou’s direction.

Shirou stared helplessly at the girl silently clinging to him, tears beginning to form in the corner of her eyes. He had to… he was supposed to… he had absolutely no idea. “Sakura,” he finally said. “I…”

“I understand,” Sakura said softly. “I think… I think I always knew that you wouldn’t feel the same way that I do.”

“No!” Shirou grabbed her shoulders and forced her to look up at him again. “Sakura… I don’t… no one’s ever told me something like that before. I… I’ve never even thought about loving someone… like that.” He stumbled over his words, trying to put together a complete thought for once. “I… I care for you… very deeply. I just… I don’t even know what it’s like to be in love with someone.” He reached up, carefully wiping a tear from her cheek.

Sakura looked in to his eyes and sniffed. “Senpai…” She leaned in and Shirou found her lips
against his again. This kiss lacked the soft, unsure edge of her first. Instead, her mouth mashed roughly against his and her tongue pushed against his lips. He found his lips opening reflexively and her tongue invading his mouth, eagerly seeking out his own. He was finally forced to pull away, gasping for breath and red faced. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest and a pleasant curl of warmth in his chest.

He froze as Sakura’s hands came up, slowly unbuttoning her shirt. “Sakura, you don’t have to…”

“Please Shirou, let me do this,” she murmured, barely above a whisper. “You can already cook and clean better than I can. You’ve already taken me in to my home. You wouldn’t want anything my family can offer you… All I can give you as a woman is this. Please, let me give myself to you, even if it’s only once.”

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“Well, didn’t see that one coming,” Iri said.

Kiritsugu sighed. “Aren’t you the one who planned for him to have a harem?”

“Well, yes, but I didn’t think that’d she’d move that quickly. Maybe I underestimated her a little bit…”

Kiritsugu pulled out a cigarette and lit up. “Are we actually going to sit here and watch our son lose his virginity?”

“Nope.” A large, plush bed appeared from nowhere. “We’re going to celebrate our son losing his virginity the fun way and give him some privacy.”

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“I… I can’t just do… that with you,” Shirou stammered. “I don’t even… I’ve never…”

“Shhh, just relax senpai,” Sakura said as she let her shirt fall to the ground, revealing the pale lavender bra supporting her impressive assets. “Let me take care of you…” She popped the button on her skirt and let it fall to the ground.

Despite his best efforts to stay calm, Shirou felt himself growing hard and he was sure that Sakura could tell. “Sakura…”

“Oh, he’s standing up for me already…” Sakura had an expression on her face that he’d never seen before. It almost seemed hungry. Shirou finally caved as her hand ran along the front of his pants, sending a shiver along his spine. “This way Shirou. It will be much more comfortable in my room.”

Shirou nodded silently, still too stunned to reply as she looped a finger through one of his belt loops and half dragged him off to the guest room she’d been staying in. The room was dark and quiet, only lit by moonlight filtering in through the windows. Sakura smiled at him, her frame illuminated by the silvery light and Shirou found his heart speeding up again. “You’re beautiful,” he said before his head caught up with his mouth.

“Thank you.” This time he was ready for the kiss. He leaned in, his tongue wrapping around hers as their bodies pressed together. He could feel the warmth radiating from her and pulled her in close, only separating when he was forced to breathe again. “Mmmm…” Her hands moved down his front, slowly peeling his shirt away and tossing it aside, revealing his slim, fit form. Shirou blushed as her hips rubbed against his slowly, teasing his hard-on through his pants. “Let me help you with that senpai.” She dropped to her knees and unzipped his pants, reaching in and carefully freeing his
cock from his boxers. The seven inch shaft popped free and Sakura gave a little gasp. “Oh my. You’re so big senpai.”

Shirou barely had time to process that statement when he felt the incredible heat of her mouth around his swollen tip. A low, guttural moan escaped his throat as she sucked him slowly, lovingly sucking the tip and running her tongue around the edge of his cockhead and coaxing out a thick drop of precum on to her tongue. “S…Sakura!”

Her lips released him with a wet pop. “Mmmm, you’re so tasty too. Just relax and enjoy.” Her mouth captured his cock again and quickly worked down his shaft, taking more and more of his cock. Shirou moaned, putting one hand on her shoulder to brace himself as the warmth of her throat consumed every inch of his hardness. He could feel her tongue running along the bottom of his shaft, sending a new surge of pleasure through his body with every stroke.

“Slow down Sakura! I’m going to…”

Her mouth popped off his cock again. “Oh, I’m sorry, I got carried away.” She leaned back on the futon, her face flushed with excitement. “Could you… could you do me too? Please.”

Shirou swallowed hard then dropped to his knees between her legs. “I don’t really know what I’m doing,” he admitted. “But I want you to feel good too.” He carefully hooked his fingers over the waist of her panties and pulled them down, revealing her pretty pink clam, already glistening with her juices. He hesitantly placed a kiss on her lips, earning a little moan from the younger girl. Taking that as a good sign, he repeated the motion then ran his tongue along her slit, tasting her juices on his tongue. It was a bit odd, but not unpleasant as he slowly lapped at her hole.

Sakura began to squirm and moan a bit more as he became more confident, licking harder and deeper with each movement. “You… you’re doing fine senpai. Please, just above the slit there’s… my clit… please I need you there.” Shirou nodded and redirected his efforts, shifting his mouth up and searching around for a few moments before he found a hard little bud that had to be what he was looking for. Sakura moaned loudly and threw her head back as he licked it firmly a few times.

“Yes! I’m ready senpai. I need you now. I need you inside me!”

Before Shirou could respond, Sakura pushed him back, landing him on his back on the futon. She straddled his hips, hesitating as she looked down at him. Shirou stared back up at her and nodded slowly. “Yes,” he said quietly. “I want you Sakura.”

That was all she needed. Her hips pushed down, taking his cock inside her in one quick motion. All that came from Sakura’s mouth was a breathy gasp, but Shirou wasn’t able to hold down a deep moan as her hot, tight pussy engulfed his cock. “So good…” the girl said as she began to move on top of him, grinding her hips against his as she rode him slowly.

Shirou reached up and grabbed her hips, holding her steady as she started to ride him faster. “You’re too good…” Shirou muttered. “I’m not going to last.”

“That’s… that’s okay,” Sakura moaned. “I want you to… to cum with me. To cum inside me. To fill my pussy with your hot, steamy cum.”

That nearly sent Shirou over the edge right there. His cock throbbed inside her and he thrust up against her, driving his cock deep inside her pussy. He bit his lip, desperately trying to keep himself from cumming immediately. Sakura’s moans grew louder and her control over her movements slipped as she grew closer and closer to her climax. “I’m…”

“Do it!” Sakura all but shouted. “I need it now senpai! I’m so close!”
Shirou moaned and erupted inside her, his head going white as he painted Sakura’s cunt with his cum.

That was all Sakura needed to go over the edge. She screamed once and her whole body stiffened, her pussy clenching around his cock as she felt his cum pouring inside her and the pleasure surged through her. As the pleasure died down, she went limp on top of him, slumping down on top of Shirou. “Thank you,” she whispered, slowly lifting herself off his cock, but staying pressed tightly against him.

“You’re… welcome.” It sounded strange, but it was all he could think with his head still buzzing with the aftermath of his orgasm. He lay back on Sakura’s bed and stared up at the ceiling, not sure what to do next.
Chapter 12

Shielder landed almost silently on the front steps of the church. For a night wearing a full suit of armor and carrying a shield as big as her body, she was remarkably light on her feet. She knocked twice to announce her arrival then stepped inside out of the cold. “Mistress, Father Kotomine,” she said, bowing her head slightly to the two already waiting inside. “I followed them as instructed.”

“What happened?” Caren asked. “We could feel something even all the way out here.”

“It seems that the Einzbern master was waiting for them,” Shielder said. “She ambushed them on their way back to the boy’s house and they ended up fighting. It seems the Einzbern family has summoned a truly frightening Berserker.”

“Frightening how?” Caren asked, more curious than worried.

“She fought with physical powers of even the mightiest Berserkers, but she still had the skill of a master swordsman. Even from the distance I was at, I could feel her power. And she managed to fight Saber to a near draw. And then there’s her Noble Phantasm…”

“She used it?” Kirei interrupted. “That seems careless. The Einzberns have been known for playing carefully and using dirty tactics. Such a direct attack is odd for their representative.”

“I… can’t be completely certain,” Shielder admitted. “But she was able to produce some sort of copies that fought with different weapons, but equal skill. They managed to keep both of the girls’ servants locked down rather effectively, though I wasn’t able to get close enough to see the details of the fights. It must be her Phantasm, but it’s not anything I’m familiar with without more information. Even the Grail’s knowledge only goes so far.”

“I see.” Kirei crossed his hands, clearly deep in thought. “We’ll let them continue like this for a little while longer. If this Berserker is as strong as she appears, she’ll be easier to deal with if we let the other masters handle the bulk of the fighting. I’ll have Bazett handle the majority of the reconnaissance from here on out. Thank you for your work tonight.” With that, the priest turned and left without another word.

“What a boring person,” Caren said with a sigh. “He spends so much time avoiding me. I really thought he might be entertaining too…”

“There’s one more thing,” Shielder said. “I’ve managed to figure out Saber’s identity.”

“So quickly? Interesting~” Caren grinned. “Alright, so who is our mysterious warrior in blue?”

“My former liege.”

Caren said nothing for a moment then burst out laughing. “That little girl is King Arthur?”

“I was suspicious the moment I saw her, but the moment she revealed her sword, I was certain. There’s only one Excalibur and no one who served under our king could ever mistake it for something else.”

“Hmmm, so we have the Queen of the Land of Shadows, King Arthur, and one of the Knights of the Round Table at the very least.” Caren dropped heavily in to one of the pews. “I think this Grail War is going to get very interesting very quickly.” She groaned and stretched her arms out above her head. “I hope Kirei stops being so careful soon. I don’t want to miss out on the fun parts.”
“Mistress.” Caster gently shook Luvia’s shoulder, trying to rouse her mistress from her slumber. As Luvia shifted, she jumped back, just in case her mistress had a sudden case of spontaneous cuddling. “Please mistress, wake up.”

Luvia finally yawned and sat up with sleepy eyes and her hair a mess. “Caster? What is it?”

Caster sighed. “You asked me to wake you if something happened mistress.”

Luvia was instant up and alert. “Already? It’s only the first night!”

“My familiars just reported the fight to me,” Caster said. “It seems that there was quite the battle for the first day.”

“Where was it? Who was involved? Please tell me Tohsaka hasn’t gotten her Servant killed already!”

“Uhhhh…” Caster stepped back as her master jumped out of bed and bore down on her. “Near the cemetery, Saber, Archer, Rider, and Berserker, and Tohsaka’s Servant made it out without too much trouble.”

“Well, that’s good,” Luvia said suddenly brightening up considerably. “I wouldn’t want my rival to be defeated before I have a chance to show her the obviously superior power of my Servant.”

Caster blushed. “I’m really not that much of a fighter…”

“Don’t worry,” Luvia said cheerfully. “We’ll defeat her no problem. With your power and my skills, we’ll run circles around that uncouth simpleton!”

“If you say so mistress…” Caster felt a drop of sweat form on her brow and wisely decided not to argue.

Assassin moved silently as she reentered her Master’s home through her bedroom window. Avoiding the girl’s family was tricky enough as it was. Lurking around the house would only make things more complicated. The girl had been a decent choice, and had been kind enough to take her in, but she really didn’t know what she had gotten herself into. She sighed and slipped over to the futon that she’d been given as a bed. She sat down and fell into a meditative position, trying to calm her mind. After the battle she had just witnessed, she couldn’t help wondering how her own master might have handled it.

Not well likely.

She’d barely given an order since they’d met, treating her more like a house guest than a warrior in a mystical war. Perhaps she simply hadn’t fully grasped what learning about magic meant for her life. She wouldn’t have even been out scouting if she hadn’t taken her own initiative. And then she would have missed a golden opportunity to get a first look at the other Servants.

And they were monstrous. That Berserker fought like a demon and could fight multiple Servants at once thanks to that skill of hers. The Saber was the height of her class, a true master swordsman. The Archer was one of those odd modern types who used gunpowder weapons. They were a bit after her time, and honestly she didn’t see the appeal. They were flashy and loud and just added to the chaos on the battlefield. As foul as her powers could be, at least they were quick and quiet. The
Rider was… interesting. Her fighting style wasn’t anything she’d seen before, but she was able to match that Berserker while injured so she couldn’t underestimate her. A direct fight against any of them would be a nightmare at best and more likely than not a death sentence.

Which she had expected from the beginning.

Even among the Hassan, she wasn’t one who specialized in direct combat. Her skills were incredibly deadly, but they relied on long term stealth and subtlety. “Master… would hate such tactics.” The thought was the center of her troubled mind. She had taken more lives than she cared to count during her life. But knowing that her new Master would disapprove did more to give her pause than any of her many regrets. “She’s not even a mage. What would she say... if I told her that I had killed someone.” She sighed and pulled her mask off, letting the night air cross her face as she looked up at the ceiling. “I am a fool…”

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“Stupid, stupid onii-chan!” Ilya smashed another table with a blast of magic. “How could you forget your sister? Stupid!” A priceless vase was reduced to powder by another blast. “And then you ran off with those sluts!” And the pedestal it had been sitting on.

“Mistress Ilya!” Sella said, hurrying after the angry young woman. “You must stop this! This is not an appropriate way for a child of the Einzberns to express her frustration.”

“Please stop making more of a mess for us to clean up,” Leysritt added, hurrying in behind her companion with a large garbage bag and a broom.

Sella elbowed her companion in the side. “Don’t be so informal with our mistress,” she hissed.

Leysritt glared at her counterpart. “She’s destroyed three priceless five hundred year old vases in the last twenty minutes. Now I’m going to have to go shopping for replacements.” She sighed. “I don’t even know if there are any good antique dealers in the city…”

“Let me try,” Berserker said, appearing from her astral form. “I know how to deal with a little temper tantrum.” She crossed the room in a flash, catching Ilya’s arm before she could blow anything else up.

“Let go!” Ilya shouted.

“Ilya,” Berserker said firmly. “Do you think your momma would be happy to see you acting like this? Or your brother?”

Ilya glared up at her, but Berserker just returned her stare evenly. “No.” She pulled her arm free and pouted, but she didn’t move to keep breaking things.

“I understand how much it hurts to lose your family, but there are times when you need to act your age instead of expressing your anger like a child.”

Ilya scowled. “It’s just not fair! I was finally going to see my brother for the first time. I was going to have a family again. And then he doesn’t even recognize me! It… I don’t know if it’s worse if he forgot me or if papa did…”

Berserker pulled Ilya in to a tight hug. The girl squirmed a little in Berserker’s almost crushing grip, trying to ignore the fact that her Servant’s massive assets were right at face level. “A family’s love is the most powerful force in the world,” Berserker said. “Do you really think that they would ever forget you?”
“Then why didn’t onii-chan recognize me?”

“I don’t know,” Berserker admitted, lifting her up off the ground. “But being angry about it isn’t going to help.”

Ilya sighed. “Fine. I’ll just have to make sure onii-chan comes with me next time so I can make him explain himself.”

“Gently Ilya.”

Ilya sighed. “You’re going to complain if I try to have fun with this at all, aren’t you?”

“I don’t want you two to get off on the wrong foot,” Berserker replied. “Your mother entrusted both of you to me and I don’t want you to hurt each other any more than I want someone else to hurt you.”

Ilya sighed again. “Alright, I’ll try to be civil with him next time.” She looked over at the two maids. “Let me help with that.” She snapped her fingers and the shattered furniture began to put itself back together.

“Why are we even here if she can do that by herself,” Leysritt muttered as the shards of porcelain reassembled themselves on top of the newly reformed table. Sella elbowed her in the gut, causing the other maid to shoot her a dirty look.

“That’s better.” Berserker kissed her on the forehead, making Ilya squirm a little. “Mmmm, you’re so cute when you’re sorry.” She leaned in and kissed Ilya on the lips, her tongue flicking across the smaller girl’s mouth.

“Oh.” Leysritt blushed rosily and looked away.

“Forbidden love?” Sella muttered with a slight tilt of her head. “The things we have to put up with…” That earned her another glare from her counterpart.

“Berserker!” Ilya sputtered as their lips separated, a luminescent blush on her cheeks. “Mmmm, you’re so cute when you’re sorry.” She leaned in and kissed Ilya on the lips, her tongue flicking across the smaller girl’s mouth.

“Forbidden love?” Sella muttered with a slight tilt of her head. “The things we have to put up with…” That earned her another glare from her counterpart.

“Berserker!” Ilya sputtered as their lips separated, a luminescent blush on her cheeks. “Not in front of other people…”

“I’m sorry mistress. You had such a cute expression on your face, I just couldn’t help myself.”

“At least take me to my room if you’re going to do that.”

“An excellent idea.” Ilya yelped as Berserker picked her up. She looked at the maids and smiled. “Keep up the good work.” Berserker carried Ilya away, pushing open the door to the first bedroom she found and setting Ilya down on the bed.

“What are you going to do to me now Berserker?” Ilya asked coyly, kicking her shoes off and batting her eyelashes.

“Mmmm, I can’t help myself anymore,” Berserker said. “Not after seeing your handsome brother.” She giggled and kissed Ilya again. “The Holy Grail has blessed me with two lovely children. I just have to show you my love.” She popped the top two buttons on Ilya shirt, peeling it back to reveal her pale skin and her small, budding breasts. “You’re so cute. I just want to eat you up!”

Ilya moaned as Berserker’s mouth attacked her chest, her lips peppering her skin with kisses and her tongue flicking across her small mounds. “Oh!” She bit her lip. “I don’t want t… to just be… cute…” She groaned as Berserker’s mouth sucked her nipple. “I bet… that’s why onii-chan was so
“There’s nothing wrong with having a petite body,” Berserker said, teasing both nipples with her fingers. “And your brother will love you no matter what you look like.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Ilya said. She reached up and grabbed the front of Berserker’s kimono. “You have these!” And tore it open with a surprising display of strength. The servant’s hefty mammories bounced as they were released from the tight, confining cloth. Ilya grabbed one in each hand, roughly squeezing and tugging on the large melons.

“Be gently dear,” Berserker gasped as Ilya molested her. “It’s not… oh!… not pleasant if you’re too hard…” She moaned as Ilya tugged on her nipples. “Do you not like my breasts?”

Ilya frowned. “Well, I don’t mind them on you,” she admitted. “But you’re my auntie. You’re supposed to have big breasts! They’re younger than me and they still have huge ones.”

Berserker smiled softly. “Oh, don’t worry about that. A cute girl like you has her own charms.” She pulled Ilya in to her lap and reached under her skirt, slowly running her fingers over the front of her panties. “You’re perfectly attractive as you are.”

Ilya moaned as Berserker’s long fingers stroked her pussy. “No fair… teasing me…” she gasped. She grabbed the nearest breast and attacked it with her mouth, her lips wrapping around Berserker’s nipple and sucking it hard.

Berserker moaned and pushed Ilya’s panties aside, letting one of her fingers sink in to her tight, wet pussy. “Better?” she murmured, slowly pumping her finger in and out. Ilya responded by sucking her nipple harder and starting to rub her other breast with her free hand. “Mmmm, I’ll take that as a yes.” She added a second finger and picked up the pace.

Ilya moaned and her hips bucked forward, trying to take Berserker’s fingers even deeper. “Keep going… deeper!”

Berserker smiled and pushed her fingers in deeper. Her thumb found Ilya’s clit and began to stroke it as she fingered her pussy. Ilya mewled and bucked against her hand again, her body trembling as Berserker focused on her sensitive little bud. Her back arched as she felt Berserker’s fingers hit her special spot and she couldn’t hold back a cry. Berserker just smiled more and curled her fingers against that spot again and again as she stroked Ilya’s button.

Ilya’s eyes nearly rolled back in her head as she lost control and came hard. Her pussy clenched around Berserker’s fingers and her whole body trembled as the pleasure surged through her. She finally went limp in Berserker’s lap, panting heavily. “Feel better?” Berserker asked.

“That’s… cheating…” Ilya gasped, slowly recovering. “But yes…”

“Then I consider that a job well done.”

Ilya grinned. “But now it's my turn. Get those clothes off. I'm going to eat you out.”
Chapter 13

Shirou woke up slowly. He blinked and raised one hand to fend off the morning sunlight pouring in through the window. He tried to sit up, but there was something heavy lying on top of him. Something soft and warm and... He rubbed his eyes and looked down to see Sakura’s tranquil, sleeping face just inches from his own. Blood rushed to his face as memories of the night before filled his head and he desperately tried to keep himself... under control. He wasn’t sure if he was supposed to wake her up, or try to worm his way out from under her without waking her.

He was still deliberating when he heard someone clearing their throat. “Good morning Master.”

To Shirou’s credit, he only yelled in shock a little bit. Sakura groaned and pushed herself up. “What’s wrong Shirou?” she murmured, rubbing her eyes.

Shirou pushed himself up to a sitting position and turned to see Saber sitting formally near the door. “What are you doing here!?”

“Leaving you alone in a room with a potential enemy is unacceptable. After you were done, I came over to watch over you.”

“You shouldn’t come in to a boy’s room without asking first!” Shirou sputtered.

“Technically, this is my room,” Sakura said, climbing off of Shirou and yawning. Shirou blushed a little as the sheets fell down, revealing her body. “But... Rider!”

The purple-haired servant appeared in a shimmer of light. “Allowing another servant to watch over my master on her own could put you at risk.”

Shirou wondered if it was possible to pass out just from the blood rushing to his head. “It doesn’t matter whose room it is! Neither of you should be here!”

Saber sighed. “Master, you shouldn’t think of me the way you would a normal woman. I am not some house guest. I am a blade that is meant to win the Holy Grail.”

Shirou groaned. “That’s doesn’t matter. It’s still not proper. And I have a right to at least some privacy.”

“If an enemy was to attack in the middle of the night, I wouldn’t be able to respond fast enough to help you from a different room,” Saber insisted. “Especially if they were already inside.” Rider elected not to respond to that.

Shirou groaned. “Just... please leave so I can get dressed. We’ll talk about this after I make breakfast.”

Saber nodded. “Very well. I’ll be waiting in the dining room.” Rider just nodded and followed Saber out.

Shirou and Sakura spent a few very awkward seconds just staring at each other. “Thank you,” Sakura finally said.

Shirou cocked his head. “For what?”

“For accepting me,” she said softly. “Thank you.”
Shirou smiled gently. “Sakura… I’ll always care about you.”

Sakura blushed. “Go get dressed,” she said quickly. “I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

“I’ll be quick.” Shirou got up and hastily tugged his pants up to cover himself. He slipped out in to the hallway just in time to hear a familiar sound.

“Shirou! I’m here to eat!”

Surely fate was this cruel? “Fuji-nee! Uh… just… wait for a second. I just need to… change my pants.” There, that wasn’t even a lie.

The front door slammed open. “Did you over sleep again Shirou? I thought you were more responsible than that.”

“Yeah… I’m going to go right now.”

Shirou was about to beat a hasty retreat when Taiga’s head poked around the corner and he froze. “Looks like you need to put on a shirt too.” Oh no. “And zip up your pants.” Was this the end? “You shouldn’t be walking around like that when you have a lady in the house!” He couldn’t die here. “Hey… why are you in front of Sakura’s room anyway?”

Shirou stammered, trying to come up with some explanation. “I… I…”

“Senpai,” Sakura said from inside. “Did I hear Fujimura-sensei?” The door to Shirou’s doom swung open and Sakura peaked out in to the hallway. She hadn’t managed to do much more than get her panties back on, and her hair was still slightly tangled from lying in bed with him.

“What is this!” Shirou felt his heart almost stop. “Why is Sakura dressed like that?” Shirou tried very hard to come up with a good excuse, but Taiga simply pushed on. “Ah! Kiritsugu, where did I go wrong!! Shirou stole Sakura’s innocence!” Shirou took a step back as an aura of power formed around Taiga’s body.

“Uh… Fuji-nee, did you have your shinai when you came in?” Shirou kept backing away slowly.

“Now I have to administer punishment.”

“Wait!” Sakura jumped between the two of them. “Shirou didn’t do anything to me that I didn’t ask him to do!”

Taiga stopped dead in her tracks. Shirou grabbed Sakura’s arm, ready to pull her behind him if the Tiger of Fuyuki decided to turn her rather on Sakura instead. Then Taiga just started bawling. “Sakura took Shirou’s innocence! A woman I let in the house stole Shirou’s virginity! I’m a bad guardian!”

Shirou and Sakura both just stared at her for a few seconds. “Why don’t you go sit down Fuji-nee?” Shirou suggested. “I’ll be down to make breakfast as soon as I’m dressed.”

Taiga sniffed and wandered off toward the dining room. “Wait. Senpai, aren’t Rider and Saber…”

“Why are there strange women in your dining room Shirou?!”

Shirou groaned. “It’s going to be one of those days…”

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Fifteen minutes later, Shirou was cooking a large pot of miso soup to feed the women gathered around his table. He tried to keep a calm expression on his face despite the suspicious look still on Taiga’s face. “I don’t know. Kiritsugu had some pretty shady friends, but I’d definitely remember if he ever mentioned a blind woman with purple hair.”

“I’m not blind,” Rider said. “I just have a condition. It’s easier for me to keep my eyes covered.”

“Whatever. And then there’s this snooty blonde foreigner…” Shirou could see the veins on Saber’s head visibly bulge as she tried to restrain herself. “With a funny name…” Shirou absently wondered if a servant could disintegrate someone with their eyes alone. “Who just shows up and asks you to take her in…”

“I offered to give her a place to stay until she’s done her business here in Fuyuki,” Shirou interrupted before Taiga could pick up too much steam.

“Relax,” Sakura said with a gentle smile on her face. “They don’t mean any harm.” She slid a steaming cup across the table to the irate teacher. “Here, have some tea and take a deep breath. It’s nice and hot, see?” Shirou frowned as he saw the steam swirling above the cup oddly and a twinge at the back of his head. Then Taiga just slumped over and started snoring.

“What did you just do?” he asked.

“Oh dear,” Sakura said, looking a little embarrassed. “Well, that was supposed to be a simple hypnotism spell to calm her down. I don’t think it’s supposed to put her all the way to sleep…”

“Well, she is certainly calmer this way,” Rider added with a smile.

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“Wake up!”

Taiga groaned as the voice rang in her ears. “Five more minutes…”

“Wake up T-chan!”

Taiga shot bolt upright as something smacked her on the back of the head. “Ow! Who did that?” She frowned as she saw a white-haired woman in a pink kimono holding a paper fan standing over her. “Do I know you? And where am I?”

The woman smiled. “We’ve met once before T-chan. And I’m here to give you some remedial lessons.”

Taiga groaned, rubbing the back of her head. “This seems really weirdly familiar…” She looked around. “Are we in the dojo behind Shirou’s house?”

“Sort of.”

Taiga sat up and took a moment to realize she was wearing her kendo uniform instead of her usual dress. “When did I get changed? I was asking about all those strange women Shirou had over and then…” She jumped to her feet. “That’s right! I was giving those two a piece of my mind!”

“That’s right!” the woman said. “So what happened?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” Taiga declared. “But I bet one of them did something sneaky and then they dumped me out here so they could have breakfast without me!”
The woman fought down a giggle. “So what are you going to do about it?”

The air around Taiga seemed to light up. “I’m going to go back in there and teach them a lesson! I won’t let suspicious people like that take advantage of Shirou’s kindness. It’s my job as his guardian to keep him safe.”

“That’s right!” the woman declared eagerly. “You’re not going to take this lying down. Now, do you have the spirit to go in there and keep those girls in line?”

Taiga crossed her arms, her eyes shining with determination. “Yes.”

“No matter what stands in your way?”

“Yes!” Taiga shouted.

“Even if you have to fight them to keep Shirou safe?”

“YES!”

“And are you going to get a piece of that action before all the good spots in the bed are taken?”

“HELL YES! Wait, what?”

“That’s the spirit!” The woman slammed the fan down on Taiga’s forehead and knocked her out cold before she could process. Taiga disappeared in a flash of light and Irisviel’s outfit shifted back to her usual dress.

“That was cruel,” Kiritsugu said, stepping out from around the doorway to the faux dojo.

“Oh, Taiga’s a tough one. She’ll handle her new responsibilities just fine.”

“I meant to Shirou and the girls.”

Irisviel just smiled wickedly.

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“Shouldn’t she be waking up by now?” Shirou asked, starting to get concerned. “Usually the smell of food will have her up in a heartbeat.”

“I’m sorry senpai. I must have done something wrong with the spell. I’m sure she’ll wake up eventually. Well, mostly sure…”

Taiga groaned in her sleep and rolled over, the back of her hand beginning to glow. “That’s not normal,” Shirou said.

“This feels familiar…” Saber trailed off as the light coalesced in to a set of three red marks. “Wait, are those command seals?”

“I thought all of the Servants had been summoned already,” Rider muttered.

Shirou hesitated. “I think Tohsaka mentioned something last night but…” He raised a hand to shield his eyes as a sudden flash of blue light filled the room. As he blinked the spots away, he saw another woman taking form directly behind Taiga. She looked… a little like Sakura actually. Her hair had more blue in it than Sakura and she was a little taller, but their faces and bodies had a similar shape. A white robe-like outfit swirled around her, though it left quite a lot of skin visible.
Taiga groaned and sat up slowly. “What the… what a weird dream…” She yawned. “It was a nice
nap though.” She looked around at everyone’s looks of shock then followed their gaze and slowly
turned around. “Hey! Why is there another strange woman in here now?”

“Don’t look at us,” Rider deadpanned. “We have no idea where she came from either.”

“I apologize. My name is Ruler,” the woman said, bowing her head slightly. “And I think I can
explain a few things.”

Sakura and Shirou shared a confused glance. “I have a feeling this is going to be a long
conversation,” Shirou said with a sigh.
“So let me get this straight,” Taiga said, crossing her arms and scowling. “You…” She pointed at Sakura. “And you…” She pointed at Shirou. “Are wizards.”

“Mages technically,” Sakura added.

“Whatever.” Taiga sighed. “And these three…” She pointed to Saber, Rider, and Ruler. “Are ancient heroes summoned by actual magic to fight in some sort of war…”

“More of a contest of strength between champions really,” Ruler said. “It’s called a war, but it’s not much of a war with only a dozen or so contestants.”

“Not the issue here!” Taiga interrupted. “And neither of you told me anything about any of this.”

Shirou and Sakura looked at each other guiltily and eventually Shirou spoke up. “Magecraft is supposed to be kept secret from outsiders. I didn’t mean to worry you Fuji-nee, but there are some very scary people who would come if it got out that someone knew that magic existed and you’re not the most subtle of people…”

“I’m not that thick!” Taiga roared. “And I’m supposed to be responsible for you. How am I supposed to be a responsible adult if you’re running off to do dangerous magic stuff without telling me?” She stopped and just stared for a second. “I can’t believe that I just said that sentence and it makes complete sense.”

Shirou couldn’t help wondering when Taiga had gotten so dedicated to keeping an eye on him. Usually she just came over to mooch off his food. “I was just trying to keep you out of danger,” he offered lamely.

Taiga slumped. “Shirou’s the one who’s trying to protect me now,” she said to the ceiling. “When did I become the kid in the room?”

“It’s really not that bad Sensei,” Sakura said, trying to be reassuring.

“That’s true,” Ruler agreed quickly. “And you wouldn’t have been selected as my master if you didn’t have the spirit to help me in my task.”

“And how did I get dragged in to this mess anyway?” Taiga added with a groan.

“I am of the Ruler class of servant,” Ruler explained. “It is my duty to act as the arbitrator of the holy war so that no one abuses or misuses the situation for their own advantage.”

“Which I don’t recall there being in the last war, despite nearly everyone throwing the rules aside when it was convenient for them,” Saber added dryly.

“A Ruler is not summoned in every conflict.” Ruler frowned, her face pensive. “I believe that I was called because of how… badly the last war ended.”

“So I’m a referee now?” Taiga asked.

“Eh, more or less,” Ruler agreed. “It’s more that I’m a referee and you’re my assistant.”

“Great, I’m assistant referee to a secret magical battle royal. Just what I wanted in life.” Taiga slumped forward and groaned. “Do you have to do this? It seems way too dangerous.”
“We could forfeit our position as Masters,” Shirou said after a moment. “But while if we did that, we’d be abandoning anyone who got caught up in the middle of this. And I can’t just stand here and do nothing while there are people in danger.”

“Most magi aren’t very nice people,” Sakura added. “They won’t care if a few innocent bystanders get caught up in the fighting.”

Taiga sighed. “You and your hero complex… Fine. Then if my job is to help referee this mess, I’ll be the best damn referee ever. No one will get hurt on my watch!”

Everyone else in the room stared as a fiery aura seemed to form around Taiga. “She’s certainly a lively one,” Rider said with a small smile. “So, what’s for breakfast?”

“I’m not sure this is going to work,” Shirou said as they walked toward the school.

“I think it’s an excellent compromise,” Saber said, walking just behind him. “This way, I can keep close enough to protect you without drawing unnecessary suspicion, even if I can’t astralize properly.” Her blouse and skirt had been replaced with a deep blue jersey, a pair of shorts, and comfortable boots. “For someone so excitable, Miss Fujimura is rather sharp.”

“I’m not sure that she has enough pull to get you a position as a gym teacher that fast,” Shirou said, glancing back at his disguised Servant.

“Sensei is trying her best,” Sakura said. “And it’s not actually a bad idea.”

“It’s not a bad idea at all. I just don’t know if it will work and I don’t want Fuji-nee to put herself through too much trouble for me.”

“Well I’m rather grateful to her,” Saber said. “You were going to be stubborn and try to leave me at your home until she offered a better solution.”

“You can’t just follow me around everywhere,” Shirou replied. “Besides, we’re not supposed to be in danger during the day, right? And Sakura, Rin, Rider, and Archer are all going to be at school today too, so I have plenty of help if something does happen.”

Saber shook her head. “It would be a dereliction of duty for me to leave your safety in their hands. My purpose as a Servant is to serve as your sword and shield. I can’t very well do that if you refuse to let me stay close you you.”

Shirou looked distinctly uncomfortable, but didn’t respond.

The rest of the walk was spent in silence. Saber walked just behind Shirou with a placid expression on her face, while Sakura occasionally glanced between her two companions. When they finally reached the school gates, Taiga was already waiting for them. “Hey! Saber, the principal wants to talk to you!” She waved with both hands and a huge smile on her face.

“He actually said yes?” Shirou couldn’t keep the skepticism out of his voice.

“I stopped by my place after breakfast and asked Grandpa to do me a favor and have a chat with the principal,” Taiga said without losing her smile.

Shirou and Sakura shared a look. “Sometimes I forget that you’re a scary person when you get determined to do something Fuji-nee,” Shirou said.
“Damn right I’m scary!” Taiga declared loudly, making everyone turn and stare for a second before they just headed inside. “Now you two get inside while I get our new assistant gym teacher acquainted with the school. I’ll see you in homeroom Shirou.”

Saber’s façade cracked for a moment and she shot Shirou a worried glance before Taiga dragged her away. “Good luck,” Shirou called after her. He awkwardly chuckled, hoping that Saber wasn’t going to have any trouble then turned to Sakura. “So I’ll see you at lunch then?”

Sakura bowed her head. “If you’d like to eat together, Senpai…”

Shirou smiled at her. “Of course I would. I’ll stop by class one and get Rin too.”

A look of disappointment flashed across Sakura’s face for just an instant. “Alright. That would be nice, Senpai.” She smiled and hurried inside ahead of him. Shirou rubbed the back of his head, wondering if he’d said something wrong. He sighed and just walked to class.

As the lunch bell rang, Shirou grabbed his bagged lunch and headed down the hall to Rin’s classroom. He hesitated for a moment at the door, not quite sure what to say. People might take it the wrong way if he just walked in and called Rin out to have lunch with him. Thankfully, his problem was solved when the door slid open and Rin nearly ran into him. “Oh, Emiya. Good timing, I need to talk to you about something.”

“How important is it? We can talk over lunch, if you’d like to join Sakura and me, if you’re not busy of course.”

“What?” Shirou raised an eyebrow as Rin looked over her shoulder like someone was after her. “No, that’s fine. Let’s get out of here and eat somewhere else.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Let’s just go before…”

“Oh Tohsaka~” Rin groaned and Shirou looked over her shoulder to see a rather… buxom blonde with the biggest hair-do he’d ever seen. “Are you trying to run away from me? After I was so kind as to invite you to share the lovely gourmet lunch I brought.” The blonde’s eyes widened slightly when she saw Shirou. “Ohhoho. I see. Lunch with a handsome young man instead.”

“Uh,” Shirou backed up a step as the blonde closed in. “Hello. I don’t think we’ve met.”

“This is Luviagelita Edelfelt,” Rin said through clenched teeth. “A new transfer student from Europe. She’s supposed to be here for the rest of the semester.”

Shirou looked between the smirking blonde and angry brunette and wisely decided that discretion was the better part of valor. “It’s a pleasure to meet you Miss Edelfelt. I hope that you’re getting used to our school.” He bowed his head slightly.

Luvia blushed softly. “Please, call me Luvia. I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of meeting you either.”

“Oh right, I’m sorry.” Shirou bowed his head again. “My name is Shirou Emiya, from Class 2. It’s very nice to make your acquaintance.”

“It’s nice to make yours as well,” Luvia said with a large smile. “I hope that we can get to know
each other very well over the next few days.” She took his hand and held it to her chest.

Shirou blushed. “I’m sure we can be good friends,” he said, pulling his hand out of her grip. “Uh, I’m sorry but we need to get going.”

“Of course,” Luvia said. “I’ll see you later Shirou.”

One of Shirou’s eyes twitched at how she pronounced his name, but he kept a polite smile on his face. “Of course. Good day Miss Edelfelt.”
“And then she bragged about the gourmet lunch box! She’s such a… argh!” Shirou and Sakura both sat back and watched the amazing human fireball that was an enraged Rin Tohsaka. “And I know that she’s doing it to try to get into my head. She wants me off-guard before she makes her move.”

“Are you sure she’s another master?” Sakura asked as Rin trailed off into angry grumbling.

“The Edelfeldt and Tohsaka families have been rivals for ages,” Rin replied. “The only remotely possible reason for her to be here now is because she’s also competing the the Grail War. She’s not even trying to hide it. She’s flaunting the fact that she’s here to compete with me!”

Shirou wisely decided not to argue the point. “That’s a good thing isn’t it?” he asked. “If we know who the other masters are, resolving the war should be even faster.”

Rin grumbled a little, but didn’t look like she was going to argue. “She’s still trying to get in my head,” she said, turning her nose up. “And I’m not going to let her beat me at mind games. She won’t get to me!” Shirou felt a drop of sweat form on his brow as Rin’s eyes blazed. “Anyway, I thought that you weren’t interested in fighting like that. Unless running into that Einzbern brat last night changed your mind.”

To Shirou’s credit, it only took him a few moments to figure out what she was talking about. “I meant that it would make it easier to find our opponents!” he sputtered. “I don’t want to attack anyone!”

Rin sighed and hung her head. “I should have known better than to think you’d develop some sense overnight. Not that much can happen in one night, right?”

Both Sakura and Shirou managed to force their blushes down before Rin looked up again. “Why don’t we have something to eat,” Sakura said, trying to change the subject. She smiled and pulled out two lunch boxes, handing one to Shirou.

“Thanks, Sakura,” Shirou said, taking the box from her.

Rin sighed again. “Fine, I get it. I’m heading down to the cafeteria then.”

Shirou blinked as she got up to leave. “You’re not staying to have lunch with us? That is why we invited you.”

Rin shook her head. “I didn’t have time to pack a lunch this morning. I’m going to go down to the cafeteria to get something.”

“You can share some of mine if you want,” Shirou offered without hesitation. “It’s just leftovers from breakfast, but everyone seems to like my cooking.” He held up the box and smiled at her, completely oblivious to Sakura’s small frown.

Rin’s cheeks colored just a little bit. “Well, if you’re going to offer, it would be rude to refuse.” Shirou’s smile grew as she snapped the chopsticks apart and took a bite. Her eyes immediately lit up and she scarfed down two more before she caught herself and began to eat at a more sedate pace. “Before you distract me again, there are still things we need to discuss.”

“Uh Tohsaka…”
“Even if you insist on trying to do this whole thing the ‘right’ way, you’re going to have to be ready for the other masters to come at you with everything they’ve got,” Rin continued, ignoring his attempt to interrupt. “Especially since the last two servants are probably the most likely to come at you indirectly.”

“Assassin and Caster,” Sakura said. “We know that Tohsaka-senpai but…”

“Especially Assassin and Caster,” Rin said. “I’ll bet my family’s entire fortune that Edelfeldt has Caster. It’s just like one of them. They don’t have the skill to match the Tohsaka magecraft, so she’d summon up a servant to do it for her.”

“Tohsaka, you only met her four hours ago,” Shirou said gently. “And…”

“It makes perfect sense! She came straight at me when she got here. She was [i]planning[/i] to challenge me. They never could let that old rivalry go.” Rin grumbled and stuffed another bite into her mouth.

“People in glass houses…” a little voice in the back of Shirou’s mind said before he quashed the thought. “Assuming you’re right, that’s not really what…”

“But we know who she is,” Rin continued unabated. “So that’s one advantage we have over her. She doesn’t know everyone in our little group and I bet her dirty mind thinks that Shirou’s my boyfriend or something crazy like that rather than another master. That means that we need to worry about Assassin more than her. Any one of us could be taken out by a decent Assassin and they’re being smart and staying hidden. So if we’re going to work together we’re going to need to plan…”

“Tohsaka!” Shirou said, putting more force behind his words.

Rin finally stopped. “What? This is important Emiya.”

“I know, but I wanted to ask if I can have my lunch back before you finish it all.”

Rin looked down at the lunchbox with a slightly shocked expression. “Uh…” The rice was almost half gone already and only two of the omelet rolls were left in the box. She blushed and shoved the box back into Shirou’s hands. “Thanks for the food,” she said quickly.

“We know that we have to take this seriously,” Sakura said quietly. She watched Shirou out of the corner of her eye as he picked up Rin’s chopsticks and started to eat what was left of his lunch.

“And we’ll do what we need to do to come out of this in one piece. I promise that.”

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“How can… How can someone so cute… be so cruel,” one of Shirou’s classmates gasped as he finished his tenth lap around the track and finally came to a stop, panting and sweat dripping from his brow despite the cool winter air.

Shirou glanced over at Saber, who was standing near the bleachers by the track and watching the entire class as they ran laps. “You only learn with practice!” she called out encouragingly. “That’s it! You’ll be in shape in no time!”

“She’s not that bad,” Shirou said between breaths as he slowed to a stop.

“I have to agree with Emiya,” Issei said, panting a little as he finished his laps.

“And I thought you didn’t like girls,” one of the guys said with a cheeky smile. “I guess we finally
figured out what kind of girl Ryuudou likes.”

“Hot, mysterious, blonde foreigners?” another boy cut in. “You’d have to be dead for her not to be your type.”

Issei calmly pushed his glasses up. “Knock it off,” he said, glaring through the lens and making both students back up a step. “I’m hardly the kind of person who bases my opinion on silly things like physical attraction.” He looked over at Saber, who seemed to be in the process of giving two girls advice on something. “But she has a certain… feel about her. I think anyone can tell that she’s a good person at heart.”

“Yeah I guess,” the first guy said. “I just wish she’d chill out a little bit.”

“Hey!” the gym teacher called from across the field. “If you four are done running, go get changed! Class is about to end and the track club needs to field after school!” He cupped his hands around his mouth. “That goes for all of you! Finish your lap and head in!”

“Yes sensei!” most of the students called out as they hurried to the locker rooms.

Shirou walked out a few minutes later, absently pulling his jacket back on, only to stop dead when he saw Saber standing near the door. “Oh, I thought you’d still be cleaning up.”

Saber shook her head. “Your teacher told me that I was free to go. I believe he said that ‘a pretty girl like you shouldn’t have to stay late on her first day’ or something to that effect.”

Shirou chuckled. “Yeah, that sounds like him. I have to grab my things from the classroom and then we can go home. Do you want to meet Sakura and me at the gate?”

Saber shook her head. “I would prefer to walk with you. My purpose here is to remain close to you after all.”

Shirou thought he did a good job of not blushing. “Sure, just…” He trailed off for a moment. “Just please don’t talk like that where someone might hear us. They might take it the wrong way.”

If Saber was bothered by the thought, she didn’t show it. “I suppose people are still just as quick to jump to conclusions as ever.” She sighed. “But I understand. I’ll be sure not to cause you any trouble.”

“I’d be more worried about you getting in trouble than me,” Shirou said, half to himself. Saber didn’t respond as they walked back to the main building. By the time they reached the stairs to the second floor, the silence was almost stifling. Saber lost her relaxed demeanor the moment that she was alone with Shirou, walking just behind him with a serious look on her face. Shirou finally had to break the silence. “So… did you enjoy your first day?”

“It was alright,” Saber said. “I fear that I’m not much of a teacher, but the students were attentive and respectful.”

“Really?” Shirou couldn’t keep the look of surprise off his face. “You looked like you were having a good time leading the lesson today. And you were talking with some of the other students during class.”

“Oh, that? They were asking me how I did my hair.” Shirou nearly tripped over the top step. “To be honest, I didn’t really know what to say. I’ve never put all that much effort into my appearance. I suppose I’m not very good with children either.”
For just a moment, Shirou wondered if he should be offended that Saber considered him a child. “At least they feel comfortable talking to you. That’s a good start, right?”

Saber frowned slightly. “I see your point. Even if I’m only here for a short time, it will be helpful to earn the trust of the students.”

Shirou felt an unexpected hint of regret in his chest. He hadn’t really thought about it, but Saber would be gone as soon as the Grail War was over, wouldn’t she? “You’ll be everyone’s favorite teacher in no time,” he said with a smile, pushing down the unpleasant sensation. He stopped in front of the classroom door and pushed it open. “Wait right here and I’ll be back in a second.”

Saber nodded and stepped back to wait by the door while Shirou grabbed his bag. “Ready to go home?” she asked as he returned.

“I am now,” Shirou said. “Let’s go pick up Sakura. Oh, and we need to decide what to have for dinner tonight.”

Saber couldn’t hide a small smile as they headed back down to the gates.
Chapter 16

It was nearing sundown when Rin finally arrived at the Emiya residence, and the last rays of the sun were disappearing over the horizon. “There’s a presence in the air tonight,” Archer said, looking up at the stars as they slowly crept into view. “Something strange is going to happen tonight.” She frowned. “I’m not sure I like it. I keep getting into fights with these monstrously powerful servants when I get this feeling. A good scuffle’s all well and good, but it’s less fun when I’m the one at a disadvantage.”

Rin shot her servant a look. “Do you only pick fights with people who you know you can beat?”

“No, but I like to have time to set up a couple of dirty tricks before I fight someone stronger than me.” She sighed and rubbed her head absently. “Man, the Archer class really doesn’t suit me very well…”

“Maybe you’d be happier as an Assassin,” Rin said dryly. “Then you could sneak up on people and use all the dirty tricks you want.”

“It would probably be easier that way,” Archer agreed. “But I don’t think we’d work together very well. You don’t seem like the type to sit back and wait for me to stab people in the back.”

“Well thank you for being so considerate,” Rin deadpanned as she rang the bell.

There was a moment of silence before the front door opened and Shirou appeared wearing a sky blue apron and a headband to keep his hair out of his eyes. “Oh, good evening Tohsaka. I hope I didn’t keep you waiting.” He absently wiped his hands dry on his apron and opened the gate for her.

Normally Rin would try to keep her composure, but she was absolutely done with this day. “Emiya… what are you doing?”

“Huh?” Shirou cocked his head. “I’m washing the dishes. I thought I’d be done by now, but Saber and Rider use a lot of bowls.”

“What did I do to deserve this?” Rin muttered. She shook herself. “Well are you ready to go or not? Unless you want to stay here and wait for our enemies to come to us instead.”

“We should be almost ready to go. Please, come in and rest until we’re done.” He stepped aside and let the pair into the house.

Rin absently wiped her feet on the doormat. “Pardon the intrusion.” She slipped out of her shoes and followed Shirou down the hall to the dining room. As they rounded the corner, she finally got a glimpse of the other servants. Saber was wearing a blouse and skirt that at least looked relatively modest and sitting on one side of the table sipping a cup of tea. Rider was on the other side, wearing a sweater that was definitely far too tight on her and made her generous… assets stand out far too much. Rin self-consciously looked down at her chest for a second. “What are they wearing?” she muttered.

“Well they couldn’t exactly sit at the dinner table in armor,” Shirou said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“You know, he’s got a point,” Archer said thoughtfully. “I would be much more comfortable if I had a few more outfits. And there was the amazing leather jacket I saw downtown when you were showing me around the city…”
Rin’s eye twitched and she displayed a remarkable amount of control in keeping silent. “If this costs me money, I’m going to recoup my losses from your hide Emiya!” She took a few deep breaths before she trusted herself to speak. “We’ll talk about it later,” she said firmly.

“I have everything cleaned up and drying,” Sakura said, turning off the sink and wiping her hands on a towel hanging off the edge of the sink. “Ready to go?” There was a momentary swirl of air and a burst of light, forcing Rin to cover her eyes. When she opened them again, both servants were dressed in their combat gear.

“I’m ready,” Saber said.

Shirou took off his apron and folded it over the back of his chair then pulled a black and white jacket over his t-shirt. “Let’s just hope we don’t run into Berserker again…”

“We’ll have to fight her again at some point master. And her Berserker is a rare specimen, one who can fight with skills equal to my own while possessing the monstrous strength of her class. Better to confront her now, rather than wait for her to set the terms of engagement again.” Saber shook her head.

Shirou nodded slowly. “But if she is my sister… if she is, then maybe we don’t have to be enemies. Something must have happened to her in the years since my… since her father left her. If it’s possible, I want to help her. But I won’t let her attack anyone else either.”

Sakura smiled and Rin almost gaped at him. “Your idealism is going to get us killed,” she said. “But… if she is your family, I won’t interfere if you insist on dealing with her alone. Just don’t blame me if it blows up in your face!”

“Then let’s go. I’m sure Fuji-nee is already getting impatient.”

“She’s coming with us too then?”

Shirou nodded. “She said that we’re probably going to run into trouble, so she wants to be around to do her ‘job’ or whatever you want to call it.”

“I wonder if it counts as a conflict of interest to have the neutral referee be the guardian of one of the competitors…” Rin muttered. “That seems sleazy as hell.”

“I think that the Holy Grail knows what it’s doing,” Sakura said. “At least, I hope that it does. The Grail system wouldn’t work very well if the Grail wasn’t impartial.”

Rin rubbed her neck. “I guess you’re right.”

The group all headed out, giving Shirou a moment to lock the door behind him before they walked down the block toward the entrance to the Fujimura estate. All of them came to a sudden halt as they saw who was standing at the gate. Ruler looked just the same as the last time they’d seen her, but Taiga looked… different. Her usual simple dress and shirt had been replaced with jet black dress pants and a matching blouse, with a heavy coat protecting her from the cold winter night. Her famous, or perhaps infamous, shinai was held over her shoulder.

“Fujimura-sensei?” Sakura said carefully, like she wasn’t sure if they were actually talking to the same person.

“You took too long!” Taiga half shouted. “I was starting to think I’d have to go off on my own!”

“You look different,” Shirou said carefully.
“Grandpa bought me this ages ago when he needed me to look professional for one of his business partners.” Taiga puffed up her chest and put her hands on her hips. “I think that those other mages will take me seriously like this.”

“You’re certainly more noticeable…” Shirou muttered.

“Well, let’s not stand around here then!” Taiga smacked Tora-shinai against her palm. “We have places to go and people to teach a lesson!”

Rin was learning all sorts of interesting things tonight. “This woman is a teacher…”

The night was remarkably quiet as they group moved through the streets. Everyone seemed to have turned in for the night, save the occasional late night worker who quickly disappeared back inside their shops when the strange group moved past. “Maybe moving around in one group is making the other combatants wary,” Sakura finally suggested.

“Maybe, but I don’t think it’s that simple,” Rin replied. “I can feel it. We’re being watched by something. A familiar maybe. They’re waiting for us to get somewhere that they’d prefer to do battle. Somewhere without witnesses.”

“The park,” Shirou suggested. “Or down by the river.”

“Oh, let’s go down to the river,” Archer said, a savage grin on her face. “I can really cut loose with a decent body of water nearby.”

“I second the suggestion,” Saber quickly agreed. “My abilities lend themselves well to a battle near water. And I believe it may give me some extra options when dealing with Lancer or Berserker, shoulder they choose to attack again.”

Everyone looked at Rider and the purple-haired servant just looked back for a second. “What? As long as I’m capable of moving, I can fight. I don’t have any special desires for a battlefield.”

“Staying away from possible witnesses would be to everyone’s benefit,” Ruler added. “And it would avoid me needing to sanction anyone for risking the exposure of the Holy Grail War.”

“Are we going to have to make every decision by committee?” Archer grumbled. “Come on, let’s just go already!”

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The riverside park was small and predictably completely abandoned. No one was going to be on a romantic evening walk in the middle of winter. “Well! We’re here!” Archer shouted to the air. “Come on, don’t keep us waiting! I haven’t had a fight go uninterrupted this entire War. I want some action!”

Sakura frowned. “Archer, I don’t think they’re…” She was cut off as the sudden feeling of a servant appears in the distance and rapidly closes in on their position. A servant clad all in black appeared above the tree line and landed lightly on a lamppost.

“Oh, a rematch,” Archer said, drawing her pistols. “Anyone mind if I take this one?”

“I was hoping for a rematch with Saber,” Lancer said as she casually twirled her spear. “It’s been a long time since I fought a worthy opponent. But if you want to fight me, I’ll send you back to the Throne before I face her.”
“You’re entirely too cocky,” Archer said. She ignored a coughing fit from Rin and continued to stare down the other servant. “I think I want to wipe that smile off your face.”

“You’re welcome to try. No one has succeeded yet.”

“Doesn’t it sort of defeat the purpose of working together if they run off to fight one on one?” Shirou asked, mostly to himself as both servants moved. Archer leaped sideways, filling the air with lead while Lancer calmly weaved between the shots, occasionally dodging back or knocking one of the shots away with the haft of her spear. She seemed to be taking her time, getting accustomed to Archer’s fire before charging forward and attacking in the instant that the red-clad servant leaves a gap in her firing pattern.

“As impressive as this is,” Rider said as the pair moved toward the river. “Shouldn’t we do something while she’s alone?” As if on cue, the ground shuddered and the pavement cracked around them. The earth rose up and skeletal warriors began to crawl from beneath the soil. “It seems that I spoke too soon. Sakura, get behind me.”

Saber drew her blade, putting herself firmly between the masters and the new arrivals. “You should do the same master,” she said. “These things shouldn’t be much of a challenge.”

“What are they?” Shirou said, falling back a few steps instinctively.

“Constructs of some kind,” Rin said, drawing three small gems from her coat pocket. “Or familiars. But they’re different from anything I’ve seen before. If I had to guess, these are the work of Caster.”

“Oh come on!” Taiga said. “This can’t be fair.” She tried to move to a ready stance, only to have her servant put a hand on her shoulder.

Ruler shook her head. “Actually, this is exactly what would be expected of a Caster who doesn’t wish to directly engage an enemy. I can’t intervene unless someone violates one of the tenants of the Holy Grail. And it would be in bad faith for my master to do any different. Please, come with me and find a decent vantage point to observe the battle.”

Taiga growled and ground her teeth together. “If Shirou or Sakura get so much as a scratch on them, I’m coming down here and dealing with these things myself and you can’t stop me!”

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“O~hohohoho! I think Tohsaka’s a little put out,” Luvia said as she watched the scene unfold in the scrying pool Caster had thrown together after dinner. “But I must say, I’m impressed that you’re able to control so many over such a long distance. The Caster class really does live up to its name.”

Caster smiled and curtsied. It was so much nicer to be back in her robes and dress. “It’s not much of a challenge for me, though I prefer to use normal animal familiars to the dragon tooth warriors. But since I don’t specialize in direct combat magic, I need to be a little creative.”

“I can appreciate some creativity. I wonder if Tohsaka will get out of this one with her servant distracted or if she’ll be forced to sit there being useless while her allies do all the heavy lifting.” She smiled wider and leaned over to get a better view of the battle. “Try to get some of the familiars past the servants and go for the masters. If you can’t, try to at least take Rider out. She’s likely to be much weaker than Saber.”

“I’d rather not have to deal with Saber at all,” Caster said. “I don’t have powerful enough attack spells to touch her at all. It would make things a great deal easier if one of the other servants were to eliminate her instead.” She sighed. She wasn’t one for fighting much at all, but as long as she was a
servant in the Holy Grail War, she would do her best to succeed, even with her skills.

“We’ll find some way to deal with her if we have to,” Luvia said. “We’re a team after all. If we combine our marvelous intellect, we can solve any problem.”

Saber shattered two more of the constructs with one swing, easily crushing their brittle bodies. They weren’t really a threat because of their strength or durability, but they simply kept coming. She was forced to simply hold her ground and keep them from reaching her master rather than making any progress toward the battle between the other knight classes. And to make matters worse, the servant who had conjured the familiars was apparently staying out of the fight, so fighting the skeletons was essentially nothing more than a distraction.

To her right, Rider was carving through them with just as much ease, her body flipping through the air and flickering between the bone warriors so fast that anyone other than a servant wouldn’t be able to see her moving at all. However, she wasn’t making any more progress as the flood of constructs forced her to stay in a small area to prevent them from getting close to Sakura.

Occasionally, a burst of bright light erupted in a particularly tight cluster of the warriors, annihilating the lot and leaving the air filled with glittering fragments for a few moments. Rin was grumbling as she pulled out more gems to replace the ones she spent destroying their enemies. Sakura matched her support, occasionally shooting a strange beam of black light that caused every skeleton that touched it to crumble to dust instantly. But the purple-haired girl’s mana was clearly running out faster than Rin’s, forcing her to rely on Rider for most of the work. If she could just find some way to stop the things from rising again and again then maybe…

“Saber! Behind you!” Saber spun as she realized that another warrior had risen from the ground while she was distracted and was poised to cut into her back. Before she could put the thing down, Shirou charged forward, crushing its head with a reinforced branch.

“Master, what are you doing?” Saber growled as she cut through another three. “You should stay back with the others. A few would be no threat to you, but you’ll be overwhelmed if you try to face their numbers. Let me do my duty and fight for you!”

“You’ll be overrun if this keeps up,” Shirou insisted, swinging his makeshift weapon through another skeleton’s spine and sending it toppling to the ground in pieces. “I can’t stand there doing nothing while you’re fighting by yourself.”

Saber wasn’t sure if she should gape or just sigh. “You’re being foolishly stubborn master, especially over something so pointless. Get back before you get hurt. I’m more than capable of handling these things.”

Shirou shook his head. “Rin and Sakura are fighting. I refuse to not do my part.” He stepped forward, smashing two more skeletons as they tried to rise from the earth on Saber’s left. “Just leave it to me.”

“It’s far too much effort to argue with you in the middle of a fight,” Saber replied, sweeping her blade through an entire pack of the creatures. “But we will discuss this later.”

Shirou wisely took that as a win and bashed another skeleton to pieces. He swung at another, but suddenly felt a familiar burning in his arm. The reinforcement on his makeshift weapon failed and the wood shattered over the familiar’s body. Shirou gritted his teeth through the pain and staggered back as the skeleton took the opportunity to backhand him. He cried out as he hit the ground hard,
feeling the broken stone path dig into his back.

Before the creature could follow up with its weapon, Saber calmly dispatched it with one swing. “If you insist on fighting, at least stay close to me so I can cover for you,” she said calmly.

Shirou nodded. “Right. Let’s do this.” He grabbed another branch and felt the heat surge through his body as he built a circuit and reinforced the wood before jumping back into the fray.

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Archer hated to admit it, but this one might be a little out of her league. Lancer was faster and stronger than her, and definitely knew how to use that spear to full effect. She hadn’t even hinted at its full powers yet and it didn’t seem to have any passive tricks. At least the two wounds she’d managed to pick up when she’d let Lancer get too close didn’t seem to be doing anything other than bleeding a bit. “Okay, I admit that you’re not too bad at this,” she said, falling back and dropping to one knee to catch her breath. She fired a couple of shots in Lancer’s direction to keep her from closing the gap immediately.

“I’ve spent most of my life being the best,” Lancer replied, leaping over the bullets and diving down toward the slowing servant. “If you want to surrender, I’ll be happy to accept your concession. Of course, that would require me killing you, or taking your master’s command seals.” The black clad servant landed smoothly in front of Archer and pointed her spear at her neck.

“You might be the best,” Archer admitted. “But…” One hand came out from under her coat and fired a shot straight through Lancer’s leg. “You’re too used to fighting fair. And I love to fight dirty.” She leaped back, landing at the edge of the water.

Lancer hissed in pain as she experimentally jumped back with her injured leg. “So it seems. I guess I’ve gotten a little reckless. So I’m going to have to end things here.”

Archer laughed. “Oh, still arrogant. Well… Let me show you…” She leaped back again, launching herself out over the water. “Just who you’re dealing with!” The water exploded as a massive galleon emerged from beneath the river. “Let’s see you dodge this win a hole in your leg!”

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“I believe Archer is about to use her Noble Phantasm,” Caster said, still watching the fight from the safety of their hotel room.

“Keep watching,” Luvia said urgently. “Even if we don’t get anywhere with the others, we can at least identify Tohsaka’s servant.”

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“Uh oh,” Rin muttered, feeling the pull on her mana. “I think Archer’s angry…”

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Archer pointed her pistol directly at Lancer and all of her flagship’s cannons did the same. “To hell with you! All cannons… fire! Golden Hind!”

As the pulled the trigger, two things happened very fast. First, Lancer threw herself backwards, trying to get as far from the blast as possible. Second, another woman in black and purple armor charged out of the trees, a massive cross-shaped shield in hand.
“What?!” Archer barely had time to register the movement as her Phantasm fired a volley of supernatural cannon fire.

The pinkish-haired girl slammed her shield into the ground. “Lord Camelot!”
Chapter 17

Shirou stopped dead in his tracks as two brilliant lights erupted from the edge of the river. An explosion of gold fired in, only to be met by a towering white wall. The force of the impact surged through the air, knocking the skeletons head over heels and nearly taking the magi with them. Shirou felt a shiver run down his spine. Was this the power of a Noble Phantasm? It wasn’t just the physical power he could feel. There was a tangible awe to watching the two powers clash. He could feel Archer’s fury and something strange from the white barrier. Someone who was fighting Archer was probably his enemy, but the barrier gave of a sense of majesty that made him feel almost… safe.

Saber on the other hand looked somewhere between shocked and horrified. “No… not again,” she whispered, almost too quiet for him to hear. Then she dashed forward, carving through the remaining familiars with brutal efficiency. The skeletal warriors seemed almost as awed, putting up even less of a fight as she pushed through them. The last few warriors fell and the tide finally seemed to end as they pushed through to the water.

Archer was standing on the edge of the water, her ship fading back into sea mist. “Who are you to get in my way?” she asked, panting slightly.

“I had everything under control,” Lancer said, still favoring her injured leg a bit. “Who sent you to help me?”

“Galahad!” Everyone turned to see Saber at the top of the steps leading down to the water. “It is you.”

The woman in black armor turned to face the knight, her massive shield held loosely in one hand. “Greetings my lord,” she said, bowing her head respectfully. “I was hoping that we wouldn’t meet on the battlefield.”

“It really is you,” Saber said, ignoring the rest of the group entirely. “Why? Why are you here?”

“In this time, I am known as servant Shielder. And I was summoned to be part of this Grail War, just as you were,” the pink haired girl replied. “I suspected that it was you the first time I laid eyes on you, but I wasn’t certain until I saw you do battle.”

Saber’s grip tightened around her sword until her hands trembled. “So do you stand here as my enemy then? Would you ask me to do battle with you?”

Shielder dropped to one knee. “I beg your forgiveness my lord, but by the summoning contract requires that I pay fealty to my master. I don’t wish to face you as an enemy, if it can be avoided.” She raised her head and looked at Saber. “I have seen that you seek a way to participate in this war without unnecessary conflict. I hope that your master and mine might be able to come to some accord.”

“We have come to a temporary truce, but make no mistake. I must win the Grail,” Saber said firmly. “I made too many mistakes when I was alive. This is my chance to make things right again.”

“The sins of the past were all of ours to bear my lord,” Galahad said. “And we stood by your side through all of it regardless.”

Saber closed her eyes. “You deserved better than such a foolish king… But I will discuss your offer with my master.”
“That doesn’t answer my question,” Lancer said.

Shielder blinked and turned to the other servant. “My apologies. I was instructed to come here and help you by my master. I’ve been asked not to say much more than that.”

“That’s great and all,” Lancer said, swinging her spear up over her shoulder. “But I can handle myself. There’s no point in winning or losing if someone else intervenes on my behalf.”

“If you want to keep going, I’ve got plenty of energy for another round,” Archer said.

“I’m afraid that I can’t allow that,” Ruler said, walking out from somewhere behind the onlookers. “I’m afraid you’ve attracted far too much attention.”

“Why do people keep getting in the middle of my fights?” Lancer muttered.

“I am servant Ruler,” she replied without missing a beat. “And it is my duty to act as the arbitrator of the Holy Grail War. And maintaining the secrecy of the Grail War and magecraft as a whole is one of the Holy Grail’s decrees.” She pointed down the river toward the bridge, where the lights of cars could already be seen gathering. “So I am declaring this conflict concluded for the evening. If you would like to disagree…” She smiled. “Then you can take it up with me, and all the power that the Grail grants me to fulfill my duties.”

Lancer sighed. “It seems like I’m not going to get to finish the fight again.” She twirled her spear, balancing it across both shoulders. “Well then, I bid you all fair well. Hopefully we’ll get to have a better match later.” She waved cheekily and vanished into her astral form.

“I hope to see you again my lord,” Shielder said, bowing her head again before she vanished.

“Well, that was interesting,” Rider said.

“I’ll say,” Rin said, finally finding her voice. “That was Sir Galahad. Which makes you King Arthur.”

“King Arthur…” Shirou looked over the blonde servant as her dress swirled around her.

Saber blushed and turned away. “There’s no need to stare…” she said. “I wanted to keep my identity safe, but it seems that there’s little point to that now.”

“Why are you a woman?” Rin asked bluntly.

“You’re one to complain,” Archer muttered.

Rin gritted her teeth. “Not. Now.”

Saber sighed. “The people of my time wouldn’t have approved of a woman ruling them. Hiding my true gender was necessary. I’m not surprised that the truth was never uncovered by history. Can we please talk about this later?”

“Let’s go back to my place,” Shirou said. “We can talk there.”

Hmmm, Ruler seems to have adapted to her duties nicely,” Irisviel said as she watched the group moving back to the house. “Good, good…”

Kiritsugu’s eyes narrowed. “Dear, is there something you didn’t tell me?”
Irisviel smiled at him. “What could I possibly have hidden from you?”

“A servant’s abilities are part of the vessel they’re summoned into. The only reason she’d have to adapt to anything is if you changed that somehow.”

His wife’s smile widened just a bit. “I might have added a couple of extra instructions to the usual list. It was for everyone’s benefit.”

Kiritsugu counted to five and pulled out a cigarette. “Don’t you think that rewriting the Grail’s rules could have consequences? It took the three families asking Zelretch for help to make it work in the first place.”

“I have access to everything that they put into the Grail. I’m sure that I can manage it just fine. What’s the worst that could happen?”

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“Are you certain of this?”

“Absolutely,” Julian Ainsworth said. “I’ve been monitoring the Fuyuki Grail closely ever since it began to show signs that something was wrong. My familiars have recently confirmed that the servant limitations have been broken. For the first time since the systems inception, we may have the chance to circumvent the Grail’s restrictions and enter the competition to claim the prize.”

His father frowned, folding his hands in front of his face. “We wouldn’t have time to make further preparations. You would be performing the ritual with no catalyst and very little practice.”

“This may be our only chance! The Einzberns robbed us of our spot constructing the Holy Grail when they turned against us. We have the chance to regain everything they took! Our family’s ancient goal is finally in reach. If we question our resolve now, then we’re doomed to failure!”

Zachery Ainsworth closed his eyes. “And you are prepared to accept this burden? To fight and potentially die in a war against some of the strongest mages in the world?”

Julian’s eyes shone. “Without a doubt. I’ve already researched the necessary rituals, and I believe that I’ve found something that will suit my goals perfectly.” He placed a slightly battered tome on his father’s desk. “The Einzberns did something interesting during the Third Grail War that I believe we can take advantage of.”

His father flipped the book open to a marked page and read over the material once. Then he snapped the book shut. “We have work to do.”

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“Are the stories true?” a grey haired woman asked. “The Holy Grail War has begun.”

“An interesting exercise in spiritual invocation,” a red-headed boy replied. “And the Einzberns have fielded some fascinating homunculi in previous conflicts. I wonder if they sent another to take part in this competition. I would love to get to meet one of them…”

“Preposterous,” a heavy set blonde man said. “The Holy Grail System is one of the most refined magical systems in existence. Surely such an event is impossible.”

A sandy brown haired young man yawned and scratched his head. “Does it really matter? It seems like a waste of effort to spend so much time on such an antiquated ritual with so many chances for it
to go wrong. Really, I don’t see why people bother.”

“Now see here!” the large man snapped. “Just because you have no respect for tradition…”

“Enough!” The entire clan fell silent as a blue haired man in a vaguely militaristic uniform joined
them, pushing a beautiful brunette woman in a wheelchair in front of him. “Bickering will get us
nowhere.” He looked over the gathered mages for a moment. “A few of my friends at the Clock
Tower have responded to my inquiries. Last week, an Enforcer was noted to have obtained the
Command Seals necessary to invoke a servant. She left for Japan shortly afterwards and nothing has
been heard from her since.”

“So it is true,” the first woman said thoughtfully. “But if it’s been this long, surely the war will have
already begun? Why call us here if there’s no battle to take part in?”

Darnic raised a hand for silence. “Be at ease, Celenike. I called in a favor with the Enforcers and
managed to find out a bit more about what’s going on. And something has changed. A contact from
the church has concluded that at least one extra servant has already been summoned.”

“And extra servant?” the large blonde man said thoughtfully. “A change in the formula? How could
something like this be? Surely it would require the fundamental nature of the Holy Grail to have
somehow changed.”

“I can’t say, Gordes,” Darnic admitted. “But considering how the last several conflicts have ended
poorly, perhaps the Grail is attempting to ensure that there’s actually a winner this time.”

“Then if we have the chance we should take it!” Celenike snapped. “Why stand around talking
about it? Didn’t we unite our clans so that we could have power that we’d never have apart? If
there was ever a time to use our strength and crush our enemies, it’s now.”

“Even if we attempt to turn this to our advantage and claim the Holy Grail, we cannot act as a
group,” the girl in the wheelchair cut in. “The Mage’s Association wouldn’t be very happy if our
entire clan moved to work together to win the Grail War. We’ll have to send a single representative,
just like everybody else.”

“Fine!” Celenike interrupted. “Then send me and I’ll handle everything myself.” The red-head
snorted, trying to restrain a laugh. “Something funny, Roche?”

“You’ll probably do something foolish and get yourself killed by the end of the first day,” he said.
“Why not let one of my golems do the work? An artificial master can be built with any of the
abilities we need and optimized to ensure he possesses enough mana to supply a very powerful
servant.”

“One of your toys?” Gordes scoffed. “We need a true magus to handle a powerful servant, not some
doll.”

“Enough!” Darnic said, raising his voice. He sighed. Sometimes trying to keep his adoptive family
on the same page was like trying to herd cats. “There is only one of us who possesses the aptitude
necessary to become our representative.” He looked down at the girl sitting in front of him. “Fiore.”

The girl jumped. “Me? Why me?”

“Because the Holy Grail will not only resonate with your magical talent, but also with your desires.
The Grail will respond more strongly to someone with a strong desire for something that they can’t
obtain on their own. Therefore, she is our best choice.” He smiled at her. “What do you say?”
Fiore shifted uncomfortably as every eye in the room turned to her. “It seems that the choice is obvious,” she said. “I don’t like the idea of such a conflict if there was another way, but a chance to obtain the Holy Grail... What do I have to do?”

The door swung silently shut behind her, locking the cold air out, though it did little to help the atmosphere of the house. She hung her coat on the rack by the door and shivered slightly, absently rubbing her arms. Before she could head into the kitchen, she saw a light blinking on the phone. With a sigh, she pressed the button and let the message play.

“Hello?” the voice on the other end came. It was a woman’s voice, with a hint of nervousness making her speak rather quickly. “Miyu? It’s your aunt. Something’s come up and I’ll be out of the country for a little while. Normally I wouldn’t worry, but things have started happening in Fuyuki and I’m afraid that it might be like last time. You’re the last member of the main branch, so I want you to stay safe. If something happens to you, it could be the end of our clan. I trust you not to do anything foolish, but if things get bad, you should leave the city and come to my place. It will be empty, but you’ll be safe there. Good luck.”

With that the message ended with a small beep. Miyu Sakatsuki sighed and hit the delete button. It was nothing she didn’t already know anyway. Most normal people wouldn’t really notice the difference, but anyone with some skill in magecraft could tell that powerful beings were gathering in Fuyuki City. Stories about strange people in odd historical costumes or bizarre impractical outfits just confirmed what she had suspected.

It was happening again.

Miyu’s fists clenched and her shoulders trembled for a moment before she regained her composure. For just a minute she was sure that she could smell smoke and hear a dark, unholy sound whispering from the flames beneath the screams. She shuddered and took a deep breath, forcing herself not to remember again. It was over. They were dead and buried and it was over.

She opened her eyes and headed straight for her workshop at the back of the house. Well, she called it a workshop, but it was mostly just the family library with a few shelves repurposed to hold notes and diagrams that she’d been using to practice. A lot of the older books were still too complicated to work from, and it wasn’t like she’d had a teacher to show her how things were supposed to work.

“We’ll start your training when you’re older Miyu,” her mother had said. “Once your powers stabilize. Just stay inside and be good, okay? You’re a very special girl. We don’t want you to get hurt.”

Like she had a choice. The bounded fields that kept everyone other than her immediate family out were just as good at keeping her in. She wasn’t old enough to realize it at the time, but she had been a prisoner in her own home. But she’d been more upset that she wasn’t allowed to play with the other children in the neighborhood. Miyu had almost laughed at herself when she’d finally finished reading the family histories.

Still, she owed her life to those barriers. They kept the flames from touching the main house when the rest of the city had been consumed in whatever dark magic had set the city on fire. The rest of her family hadn’t been so lucky.

What good was being a ‘holy child’ if her powers couldn’t give her what she really wanted? All she wanted was a normal life with her family. Was that a lot to ask? She shoved a pile of books out of the way and tossed a few papers haphazardly on a half empty shelf. Then she grabbed a piece of
chalk and dropped to her knees to begin drawing on the hardwood floor.

Maybe she wasn’t the holy child anymore, but she wasn’t the only source of wishes in Fuyuki. There were records of her family’s time in Fuyuki going back centuries, including the arrival of ‘outsiders’ who could wield powerful magic. A few of the other families had combined their powers to create a device that could grant wishes with power equal to any of her family’s holy children. Maybe even greater. Her ancestors had never bothered to get more involved. They had done what they’d always done and hidden away in their ancestral home, keeping their children safe and isolated from the rest of mankind until it was safe to let them out again. Only for the last attempt for some mage to claim the Grail to nearly end their family line.

But maybe… just maybe it could still grant her wish. She couldn’t bring her family back, but maybe the Holy Grail could finally give her a chance to have a real life, not trapped by the legacy and powers her family had handed down to her. It had taken weeks of research once she’d finally realized just what was hidden in the city, but she was finally ready to try. Her hand traced long, complicated patterns on the ground, slowly filling the circle with magic symbols. Soon a complex array lay on the ground before her.

She folded her hands, almost like she was praying, and channeled her magic into the circle. “Holy Grail, please hear me…”

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“Oh no, oh no, oh no,” Iri muttered.

“Irisviel, what’s happening?” Kiritsugu said. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen his wife actually look like she was afraid of something.

“Okay, so maybe there’s a teeny-tiny little problem after all,” she admitted, clearly focusing on something else. “Maybe removing the limits on servant summoning wasn’t the best way to handle the extras…”

That did not sound good at all. “Can I do anything to help?”

Irisviel shook her head. “No, not right now. Just let me concentrate. It’s very, very hard to try to stop a summoning if there are still servant slots open and there are several going on at the same time.” She bit her lip and fell silent as she worked on something that Kiritsugu couldn’t see. He sighed and willed a chair into existence. He dropped down heavily and watched his wife’s silent form as she struggled with whoever was trying to invoke another servant from the Holy Grail.

“I think Shirou can handle six more girls, right?” she asked suddenly. “He’s a durable young man.”

“Iri…”

“It’s going to be easier to make a few adjustments and push things in my favor that it is to try to forcibly shutdown three rituals at once,” Irisviel admitted. “I may have almost limitless power, but I can’t be everywhere at once.”

Kiritsugu fought with himself for a few moments. “If the only other option is someone who might hurt him getting a servant…”

“Oh good!” Irisviel raised her hands and Kiritsugu felt something shift. “Now let’s just get those limits adjusted so this little problem doesn’t happen again…”

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Angelica Ainsworth stood along the edge of the room with the rest of the family servants, watching as her brother finished the last stages of the ritual to call down a Heroic Spirit to fight on his behalf. Part of her, a small part at the back of her head, was sick of her brother’s machinations. His desire to create a legend had become more of an obsession, and their just father indulged him.

The runic circle began to glow and mana surged through the room, flying wild and uncontrolled. She reflexively raised a hand to shield her eyes and felt the power pushing outward. She couldn’t help wondering if Julian was finally in over his head. The room shook and she felt a burning sensation on the back of her hand as the magic washed over her one more time before a flash of light forced her to cover her eyes completely.

When the light finally died down, she peeked over her arm. A woman appeared from the circle, a purple cape so dark that it was almost back swirling around her body. Strange, form-fitting black armor covered her almost from head to toe, with only a splash of pale skin visible in the gap between her skirt and boots. One hand was sitting lightly on a sword at her hip while the other holding a staff with a standard hanging limp from the top. She looked around dispassionately for a moment. “I am servant Avenger, bearer of resentment,” she said. “Now, who among you claims to be my master?”

Julian couldn’t keep a look of triumph off his face. “I am your Master,” he said, stepping forward.

The woman looked at him for a long moment then a smirk crossed her face. “No, I think not. You don’t carry my command spell.” Julian’s eyes widened, but he managed to maintain his composure. The woman ignored him and looked around. “You.”

Angelica felt a hint of surprise. “Me? I don’t understand.”

“I can sense the command seals upon you.” Avenger pointed to her hand. Angelica looked down and saw a blood red pattern etched into her skin. “You are my Master.”

Angelica stared at the command seals on her skin. This was definitely not as planned.

The entire Yggdmillennia clan worked together to create their ritual. It wasn’t all the complicated, but without a catalyst, they had to use every trick at their disposal to try to bring a powerful servant to them. They weren’t strangers to combining their power and knowledge, but this was uncharted ground. Fiore sat in her chair, watching as the others finished the circle and places gems glowing with mana all along the edge. Maximizing her power would hopefully let her draw out a servant that could match whatever the Founding Families brought to the table.

“Sister,” her brother said. “Are you sure you want to do this? Risking your life for this ritual…”

Fiore shook her head. “I’m not, but the power of the Grail… it could do anything. We could finally reach the Root. Or maybe…” She looked down, one hand running slowly along her legs, trying to work out a little of the lingering pain that plagued her.

Caules sighed and adjusted his glasses. “Then we’re ready to begin.”

Fiore wheeled over to the edge of the circle, looking at the intricate ritual circle laid out for her. She closed her eyes and braced herself for the inevitable pain as she activated her circuits and let the magical energy flow through her body. Her limbs burned, but she ignored the sensation and pushed her mana into the circle. The gems lit up one by one as they poured more magic into the ritual, enhancing her already excellent mana output and filling the circle with her power. The power surged around her and for a few moments it felt like the circle was resisting.
Then the wall broke and she felt the back of her hand burn for an instant. A pillar of light filled the hall and she flinched as a gust blew through the air and she felt her chair forced back a few inches before the wind finally died. The light faded to nothing and someone appeared from the circle.

She was... actually kind of short. Short enough that she was looking Fiore straight in the eye while she was sitting down. Her clothes resembled a military uniform, though their style didn’t match anything she’d seen before. A long red cape swirled around her, still held up by the wind. A sword was braced at one hip, while her other hand held a long, ornate musket. The servant looked around for a moment before her eyes settled on Fiore. “Mwahahaha! Wonderful! What a fabulous way to return to the world. I am the great Demon King of the Sixth Heaven, but you may call me Servant Gunner!”

Fiore felt a sweat drop form on her brow. Who the hell had she summoned?

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Miyu felt her heart race as the circle was consumed by light. Did it work? Did the Holy Grail actually respond to her wish? She barely noticed as a twinge of pain shot through her hand. Then the light died down and a figure emerged from within.

The new arrival looked a bit... unusual. She was wearing a ridiculously puffy black dress that had a little bit of a gothic feel to it over a white petticoat and a white sweater. Pink details lined the edge of the outfit. Her arms were bare from the shoulders to her elbows, but long white gloves with oversize puffy ends covered the rest of them. Skin toned stockings with small patterns along the front ran down her legs into white knee-high boots. But the craziest part by far was the horns sticking out of her pink hair and the tail dangling behind her. “Hey there!” she said cheerfully. “Looks like you can call me Temptress. Let’s put on a good show together, okay?”

It took Miyu a minute to find her voice. “What?” Okay, so maybe it wasn’t the most eloquent response.

Temptress cocked her head. “Uh, I’m your Servant. You just summoned me. Are you feeling okay?”

Miyu stared at her some more. “I don’t… what?” Damn it. Her ritual had gone completely wrong, hadn’t it? “Damn it. I was just trying to contact the Holy Grail.”

Temptress perked up. “Oh, no, you did that exactly right. I’m Temptress, one of the Heroic Spirits summoned by the Holy Grail by a mage to act as their champion. whoever wins the battle between heroes will have the right to ask the Holy Grail for a single wish. So I hope you have something interesting in mind.”

Miyu sighed. Of course there was a catch. There’s always a catch when magic is involved.
He was looking at a sword. Shirou had seen swords before. There were ornamental blades at Taiga’s house and he’d used training swords plenty of times. He’d even gotten a good look at the shining steel being used by some of the Servants he’d encountered so far. But this was… different. The sword was majestic in a way that couldn’t be properly put into words. He could almost feel warmth radiating off the silvery blade. And the tip was buried deep inside a block of solid stone. One of his hands moved forward unbidden to grab the hilt.

“Hold,” a voice said from behind him. He half turned to see a man appearing out of mid-air. A white cloak billowed around him and tufts of bluish hair poked out from under his hood. “Do you understand what it means to take up that sword? As soon as you draw forth that blade, you will no longer be able to live among ordinary men. Becoming a king means no longer being human. You must become so much more. Are you prepared to make that sacrifice?”

He felt a sudden swirl of emotions. There was fear and hesitation. But determination and courage drowned them out. He nodded and the cloaked man’s lips twitched into a small smile before he faded away. He turned back to the sword and with one quick motion pulled the sword from the stone. Golden light erupted all around, nearly blinding him for a moment. He raised the blade into the air and for just a moment he could see his own reflection in the blade. And brilliant blue-green eyes looked back at him.

Then he felt his vision suddenly beginning to fade and a sharp tug yanked him back, dragging him outside of the blonde girl’s body like a ghost. Shirou reflexively reached out, trying to drag himself back toward the golden light, but the darkness closed in around him and everything faded away.

His vision returned as he hurtled downward, and seemed to fall straight into another scene. He was in a castle, but it looked more like something out of a fairy tale than from medieval Europe. He was standing on top of a set of stairs, leading down into a massive entry way. Red carpet covered the steps, leading down to a polished marble floor and golden railings lined the walkways above.

He was waiting for something. He didn’t know what it was, but he was sure that it was something important. Something that he needed to do. His hands flexed and he felt his magic circuits sparking in anticipation. It was an odd sensation, more a warm heat surging through his arm than the fiery pain that usually accompanied his powers. His unusually sharp ears picked up the sound of footsteps coming toward him and he could see two figures coming in from the front door and…

Shirou shot straight up in bed, breathing heavily. He clenched his fist, the phantom weight of the sword vanishing as his heartbeat slowed back to normal. The images of the dreams were slightly hazy, but refused to leave his head. “Saber…” he muttered under his breath, looking down at his empty hand. What was that? Just a dream? But it seemed like more than that. It was more like… a memory. He groaned and rubbed his head. Why was he dreaming about Saber anyway? And what was with that weird castle?

“Shirou.” The red-head jumped as Sakura stirred next to him. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Shirou said quickly. “Just a strange dream.”

Sakura wrapped her arms around his waist. “Are you sure that’s all it was, senpai?”

“Really, that’s all it was.” He kissed her on the forehead. “Go back to sleep Sakura. We still have school tomorrow.”
The purple haired girl frowned then kissed him softly on the lips. “Alright. Good night, Senpai.”

Rin’s alarm clock went off and she nearly jumped out of her skin. Her head snapped up and she blinked the sleep from her eyes. For a second, she didn’t actually know where she was. Then she recognized her own library. “Right.” She groaned and rubbed her eyes. She had been researching something and must have fallen asleep at her desk.

“Good morning, master,” Archer said cheerfully. “I hope you slept well.”

Rin tried to stand, only for the muscles in her back to violently protest. “I haven’t fallen asleep in here in a while,” she said, mostly to herself as she stretched out and forcing the locked muscles to respond.

“You should try sleeping on a moving ship once in a while. It might put things in perspective.”

“Laugh it up,” Rin muttered flatly. “Sir.”

One of Archer’s eyes popped up. “So that’s what you were working on so diligently.”

Rin just glared at her. “Why are you a woman?”

“Well, I started growing breasts when I was thirteen and then…”

“Not remotely what I meant!” Rin snapped, glancing down at her own chest for a second before she shook it off. “The Golden Hind was easy to identify once I saw it, but every book I’ve got is sure that Sir Francis Drake was a man. He was married at least twice. Someone would have noticed if he wasn’t a he.”

Archer said nothing for a moment. “Who says they didn’t notice? I know that modern culture enjoys a little yuri action, but back then there were things that you had to hide, especially when you were working for someone who’s the head of the Church of England.” She smirked and leaned in closer, her face hovering dangerously close to her master’s. “I could show you just how I convinced my wives to stay around and keep quiet if you’d like.”

Rin turned several very bright shades of red in quick succession. “I… I’m not… I know what you’re trying to do! And it’s not going to work on me.”

“What exactly am I trying to do?” Archer asked smugly.

“You’re trying to distract me,” Rin said, shoving one of her books into Archer’s chest and pushing her back. “Fine. If you don’t want to talk about your life, then you don’t have to. I couldn’t care less as long as it doesn’t impact your performance. Now put these away. I’m going to make some toast and get to school, so have it done before we need to leave.”

Archer chuckled. “Alright, alright. I’ll get it done, Master.” Rin shoved past her servant and went downstairs before Archer could get in any more jokes at her expense.

Twenty minutes later, a still slightly sleep Rin was walking up to the front gates of the school. “Two days in the same week?” a familiar voice called out. “I must be dreaming.”

“Good morning Mitsuzuri,” Rin said, fighting the urge to yawn. That just wouldn’t be appropriate in public. “I guess I’ve been getting up earlier recently.” Not that she’d really been trying to.
“So I can see. Maybe you should join one of the sports clubs and put that new energy to better use,” Ayako said with a grin. “It might give you something more interesting to do than sit around watching the archery club when you show up early like this.”

“I’ll take that under consideration.” It wasn’t like she hadn’t considered it before. Participating in a club would do her respectable image good, but she really had better things to do with her time.

Mitsuzuri chuckled. “Come down to the dojo with me. I’ll make some tea before we get started for the morning.”

Rin smiled. “That would be nice.”

Both of the girls were enjoying a warm cup of tea when the rest of the club started showing up. “Good morning Mitsuzuri, Tohsaka,” Shirou said as he held the door open for Sakura. “How are you?”

“Wow, you’re here too,” Ayako said.

Shirou chuckled and rubbed the back of his head. “I was just walking Sakura to practice,” he said. “I didn’t want her to walk alone with how crazy things have been recently.”

“Aw, we definitely lost out to Sakura,” Ayako pouted. “But I guess that’s a good idea. I heard there was some crazy explosion down near the river last night.”


“Alright, alright,” Ayako said, waving it off. “Are you sticking around for morning practice today?”

Shirou shook his head. “Issei asked me to take care of a couple of things yesterday, but I didn’t really have time. Since I’m here early, I should get it done while I have time.”

Rin nodded. “I should get out of the way if you’re going to get started,” she agreed. “Good luck with your practice.”

Sakura nodded to the pair. “I’ll see you both at lunch then.”

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“Master,” a voice whispered in Ayako’s head.

The captain frowned slightly and lowered her bow. “Assassin? What’s going on? I thought you didn’t want to talk to me at school.”

“The two who were here earlier. They were your friends?”

Ayako cocked her head slightly, as if she was just looking down range. “Yes. Why?”

“I saw them last night. Down by the river with their Servants.”

Ayako stiffened. “With their… they’re Masters like me?”

“Ah, not quite the same. They seem to be more experienced mages.”

There was a thump and it took Ayako a second to realize that she had dropped her bow. “Sorry,” she said as a couple of the others looked in her direction. “I think I’m a little tired. I’m going to take
“Are you sure they’re mages? Like, actual mages?”

“The one you called Tohsaka. She was using some powerful magic.”

Ayako was silent for a long moment, clutching her bottle tightly. “I need to go take care of something!” she called out to the team. “Keep up your drills and I’ll be back in a bit.” There was a general murmur of agreement and the team went right on practicing while she marched off to find her friend.

Fortunately, Rin wasn’t all that hard to find. She had sequestered herself in her classroom and was buried in a book on… pirates? Ayako ignored that for a moment. “Hey!” she called out. “Hey Rin!”

Rin jerked out of her reading and looked up. “Huh? Mitsuzuri? Is practice over already? I thought I still had more time before class.”

“Nah, I’ve got the junior running drills. I needed to talk to you about something.” Ayako grabbed the chair from the desk in front of Rin and spun it around so she could sit face to face. “We’re friends, right?”

One of Rin’s eyebrows popped up. “Of course we are. What kind of question is that?”

“And friends aren’t supposed to lie to each other.”

Rin’s face didn’t change. “Not usually.”

Ayako smiled and decided to just rip the bandage right off. “So it would have been nice to know about this magic thing before now.”

Ayako got to see three expressions on Rin’s face that’s she’d never seen before: embarrassment, shock, and panic. “Wh… what? How… I mean, what are you talking about?” And just like that all of the emotions drained off her face and she was the stoic honors student all over again. “Magic doesn’t exist.” She absently began twirling her fingers. “Really, maybe you’re overworking yourself at the club. You should…”

“Attempting to influence my master is very… unwise.” Rin went completely stiff as Assassin appeared directly behind her, her hand only inches from Rin’s neck.

Ayako blinked as the black clad woman appeared out of nowhere. “What are you doing?”

“She was attempting a mind magic,” Assassin said, not moving an inch.

“You’re the missing Master,” Rin said, surprisingly unshaken by the skull masked girl appearing at her back. “How? I missed one mage in school, but there’s no way I should have missed you. We’ve been close for too long.”

“I found her wandering around in the street after her last partner disappeared,” Ayako said. “But I don’t see why that matters when you’re a wizard and decided not to tell me.”

Rin sighed. “Magic is supposed to be kept secret. The more people who know about it, the greater the risks to everyone involved. Because magic is dangerous. This isn’t a game we’re playing. Every single time you use magic, you have to put your life on the line.”

“Mistress is not an idiot,” Assassin said.
“Not helping,” Ayako added. “True, but not helping. And would you please stop threatening her. We’re just here to talk.”

“Her servant has not appeared.”

Rin sighed again. “You can come out. Carefully. We don’t want to fight in the middle of the school, especially during the day.”

Archer faded into existence with a scowl. “You know, fighting dirty is significantly less fun when you’re on the other end of it. Now if you’d kindly step away from my master before this gets messy.” One of her hands drifted to her flintlock.

“No fighting in public!” Rin repeated a little louder.

“Fine,” Archer muttered, though her tense posture didn’t change.

“Look, the point is that I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to get hurt,” Rin said, dragging the conversation back to the point. “And mages are not the nicest of people. They’d be after you for just knowing about magic as much as magic itself can hurt you.”

Ayako rolled her eyes. “Since apparently you managed to miss a mage just wondering around two, I somehow doubt that they’d be after me that much. And it’s not like I’m five. I can take care of myself. And keep a secret.”

“It’s not…” Rin looked frustrated for a second before she schooled her features. “It’s not just about that. You just fell into this, but you’re really in over your head. And a Holy Grail War is the worst possible way to learn about magic. You could die. People are expected to die.”

“Well it’s a little late to back out now. And I can’t just abandon Assassin now. Especially when she helped me see how you’d been hiding things from me for years apparently.” She stopped and said nothing for a second. “The other mage. Is it Emiya or Matou?”

Rin jumped at the sudden shift. “What?”

“They started coming to school with someone calling herself Saber. I told you I’m not that dumb.”

Rin sighed. “Does it matter?”

Mitsuzumi shook her head. “I just wanted to know who I can trust.” Then she turned and walked away. Archer gave Rin a questioning look, but the raven-haired girl just shook her head. Assassin vanished into the shadows at the back of the room, presumably to follow her Master.

“Well, that could have gone better,” Archer said. “But at least we know who one of the other competitors is now.”

Rin glared at her. “Not now Archer.” She rubbed her eyes. “I’m going to have to tell the others about this.”
Rin elected not to try to follow Mitsuzuri. Primarily because she really, really didn’t want to try to discuss magic with her somewhere that they might be overheard. “I wasn’t lying to her because I was trying to hurt her,” she muttered to herself. “It’s better for everyone if magic stays secret.”

“I know that,” Archer’s voice whispered in her head. “Mages have always been a sneaky lot, but it’s better than everyone running around trying not to blow themselves up or set themselves on fire or whatever. But she really doesn’t.”

“That’s not really the issue…” Rin muttered, still talking aloud.

She could actually hear the shrug in Archer’s voice. “I’m a pirate, not a wizard. You want to discuss the details, summon Caster next time.”

Rin sighed. “Fine.”

“Talking to yourself, Tohsaka? You should be careful. Otherwise people might think there’s something wrong with you.”

Rin’s eye twitched. “Is it that late already? I didn’t think the dogs would be in yet.”

Luvia laughed. “Really? No need to stoop to such crass insults. We can behave like civilized people, can’t we?”

“No, you just hide somewhere out of the way and attack people with dolls. Truly, you’re a brave and noble warrior.” Rin brushed past the other girl and walked off.

“She just brushed me off!” Luvia sputtered. “How dare she?!”

“Mistress, please stay calm. She clearly has something else on her mind.”

Luvia fumed for a few minutes before stalking off toward her classroom. “She’s not wrong though. We can’t keep playing it safe. We need to have something big up our sleeves if we’re going to win. Just throwing familiars at them won’t get us anywhere.”

Caster was silent for a few moments. “I have something that might work mistress. It’s a bit… not subtle, but it’s powerful. I would need time to grow it, but…”

Luvia smiled. “We’ll have something very special waiting for Tohsaka next time. We’ll see who’s brave next time we fight.” The foreign girl threw back her head and laughed again, gleefully plotting her rival’s downfall.

She was so busy laughing that she didn’t notice as she almost ran into someone. “Oh, sorry, are you alright?”

Luvia blinked as a vaguely familiar red-head caught her hand before she could stumble. “Oh, yes I’m fine.” Then it clicked. “I met you yesterday, yes? Tohsaka’s boy toy.”
The red-head blushed slightly. “Please, just call me Shirou. And I remember meeting you too Miss Edelfeldt.”

“Luvia,” the blonde corrected. “There’s no need to be so formal.”

“Miss Luvia,” Shirou corrected himself.

Luvia sighed. “What are you doing here so early? Looking for someone?”

Shirou absently rubbed the back of his head. “Well, I was helping out the student council. It’s much easier to come in and do some maintenance for them than for them to have to keep replacing anything that starts to get worn down.”

“Oh, so you’re good with your hands.” Luvia stepped a little closer.

“Well, I am kind of the un-official handyman.” Shirou stepped back just a bit. “And I still have things to do before classes start.” He hurried away, not looking her directly in the eyes.

“Why is everyone blowing me off today?” Luvia muttered to herself. Then her lips twitched up into a smile. “But I think I just found a good way to get under Tohsaka’s skin.”

“By stealing her boyfriend?” Caster’s voice was flat and had a sharp, cold edge to it.

Luvia stopped for a second. “Oh. Right. That would be bad, wouldn’t it?” She frowned and fell silent. “Well, I can still flirt with him around her to piss her off.”

“If you must.”

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Mitsuzuri tried not to take her frustration out on the rest of the club. The underclassmen seemed to notice by the time they were packing up to go to classes though, and she could hear the whispers as they all tried to figure out what was going on. She was very tempted to tell them to shut up when she heard the suggestion that she’d been secretly dating Rin and they’d broken up.

“Uh, Mitsuzuri.” Her head popped up as Sakura approached her. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” she said, shaking her head. “Just kind of stressed out I guess. Nothing you need to worry about.”

Sakura didn’t look convinced in the slightest. “If you and Tohsaka are fighting, I’m sure Senpai and I could help…”

Ayako just barely managed to keep a scowl off her face. “It’s fine. I don’t need Emiya’s help with anything.”

Sakura frowned slightly. “Alright. But I hope things work out.” The purple-haired girl turned and left the dojo to walk to class.

“Is it wise to… push people away like that?” Assassin’s voice said in her head.

Ayako almost jumped. She’d almost forgotten Assassin was still right behind her. “I’m not trying to push people away,” she said softly, hoping that no one would overhear. “I’m just… frustrated.”

“Because of your friends.”
Ayako sighed. “I... kind of. Did that have to lie to me? I mean, I’m not a kid. I’m not going to go
and get myself in trouble.”

“But that won’t stop them from worrying. Sometimes... caring about someone means that you don’t
want them involved in something dangerous... even if they’re capable of keeping themselves safe.
And she did seem more worried about fighting with you than she did about you knowing her secret.”

“That’s...” Ayako sighed again. Assassin wasn’t exactly wrong. “I get not wanting me in danger,
but they could have at least told me that the danger existed instead of expecting me to be happy that I
was left in the dark.”

“People don’t react rationally when someone they care for is in danger.”

“Ugh, why are you the one reacting rationally? Shouldn’t you be happy to have an opponent to fight
or something?”

“If you want me to fight, I will follow your commands. But I... I do not have something that it can
give me. If you are happy... I will be satisfied.”

Ayako looked up at the ceiling. “I just wish that Rin wasn’t treating this like we have to be enemies
if I don’t give up.”

“I understand mistress.”

“Let’s get to class Assassin. Maybe Rin will be willing to talk tomorrow after things cool down a
little.”

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“You know, this place would make a great venue. Lots of wide open spaces, great sight lines, and
lots of adoring fans.”

“I thought we were supposed to be fighting, not singing,” Miyu replied, absently wondering if she’d
made some kind of mistake with the ritual.

“I can’t be ready for both?” Temptress asked. “Besides, I’m going to need a good spot for my first
show once we win and I get my debut! And there are other servants scouting out the place too. I bet
we could attract a lot of attention if we hung around.”

Miyu’s eye twitched slightly. “What did I do to deserve this?” She rubbed her temples as the last
bell rang and she climbed to her feet. “Which other Servants are here anyway? I didn’t detect any
magic use during the day.”

“Well, Saber. Duh. She’s totally looking for a fight. Why would she be standing around using her
title otherwise? And I think I caught someone else lurking around in astral form earlier. This place
is absolutely loaded with Servants. None of them are as great as me of course, but there are lots of
people to challenge so I can show off my amazing talents.”

Miyu felt a small sweat drop run down her forehead. “Sure. Let’s go with that.” She sighed and
swung her back over her shoulder, heading for the stairs. She stopped momentarily as the passed a
window, looking down over the front courtyard of the school. Students were spilling out onto the
walkway, either heading to clubs or rushing to the gate to get home. And in the middle of the crowd
she could pick out the bright blonde hair and blue outfit of their newest teacher walking beside a
male student with bright red hair. “It’s hard to believe that she’s a Servant. She seems so nice.”
“Lots of Servants are nice. They wouldn’t be very heroic Heroic Spirits if they weren’t.”

Miyu didn’t have an argument for that. “I suppose that’s true.”

“I bet the cute guy next to her is her Master too.”

Miyu blushed as her gaze shifted to the red-head. He was smiling and saying something to the blonde Servant, but she couldn’t tell what. Saber smiled back and nodded then they both stopped and waved as another girl with long dark pigtails joined them. “Probably. Maybe the girl is the other master.”

“Or she could be his girlfriend.”

Miyu bit her lip as she continued to watch the small group until the separated, Saber and the boy heading around the school building while the girl walked back toward the main building. “Come on. Let’s go home and get some rest. We’ll come back tonight after it gets dark. If they’re really here looking for a fight, they’ll be here too.”

“It’s time to start the show,” Temptress said cheerfully as Miyu started walking again. “I can’t wait.”

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Rin was leaning against the school gate as Sakura, Shirou, and Saber approached her again. “Oh, you’re still here?” Shirou asked. “I thought you said you were going to head home.”

“I was hoping to see Mitsuzuri first. I can’t just leave before I try to talk to her again.”

“Ah, Mitsuzuri volunteered to clean the dojo today,” Sakura said. “I think she’s going to be there for a while.”

Rin perked up immediately. “Which means she’ll be there alone, right?”

“Yes,” Shirou said carefully. “Just try to keep your head on straight. Mitsuzuri was still kind of on edge during afternoon practice.”

“She’s my friend. If she’s going to be as stubborn as you about this, maybe she’ll at least let me talk her into coming over and joining our little alliance.”

“We’ll be waiting at home then,” Shirou said. “Invite her over for dinner if she’s willing to come.”

“I can only hope…” Rin left the others to go home and headed back around the building toward the dojo.

“My mistress does not wish to speak to you today,” Assassin’s voice murmured from empty air.

Archer appeared in an instant, one weapon already drawn. “If you’re going to threaten my master again, you better be ready to pick a fight this time.”

Assassin shimmered into sight in front of the doors to the dojo. “I do not wish to… harm your master. It would make my mistress… unhappy.” She looked back at the doors. “If you wish to speak, let us go somewhere that we won’t be disturbed.”

“No funny moves,” Archer said, still not dropping her guard.

Assassin just shook her head and gestured for them to follow her around the building toward the
athletic fields. “My mistress believes that your worry for her is… unnecessary,” Assassin said once they were away from the dojo.

“And she doesn’t know what she’s getting into. Not really,” Rin said. “I already have to deal with one stubborn idiot who refuses to listen when someone is trying to watch their back. I don’t know if I can deal with two. Especially if she’s not willing to talk to me.”

“I agree with you…” Assassin replied softly. “And I will do everything in my power to protect my mistress. No matter who is threatening her.”

“You’re being awfully accommodating,” Archer said. “Why not let us talk if you want to help?”

“Right now, her anger with you is what is causing her harm.” Archer’s finger cocked her flintlock, but Assassin just shook her head. “No. Killing your master would cause her more distress.”

“Do you ever make sense?” Archer muttered.

“My purpose… is to aid my mistress. So long as you are opposed to each other… you may not be able to reconcile. So I propose a solution. I will fight your Servant. If I win… you will no longer have reason to worry about fighting my master and you will know that I am strong enough to protect her. If you win… I will be dead and my master will be eliminated from the Holy Grail War and you can take her under your protection.”

“I thought Assassins weren’t supposed to ask for fair fights,” Archer said.

“I was not asking.” Then half a dozen daggers hurtled through the air toward Archer’s head.
“So what should we make for dinner tonight?” Shirou asked as they walked down the street. “We’ve been cooking a lot of food the last couple of days…”

“What about fish?” Sakura suggested after a moment of thought. “I saw there was a sale at the supermarket in this morning’s paper so we could get plenty of ingredients without paying too much.”

Shirou briefly considered how much their Servants, and Taiga, were likely to eat and then the state of his wallet. “A sale seems just right tonight.” He checked his watch. “We should have time to stop by before we head home.”

Saber bowed her head. “I’m sorry for the trouble,” she said. “I know that I’m draining mana far too fast as things are.”

Shirou shook his head. “You can’t help that,” he said with a smile. “Really, it’s my fault for not knowing how to do the ritual correctly…”

“It’s really not that bad senpai,” Sakura said as they turned toward the shopping district. The sun was just starting to go down and the sky lit up red as the group walked through the nearly silent streets. Sakura slid her hand into Shirou’s and the young man squeezed it reflexively, but didn’t react otherwise.

“My my, aren’t you the happy couple?”

Shirou blinked as he looked up to see a woman in priest’s vestments walking toward them. “Oh. You’re…”

“Caren, from the church,” the young woman said. “And you’re Emiya and Matou, yes? And Saber.”

“Ah, yes.” Shirou bowed his head politely. “We didn’t have much time to talk when we first met. It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“Oh, don’t let me interrupt you newlyweds,” Caren said cocking her head slightly. Shirou immediately turned several shades of red in quick succession. “What? No! I mean… we’re not…” He trailed off sputtering.

“Oh, so you’re seeing Tohsaka instead? I must have misunderstood then. My apologies.” She bowed her head deeply in apology.

“No!” Shirou was starting to feel like his face might explode and he felt Sakura squeezing his hand a little harder. “I mean, I am with Sakura, but we’re not married or engaged or anything like that.”

“Oh I see,” Caren said, her expression completely unchanging. “You two are just so close that it’s hard to tell.” She absently shifted a bag from one hand to the other. “What brings you out here at this time of night?”

“Just shopping for dinner,” Shirou said quickly.

“And we should get going before the supermarket closes, senpai,” Sakura said softly.

“What a coincidence,” Caren said, ignoring the purple-haired girl. “I was just picking up dinner for
Kirei and me. He insisted on some obscure Chinese place…” She held up the bag.

“Really?” Shirou glanced at the package and absently wondered if the red hue to the paper was from the bag or the food inside. He absently edged back half a step.

Caren chuckled. “Kirei and his tofu. I should get it back to the church before things get cold. Good luck with your shopping.” She smiled and waved as she headed back down the street.

Shirou chuckled and rubbed the back of his head with his free hand. “She’s a strange one,” he said absently.

Sakura shook her head. “There’s something strange about everyone at that church.” She tugged Shirou’s hand. “Come on senpai. The store will close if we don’t hurry.”

The store was in fact not closed and soon the two high schoolers were walking home weighed down with packs of rice, fresh fish, and vegetables. The walk home was far freer of interruptions and the pair fell back into quiet chatting. “We’re home!” Shirou called out as Saber got the door for the two teenagers.

“You’re late!” Taiga’s voice called out from the living room.

“We were shopping for dinner,” Shirou called back, sliding out of his shoes and setting them by the door.

“Oh, that’s okay then. I thought you might have been out causing trouble without me!”

Shirou chuckled as he and Sakura carried their supplies into the kitchen. As they rounded the corner, the pair found Taiga and Ruler lounging at Shirou’s table, with Taiga still in her dress and Ruler wearing a surprisingly tight fitting sweater and jeans. “Ah, you’re both too late today,” Ruler said, reclining back in her spot. “I was starting to wonder if we were getting dinner tonight.”

Shirou blinked at her tone. “I didn’t know Fuji-nee was contagious,” he whispered to Sakura as he set the bags down on the kitchen counter.

“Neither did I,” Sakura said, equally quiet. “Should we be worried?”

Shirou looked back at the table. “Maybe.” He cleared his throat. “We needed to get extra food. I invited Mitsuzuri over for dinner too.” He glanced up at the clock and frowned. “Actually… I had thought that she and Tohsaka would be here by now.”

“I hope they’re not fighting again,” Sakura said.

“I’m sure they’re not fighting,” Shirou said. “That would be silly. Even if Mitsuzuri turned her down, it shouldn’t have taken Tohsaka this long though…”

“You’ve been very fortunate working things out so far,” Saber interjected. “But it might not be so easy every time. Perhaps they’re still discussing things.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Shirou said with a sigh.

“They could do that here instead of at the school after hours though,” Taiga said.

“And then we could be eating at the same time,” Ruler added.

“We could call and ask,” Shirou suggested.
“I don’t think Tohsaka owns a cell phone,” Sakura said.

“Let me go look for her then,” Rider said as she faded into view. “I’m the fastest one here and I know the way. It won’t take me long at all.”

“Thank you Rider,” Sakura said. “I’m sorry to trouble you with this.”

The blindfolded woman smiled. “Just have dinner waiting for me when we get home.” She turned and a moment later they could hear the back door as Rider dashed away from the house.

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“To think that we could be eating Shirou’s home cooking right now,” Archer muttered as she dodged another brace of knives.

“Just try to stop her before she kills you!” Rin called out as she backed away from the fight.

“That would be…” Archer fired twice, blasting the next attack from the air. “Easier if you would just let me blast her to pieces.”

“No blowing up the school and no killing Mitsuzuri’s Servant just because she’s being stupid,” Rin said without hesitation.

“Like I said…” She ducked again, this time as Assassin flashed forward, her hand glowing with a faint purple light. The wall behind her hissed and began to melt as the poisonous touch ate away at the brick. “That’s not exactly easy when I can’t touch her!” The red-clad Servant fired two more shots, causing part of the roof to fall in and forcing Assassin to fall back a bit and giving her some breathing room.

“What did I just say?”

“Are you going to let me fight or not?!?” Archer snapped, firing off a couple more bullets, letting them ricochet off the walls and forming a screen to keep Assassin from coming in closer again.

“What the hell happened to that pragmatism you had just yesterday?”

Rin bristled. “I am not starting my next conversation with my best friend by telling her that I killed her Servant while she wasn’t looking.”

“I’m kind of surprised that she hasn’t heard the gunshots yet actually…” Archer muttered.

“You two… talk too much,” Assassin said. “But if you refuse to fight seriously, then this will be much easier.” She jumped up, using her poison to melt a handhold in the school wall before leaping again and smashing straight through a window.

“Great,” Rin muttered. “She’s playing hide and seek now. And I’m going to have to see if my repair spell can fix damage done by a Phantasmal poison when this is over.”

“She’s putting the fight back on her terms,” Archer groaned as she hurried for the door. “Great. Just what I needed.”

Rin grumbled as she ran to keep up with her Servant. “There has to be something you can do. You said you liked fighting dirty, surely you can think of something.”

“I like fighting dirty on my terms,” Archer said as she carefully approached the first corner and poked her head around. “Now we’re fighting dirty on her terms, and that’s the absolutely worst to
Rin was starting to develop a theory that someone was deliberately fucking with her. “You’re a very confusing Servant.”

“Nah, you’re just stubborn.” Archer peeked around the next corner and then jumped out, guns at the ready, but there was still nothing there. “Is it way too quiet to you?”

“She’s clearly waiting for us somewhere,” Rin muttered. “Do you think…” She was interrupted as they heard something above them. “She’s still going up?”

“We shouldn’t be able to hear her unless she wants us to. This is a trap. And while dramatic shoot outs on moonlit rooftops aren’t bad, I don’t want to walk into one when the other guy could be waiting to stab me in the back.”

Rin sighed, but nodded anyway. “Then we’ll just have to be careful and not let her get the drop on us.”

“That’s going to be a tough one. Let’s clear every floor as we go. I don’t want to leave an Assassin at my back if I can help it.” The pair headed for the nearest staircase and followed it up to the second floor. They worked their way down the hallway, peaking through classroom doors and taking each corner carefully.

“I hate this,” Rin muttered.

“Kinda feels like a horror movie,” Archer said with a grin. “The evil monster could leap out of any of the dark little corners and kill you instantly.”

“I will not use my command seals to make my Servant stop talking,” Rin mentally repeated. She gritted her teeth and shook her head. “Just keep your eyes open. Anything could happen if you let your guard down.”

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Medusa touched down just outside the school gates. She looked up at the building and frowned. Something felt off. There was a tension in the air, like something was coming. “I hope they didn’t manage to get into a fight.” She sighed and hopped up onto the gate, looking out over the front courtyard. Everything seemed peaceful at first glance. But she had long since learned that things looking peaceful almost never were.

“Hey there!”

Rider almost jumped out of her skin, but she didn’t show it. Damn. Had staying with Sakura and Shirou made her complacent enough that she could get caught out by some random passerby? She half turned and froze for an instant. The passerby was less passing by and more standing on the rooftop across the street. For a second she wondered if it was Lancer causing trouble again, but the newcomer wasn’t someone she recognized. She was dressed in a very short black dress that showed off her panties just from the elevation and had long pink hair with actual horns poking out. “I don’t know why I’m surprised that there’s another one,” Rider muttered as she drew her blade and chain.

“Yeah! I love it when they’re raring to get started.” The pink-haired girl pulled a spear taller than her body from nowhere. “I told mistress that staking this place out was going to be a great idea. This is going to be fun!”
“She reminds me of someone…” Rider thought as she considered her options. She was alone for the moment, but there were likely two other masters on the grounds and two more Servants, but she had no idea where they were or what she was doing. She sighed. Hopefully this one wouldn’t be as much trouble as the last two. “At least give me your class name before we begin,” she called up.

The other girl smiled. “You don’t know me?” Then she suddenly struck a pose, sweeping her spear over her shoulder, sticking out her tongue, and winking. “I’m the amazing Temptress Lizzy-chan!” She twirled her spear above her head like a baton and then pointed it straight at Rider. “I hope you don’t mind being the victim of my big debut.” She flashed a grin, showing off two small fangs.

Rider just stared for a second, then did the smart thing and hurled her chain as the pink-haired weirdo finished talking. Temptress had just enough time to look surprised as the chain wrapped around her wrist and Rider pulled, dragging her down and slamming her into the ground.

“Hey! That’s rude!” Temptress grumbled as she got back to her feet.

“Are you actually going to fight?” Rider asked. “Because I have other things I can be doing tonight if you’d rather pose for a while.”

“You could have messed up my dress!” Temptress fell into a fighting stance, her spear raised again.

Rider just sighed and twirled her chain again, swinging it at Temptress like a whip. The other girl knocked it aside with the haft of her spear and jumped forward, swinging the blade overhead and slamming it down toward Rider’s head. Rider leaned back, letting the spear’s point bury itself in the ground at her feet. She wrapped her chain around the haft with a quick flick of her wrist and pulled again, throwing Temptress over her shoulder and nearly slamming her into a wall before the pink-haired servant drove her spear into the ground to catch herself.

“This is going to be interesting,” Rider muttered as her opponent came in for another attack.

“I knew she was going to be on the roof,” Archer said as they walked up the last set of stairs.

“You’d think that an Assassin would be anywhere other than where you think to look for her,” Rin added as she walked behind her Servant.

“This Assassin is sort of off her nut,” Archer muttered. “I’ve done more logical things when ten mugs deep and missing my trousers…” The Servant absently pushed her coat back, tapping her fingers against her spare flintlock as she opened the door to the roof.

“I don’t need to hear about that,” Rin said quickly.

“I know,” Archer said. Then she suddenly spun around, firing off two shots straight up and behind her at small outcropping above the door. Assassin leaped straight up, flipping back over the concrete lip to give herself some cover. “I just didn’t want Assassin to catch on.”

Rin blinked. “How did…”

“Please. It’s literally the only cover up here. Of course she was going to have hiding above the door.”

“Too obvious I suppose…” Assassin’s voice echoed from out of sight. There was a flicker as a shadow dashed along the edge of the roof and more daggers hurtled toward Archer.
Archer sighed and calmly blasted the daggers from the air. “I’ve got you beat at range, love. Why don’t you stop being naughty and we can settle this with something more fun. Maybe a game of cards. Or a drinking contest. Something less troublesome.”

“I’m not stupid…” Assassin replied. The dark skinned Servant flickered back again, disappearing back into the darkness. “And I’m not out of tricks yet…”

“Not going to let you touch me either. I can get someone less likely to kill me for that.”

“Pig…” Assassin’s voice said as she slowed on the far edge of the roof, landing lightly with the entire open stretch between the pair.

“Pirate~” Archer said in a sing-song voice as she leveled both of her guns at Assassin. “Still, this is about as good a time as any to finish things, don’t you agree? The moon is high and there’s not a cloud in the sky.”

“Yes.” Assassin flashed forward, her entire body beginning to glow and a faint cloud of poison bubbling off her skin as she lunged for her opponent. Archer grinned savagely and fired again, three bullets hurtling straight and true. Then Assassin twisted. Her body warped and bent in a thoroughly unnatural way, bending like she was made of rubber and letting her spin in midair, avoiding all three lead balls as she closed the gap.

Archer’s eyes widened as she desperately threw herself backwards, just barely avoiding the sickly purple touch as Assassin’s hand slammed into the rooftop. “Missed me.”

“Did I?” Archer’s eyes widened a hair as half the roof melted, the poison eating away at the brick and sending both Servants tumbling downward. Assassin kicked off a piece of rubble, diving straight at Archer as they both went into free fall.

Archer cursed under her breath. “Sorry Rin…” Then the air rippled for a moment and a distinct smell of ocean air blew through the hall as the barrel of a cannon appeared in midair right next to the red-clad Servant’s head. Assassin somehow managed to look surprised through her skull mask as the cannon went off, causing a massive explosion directly between the pair.

Rider half turned as she heard a loud explosion inside the building. “What the hell are you doing Rin?” she muttered. She ducked low, bending back ninety degrees at the waist as Temptress thrust her spear over her body.

“Oh, a bigger audience!” Temptress cheered. “This is turning out great.”

“Is she trying to get to me, or is she naturally like this?” Rider absently wondered as she lashed out with a kick that was matched with a blow from the haft of Temptress’s spear. She could think about it later. Right now, she had to focus on the battle.

Standing on what was left of the devastated roof, Rin winced at the sound and looked down through the hole, careful not to let her shoes touch the edge. “I thought I said no explosions,” she muttered angrily. She couldn’t see either Servant anymore, but she could tell that the floor below had a nice matching hole directly below the one on the roof. “God damn it.” Without the time to run back down the stairs, assuming the stairs had survived the blast, she called up her magic and sent a pulse through her legs. Her muscles sang as the reinforcement bolstered her limbs. Then she jumped. Her legs shook and she felt the shock through her body as she hit the floor on the first floor hard, but the
magic saved her from any broken bones. “Archer! Where are you?”

“Get back Rin!” the pink-haired Servant shouted. “I didn’t get a direct hit!” Rin jumped to the side, her shoulder colliding with one of the windows as the dust cleared and she finally got a good look at the fight. Archer’s explosion had blasted the Servants in opposite directions, leaving a large chunk of the halls demolished and letting the moonlight shine down. Archer’s coat was looking a bit worse for the wear and a thin line of blood was running down her left cheek from her forehead.

Assassin wasn’t in much better shape. One of her arms was hanging limply at her side and her already skimpy clothes seemed to be hanging on by a thread. A large crack ran down the right side of her mask, exposing just the tiniest bit of her lavender eye. “Clever… but I’m not done.”

“What the hell is going on here?!” Everyone stopped dead in their tracks and turned to see Mitsuzuri at the far end of the hall. “Assassin? Rin? Whoever you are?” Archer looked slightly offended. “If you didn’t want to fight me, why the hell are you trying to kill Assassin behind my back?”

“Hey!” Rin protested. “This isn’t my fault!”

“Master…” Assassin said, managing to sound rather apologetic. “I had hoped to end this before you came.”

“Because I was going to miss the explosions and gunfire. What. Happened?”

“I wanted to… resolve the conflict between you two,” Assassin said, sounding much like a child being scolded by a parent.

“By trying to kill Rin?”

“By trying to kill her Servant.”

Ayako said nothing for a few long moments. “Okay. This fight is over.”

“Yes mistress.”

“Just like that,” Rin muttered, rubbing her temples.

“Why didn’t we just go and get Mitsuzuri in the first place?” Archer asked, absently laying her pistol over her shoulder.

Rin opened her mouth but said nothing for a moment. Then her lips snapped shut and she muttered something that sounded a lot like “didn’t think of it”, eliciting a chuckle from Archer. Rin flushed a little. “Anyway,” she said, quickly changing her tone. “Before your Servant decided to play the martyr, I was trying to come and talk to you so we could solve this without needing to fight each other right now.” She paused for a second. “Oh, and Emiya wanted to invite you to dinner.”

Ayako just stared for a moment at the sudden shift then a small giggle escaped her. “That sounds just like Emiya.”

They were interrupted by a loud crash outside. All four rushed to the windows to see Rider slam into the wall of the club building, leaving a spider web of cracks. “Did we miss an entire other battle happening?” Archer asked as they watched the purple-haired Servant jump back to her feet and engage her foe again.

“We were focused on killing each other…” Assassin said quietly.
“And is that another new Servant that none of us have seen before?” the pirate continued.

“I’m not even surprised at this point,” Rin said flatly.

“To be fair, I’ve never seen any Servants other than you two and Saber before now,” Ayako added. “So they’re both new to me.”

“Just checking,” Archer said. She sighed. “I guess we should go help Rider then.”

“Which one is that and who’s in charge of her?” Ayako asked.

“Purple… the one called Matou,” Assassin answered. “I don’t know the pink one.”

“Sakura has…” Ayako trailed off, thinking about it for a second. “I probably should have known that. I think. I’m going to have a hell of a time keeping this straight.”

“Welcome to the world of magic,” Rin said dryly. “Let’s get out there and help Rider.”

Rider wasn’t sure if she should be glad or not when she saw four figures running toward her. “Careful! She’s kind of a crazy one,” she called out as Archer and Assassin both seemed ready to jump in and join the fight.

“Don’t worry, I know how to handle crazy,” Archer said as she stepped up on Rider’s left, raising her pistols.

“Rude…” Assassin grumbled as she stepped up.

“Hey! It’s not okay for the audience to rush the stage,” Temptress said. Then her face shifted to a savage smirk and she jumped back. “Okay! Time for my smash hit finale!” She spun her spear over her head and rammed the point into the ground, creating a glowing pink magic circle.

“Oh great…” Rider muttered. “Move!”

Rin and Ayako, already the farthest away, turned and booked it back toward the classroom building while all three Servants tried to jump away as a giant castle rose up from the ground. “Can all Servants do that?” Ayako gasped as Rin dragged her behind a wall.

“More than I thought,” Rin said, hoping they were out of the blast radius.

Temptress hopped onto her spear, massive wings flaring out behind her. Then she opened her mouth and a horrid screeching sound nearly deafened the lot of them. Rin doubled over, covering her ears as Mitsuzumi stuffed her fingers in her ears and gritted her teeth. They could hear the sound of shattering glass as every window in a hundred yards exploded, the shockwaves of the screech actually visible in the air. The Servants were all caught in the blast, being thrown through the air like rag dolls. Archer and Assassin were thrown clear, slamming into walls and hitting the ground hard. Rider was lifted clean off her feet and straight through the already damaged wall of the club building, causing most of the wall to fall in.

“Thank you!” Temptress called out, waving. “Now for the encore…” She suddenly trailed off, going silent for a few moments. “Aw. Looks like I have to cut the performance short tonight. Don’t worry, I’ll be back to finish it for you someday soon.” She winked playfully and jumped up over the wall of the grounds and vanished.
“The hell just happened?” Ayako asked.

“I have no idea,” Rin admitted. “Let’s get the Servants and get out of here before the police show up. I can’t fix all this and I don’t want to have to explain.”

“Why’d you stop me?” Temptress complained as she caught up with her master down the street.

“You blew up the school,” Miyu said.

“I was showing them my incredible talents! They should have been grateful that I was going to send them off with such a marvelous show.”

“You blew up the school,” Miyu repeated. “With a giant castle. How did you summon a giant castle from nowhere?”

“It’s my Noble Phantasm. Duh.”

Miyu groaned. “Right. I guess I’m going over all my family’s books again. And no more blowing things up unless I tell you to!”

Temptress pouted as the paired headed for Miyu’s house. “You’re no fun.”
The team from the school ran into Shirou and company about halfway back to his house. “Rider!” Sakura shouted, rushing toward her Servant. “What happened? I felt you fighting…”

Rider shook her head, leaning on Archer’s shoulder to stay upright. “I’m alright. Her Noble Phantasm wasn’t all that strong.”

“Was it Lancer or Berserker?” Saber asked, quickly going to support Rider from the other side while Sakura fussled over her injured Servant.

“Neither,” Archer said. “Looks like we have yet another extra running around and causing trouble.”

Shirou blinked. “Another one?” He looked stumped for a few moments then glanced over at Rin. “Do you have any idea why this keeps happening?”

Rin just shook her head. “Don’t look at me. Nothing in my family’s books talks about extras. You’d have to get access to the Einzbern records to find the details I’m missing. They actually did the physical design work on the Grail.”

Shirou sighed. “We’ll figure something out.”

“You’re probably not going to be able to talk to this one, kid,” Archer said. “She’s nuts from what I saw.”

“Completely,” Rider agreed dryly.

“We’ll have to figure something out,” Shirou said. “If she’s that crazy, then I guess we do what we have to.”

“At least you have half a brain,” Rin muttered.

Shirou decided it was best not to say anything to that. “And I’m glad that you and Rin aren’t fighting anymore, Mitsuzumi.”

Mitsuzumi chuckled awkwardly. “I guess. The last day has been weird for me.”

“And you’re… Assassin, right?” The red-head asked the dark skinned, almost greyish skinned really, Servant.

The skull-masked Servant bowed her head. “Yes. It is a… pleasure to properly meet you.”

Shirou blinked at her soft voice and tone. “Oh. Yes, it’s very nice to meet you as well.” He shook his head. “Let’s get Rider back to my place where she can rest.”

“I’m afraid I won’t be much help with that,” Assassin replied. “My touch is… dangerous.”

“Right.” Probably not a good idea to offer to shake hands then. “Do you need help Saber?”

“She’s not really very heavy at all.”

“I thought commenting about a girl’s weight was supposed to be off-limits,” Rider said, trying to make it sound like a joke. “But I’m just glad I don’t have to walk by myself.”
“Nice to know I count for so much,” Archer said dryly.

“You can go back to carrying me by yourself if you’d like,” Rider added.

Archer just shrugged. “You’re really not heavy enough that I need the help, but I’m not going to say no to a little bit of help. I’m kind of tired after blowing up part of the school.”

Taiga spun around. “You did what now?”

Rin shot her Servant a glare, but Archer just grinned. “Things didn’t go exactly as planned and there were… several small explosions followed by a very large one that wasn’t in any way our fault. School might be closed tomorrow. And for a while after that.”

Taiga groaned and buried her face in her hands. “No one should be able to cause this much trouble in an hour.”

Ruler giggled. “They’re certainly enthusiastic.”

“Not one more word,” Taiga said. “I will deal with discipline later.”

Rin felt a cold chill run down her spine.

“...”

“So there’s a Servant calling herself Temptress now…” Sakura said thoughtfully as she turned the fish. “What kind of abilities did she have?”

“Nothing particularly noticeable,” Rider said as she leaned back at the table. “She fought with a spear, but it wasn’t really anything special. She was pretty quick, but not quite Lancer quick. Given her name, she probably has some skill in seduction or persuasion, but that wasn’t exactly going to come up in the middle of a battle.”

“And she was acting alone?” Shirou asked, stirring the rice as it cooked.

“Not surprising,” Saber interjected. “In most Holy Grail Wars, the Masters remain concealed as long as possible to protect themselves from potential attacks. The behavior of Lancer’s or this Temptress’s Master is far more typical than your desire to stay near the front. I imagine that her Master was watching from a safe location nearby.”

“That’s… probably good actually,” Shirou said after a moment. “It’s easier to use your abilities if you don’t risk catching someone else in the blast.”

“Yes it is. You should consider it as well.” Saber gave her Master a flat stare.

Shirou chuckled awkwardly. “I’ll think about it.”

Saber’s stare continued for a moment, like she wasn’t sure if he was telling the truth or not. Then she nodded. “Please do, Master.”

Shirou sighed and opened the rice cooker. “Dinner’s on! Tohsaka, you can come in now.”

Rin grumbled from outside the door, where she and Archer were both sitting seiza under Taiga’s watchful eye. “Took you long enough,” she muttered. “I can’t feel my ankles anymore…” She slowly stood up, stretching each leg carefully and rolling her ankles to restore the blood flow.

“Hey, it could be worse,” Archer said jovially. “If someone blew up one of my ships, I’d probably
“You say that far too casually,” Rin muttered as they joined the rest of the group at the table. Or tables, as Shirou had needed to fetch a second table from the storehouse to have enough room for his expanded guest list.

“Ah, no arguments at the dinner table,” Shirou said as he and Sakura began carrying over plates of fried fish and generous bowls of rice.

“Thanks for the meal!” the whole table chorused.

“This smells great, as always,” Taiga said, grabbing her chopsticks with a grin on her face.

“I might not be much of a mage, but I’m confident that my cooking won’t be beat,” Shirou said.

Mitsuzuri sniffed the meal and eagerly took a bite. “Mmmmm, you’re not kidding. I can’t believe I’ve never had anything you’ve made before.” She glanced sideways as her servant, who was sitting very stiffly between her and Sakura. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

Assassin jolted slightly. “Ah… yes mistress.” She hesitated for a moment then reached up and pulled her skull mask away. Her cheeks colored slightly as she realized that movement around the table had stopped. “Is there something on my face?”

“Not at all,” Shirou said with a small smile. “You just look surprisingly cute without your mask on.”

Assassin’s cheeks colored. “Ah. I’ve been told that before… It was necessary for my techniques.”

Mitsuzuri reached across for the tea kettle and poured herself another cup. “Technique?”

“Yes… my seduction technique. So I could get close enough to my targets. I was considered a great beauty in my time. Even with my reputation as a poison woman…”

Shirou examined her face for a few moments. “I think I understand.”

“Can you refill the kettle, senpai,” Sakura suddenly cut in as she topped off her cup. “I think we’re almost out.”

“And more rice for me as well,” Saber said, holding out her empty bowl.

Shirou blinked at the empty bowl then looked at the petite Servant sitting next to him. “How…” He shook himself. “Of course. Everyone eat as much as you like.”

“Excellent. Then could I trouble you for a second bowl as well?” Ruler held out her equally empty bowl with a satisfied look on her face.

Shirou looked at the number of Servants sitting around his table and wisely went to put on more food.

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Three hours and thirty-two bowls later, Shirou was finally washing the dishes while most of the group retired to their homes, leaving just him, Sakura, Rider, and Saber in the kitchen. Sakura seemed to have relaxed now that dinner was done and was humming softly to herself while she dried dished and Saber and Rider was quietly discussing options for dealing with their newest problem at the table behind them.
Shirou glanced up at the clock as he washed the last plate. “It’s that late already.” He sighed and absently dried his hands. “Normally I’d say we have school tomorrow, but we probably don’t if the damage was that bad.”

“My apologies,” Rider said. “It really wasn’t my intention to cause so much trouble. Maybe I should have tried to lure her somewhere else.”

“You did the best you could, given the circumstances,” Sakura said. “We’ll just have to be careful not to do the same thing when there are people around.”

“Indeed,” Saber agreed. “If the other Masters are beginning to become more indiscriminate, the battles will only become more dangerous from here.”

“True. I believe I’ll turn in for the night anyway. I think I could…” Rider cut off with a hiss as she tried to stand and a hand flew reflexively to her side.

“Rider!” Sakura shot to her Servant’s side in an instant.

“Have you still been hurting all through dinner?” Shirou asked, hurrying over just behind her. “You should have said something.”

“There’s nothing that can be done about it,” Rider said. “I’ll heal eventually. I’m just a little low on mana tonight. I burned through a lot taking Temptress’s attack head-on.”

“I’m sorry,” Sakura said. “It’s my fault.”

“Can I help in some way?” Shirou asked. “There must be something to increase your mana reserves, right?”

Rider’s cheeks colored a little bit. “Ah. That really isn’t necessary.”

Saber blushed. “I’ll be turning in as well. Good night Master.” Shirou blinked as Saber hurriedly left. She didn’t even argue about not sleeping in his room.

“Was it something I said?”

Sakura looked thoughtfully between Rider and Shirou. “It is possible to transfer mana between two people…” she said slowly. “But it has certain… requirements.”

Shirou was starting to wonder if he’d accidentally asked something wrong. “Uh… I think you lost me.”

“It requires an exchange of bodily fluids,” Rider said, cutting to the chase. “The more it relates to life and energy, the better. Blood is usually a functional one or you can use… other things.”

Shirou turned a little red as he caught on. “Ah.”

“Semen is considered the best medium by far,” Sakura continued.

Shirou felt his cheeks flaming as he hurriedly bowed his head. “I’m sorry for asking something inappropriate.”

Sakura chewed her lip for a moment. “It’s alright senpai. If she wants… I’m alright with Rider joining us.”

Both of them just stared at Sakura for a moment. “Sakura, you don’t have to do that,” Rider said
quietly. “I’ll be fine in a day or two. I just need rest.”

“I trust senpai,” Sakura said. “I believe that he didn’t mean anything bad by it. And I believe that I won’t lose him just because he wants to help you too.”

Rider looked a bit thoughtful while Shirou stammered and tried to process what was happening. “Sakura…”

Sakura walked over and put a hand on his cheek. Then she pulled him in closer and kissed him softly. “Come down to my room in ten minutes. We’ll be ready then. If you still want to say no, then she can leave.”

Shirou nodded dumbly as Sakura smiled and pulled Rider away. He stayed standing there for a long minute, wondering what the hell had just happened. It had sounded like Sakura had suggested that he actually sleep with Rider. Or that Rider was going to sleep with both of them. But that was crazy. That sort of thing only happened in bad harem anime. He shook himself and looked up at the clock. Should he actually wait the ten minutes?

He sighed. He could at least do that. He sat down at the table, drumming his fingers for a minute before he fetched a cup of water so he at least had something to occupy his time. He wondered if he should get a crossword puzzle or something to fill his time, but the ten minutes passed quickly enough that he didn’t let his mind wander too far. He was a little worried what he might think up if he did.

When the hand on his clock finally ticked over for the tenth time, he got to his feet and headed down the hall to Sakura’s room. He hesitated in front of the door then rapped on the wood with his knuckles.

“You can come in, senpai,” Sakura’s voice called from within.

Shirou slid the door open and his brain nearly turned off. Sakura was stripped down to just her bra and panties, but his attention was immediately drawn to the other woman in the room. Rider was sitting, almost lounging, on the bed. Sakura had somehow managed to get her hands on a white, silky nightie that was far too short for Rider, leaving her small pair of equally white panties completely visible. “Wow…”

Rider flushed and looked down. “Please don’t stare at me.” She looked down behind a pair of glasses that Shirou hadn’t realized that she owned.

“Come to us senpai,” Sakura said, spreading her arms open.

Shirou’s resistance crumbled and he crossed the room in two quick steps, pulling his shirt off over his head as he moved. He caught Sakura in his arms and kissed her deep before she pulled him down onto the futon.

Rider licked her lips as the two teenagers dropped down next to her. She wrapped one arm around Shirou’s waist and the red-head felt her curves pushing up against his back. “Be gentle with me,” she purred, her voice anything be gentle. “I’m still injured you know.”

Shirou blushed and felt himself hardening as the girls expertly stripped him, letting his cock spring free. Sakura smiled and slid down, rubbing her hands against his chest and stomach before reaching his crotch and slowly running her tongue along his shaft. He felt Rider pressing tighter against him, her breasts pressing against his back, and her lips latching on to his neck, leaving a small red mark on his skin.
“You can take her first,” Sakura murmured. “I want to make sure you can give her as much… mana as possible. Just make sure you’re still ready for me when you’re done.”

Shirou nodded wordlessly and rolled over, setting his hands on Medusa’s shoulders and pressing their lips together. The purple-haired woman’s tongue flicked out, surprisingly long and nimble as it probed his mouth and ran against his lips. They separated after a few long moments and Rider rolled onto her back, allowing Shirou to straddle her hips. His throbbing cock hung just above her dripping slit for a moment before she pressed his swollen tip against her.

Sakura crawled up above him and ran an arm around his chest. “Mmmm, she needs you so badly senpai…” she whispered in his ear.

Shirou groaned and thrust into Rider’s pussy. He managed to keep himself from going wild as the tight walls squeezed around him and a low moan escaped the Servant’s lips. “Sh… Shirou!” Her head tilted back and her mouth opened in a breathy gasp as he pushed deeper until his cock was fully inside her. For a moment they both stayed there, enjoying the sensation. Then Rider’s lips parted again. “Fuck me.” Shirou didn’t need to be told twice. He rammed his cock in deep, hammering Rider’s pussy. Despite his roughness, the super strong Servant just moaned and bucked against him. Her eyes glazed over with pleasure and her chest bounced slightly from the force of his thrusts.

Shirou’s cock twitched inside her as he felt her tightening around him. “Rider… I’m almost…”

“Yessss…” the Servant hissed, her hands gripping the sheets tightly. “I’m nearly…” She moaned and threw back her head as Shirou pushed her over the edge, sending a wave of pleasure through her body. Shirou moaned and hit his peak a few moments later. He slammed in to the base again and pumped a torrent of thick white cream into Rider’s waiting pussy, drawing another moan from the Servant.

Shirou groaned as he pulled out. He actually felt a little drained after that one as he slumped back on the futon and admired Rider’s body as she lay there, covered in a thin sheen of sweat and with a tiny drip of his cum leaking from her pussy.

“Mmm.” Shirou jumped as he realized that Sakura was still right next to him. “I hope you’re not going soft on me, senpai.” He moaned as her mouth ran along his cock again, collecting the mixture of his cum and Rider’s juices from the shaft. “You promised that you’d have enough left for me.

Shirou’s cock pulsed and he gritted his teeth, feeling his second wind coming on. “I never break a promise,” he said.

Sakura giggled. “Take me senpai. Take me like you took her.”
Shirou was fighting. He could feel the weight of the sword in his hands and the burning ache of his exhausted muscles. But the scene around him was... wrong. Like two entirely different worlds layered on top of each other. One moment he was wielding a shimmering golden blade against armored knights, with the smell of blood and steel so thick that he could feel it in his mouth. The next he was cutting through men in modern clothes with twin blades that flashed black and white. Each opponent’s face covered in tight wrappings and various firearms clenched in their trembling hands.

His head throbbed as he tried to sort through what he was seeing. The scenes felt real enough that he could feel the catch as the blades hit flesh and bone, and in turn feel every blow that battered his body. In the first scene, the wounds simply closed again and again, never lasting long enough to leave more than an echo of pain. In the second, his body repelled the shots the best it could, or his hands cutting bullets from the air with strikes faster than an ordinary human could follow. But he still felt the dulled blows. The scene progressed faster again, and a moment later the bleeding was a star shaped scar and he was fighting again.

“What was the point of all of it?” he wondered. “Why did that have to keep fighting? Why couldn’t it just end?”

As the knights pushed through their enemies, he felt a surge of pride and the golden sword raised high with a wordless cry of victory. He looked back at his allies, dressed in silver and blue and rallying around the warrior with the golden blade. He could see it in their eyes. They fought for honor, for justice, and for the king with the sword of victory.

On the other side, the battle finally ended, and the man with two swords saw in the distance a simple village, nothing more than a small collection of light brick buildings. And he saw the faces of the locals peering through doors and windows at the man who had fought and bled to put himself between them and harm. And he knew what he fought for.

Shirou woke up feeling almost as tired as he had when he’d gone to sleep. And after the third time he’d finished inside Sakura that was saying something. His head throbbed and the light seemed too bright. He almost wondered if someone had slipped him alcohol at some point and the entire night before had all been one nonsensical dream.

The weight of not one, but two girls on top of him informed him that was not the case. “Sakura,” he muttered, managing to wiggle one arm out from under Rider’s body. “It’s morning.”

Sakura shifted and her eyes fluttered open. She blinked a few times and rubbed her eyes. “Senpai? Good morning.” She yawned and reached over to shake Rider. “Rider, it’s time to get up.”

“I’m awake,” the purple-haired Servant said softly. “I just didn’t want to move until you woke up.”

Sakura’s cheeks colored slightly, but Shirou just smiled. “You’re welcome to stay here with us if you want, but I do need to get up and make breakfast as some point.”

“You can join me in the bath if you’d like,” Sakura said after a moment. “We worked up a sweat last night.” Her cheeks darkened. “Oh, I’m sorry senpai. I was so demanding last night...”

Shirou finally blushed. “It’s fine. You don’t have to feel bad about wanting to feel good. I’ll do my
best to keep up.”

Sakura buried her face in his chest. “Thank you senpai,” she murmured, her voice muffled against his body.

He held her like that for a few moments before the girls finally let him go and started to look around for something suitable to walk around the house. Shirou managed to locate the boxers he’d worn the day before and slipped them on before hurrying down to his room to find something for the rest of the day. He was glad that Saber didn’t make an appearance until he was dressed in a red t-shirt and a pair of jeans.

The Servant was in her usual blue skirt and white blouse. Shirou absently wondered if she had anything else to wear at all. He made a note to go shopping for some more essentials for Saber when he had a chance. He bowed his head as she walked by. “Good morning Saber.”

Saber’s return bow was slightly stiff. “Good morning Master. I hope you weren’t up too late last night. Sleep is important to maintain your health and focus.”

Shirou chuckled awkwardly and rubbed the back of his head. “Thank you for not coming into Sakura’s room again. I told you it would be alright.”

“I believe the room may have been a bit full last night. I didn’t want to intrude.”

Her tone was perfectly level and cordial, but Shirou couldn’t help feeling like she was more upset that she sounded. “Uh… it might have been. A little bit. Are you alright?”

“Of course Master,” Saber said with a flat smile on her face. “Your dalliances are hardly my concern.”

Shirou felt a drop of sweat run down his neck. “Thank you for your discretion,” he said, bowing his head again. “I was just about to start breakfast. Is there anything special that you’d like?”

“Anything you prepare will be more than acceptable. Just make a sufficient amount.”

Shirou chuckled and mentally went over how much he still had in the kitchen. He was going to have to go shopping again soon. “I think I can manage that.” The pair walked down to the kitchen in silence, but Saber seemed to have settled a little bit. Shirou pulled a dish of miso from the fridge, along with the remains of the rice he’d bought for dinner the day before and started it cooking.

Sakura and Rider arrived as the soup was nearing completion, joining Saber at the table with a soft greeting. Taiga’s greeting as she threw open the front door and joined them was far less restrained, but that was nothing new. Shirou smiled and hummed happily. He was finally started to get used to having a crowded table for breakfast.

“Oi! Good to see you all up, but I hope you’ve got something to do today,” the teacher said as she dropped roughly in place at the table. “Because the school’s closing down until at least next week after someone managed to blow up half the club building.”

Rider managed to look a little abashed. “To be fair, it was the other guy’s fault.”

“Just don’t do anything that might get you in trouble if the police have questions,” Taiga said as Shirou brought their plates over, expertly balanced on his arms. “Grandpa will be pissed if he has to bail any of you out of jail.”

“We’ll make sure not to cause any trouble,” Shirou said, pouring a cup of tea and setting the kettle on
the table. He absently swirled his cup, staring into the shifting brown liquid for a few moments.

“You look like you have something on your mind.” Ruler said, picking at her breakfast.

Shirou jolted. He hadn’t realized that it was that obvious. A denial almost came to his lips, but he stopped himself. “Actually, there was something.” He turned to Saber. “Would you please help me practice my swordsmanship?”

There was silence for a few moments. “What brought this about?” Saber asked after a moment. “You have no reason to need to fight. I am your sword to fight for the Holy Grail. An ordinary human, even a mage, cannot hope to match the power of a Heroic Spirit.”

Shirou gripped his cup tight enough for his knuckles to go white. “I can’t do that.”

“Stop being reckless!” Saber snapped. “You should leave the battles to me.”

“The fights keep getting more dangerous,” Shirou replied firmly. “Two days ago at the river we were nearly swarmed under by those monsters. Last night our school was nearly destroyed by one of the other Servants. And I’m the only one who can’t protect himself properly. I’m not a competent mage like Tohsaka or Sakura. And I’m not a moderator like Fuji-nee. I don’t have any other way that I can improve right now. So please. Help me learn to fight.”

Saber stared at him for a second, then her shoulders slumped and she sighed. “I can see that you are determined. So I will do my best to help you stay alive. But I want you to promise me that you won’t go picking fights that are beyond your abilities.”

“I promise,” Shirou said without hesitation.

“Then we’ll begin after breakfast.” She dabbed at her lips with her napkin. “Another bowl please.”

Fiore’s phone rang and she nearly jumped out of her skin. She’d almost forgotten she had it with her at all. She fumbled with the bag hanging from her chair for a moment to pull it out. “Hello?” The phone simply continued ringing. She flushed with embarrassment and tapped the screen twice before holding it up to her ear again. “Hello.”

“Sis?” Caules’ voice said from the other end of the line. “Good, I was hoping I caught you. I wasn’t sure how early it was there.”

“It’s only nine in the morning,” Fiore replied. “And shouldn’t you be asleep right now?”

“I was working on something and wanted to check in with you. We haven’t been apart in ages. So excuse me for being worried about my big sister.”

A small smile appeared on Fiore’s lips. “What exactly were you working on after midnight?”

“Well, I was having some playback errors on my laptop, so I was pulling on the sound card to check to see if something was wrong. Then I found that one of the connectors had overheated and melted at some point so I had to replace…”

“Caules, I know that I know more about computers than anyone in the clan other than you, but I still only understood about a third of that.”

A sigh rattled through her phone’s speakers. “Sorry. I think I’m just having trouble sleeping. I
don’t like sending you into a war without back-up.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m the one who needed to do this.”

The door to her suite suddenly slammed open behind her. “Ah~ Traditional inns are the best!” Gunner declared happily. After much convincing, Fiore had finally managed to convince her to change into a t-shirt and modern pants, though she had absolutely insisted that she needed to keep her hat on. “I haven’t felt this relaxed in ages!” Then she saw Fiore on the phone and actually stopped talking for a moment. She nodded and started digging through one of the cabinets.

Fiore couldn’t help chuckling. “We summoned a perfectly competent Servant with a strong home field advantage. We can do this. I promise, I’ll be home better than new.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Caules replied. “I’ll see you in a few weeks. I will see you in a few weeks.”

Fiore smiled wider. “Goodbye Caules.”

Gunner finally found what she was looking for, pulling a bottle of sake and two cups from the cabinet. “I like your brother,” she said as she dropped heavily at the table in the middle of the room. “He’s certainly less of a pain than mine was.”

“Your brother can’t have been that bad,” Fiore said as Gunner filled both cups. She wasn’t really a drinker, but it seemed rude to refuse. She took a small sip and winced slightly as the bitter drink hit her tongue.

“Well…” Gunner didn’t say anything for a second. “Your dad reminds me of my brother more than your actual brother.”

Fiore blinked and looked completely lost for a second. “Oh!” Then her cheeks colored slightly. “Darnic isn’t my father. He’s the head of our clan but…”

Gunner just shrugged. “Yeah, yeah. I know what that’s like. A bunch of old men who don’t shut up and get in the way of important things. Like conquering your enemies.” Fiore felt a sweat drop form on her forehead. “But I more meant his attitude. He cares, but I occasionally feel like I should check my back to make sure there isn’t a knife there.”

“What kind of family did you have?” Fiore asked.

“A bothersome one,” Gunner said. “But enough about problems that haven’t been problems for centuries. I just found out that this place has a communal bath!”

Fiore made a small squeak. “A what?”

“A bath!” She downed her cup in one practiced motion and jumped to her feet.

“Wait what are you…?” Fiore reflexively gripped the arms of her chair as Gunner took the handles on her chair and spun her around.

“I’ve heard that skinship is a very popular way to build relationships in this era! It seems like the perfect team building exercise for us.”

Angelica looked around the penthouse suite. It was certainly what she’d expected from her brother.
Fine to the point of being a little ostentatious. She couldn’t help wondering if it would have been better if his ritual had worked out as he’d intended. She had no particular desire for this kind of battle. But it was her duty to the family and she saw little choice in the matter.

“Ugh, this place…” Avenger muttered, tossing Angelica’s bag onto the bad. “Your brother thinks a lot of himself, doesn’t he?”

“To a degree,” Angelica said, walking to the window and looking out over the city below her. “He would like looking down on the city from here I think.”

“Looking down on the masses.” Avenger tossed her hair over the shoulder of her dress. She’d chosen a short, particularly tight leather dress with a zipper running down the front. A large jacket with a fur collar covered her exposed arms. “As if he’s somehow above the rest of the ants.”

Angelica absently wondered what summoning a moody, vaguely maniacal woman who sometimes laughed wickedly when she thought no one was looking said about her brother’s personality. “It doesn’t matter in the end,” she finally said. “We’re here to do a job. Where we stay for the duration is irrelevant.”

“God.” Avenger stopped and spit into the corner. “You’re boring. Your brother might be a megalomaniacal little shit, but at least he’s doing something. Come on. Crack a smile. Laugh a little. Burn something down. Do something interesting."

Angelica chose to sigh. “How about I order some lunch and we can discuss how we’re going to approach this?”

Avenger rolled her eyes. “Fine. This place must have decent room service, right?”
Chapter 23

Shirou hung his apron up on the hook in the kitchen. Saber had disappeared as soon as she was done to go get ready in the dojo and Taiga had run off back to her house for something with Ruler. Sakura quietly wished him luck and disappeared back into the house with Rider to go run a bath. He sighed and wiped his hands one more time before hanging the towel as well and heading out back. It was little odd to be going back into the dojo for actual training. He hadn’t used it for sword practice in years. The door slid open to reveal Saber kneeling in silence at the other end of the dojo, her eyes closed and a shinai across her lap. Shirou stopped and stared for a moment, looking at the morning sun playing across her features.

Saber’s eyes opened and Shirou looked away before she could notice his staring. “Is something the matter?” the blonde Servant asked.

“No,” Shirou said, awkwardly rubbing the back of his head. “I just thought you looked very peaceful like that. I didn’t want to disturb you.”

Saber flushed slightly. “There’s no need to be concerned with something like that. I was waiting for you to join me after all.”

Shirou chuckled. “I suppose that’s true.” He bowed his head. “Then I’ll be in your care. Please be gentle on me.”

Saber smiled slightly. “I’ll do my best to teach you everything I can. But I must warn you. It will not be easy.”

“Wait!” The door slammed open again and Shirou nearly jumped as Taiga stormed in, dressed in her kendo armor with Tora-shinai over her shoulder. Ruler followed close behind.

Shirou just blinked. “Fuji-nee? What are you doing?”

“You think I’m going to let you practice the sword without me? You should know me better than that by now!”

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Ruler said, quickly walking over to the side of the room and sitting down comfortably. “I’m just here to watch the show.”

Shirou felt a drop of sweat run down his forehead. “I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.”

“Shirou is quite correct,” Saber agreed. “No matter how skilled a human you may be, you cannot hope to match a Servant outright. You won’t be able to keep up.”

“There’s more to learning how to use a sword than just being stronger or faster than the other guy,” Taiga said firmly. She whipped her sword down, sending the cover flying off to the side. “Skill, luck, experience. All of them play just as much of a role in a fight as anything else.”

Saber said nothing for a moment. Then she got to her feet, shifting her practice sword into a ready stance. “I believe that a demonstration would serve better than attempting to further explain. I want both of you to come at me at once.”

A frown appeared on Shirou’s face. “Are you sure? Won’t that be unfair?”

Saber shook her head. “Don’t worry about me. I just want both of you to come at me with
everything you have.”

Shirou looked at Taiga for a second, but the other woman just looked eager. The red-head sighed and took one of the practice swords from a rack by the wall and took a ready position. To no one’s surprise, Taiga made the first move. She stepped forward, easily shifting into her stance like she was born to it and taking two testing strikes at Saber. The blonde swordswoman parried both with a flick of her wrist, knocking Taiga’s blade aside easily and retaliating with two strikes of her own. Taiga managed to twist enough to avoid the first hit, but the second hit her side hard, forcing her back a step as the wind was knocked out of her.

Shirou hesitated for an instant, but that only gave Saber time to close the distance between them and bring her sword down hard at him. Shirou brought his shinai up to block, and his arms trembled under the sheer power behind Saber’s strike. Before he could follow up, Saber pushed the attack, delivering a pommel strike against his collar bone and slamming the sword into his gut hard enough to send him sprawling on the ground.

He groaned and looked up as Taiga charged back in. Her sword clashed against Saber’s several times, but each strike was easily repulsed. Finally, Saber knocked Tora-shinai aside and smacked Taiga upside the head, sending her to the ground as well. Shirou looked up at the composed swordswoman for a long moment then he sighed.

“Now you see the difference in our strengths,” Saber said, tapping the tip of her sword against the ground. “No matter how much I teach you, I cannot grant you the strength and speed necessary to fight a Heroic Spirit head on. All I can do is give you as much battle experience as possible so that you have a chance to survive against an opponent who outmatches you at every step.”

Taiga groaned as she slowly sat up. “You didn’t have to hit me that hard.”

“Holding back will only make things more difficult in the end,” Saber said firmly.

“It’s alright,” Shirou said, getting back to his feet. “I’m ready to go again.” He tightened his grip on his shinai and readied himself again.

Saber smiled. “Very well.”

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Shirou hit the ground again and groaned. He was starting to feel the bruises along his back and his arms were aching from the effort of repeatedly trying to fend off Saber’s blows. Taiga had reluctantly settled off to the side, occasionally calling out advice of varying usefulness. However, he’d finally managed to get from instantly being knocked on his ass to only getting knocked down every few hits. Shirou finally stopped for a moment, breathing heavily with sweat running down his face. “I think…” He groaned and wiped his forehead. “I think I’m starting to get the hang of it.”

“Oh dear, don’t work yourself too hard,” Ruler said with a smile. “Maybe you should take your shirt off.” Everyone stopped and turned to look at the blue-haired woman. “What? My knowledge of this era might be slightly incomplete, but I thought it was a common practice for your men to remove their shirts if they were feeling too warm.”

“I think you’re thinking of something else,” Shirou said as both Taiga and Saber hurriedly looked away with red cheeks. He struggled back to his feet and raised his sword again, ready to go again.

“Where the hell are you getting ideas like that?!” Taiga sputtered before she jumped to her feet. “If you have time to come up with weird ideas, we’re both sitting around too much. I came out here to
train, not lounge around watching Shirou get beat up!” She turned to her Servant and took a ready stance again. “You know how to fight right? Spar with me! If Saber’s busy with Shirou, I need my own partner.”

Ruler blushed. “Oh my. I’m afraid that I don’t have any skill with swords. It wouldn’t be appropriate for a saint to wield bladed weapons. And my staff may be a bit too hard to be a sparring tool.”

“Eh?” Taiga pouted. “You’re not going to help me?”

Ruler tapped a finger against her chin. “Well, I have a little self-defense training. Fighting with my hands isn’t much more appropriate than using a sword, but I suppose it will do.” She adjusted her position and took a fighting stance.

“Daring,” Taiga said. “I like it.” She shot forward, whipping her sword around.

Ruler just smiled and knocked the shinai aside with the back of her hand. Taiga had just enough time to realize that she’d overextended when the saint grabbed her by the wrist and performed a perfect shoulder throw, slamming Taiga into the ground. Everyone stopped again. “Oh dear, was that a bit too rough?” Ruler smiled innocently.

“Pardon me.” Everyone turned as the door slid open and Sakura poked her head in. “Lunch is almost ready.”

“Then this is the perfect time for a break,” Saber said, laying her training sword over her shoulder.

“But I barely got started!” Taiga practically shouted.

Shirou frowned slightly. “I think that I can still handle some more. We can delay lunch a little bit. I’m just starting to get the hang of this.” He felt a cold shiver run down his spine as Saber smiled at him.

“I see.” There was a blue flash and her armor formed around her body. “I must not have been working you hard enough if you have so much energy left Master. Forgive my error. I’ll give you a proper lesson from this point forward.”

Sakura served everyone lunch while Shirou relaxed at the table and let his bruises form. Saber was back in her casual clothes, sitting quietly across the table while she slowly but steadily worked her way through a plate of sandwiches. “Would you like me to get an ice pack?” she asked as she set Shirou’s own plate down.

The red-head shook his head. “I’m not really hurt. I might be stiff for a couple of days though.” He picked up one of the sandwiches and took a bite. “And thank you for your hard work on lunch. This is delicious.”

Sakura flushed slightly. “Thank you senpai. I just did my best.” She looked up as they heard the doorbell ring. “Oh. Give me just a moment.”

“I can get it,” Shirou said. “You sit down and have something to eat too. It’s probably just Tohsaka. She probably wasn’t expecting to miss us at school today.” He got up and walked around the corner and down to the front door. He slid the door open and stopped at the sight of a pink-haired girl he didn’t quite recognize. She was wearing a grey hooded sweatshirt over a black shirt and skirt, with thick leggings to ward off the cold. A pair of glasses sat balanced on her nose. He
hesitated for a moment before he finally spoke. “Can I help you?”

The girl bowed her head. “My Master wanted me to deliver a response to you in person.”

Shirou’s eyes widened slightly. Somehow she looked completely different out of her armor, even more so than Saber or Rider. Maybe it was the glasses. “Ah. That’s good to hear.” He really hoped that it was a good answer.

Shielder smiled. “My Master would like to meet with you to discuss terms. I believe she’s amenable to working with you. She’s also convinced the Master of Lancer to sit down and at least talk with us, if that’s acceptable.”

Shirou’s shoulders sagged with relief. “That sounds perfect. Would you like to come by tonight? We can talk over dinner.”
Chapter 24

Shirou looked at the contents of his fridge with a heavy heart. He wasn’t sure how he was going to keep up with the sheer number of people who seemed to be regularly gathering at his house for dinner. None of the Servants had quite the appetite that Saber did, but they were still tripling the size of the meals he needed to prepare. And serving four more guests was going to stretch his supplies to the breaking point. His shoulders slumped as he calculated how much he was going to have to buy to just keep up. He was going to need to rebalance his food budget. Maybe Otoko would give him a few extra shifts if the school was going to be closed for a little while. He sighed and pulled out the rest of the miso and the leftover fish. He had work to do.

The kitchen was soon filled with the familiar smell of Shirou’s cooking and a small cloud of steam from the soup. He sampled a small taste and nodded, adding another pinch of spice. A good meal would be an excellent way to make a first impression on the other Masters. He was so focused that he almost didn’t hear a knock on the door. “Saber! Could you get for me?”

“Of course Master!” he heard her call back as her footsteps headed toward the front of the house. There was a moment of silence and he could hear another female voice speaking before Saber called out again. “Shirou, Rin is here.”

Shirou put a lid on the pot before he went to greet his first guest. “I didn’t expect you this early Tohsaka. Is everything alright?”

“I figured someone would have to set up some kind of defense if you’re having a potential enemy just walk into your house,” Rin said flatly. “Because I don’t think you’re actually capable of doing it yourself and Sakura is too polite to do it for you without asking.” She shoved a bag into Shirou’s hands. “Just hold my things for me and this won’t take long.”

Shirou grunted at the weight of Rin’s bag and glanced in the top. It seemed to be filled with a mixture of jars and stones. His eyes widened slightly when he recognized the precious gems sparkling against the fabric. “Are all of these necessary?”

“The mana flow around your house is weird,” Rin muttered, picking out a small blue stone. “I wanted to bring a few uncharged stones to act as focuses for the new bounded field. The mana that flows through here should do the rest. Now, where would you say is the exact center of the property?”

Shirou raised an eyebrow. “What exactly are you setting up in my house?”

Rin sighed and rubbed her eyes. “A fairly simple defensive field. It should at least give us some extra options if Lancer or Shielder’s Master decides to try to kill us. It should also weaken any spiritual being that becomes hostile within the perimeter, so that might discourage her Servant from causing trouble. At least a little bit.”

The red-head just stared at her blankly. “I followed half of that. Dad never really got around to explaining the theory of bounded fields to me. I was terrible at that kind of stuff.”

Rin rolled her eyes. “Just come with me and show me the locations and I’ll do the actual work.”

Shirou decided that it was probably easier to let her work than to try to get any more out of the other magus. “Right. This way then.” Rin’s instructions were logical when he thought about it for a few minutes. She just needed to find the center of the house, the four corners of the property, and the
four cardinal directions. He didn’t really understand the runic symbols she drew, but he assumed that Rin knew what she was doing. It was nearly dark by the time she finished her work on the barrier, and Shirou went to finish cooking dinner while Rin and Sakura wandered off to have a conversation. Rider was… somewhere. Shirou found it hard to keep track of the purple-haired Servant sometimes. She seemed to slip into her spirit form whenever she wanted to be left alone. Saber was resting in the kitchen, silently keeping one eye on her Master while he worked.

Then there was another knock on the door and Saber was on her feet in an instant. “Allow me to get the door again,” she said.

“Just a second,” Shirou said, wiping his hands. “I should greet our guests in person.”

The Servant sighed. “You are taking this far too casually.” However, she still waited for her Master to join her before they walked around to the front. Sakura and Rin both emerged from down the hall, looking after him as he went to greet the new Master. Shirou put on a calm smile and opened the door. His eyes widened slightly when he saw who was on the other side.

“Good evening, Master of Saber,” Caren said, a matching smile on her face. She had elected not to wear her vestments to their meeting, instead wearing a purple blouse and a short black skirt with dark stockings. Shielder was standing quietly behind her, though she waved when Shirou answered the door. “Isn’t it nice to see you again?”

It took Shirou a second to find his voice. “You’re… from the Church, aren’t you? You’re a Master?”

“I’m not surprised,” Rin said flatly. “I should have known the fake priest was up to something. But I didn’t think he was backing two of the Masters directly. Or is he actually one of them and you’re the other? Either way, that certainly explains a few things. The overseer no longer being impartial would explain the necessity of a Ruler. He’s turned into quite the snake over the years.”

Caren’s smile didn’t shift in the slightest. “Oh, such a rude thing to say about one of the men who raised you. Though not an inaccurate description.” Rin just scowled at her, but the nun turned to Shirou. “I’m afraid that Father Kotomine is still the neutral overseer in this conflict. I was assigned to act in the Church’s interests entirely without his input. As you can see, I’m currently acting as the Master of Shielder.”

Shirou looked past her. “Is Lancer’s Master running late?”

“Oh, she’s around,” Caren said. “She has a request before she accepts your meeting.” She held out her hand and Shielder placed a rolled up piece of paper in it. “She’ll only agree to an in-person meeting if you’re willing to agree to a formal ceasefire until midnight.”

Rin snatched the paper before Shirou could touch it. “This is a geas scroll.” She eyed Caren suspiciously and unrolled the paper. Shirou swore he could hear her muttering something in a language he didn’t understand. “There don’t seem to be any traps written in here. And all conditions of the contract end at midnight.”

“Suspicious of a hand offered in peace.” Caren’s smile vanished and she looked at Rin with a serious expression. “You really are a first class mage.”

“I don’t need back-handed praise from you,” Rin replied. She pushed the scroll in Shirou’s direction. “It should be safe to sign. All it says is that you and your Servant swear to take no hostile action against her and she’ll do the same in turn. It’s a sensible precaution.”
Shirou fetched a pen from next to the phone. “This seems a bit excessive, but if it puts her at ease, then it’s no real hardship.” He quickly jotted down the characters to his name across the bottom of the page. The ink glowed for a moment and he felt a very slight tug on his body.

“I’m impressed by your openness,” a new voice said from outside. Another woman rounded the corner of the gate. She had bright red, almost purple, hair and was wearing a full two-piece suit and tie. “Maybe I’m too used to dealing with traditional mages.” The familiar form of the red-haired lancer appeared a moment later, wearing a tan sweater and jeans.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Shirou said, bowing his head slightly. “I’m Shirou Emiya. Everyone, please come inside. All of the guests other than Ruler and her Master are already here, so I’ll start serving dinner before we talk. I’m sure they’ll be along as soon as it’s on.”

“Bazett Fraga McRemitz,” the woman said. “You’ve met Lancer several times already, but I believe I’ll keep her true name to myself for a while longer.” The group all moved inside, with Shirou leading the way into the dining room.

It only took Shirou a few minutes to serve, and just as the last dishes were set out, he heard the front door open again. “Shirou! We’re here!”

“I’m guessing that’s Ruler’s Master then,” Bazett said, one eyebrow going up at the rather energetic call.

Caren chuckled. “She sounds like a lively one.”

Taiga burst around the corner and looked over the pair and her eyes narrowed slightly. “So you’re the other masters huh?”

“And you’re the Master of Ruler,” Caren replied. “An unusual position. When I checked the Church’s records, Ruler is supposed to be summoned without a Master and provided for by the Holy Grail.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Taiga said with a shrug. “I’m just here because Shirou’s hopeless and I got dragged into this mess already, so it’s my responsibility to keep an eye on him.” She dropped down into her usual spot at the table and sat cross-legged. “And for the food.”

“I can’t say why the Holy Grail elected to present me with a Master instead of sending me on my own,” Ruler agreed. “Perhaps it believed that a human touch would help me perform my duties. But regardless of the reason, I will do what is required of me as both a saint and the arbitrator of this conflict.”

“Ah, you’re being way too serious tonight,” Taiga grumbled. “We’ll just kick anyone’s ass who gets out of line and everything will be fine.”

“Very lively it seems,” Caren said.

“You weren’t kidding about her being right on time,” Bazett added. “Thanks for the food.” She traced a rune on the side of her cup to make sure there was no reaction. Then she took a sip of tea and tasted the soup. Her eyes widened slightly and she took several more bites before she stopped and dabbed her lips with her napkin. “This is good.”

Lancer picked up her cup and looked at the tea. Then she just sighed. “A teenager living alone wouldn’t have anything stronger on hand, right?” Shirou just nodded. “Well, a good meal with other warriors is good on its own I suppose.” Bazett gave her a sharp look. “Alright, alright. Business before pleasure.”
“With everyone here, perhaps we can get to the heart of the matter,” Bazett said. “You called us here for a reason.”

Shirou nodded and took a seat at the head of the table. “Last time there was a Holy Grail War in Fuyuki, hundreds of people died. I don’t want to see that happen to anyone, ever again. That’s why I agreed to participate in this war.”

Caren giggled, but Shielder looked rather proud. “That’s a noble goal,” the Servant said. “Just what I’d expect from the Master of my king.”

Shirou blushed slightly “It’s not that special. Trying to help other people is normal, isn’t it?”

“Not usually to the extent of being willing to fight to the death for it,” Caren said.

The red-head rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “Maybe not. But my father always said that being a magus meant being willing to risk your life. So if I’m going to risk my life, it should be for something worthwhile.” He set his cup down. “That’s why I want the Masters to be able to work together. If we just go out and attack each other, everyone in Fuyuki could be in danger. I can’t sit back and do nothing while that’s happening.”

“I share this goal,” Shielder said. “I am the Servant of Defense. My duty is to protect everyone from harm. But I cannot speak for my Master….” She looked at Caren with a hopeful expression.

Caren set down her chopsticks. “My purpose as a member of the Church is to attempt to prevent a second catastrophe. I expected to need to actually win the Holy Grail War to do such a thing, but it seems that someone is already trying to do my job for me. Maybe I should take a vacation.” Her lips twitched up into a slightly insincere smile. “You and your girls are certainly making my life interesting.”

“Not my anything,” Rin interjected with a vein pulsing in her forehead.

“Oh yes, that’s right,” Caren said, her smile not wavering. “Matou is his. You and him aren’t really anything, are you?”

There was a crack as Rin’s chopsticks snapped. She took a deep breath, her fists clenching and unclenching a few times. “My apologies,” she said, her expression suddenly shifting to her schooled half-smile. “How clumsy of me. Let me fix that.” She murmured a word and the chopsticks merged back together.

“That’s very idealistic,” Bazett interrupted, trying to get things back on track. “And protecting innocent people is something that I can respect. But I want you to answer a question for me.”

“Of course,” Shirou said without hesitating.

“How do you plan to resolve the Holy Grail War?”

Shirou blinked. “I’m sorry?”

Bazett folded her chopsticks over her now empty bowl. “You said you want the Masters to work together and you don’t want us to fight when it might put people in danger. And that’s all well and good. But how do you plan to resolve the Holy Grail War then? One way or another, we will have to fight eventually. Putting that off is only going to keep the people of Fuyuki out of danger for so long.”

Shirou hesitated. “I don’t know,” he admitted after a few moments. “I wish… I wish there was a
way this could be done with no one having to get hurt. But in the end, if we have to fight, then I’ll fight.”

Bazett stared him in the eye for a minute. Then she laughed. “For someone with ideals, resolve, and determination, you’re rather half-assed, aren’t you? For the time being I can accept that, but in the end I will be trying to win the Holy Grail. I’ll agree not to go picking fights in the middle of town or intentionally causing trouble, but beyond that, I don’t see any reason to cooperate with you further.” She stood up. “But try to come up with an answer. Maybe you’ll have a better solution next time we meet. Thank you for the meal.” She stood and motioned for Lancer to follow.

“Saber,” Lancer said before she stood to join her Master. “Your Master has guts, even if he’s a little naive. Make sure you keep him alive, alright? I want to see where he goes from here.”

Saber nodded. “I will not allow my Master’s safety to be put in jeopardy if I can help it. Worry about your own Master. It would be a pity to see you fall to an assassination rather than having a chance to face you in combat.”

Lancer laughed. “You two are definitely keeping things lively. Good luck. I think you’re going to need it.”
Chapter 25

Caren said her goodbyes as soon as she and Shielder finished their plates and disappeared into the night to follow Bazett and Lancer. The Servant only stopped for a moment to exchange a few words with Saber and bow to her before she hurried after her Master. Taiga grumbled a bit before she and Ruler ran off as well, heading home for the evening.

Shirou sighed. He’d hoped… he wasn’t exactly sure what he’d hoped for. Bazett’s question nagged at the back of his head. What exactly had he been trying to do meeting them? Trying to get them to fight nicely? Wanting to find a way for all of them not to have to fight? “I’m sorry I called you over just for that,” Shirou said. “I might not have thought this through entirely.”

“She was too polite to say it, but you’re an idiot,” Rin replied dryly. “And if you’re going to keep being wishy-washy, you’re going to make a mess of things.”

“There’s no need to be hard on him,” Sakura said as she started to clear the table.

Shirou shook his head bowed deeply. “No, she’s right. I wasn’t putting my all into this and it’s been making it harder for you both. I may not have anything I want from the Holy Grail, but you have your own reasons to claim it and I’ve been making that harder on you. I’ll try to do better from here on. I promised that we’d work together, so I’ll do my best not to be a burden to you.”

A vein appeared on Rin’s forehead. “Idiot!” The shout was punctuated with a slap upside Shirou’s vulnerable skull. “That’s not what I meant!”

“Rin, that’s too far,” Saber said firmly, one hand reflexively going to her sword.

“Not when I’m dealing with this moron,” Rin snapped. “I’m not talking about winning the Grail! I’m saying that if you keep going about this like a half-assed moron, you’re going to die! Is that what you want? To get gutted by Lancer, or by that monster your crazy sister is working with?”

Shirou said nothing for a minute. He didn’t even stand up again until Rin was done yelling. “I don’t want to see anyone get hurt if I can help it,” he finally replied. “The hero’s duty… is to protect everyone. If my life is payment for that, then that’s alright.”

Rin and Sakura, and even Saber, stared at him for a very long moment. “And what about the people who are trying to kill you?” Rin asked softly.

The red-head clenched his fist. “If they’re trying to hurt innocent people, I’ll do what I can to stop them.”

“That is not what I asked,” the magus hissed. “I asked what you do if someone tries to kill you.”

Shirou cocked his head. “Well, I’m already risking my life.”

Rin’s mouth opened a closed a few times while she continued to stare at him. The silence was broken when Archer whistled. “Damn,” the pirate said, shaking her head slightly. “You’re crazy, you know that?”

Shirou looked around the room, feeling slightly uncomfortable as everyone stared at him. “What’s the matter?”

“The fact that you have to ask says everything I need to know,” Rin said, her voice suddenly very
soft. “I… I think I need to think about some things. Have a good night Emiya.” With that, she turned on her heel and walked out.

“Was it something I said?” Shirou asked, completely mystified.

“Selflessness is an admirable trait in a hero,” Rider added as she spoke up for the first time. “But there is a point where you take it too far.” She set down her cup and stood up. “And worry often makes people upset. Perhaps you should think on that a bit.”

“Your’re looking melancholy,” Lancer said, folding her hands behind her head. “Expecting more from the kids?”

Bazett looked up at the night sky, watch the small cloud her breath formed drifting into the air. “I’m not sure. Maybe I was hoping that one of them had a plan or something. I’ve never had to kill kids who weren’t already dead before. I don’t want to start with this.”

“Well, I think the red-head would agree with you.” Lancer absently stroked her chin. “He reminds me of a lot of the students I took on.” Her smile faded and her face took a drawn look. “They were usually wide-eyed and idealistic too. They all wanted to be a hero who would go and slay the monster and marry the princess and get all the best parties. The ones who made it through my training without running away or breaking learned the most important truth of being a hero.”

Bazett felt an almost morbid desire to ask. “What truth is that?”

“The hero rarely gets to be the nice guy. And when he does, he’ll probably get screwed over by it.” Lancer shook her head. “I should have asked for the booze before we left. I’m starting to get sentimental.”

Bazett stopped walking and sighed. “You make it sound like the kid’s doomed.”

“Nah, not yet anyway,” Lancer said. “He’s still young. He’s got time to unlearn some of those bad habits. It’s perfectly possible to be heroic without killing yourself trying to make sure you dragged the last innocent bystander to safety. He just needs to learn a little… moderation.”

“I don’t know, I think he’s quite interesting.” The two women spun around as Caren walked up behind them. “Though I suppose he wouldn’t be fun anymore if he died.”

“I think he and my liege will be good for each other,” Shielder said as she ran to catch up with the group. “She needs someone with that kind of good natured earnestness to help pick her up. She was always far too serious.”

“Speaking from personal experience?” Caren asked.

Shielder blushed slightly. “Have a father at the Round Table and you’re the baby of the group forever,” she muttered, pouting a little bit. “But I was actually talking about one of the other knights. Sir Bedivere was always the one who could make the king smile. He was a bit like Shirou actually. Earnest and determined, even if he was pushing himself far too hard.” She sighed wistfully. “I miss him sometimes.”

“Just him?” Caren asked. “The Round Table must have been a boring place.”

“Oh no, life in Camelot was always exciting,” Shielder protested. Her lips twitched up into a smile, but it looked uncharacteristically cold. “Like when Gawain would come home after one of his
adventures and spend hours regaling us all with his incredible skills, whether we wanted to listen or not. Or when father would gain another admirer and we’d spend weeks helping him hide from her whenever he inevitably got tired of the poetry and flowers and gifts. Or when we all started a game of trying to figure out whether Tristan was asleep during our Round Table meetings or not. Or when Gareth would bring home another man that she’d ‘befriended’ and Gawain would go on for hours about how he just wanted her to be safe before bullying us into spying on the new guy for him.”

Her audience all stared at her with sweat drops running down their foreheads. “Somehow I feel like my image of the Knights of the Round Table has been permanently damaged,” Bazett said.

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Lancer said, cheerfully patting her Master on the back. “I can tell you plenty of stories about the Hound and his buddies. The knights of Ulster weren’t quite that quirky, but there was this one time…”

“No thank you!” the Enforcer said quickly. “I like my image of Cu Chulainn the way it is!” The rest of the group laughed as Bazett hurried ahead before Lancer could launch into some wild tale of her former pupils most embarrassing moments.

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Kirei Kotomine sat in his office, slowly sipping from a glass of wine. He was eternally grateful that his unfortunately large contingent of guests had elected to go to bed early. Their report on the Emiya boy was as intriguing as it was frustrating and he wanted a chance to consider it in private.

“You have a troubled looked tonight, Kirei.” Well, almost private. A pair of red eyes stared at him as the blonde-haired King of Heroes emerged from the shadows in his casual clothes. “I thought you had put your days of pointless brooding behind you.”

The priest shook his head. “Simply remembering something you said to me many years ago. I believe I may be… obsessing over yet another Master in this conflict.”

Gilgamesh laughed and took Kirei’s bottle from the table. He checked the label then scowled and drew a different bottle from thin air, along with a golden cup. “If you’re going to brood, at least do it to a better vintage than this.” He snatched the glass for the priest’s hands and tossed the contents out the window before filling it again from his own bottle. “Not that there’s anything wrong with obsession. To have seen something so grand that it dominates your thoughts and haunts your dreams can be a state of ecstasy, if you take the time to thoroughly indulge in every aspect of your desire.”

“It’s the Emiya boy.”

The king tapped his glass against Kirei’s before taking a drink. “Of course it is. His father was the answer to your last question, was he not? It’s only natural that you be curious if the son takes after the father.”

“If it were that simple, I would have no need to contemplate anything,” Kirei said, indulging in slow sips of the exquisite drink Gilgamesh had provided. The bottles he’d been progressively draining over the last few days were bitter and thoroughly inadequate by comparison. “But Bazett’s report is troublesome. The boy shares his father’s contradictory desire for heroism, but she claims he has yet to come to an answer as to how to attain such a goal.”

“And you wonder if he will follow his father’s path and become a ‘hero’ or if he will reject it and become something else,” Gilgamesh finished for him. He threw back his head and laughed a second time. “A family tragedy a decade in the making. It’s almost entertaining enough to make up for the utter farce this Grail War has been so far.”
“Has no one caught your eye this time King of Heroes?” Kirei asked, a small smile playing across his lips. “I would have thought that seeing King Arthur again would put you in a better mood.”

Gilgamesh smirked and downed a large portion of his cup. “Ah yes, the lovely King of Knights is still a sight to behold. But her presence hardly makes up for the foolishness of the other mongrels the Grail chose to spit out. Perhaps it exhausted itself sending extras and had to skimp on the quality. Truly a shame. You’d think it could provide me with at least one opponent that was at least worth a little of my attention. Perhaps the Queen of Shadows may have the potential, but I have yet to be impressed.”

“There’s still plenty of opportunity for them to surprise you,” Kirei suggested.

“This world has surprised me many times,” the golden king said. “But I doubt this will be one of them.”

The priest just smiled. “I believe we are in disagreement this time Gilgamesh. I believe the best is yet to come. All we must do is bide our time until things are prepared. Then we will truly see if what sleeps within the Grail will bring us what we desire most.”
Shirou was getting tired of dreams of war. He saw the knights in battle, but not on open fields. The armored warriors fought on foot, clashing against their foes in the streets of a peasant village that half of them didn’t even remember the name of. Their normally shining armor was stained with mud and blood and they all looked exhausted. The king stepped over a body without reaction. Not a soldier or one of her knights, but a middle aged woman in a roughspun peasant dress. She wasn’t the only one. The trampled bodies of peasants lay sprawled about the village square. The few visible faces where locked in empty looks of horror or pain.

The king didn’t allow it to slow her. He could feel the heaviness in her chest and the extra weight on her shoulders, but she ignored it. In that moment, he could see into the king’s heart. They were at war and death could not be avoided, not for everyone. She would mourn the dead, but she did not regret what she had to do. She would make a good kingdom, a place where those who lived would have peace and happiness. If so many were to die, she was going to make it worth it.

Shirou was almost relieved when the scene shifted. He was starting to get used to the strange, multilayered dreamscapes, even if the stories never seemed to get any better.

Then his stomach rolled as the smell of blood hit him even harder than before. He was running through a modern looking manor, with the smell of blood all around him. He caught a glimpse of himself in a half open window as he dashed by. Hard grey eyes looked back at him from under greying hair and his skin looked permanently tanned. Who was this man? There was something eerily familiar about his face, but the hard expression disturbed him.

His thoughts were interrupted when he heard doors slamming open and figures poured out. They looked human for an instant, but then Shirou could see just how wrong they were. Their eyes were empty and their walk was a slow, shuffling gait. A few even had blood splattered across their bodies straight out of a horror movie. The man gritted his teeth and his body burned as magic energy poured through him. There was a flash of blue and blades manifested in mid-air, firing like arrows. The dead things collapses one after another as the blades tore through their soft bodies.

The man moved past them, taking only a moment to look down at their now motionless forms. A young woman in a sundress, a man in a suit, a teenager in jeans and a slogan t-shirt, an older woman in a skirt and blouse. He acknowledged each face with a tired sigh and kept walking. His black and white blades manifested in his grip and he slashed through the next group with his own hands. The dead thinned slowly, but there were no more living among them. The man’s knuckles went white around the hilts of his swords.

His heavy boots splintered the wood as he kicked open the double doors at the end of the hall. A thin, pale man looked up from a table covered in vials, papers, and bowls full of strange ingredients. His eyes glowed for a moment and he opened his mouth to speak, flashing razor sharp fangs. The man in red just growled and conjured half a dozen black swords from nothingness. The pale man had just enough time to look frightened before he was impaled through the head and heart by the flying blades.

The man stopped for a moment to take stock of the room. Then he heard a small sound. He spun, blades appearing in a flash of light before he actually realized what he was looking at. There were cages along the far wall. Most of them were empty, save for a few bloodstains, but a few still held various animals. Part of him recognized that they were likely familiar candidates, or subjects of whatever the bloodsucker had been working on. But the last cage held a boy. He wasn’t all that young, but he didn’t seem to have quite reached puberty yet. The man’s stomach turned when he
started to imagine what the monster had wanted with him. He smashed the cages open, letting the animals run free before he tore the lock apart and gently pulled the small body free. He only stopped the call one more blade, a blade sword with a red hilt. He grabbed the sword and slammed it into the body on the floor. It burst into flames, consuming it in an instant.

He looked down at the small body in his arms as he walked through the silent halls toward the exit. The dead around him couldn’t be saved anymore. But he’d been in time to at least save one person. That… maybe that was enough.

Shirou Emiya snapped awake covered in sweat, his heart pounding in his chest. He was definitely getting tired of dreams.

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Breakfast was done by the time Shirou started to feel more like himself again. The methodical act of washing dishes helped clear the dark ideas from his head. “How about we all head into town today?” he asked as he turned off the sink and passed the last of the dishes to Sakura to dry.

“What brought this on?” Rider asked, taking each dish from Sakura as she finished and setting it in its proper place in the cabinets.

“Well, I need to refill the fridge after last night, and I thought that maybe we’ve been spending too much time just sitting around my house,” Shirou said. “And I thought that you and Saber might enjoy having some time to explore the city.”

“A day on the town might be very nice,” Sakura agreed. “We can get lunch together and do some other shopping too. I think Saber and Rider could use more than one outfit to wear.”

Taiga narrowed her eyes. “Just don’t go any weird places, okay? I’m starting to worry that you might get into trouble if I let you out of my sight for too long.”

Shirou cocked his head curiously. “You can come along if you want, Fuji-nee.”

“I can’t,” Taiga said leaning back. “Grandpa has a business partner coming over today and since the school is closed, he asked me to be there. Gotta uphold the family image and all that.”

“I must admit, this time period is far more peaceful that when I was alive,” Ruler said wistfully. “Back in my day, the only way you could get criminals to be civil was to use blunt force.”

Shirou did his best to smile, but he didn’t think it was very convincing. “I see.”

The group quickly finished cleaning and Taiga dragged Ruler off while the rest of the group bundled up for the walk into the city. Despite Saber’s insistence that she wouldn’t be cold, Shirou badgered her into taking a warm white coat and a deep blue scarf. There was some brief discussion of where to go first, and they eventually decided to take care of important errands first so they could leave the groceries at home and not have to worry the rest of the day. The walk into town was calm and much more peaceful than the last few times they’d been out and about. There was a slight breeze blowing, but the sun was up and the sky was clear, keeping it from getting too cold.

But Shirou hadn’t quite been prepared for how enthusiastic Saber was when they went grocery shopping. “Beef steaks!” It was almost cute to watch her eyes sparkle when she looked over the vast array of food laid out on the counters and coolers. Then he saw the price tag and felt a very empty feeling in his wallet. “And fresh vegetables. Do you know how to make stew, Shirou?”

“Well, I’m not bad at it,” the red-head said with a small chuckle. “Actually, considering how many
guests we keep having, maybe I should get the ingredients for a hot pot while we’re here.”

Sakura’s face immediately brightened. “That’s a perfect dish to share with everyone,” she agreed cheerfully. “We haven’t cooked anything like that in a long time.”

“That’s because Fuji-nee ate more than twice what we ate combined last time,” Shirou said dryly. “And then got sick afterwards.”

“That was a strange Christmas,” Sakura said with a sigh.

Saber’s eyes sparkled. “That sounds delicious.”

Shirou chuckled and picked out a pack of one of the less expensive beef steaks. Then a second for good measure. “Let’s see… we’ll need carrots, radish, onions, tofu…” He trailed off, going over the ingredients in his head. “I think everyone is going to need to help carry the bags when we’re done here.”

It took three-quarters of an hour to get through the entire place. By the end, Shirou was picking meals based on how excited Saber and Rider seemed to be about the idea. The purple-haired woman was significantly more restrained than Saber when it came to the topic of food, but she couldn’t hide the look of approval when he picked out a few items. Saber seemed excited about just about anything that didn’t have potatoes in it. Shirou had a feeling he still didn’t understand quite a bit about his partner.

The tranquility of the morning was finally broken when they returned to the Emiya residence to find someone banging on the front door. “You know, they might not be home,” Archer said as Rin tried the bell again. The Servant was dressed in casual clothes for the first time Shirou could remember. Her cleavage was still spilling out of her jacket, but now it was a modern red leather jacket over a low cut shirt. Simple jeans and dark leather boots covered her legs.

“Tohsaka?” Shirou cocked his head slightly as the young magus turned to him. Rin looked, quite frankly, awful. Her hair was slightly disheveled and there were bags under her eyes. Her scarf wasn’t even on properly. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” she said quickly. “I just had nothing to do today and thought it might be a good time to talk.”

“She barely slept last night,” Archer revealed with a huge grin on her face. “And she wanted to come see you.”

“Surely that’s not healthy,” Saber interrupted. “Exhaustion is nearly as dangerous a foe as hunger.”

Shirou felt a drop of sweat on his brow. What was with Saber and food today? “It’s all that rich bitch’s fault,” Rin grumbled, looking away with pink cheeks.

“You can’t blame Edelfeldt for everything,” Sakura said gently.

“Oh, no, it’s actually her fault this time,” Archer said. She looked like she was trying to keep herself from laughing. “She pulled off a prank that only someone slightly crazy and unreasonably rich could ever possibly pull off.” She actually giggled for a second before she got control of herself again and focused. “She bought the property next to Rin’s and has men working around the clock to build a mansion there that’s bigger than the Tohsaka place. They kept waking Rin up last night.”

“That’s…” Shirou had no words.
Rin groaned and rubbed her eyes. “I hate her so much,” she said through gritted teeth. “So, so much.” Archer finally lost the stoic façade and broke down laughing.

“You can come out with us if you like,” Shirou said. “We were just going to spend the day in town and do a little shopping, but I do know a place that makes amazing coffee.”

Rin nodded slowly for a moment. Then she perked up a little and her lips twisted into a wicked little smile. “Really? A boy’s never taken me shopping before. That’s very gentlemanly of you.”

“What?” Shirou felt existential dread settle over him and he could almost imagine a faint weeping sound coming from his wallet.

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After three cups of coffee and a quick trip to the restroom that Shirou was certain involved a brush and some cosmetics, Rin was looking much better. She sat at the small table in front of the café with all the grace of a queen, sipping her final cup daintily. Someone with less experience with the girl might actually be fooled. “This was just what I needed,” she said with a happy sigh. “Thank you Emiya.”

“It was no trouble,” Shirou said. At least the rest of the group seemed to be enjoying the hot chocolate he’d gotten them.

Rin pushed a stray strand of hair back out of her face and smiled at him. “I feel like I should apologize for my rude behavior when I showed up at your house.”

“Laying it on a little thick,” Rider muttered, quickly looking away when Rin shot her a glare.

“It’s fine,” Shirou interjected before anyone could get riled up. “Let’s just go down to the shops and try to enjoy ourselves. We did come out to have a good time, right?”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Rider said before she turned back to her own master.

The group headed down the street with their steaming cups in hand. Shirou reluctantly admitted that he wasn’t really familiar with a lot of stores. He just bought whatever he thought looked decent and didn’t worry about it too much. So he wasn’t terribly surprised when Rin hijacked control of the expedition and directed them to an upscale shopping mall. What did surprise him was how eager the clerks seemed to be to work with the odd collection of customers.

“Where did you get your hair colored?” one of them asked as she circled Rider. “It looks so natural.”

“Uh…” The Servant’s cheeks turned pink as the woman gave her a once over.

“Probably the same place her friend did,” another saleswoman called out from over by Sakura.

The young Matou looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Oh, my hair is naturally like this. It’s a… family condition.”

“Natural purple hair? I’m not sure if you’re lucky or unlucky,” the woman sighed. “Matching colors must be a neat trick.”

“Why don’t we try something light?” the other saleswoman suggested. “Maybe a nice cheery yellow…”
The second woman scoffed. “But that would be so gaudy! No, let’s start with white and see how it goes from there.”

Leaving the work of finding clothes to the professionals, Shirou simply took a seat and watched as they girls were run through a gauntlet of styles and colors. Saber looked slightly overwhelmed as the girls picked out different colors for her, but they always seemed to gravitate back toward more blue. Though one girl seemed insistent that red would look fabulous on her. There was something about watching the blonde flushing at being fussed over that brought a smile to his face.

“Having fun?” Shirou turned as Rin came up behind him, but any answer immediately abandoned him when he got a good look at her. Apparently she’d been getting fashion tips from Archer while he wasn’t paying attention. She had changed into a dark reddish-brown blouse with the two two buttons left open, revealing a fair bit of skin. Though, the look didn’t quite work the same way with Rin’s more… modest assets. She leaned forward and Shirou quickly turned away to keep himself from looking down her shirt. “You know, most boys your age would be ecstatic to see a bunch of girls trying on cute clothes in front of them.”

“I see girls more than enough,” Shirou said, trying very hard not to look directly at her.

“I see you found something that fits your style,” the first saleswoman said as she approached the pair. “Your friends were going to go over to our undergarment section. Would you like to join them? We have bras for all sizes available in some wonderful styles.”

Rin’s face immediately turned so red that Shirou was worried she might catch fire. He did everything in his power not to react. Laughing would definitely make things worse. “You can wait outside for this part,” Rin snapped, spinning him around.

“Alright, no need to push.” Shirou stepped out of the shop and left the rest of the group to their underwear shopping. An image of Sakura and Rider in matching white lingerie sprang to mind against his will and he sighed wistfully. He was going to turn into some kind of pervert at this rate, but damn if it wasn’t a wonderful image.

Said image also distracted the young man long enough that he didn’t even notice when he almost walked straight into someone. There was a startled yelp and he snapped out of his happy place just in time to see another teenage girl fall on her ass right in front of him. She was a little shorter than he was, with shoulder length black hair tied up in pig tails and bright hazel eyes. She was wearing a blue shirt and a black skirt, though both of them were splattered with the whipped cream and strawberry remains of two crêpes. “Ow…” she groaned.

“I’m sorry,” Shirou said, bowing his head. “This is my fault. I should have been paying more attention. I’ll go get you some napkins to clean up right away.”

The girl looked up at him and immediately turned bright red. “Oh! No, it’s alright. I was distracted too.” She took his hand and he helped her to her feet.

Shirou bowed his head again. “At least let me replace your food, Miss…”

The girl bowed her head in return. “Sakatsuki. Miyu Sakatsuki. Thank you, I appreciate the help.”

Shirou smiled warmly at her. “I’m Shirou Emiya. It’s a pleasure to meet you. And there’s no need to thank me. I made the mistake after all.” He gestured toward the stairs. “The food court is just down here, right?”
Shirou insisted on paying for Miyu’s lost crepes himself while she waited at one of the many tables in the food court. He had never really been into that sort of thing himself. They just had too much sugar for him, but supposedly they were the big thing right now. He wondered if he could find a good recipe for a healthier variety to try for dinner one night. He wasn’t particularly good at a lot of foreign cooking, but they didn’t seem all that complicated to make. “Here you go.” He offered the matching cream filled treats to the younger girl.

“Ah, thank you very much,” Miyu said, taking them carefully from his hands. “I apologize for causing you any trouble.”

“It’s no trouble at all.” Shirou smiled at her. Compared to the bill he was likely to rack up when the girls were done shopping, this was pocket change. His small shrunk slightly and he looked at her curiously. “Have we met before? It feels like I’ve seen you somewhere before.”

Miyu nodded once. “I go to Homurahara Academy. I’ve seen you at school a few times. You’re in the archery club and you’re staying with one of the teachers, right?”

Shirou cocked his head. “You mean Fuji-nee?” Miyu gave him a confused look. “I mean, Miss Fujimura,” he clarified. “She’s technically my guardian, but she’s more like a big sister who comes by every now and then.”

Miyu looked even more confused. “Oh, she’s the second year English teacher, right? I’ve heard about her, but I meant Miss Saber. You came to school with her before the incident.”

The red-head nodded in understanding. “She’s staying at my house due to her circumstances for now,” he said, rubbing the back of his head. “It’s kind of complicated.”

Miyu’s eyes narrowed momentarily then she bowed her head in apology. “I see. I apologize for bringing up something private.”

Shirou chuckled awkwardly at her formality. “It’s not really private, just hard to explain. You don’t need to apologize for anything.” He looked down at the second, untouched crepe on the table. “I can go if I’m keeping you from meeting someone.”

“Oh no, I’m not meeting anyone or anything like that,” Miyu replied quickly. “I was just planning on taking the other one home for later. Cooking dinner every night is troublesome sometimes, so I wanted to take a snack home.”

Shirou nodded in understanding. He knew that feeling all too well. “It takes a lot of practice, but I’ve always found cooking to be very relaxing.”

Miyu’s cheeks colored immediately. “I’m not a very good cook,” she admitted after a few moments. “I usually just make myself whatever I can put in the microwave.”

Shirou knew that it was a little rude to ask, but he was curious. “Just you?”

Miyu took a few bites of her snack, using the excuse not to reply for a few moments. “I live by myself,” she said after she wiped her mouth. “Ever since I lost my parents in the fire.”

Shirou’s whole body went tense. “The fire as in…”
“The fire ten years ago, yes.”

Shirou felt his chest tighten. She’d lost her family in the fire. The fire that had taken his memories and quite likely his original family. The fire his father may have inadvertently started. He bowed so deeply his forehead almost hit the table. “I’m so sorry,” he said. “You shouldn’t have had to lose your parents like that.”

Miyu actually smiled slightly. “I appreciate the sentiment. But I think we may be apologizing to each other too much.”

Shirou looked surprised for a second. Then a small chuckle slipped out before he could help it. “Maybe we have. My apologies.”

Miyu covered her mouth to fight down a giggle. “Now you’re doing it on purpose.”

“Shirou!” The pair stopped and looked back toward the stairs to see a veritable swarm of girls descending toward them, loaded down with bags. Shirou absently noted a very depressed looking Rin at the back of the group.

“It looks like we’re out of time,” Miyu said, collecting her snacks. “Thank you for your help today.”

“It was my pleasure,” Shirou replied. “I hope I’ll see you at school sometime.”

Miyu’s cheeks colored again and she turned away. “Me too. It was nice talking with you.” She rushed off before the rest of the girls could descend on them.

“You looked like you were having fun,” Rin said with a forced smile. “While I was paying for everyone’s purchases.”

Shirou sighed and bowed his head again. He really was apologizing a lot today. “I’ll make sure to pay you back in full for everything Saber, Sakura, and Rider bought,” he promised.

“Oh, grandfather did give me access to the family funds,” Sakura cut in. “So you don’t need to worry about paying for anything Rider and I bought.”

“Are you sure?” He’d never heard any mention of this before.

“I’ve burdened you enough already senpai,” Sakura said firmly. “I can carry my own weight from here on.”

Shirou stopped for a second. He had never heard Sakura’s voice so firm before. “Of course,” he said. “I would never think you’re not capable of taking care of yourself. Just don’t expect me to start charging you rent or something silly like that.”


“I hope you’ll still let me pay for a late lunch though,” Shirou interjected before Sakura could reprimand her Servant. “There’s a nice family restaurant just around the corner.” There was a general murmur of agreement and the large group set off to fill their bellies.

Unbeknownst to the group, Miyu Sakatsuki watched them leave from the second floor, a small frown on her face. “It’s safe to come out now,” she said once the doors swung closed behind them.

Temptress appeared in a shower of sparkles, her cheeks puffed up with indignation. “No fair! You
spent all that time having an intimate moment with that guy and made me wait for my sweets!”

Miyu sighed in exasperation and handed one of the crepes over to her Servant. “He was just being friendly.”

“Mmm, he’s kinda a good match actually,” Temptress said as she munched on the food. “Sweet and charming and not too bad looking. He’s the kind of guy your fans would think makes a cute pair with you rather than being able to get mad at him for getting the cutest girl.”

Miyu’s face burned and she hurriedly looked away. “He’s not that cute,” she mumbled. She didn’t even sound convincing to herself. “Didn’t you have something you wanted to buy or something?”

“That’s right!” Temptress said. “You promised we could look at shoes!”

Paying for lunch very quickly ate through the money Shirou had saved by only paying for Saber’s rather modest selection of clothing. Somehow the blonde’s stomach still found ways to surprise and amaze him. He didn’t even want to think about what the kitchen staff must have thought after seeing their order. At least the girls seemed satisfied.

He glanced down at his watch and sighed. “Will you all be alright heading home by yourselves? I need to get going.”

Saber cocked her head. “Going where, Master?”

“I have to get to work,” he said, pulling his jacket tighter around himself. “I should be home in time for dinner, but don’t worry about waiting if I’m a little late. Oh, and you’re welcome to stay for dinner if you’d like, Tohsaka.”

“I may just take you up on that,” Rin said. “I doubt I’ll be able to enjoy a meal with the rich bitch’s construction project next door.”

“I’ll make sure everything is ready when you get home,” Sakura added.

Saber looked conflicted for a moment. “Please try to be home before it gets too late, Shirou,” she finally said. “And don’t hesitate to call me for help if you need it. Especially if you’re out after dark.”

“I’ll be careful,” Shirou promised.

“Then we’ll be waiting for you at home.” Saber smiled brightly at him before Shirou separated from the group. The young man frowned slightly as the girls disappeared around a corner and he headed in the other direction. He hadn’t realized how lonely walking through town by himself could be before now. He was slightly relieved when he walked through the front doors of Copenhagen.

“Hey Emiyan,” Otoko said, waving from behind the bar. “Enjoying having a day off?”

The red-head shrugged, sliding his coat off and hanging it off the rack by the door. “Busy as usual really,” he said.

The manager laughed. “Always so serious,” she teased. “You can stop and chat for a minute before you get started you know.”

“It’s easier to handle things while I have the free time,” Shirou said, grabbing an apron from behind
the counter. “Do you need me to check the store room for anything?”

Otoko chuckled again. “Bring up a bag of the Peruvian beans and case of Jameson’s for me. Hot drinks sell well on windy days after all. Then we’ll see where I need you.”

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Shirou wiped his brow as the last customers of the day filed out. Saturday nights were usually busy, but Otoko handled it with her usual ease. He’d ended up spending most of the time fetching things from the storeroom and keeping the main room clean and presentable to the customers. Just an average day for him really.

“You were really working your butt off today,” Otoko said as she wiped down the bar. “You sure you need extra hours that bad?”

“My food budget got a little bigger this week,” Shirou explained, absently rubbing his neck. “So I appreciate you giving me the extra time.”

“You new guests must have quite the appetite.”

Shirou gave her a flat look. “Fuji-nee called you earlier, didn’t she?”

Otoko grinned. “We do keep in touch you know. I think it’s sweet, but don’t overwork yourself too much. I don’t know what I would do if my best employee made himself sick.”

“I’m your only employee,” Shirou replied as he folded his apron. “But I’ll make sure to watch my health.”

This time Otoko outright laughed. “Good luck tonight!” she called after him as he grabbed his coat and stepped out into the night. Shirou pulled the jacket tight around him and walked down the street toward home. He just hoped that Sakura wasn’t feeling too overwhelmed having to get dinner ready for everyone.

He yawned and stretched his hands over his head as he walked, feeling his back pop slightly from the pull. Maybe he was working himself a little too hard. Not to mention the bruises he still had left after Saber’s training session. He absently rubbed his eyes, trying to wipe away the desire to just shut them for a minute or two.

“Good evening,” Shirou stopped when he heard a familiar voice. He spun on his heel and his eyes met a pair of glowing red irises. “I was hoping I’d catch you onii-chan.”

Shirou felt his head throb and the tired feeling hit him harder. He staggered in place, trying to keep himself upright. “I… Ilya… wait…”

“Don’t be scared onii-chan. I promise Berserker and I will take very good care of you.” The redhead finally couldn’t fight back any more and he toppled forward. With his last moment of consciousness, he saw the tall form of Ilya’s spandex clad Servant appearing next to her. Then everything went black and he knew no more.
“Shirou! We’re here!” Taiga called out as she and Ruler burst through the front doors of the Emiya residence. “What’s for dinner?” She stopped as she rounded the corner to the dining room and saw the table full of girls, but the owner of the house conspicuously absent.

“Good evening,” Sakura said as she served out dinner.

Taiga pouted and dropped into her usual spot. “Is Shirou still not home yet? Shouldn’t he be done work by now?”

“Yes, he should be,” Saber said. “And it’s already past sunset. I’m beginning to fear that something happened to him.”

“Eh, no reason to get all worked up about it and miss dinner. He probably just stopped to help some old lady with her shopping,” Archer said with a shrug. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

There was a very long moment of pointed silence.

“I’m calling Ayako,” Rin said as she got to her feet. “I think we’re going to need as many hands as we can get.” She rushed down the hall to find the phone.

“Saber, you should start looking at the market,” Sakura suggested, pulling off her apron and turning of the stove. “He might have just gotten delayed by something. Or you might find a trace of where he went.”

“We’ll look near the school and the temple,” Rider said, her combat clothes appearing in a flash. “There seem to be a lot of Masters around the school, so maybe we’ll find something.”

“We’ll head down to the waterfront,” Archer added. “It worked last time we went looking for trouble. And I’m good at getting lucky twice.” She grinned as her own clothes changed.

“Ayako’s fine with heading down toward the south side!” Rin called out from the hallway. “She said she’ll meet back here if she finds anything.”

Taiga groaned. “I guess that means we have to head down toward the bridge and the city center,” she grumbled. “Whoever grabbed Shirou better hope I don’t find them first. Because if I do, I’m going to show them what happens when someone delays my dinner after a long day!”

“Miss Fujimura,” Saber interrupted. “Before you depart, I have a request. Does your family possess a vehicle? It would expedite my search if I could move faster.”

Taiga thought about it for a moment. Then a savage grin spread across her face. “Kiri left behind something that I think might be just your style,” she said. “Just make sure you run over whoever thinks they can take Shirou from us.”

Saber looked momentarily surprised. “Something Kiritsugu left…”

“…”

“It looks like they’re splitting up,” Fiore said, watching the Emiya house from a distant rooftop. Her familiars seemed to have gone undetected by the other magi. “Hmmm, you’d think their meeting place would be better defended. I could detect the Servants gathered there from halfway across the way…”
Gunner grinned, her cape billowing slightly in the breeze. “That just makes it easier to find them. What fun would it be if the war turned into a game of hide and seek?”

Fiore sighed. “Honestly, I’d rather feel things out for longer than this,” she admitted, watching the various Masters and Servants hurrying off in all directions. “But we don’t have the support I’d have with the rest of the clan around, so we can’t afford to play around and wait for them to find us. We should use the element of surprise while we have it.”

“Of course we should!” Gunner declared loudly. “It’s only fitting that the conqueror is on the offensive. Sitting back and waiting for our death to come to us is the act of a fool.” She chuckled. “And I’ve been the fool more than often enough in one lifetime.”

Fiore felt the urge to sigh again. “We’ll pick one target for tonight. We don’t want to overextend.”

“I’d like to take our foes as fast as possible,” Gunner said. “But I suppose it can’t be helped. Choose an opponent and I’ll introduce them to my firing line.”

The Yggdmillennia Master followed the moving Master and Servant pairs for a few moments. “The red pair seems to be heading for the harbor. It should be easy to pin them down and isolate them there. And we’ll have plenty of space for a battlefield.”

“A firefight at the moonlit waterfront! How perfect! I’ve been waiting for an opportunity like this.” Gunner grinned wildly and leaped from the rooftop. “Let’s not waste any time.”

Fiore did sigh this time. She really didn’t have the energy to keep up with a Servant like this. Roche or even Celenike would have been better choices for this sort of thing. “Yes, let’s be off.” Her Mystic Code lifted her from her seat and propelled her after her Servant. “We have a battle to begin.”

The engine of the Yamaha V-Max purred between Saber’s legs as she rode into the shopping district. She didn’t know if it was the same one she’d used before, or a replacement of the same model, but either way it reminded her of why she enjoyed this era. It had the best toys. She put down one foot to balance herself as she let the bike idle and looked around. The market was all but abandoned this late, and most of the smaller shops were already closed. And there was no sign of her missing Master.

She was certain he was still alive, and hopefully not seriously hurt, if only because she could still feel their pact through the Command Seals. But that was a small comfort when he was missing and quite likely prevented from calling her to his side. She scowled. She hated this.

“My liege!” Saber turned, to see a familiar pink haired knight and her Master rushing toward her. Shielder was in her armor already, while Caren was wearing some sort of strange outfit vaguely resembling her vestments but conspicuously missing a skirt. “We’ve been looking for you.”

“Galahad, what’s going on?”

The Servant stopped, doubling over and panting softly. “Your Master, he’s missing, isn’t he?” Saber’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, but where did you hear that?”

“Oh, I’m afraid that’s my fault,” Caren said. “I was picking up Kirei’s dinner when I happened to
see a small girl with a very tall woman in the strangest outfit carrying a young man away. Of course once I recognized your Master, I hurried back to the church to fetch Shielder, but when we came to try to warn you, you’d already run off searching for him. We’ve been trying to find you to tell you ever since.”

Saber gave her a flat look. “Illyasviel and Berserker then…” Then her eyes widened. “I believe I know just where they’ve taken him. You have my thanks Sister Hortensia.” She wheeled around and revved the engine.

“Oh, Bazett and Lancer are probably out looking for him too,” Caren called after her as the bike took off. “Try not to start anything if you run into them!”

Shirou regained consciousness to a particularly soft feeling. He groaned and blinked a few times to clear his vision before he forced himself to sit up and take in the unfamiliar room. The first thing that struck him was how fancy the place was. The walls were done in red and tan, with gold filigree on just about everything. It looked like the kind of place that someone who was really trying to flaunt their wealth would build. The second thing he noticed was that it looked absolutely nothing like anywhere he’d seen in Fuyuki City before. He really hoped that he hadn’t been unconscious for too long. Ilya couldn’t have taken him that far, could she?

He pushed himself up out of the extremely plush bed he’d been left in and tried to find a way out. Unfortunately, the door was locked and the room he was in had no windows, so he was forced to wait and see if anyone would come to visit him. More fortunately, it was only a few minutes before the door opened and a red-eyed woman in a black and white dress entered the room. “Ah, it’s good to see you awake. Mistress Ilya has been waiting for you to recover.”

“Uh…” Shirou was at a loss for words for a moment. “Where exactly did she bring me?”

“Oh, my apologies.” The woman bowed slightly. “You are currently in the guest chambers of the Einzbern family’s Fuyuki estate. I am Sella and I have been assigned to be your maid during your stay.” She smiled stiffly. “Oh, and I am aware that as a young man you have needs. But please be aware that I am not available for personal services at this time.”

Shirou immediately turned bright red. What the hell had Ilya been telling her servants? “I definitely don’t need that kind of service,” he said quickly.

“Then I’m glad we understand each other.” Sella bowed again. “I will inform the mistress that you’re awake. I’m sure she’ll be up to see you shortly.” Then she left and Shirou heard the distinct click of the lock. He sighed and sat heavily back on the bed. He briefly considered trying to break the door down, but he had a feeling that would just end with Berserker coming to find him. Maybe if he summoned Saber…

His train of thought was cut off by the sound of running footsteps outside. The door burst open and a small figure shot at him like a ballistic missile. “Onii-chan!” Shirou grunted as Ilya tackled him hard enough to knock him back onto the bed.

“Ilya.” Shirou awkwardly patted her on the back. “Hi?”

The small Einzbern glared at him. “I thought you’d be happy to see me,” she grumbled.

“I am, really,” Shirou said, even though he didn’t sound very convincing. “I’m just a little… confused. I’m not exactly used to having a sister yet. And did you have to kidnap me?”
Ilya pouted. “You were spending all your time with those other girls instead of coming with me. I had to do something to get some time with you.”

“You could have just come to my house,” Shirou pointed out.

“With all of those other girls trying to get your attention?” Ilya glared at him again. At least she tried to, but it came out more cute than angry.

Shirou was starting to think that Ilya had a very different idea of how siblings were supposed to behave than he did. “Would that have been so bad? I promise I would have paid you as much attention as anyone else.”

Ilya gave him a funny look. “Onii-chan is a playboy,” she finally said.

It took a moment for Shirou to process that. Then he immediately turned bright red. “It’s definitely not like that! I’m only actually sleeping with two of them!” The instant that words left his mouth, he groaned and he smacked his head against the pillows. “That didn’t come out right.”

Ilya’s cheeks puffed up. “Stupid. Why did you pick one of them first? Is it Tohsaka? She was giving you that look. Or Matou? I knew I shouldn’t have left you alone with them.” She pounded on his chest a couple of times, though she wasn’t really strong enough for it to do more than sting a little.

“Even if we weren’t related,” Shirou interrupted, trying to get away from the subject. “Aren’t you a little young for us to even be talking about this?”

Ilya stopped and gave him an odd look. “How old do you think I am, Shirou?”

The red head rubbed his head. “I don’t know. You would have had to be pretty young when Kiritsugu left so… maybe twelve? Thirteen?”

Ilya continued to stare at him for a few seconds. “I’m eighteen.”


“I’m eighteen,” Ilya repeated. “I’m your older sister.”

Shirou’s brain was having a great deal of trouble restarting. “What? But… how?”

Ilya huffed before explaining herself. “I was eight when mama and papa left for the Fourth Holy Grail War. When papa didn’t come home, grandfather modified my body to ensure that I would have an advantage when I participated in the next Holy Grail War. His stupid enhancements affected my growth.”

Shirou gaped for a few more moments before he realized the implications of having an eighteen year old girl straddling his chest. “I… would you please get off me before we keep talking?”

Ilya’s sullen expression suddenly twisted into a cat-like smile. “Is there something wrong onii-chan? Or are you just starting to realize that I’m already a woman?” She ran her hands over his chest, rubbing him through his shirt.

Shirou was noticing several things, including the way her hips were very subtly grinding against his stomach. He fought very hard not to react. “That’s one of several problems here,” he muttered. “There’s nothing wrong with it onii-chan,” Ilya purred, leaned over and whispering in his ear before
nipping at the lobe. Her mouth moved down, her lips pressing against his neck and leaving a small mark on his skin. “It’s a sister’s duty to take care of her brother, isn’t it?” She slid her body a little lower, pressing her crotch against his and grinding against him through his pants.

Shirou felt himself hardening despite his best efforts to think of anything else. “That’s definitely not what taking care of your brother means,” he said a little desperately.

“Don’t worry,” Ilya murmured, sliding her hands under his shirt. “Auntie has been helping me practice. I promise you’ll enjoy it.” She pulled her hands free and unbuttoned her shirt, revealed her small, pale breasts. They were little more than small bumps on her chest, but her nipples were perky and hard already. She shrugged her shirt off and then unfastened her skirt, tossing the small while piece of cloth away to reveal her small lilac panties.

Shirou saw a small wet spot already forming on the front of her panties and he felt his cock twitch in his pants and his member swelling against the tight fabric. Despite her small form, the only word her could think to describe Ilya was ‘erotic’. It certainly matched the hungry look in her eyes. For a moment Shirou considered just throwing her off, but a small, stubborn part of him refused to move.

“Are you getting excited?” Ilya purred. “I’m going to take it out now.” She reached down and unzipped his pants, causing his cock to all but burst free from its confines. “Wow! It’s so big!” Ilya spread her legs to his cock was rubbing right against the crotch of her panties. “Do you think it will all fit inside me?”

“Maybe not,” Shirou said. “Maybe we should stop now.”

Ilya giggled. “Before we even try it? Of course not.” She pulled her panties aside, rubbing her small pink pussy against the swollen head of Shirou’s dick. He groaned as he felt her wetness rubbing against his sensitive tip. “I can feel it throbbing.”

“Ilya…” Shirou groaned as her lips slowly spread open and his cock sank into her small, wet pussy. He couldn’t have possibly imagined how tight she would feel, or how hot her insides would be as she slowly moved down on his cock.

“Oni… chan…” Ilya gasped, her mouth half open. “So… big…” She moaned lewdly and pushed down hard, taking him almost to the base. “Told you it would fit.”

Shirou gritted his teeth and gave in. “Not quite.” He pushed up, slamming the last inch into Ilya’s pussy.

Ilya mewled and her whole body trembled. “Feels so good…” She began to move on top of him, her light body bouncing wildly against his hips. The pace was rough and not particularly even, but Shirou couldn’t stop himself from moaning. Maybe he was getting too familiar to Sakura’s surprising, but very welcome, skills. “Please touch me,” Ilya moaned.

Fuck it. If he was going to do this, he was going to do it right. Shirou reached up, grabbing her hips and running his hands along her skin. One thumb found her clit while the other hand ran up her side. “Don’t go too fast,” he murmured. “Take your time to enjoy it.”

Ilya nodded wordlessly, slowing down slightly and finding a smoother, more even rhythm. Her pussy clenched and released around his cock almost in time with her movements and her breath came out in small gasps. “I’m… I’m going to…” She moaned and her back arched as she hit her peak. Her pussy clenched around him again and her body shook as the climax rolled through her.

Shirou gritted his teeth as her pulsing cunt seemed to be milking his cock. “Ilya… I’m almost there
“Cum inside,” Ilya ordered. “It’s safe, just fill me up!”

Shirou moaned and pushed in to the base again as he felt his balls tighten. His cock jerked and unloaded a torrent of thick, hot cum deep inside her. He felt Ilya’s pussy clench again, like she was trying to force his cum in deeper. Her body shivered again and he was pretty sure she had a second, smaller orgasm as his cum filled her to the brim.

For a long moment, they both lay there, panting and covered in a thin layer of sweat. Then Ilya leaned over and placed a kiss right on his lips. Then Shirou heard the door opening and nearly shoved her off. “Oh my!” He jumped when he recognized Ilya’s Servant stepping through the door. Berserker smiled. “You should have told me you were going to consummate your relationship. I would have been here much sooner.” She shut the door behind her and reached back to begin unfastening her tight suit.
Shirou could barely believe what he saw as Berserker’s incredibly tight jumpsuit fell away and more of her skin was revealed. He hadn’t realized that it was even possible for someone to have breasts the size of their head. He hastily tried to cover himself as the ridiculously curvy beauty stepped out of her clothes and walked toward the bed. “I was just…”

“Mmmm, giving my little girl just what she wanted,” Berserker purred. She crawled onto the bed and carefully pulled Ilya off of Shirou. “Oh my, just look at that. You fucked her little pussy so good.” She hummed happily and slowly ran her fingers along Ilya’s pussy lips. “Such a big, hot load.” Shirou could see a few drops of his cum leaking from Ilya’s hole onto her fingers. The Servant lifted her fingers to her mouth and licked the cream from her skin. “Delicious.” She leaned in and slowly ran her tongue along Ilya’s slit, lapping Shirou’s cum up as it dripped from Ilya’s tight hole.

Despite having just finished inside Ilya, Shirou felt his cock throb and harden against his hands, even as he tried to hide it. “Uh…” He found himself at a rare total loss for words. He was pretty sure that this kind of situation never happened to actual people. He’d have to be the protagonist of some H-game to end up sleeping with his older sister and her hot guardian.

“Oh dear, did Ilya not take care of all of your needs?” Berserker actually sounded worried. “You poor boy. You’ll have to forgive her, she’s still inexperienced.”

“I’m not that inexperienced,” Ilya grumbled. “Onii-chan is just horny.”

Berserker chuckled and kissed Ilya on the forehead. “Don’t worry sweetie. Auntie will take care of your big brother’s big friend.” She licked her lips and crawled up the bed toward Shirou. The red-head was torn between being worried and just staring at those massive breasts. The older woman wrapped her hand around his cock and stroked him slowly. His cock throbbed in her hand and she licked her lips again. “You don’t have to…”

“Just relax,” Berserker murmured. “I promise I’ll take good care of you.” She pushed her very generous chest forward and let the massive mammaries press around his swollen cock. Shirou groaned as he felt the soft tits around him and finally gave in. The Servant pressed her breasts together and stroked him between her breasts. Her tongue slipped out of her mouth and she let a long strand of drool drip over his shaft, making both his cock and her chest glisten as she rubbed it in.

“B… Berserker…”

“Call me Raikou,” she murmured. Then she wrapped her lips around the head of his cock and began to suck him, slow and steady. He could feel her tongue lapping around his tip, teasing the sensitive flesh while her lips took in as much of his cock as she could without relinquishing the grip her breasts had on him.

Shirou moaned and gritted his teeth as his cock throbbed in her mouth. “Raikou…”

The Berserker released his cock with a pop and licked her lips. “Oh dear, I almost went a little overboard there. It would be a shame if you finished somewhere other than inside me for the first time.” She straddled his hips, aggressively displaying her whole body as her pussy rubbed lightly against his throbbing cock.
Shirou finally couldn’t take it anymore. He reached up and grabbed her breasts roughly, feeling the huge, soft tits under his fingers. Raikou moaned as his cock thrust up against her body, grinding against her slit. “These are amazing,” he growled, taking one nipple roughly in his mouth.

Berserker groaned and pushed her hips down against his. “Oh my! Such a naughty boy.” She reached down and gently guided his cock until his tip pushed inside of her. She moaned as his cock filled her up and Shirou thrust against her, burying himself to the base inside her hot, dripping pussy. “Mmmmm, that’s it. Fuck me!” Their hips slapped together again and again as Shirou’s thrusts became wilder. Raikou’s voice came out in a breathy whine as she gripped his shoulders hard enough to bring a grunt of pain to Shirou’s lips. He ignored the feeling and focused entirely on the warmth squeezing around his cock. His hands squeezed her breasts and he switched his mouth to her other nipple, sucking the swollen teat hard. “That’s it. You’re going to make auntie cum!”

“Me… too…” Shirou groaned and thrust in to the base as he felt Raikou’s body tensing on top of him and she threw her head back and screamed with pleasure. He held out a few seconds before his balls tightened and he shot his second load of the night deep inside her. He finally released her breasts as their mutual orgasm subsided and slumped back on the bed. His head felt light and fuzzy and he was far more exhausted than he thought he’d be.

Raikou panted and released her grip. She frowned at the small bruises forming on his body where her hands had been. “Oh dear, I may have been a little rough…” She sighed. “I’ll be more careful next time.” She carefully lifted herself off of his cock, letting the slowly deflating member free of her cunt. “But it looks like we emptied you out properly this time.”

Shirou just groaned and nodded. “That was…” He fumbled around for a proper description for a moment.

Raikou didn’t actually give him a chance to finish as she leaned down and gave him a deep, firm kiss. “Excellent,” she said. “Just rest and we’ll be here to have some more family time later.”

Considering how exhausted he felt, Shirou just nodded as the pair climbed off the bed and left him alone to his thoughts. The door swung shut and Shirou collapsed back on the bed and covered his eyes. “What the hell is going on with my life?” he muttered to himself.

Saber’s motorcycle roared down the curving road toward the Einzbern castle. She took the curves with practiced ease, whipping around the tight road with perfect precision. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. Her Instinct screamed that she was being watched by something not entirely friendly. She was sure she’d picked up the tail somewhere near the edge of the city, but exactly where eluded her. Part of her hoped that it was just a watcher from the castle, or maybe Lancer looking to pick a fight with Berserker, but she feared that she wasn’t nearly fortunate enough to have it be that simple.

Then she had the sudden urge to get the hell out of the way. She kicked off the motorcycle, letting it skid forward and spin out onto the side of the road as she flew backwards away from it just as the ground cracked and blackened spears erupted from the asphalt where she’d been riding only a moment before. “Of course,” she muttered. She drew her sword, the wind blasting around her. “I’m in a hurry tonight!” she called out to the empty air. “If you want to fight, then come face me and don’t waste my time!”

There was a deep, cackling laugh from the forest below her. “I’m right here! Come and get me.” Saber sighed and leaped off the edge, sliding down the steep embankment and coming to a stop at
the bottom of the rocky cliff. Her eyes widened slightly when she hit the bottom and saw her opponent. They weren’t exact twins, but the resemblance was almost disturbing. Her doppelganger was far paler and her hair was shining silvery blonde instead of the deep gold of her own locks and her armor was jet black with hints of crimson. And the look on her face was borderline mad, with a smug grin spread across her lips. It reminded her far too much of her sister. “Who are you?”

The pale woman just laughed again. “I see, I see. You’re not who I thought you were. For a minute I thought my weaker half had actually managed to get herself summoned, but you’re not, are you? You’re someone else entirely. Really, the resemblance is uncanny.” She twirled her staff and Saber realized that it was a standard, not a spear. “That really pisses me off.”

Saber’s eyes widened and her grip around her sword tightened. “That’s not the first time someone has mistaken me for someone else. But I’m certain whoever I was mistaken for would never have such a cruel expression.”

The black clad warrior’s grin grew. “So you’ve met someone who knew the weaker me. Good. That means I’m not imagining how much you look like that saintly bitch.” She chuckled for a moment, then threw back her head and laughed uproariously. “I am Servant Avenger. And I’m going to have to kill you now. You remind me far too much of her.”

Saber didn’t wait for her enemy to make the first move. She lunged forward, bringing her blade down in a powerful arc. Avenger just smiled and drew her sword, swinging it across her body and meeting Saber’s blade in the same movement. Wind and fire collided and the air exploded with heat and force. Both swordswomen were knocked backwards by the impact, sending them skidding across the leafy forest ground. “You will not find me easy prey,” Saber said, shifting back into her ready stance.

“Clearly not,” Avenger said, absently twirling her sword. “You’re much better than my other self would be in battle. You actually know how to hold a sword. But I’m still going to kill you.” She jammed the butt of her standard into the ground and more blackened pikes, all smoking like they were freshly burned, erupted from the soil beneath Saber’s feet, forcing her to dodge and weave to avoid being skewered.

The blue knight scowled and twisted away from another barrage of spears before she charged forward, closing the gap and forcing Avenger into close combat again. Their swords collided a second time, sending a shower of sparks raining to the ground, but they both kept in, pressing the attack as their blades collided again and again. Saber silently cursed herself as she was forced to break off again and both of them had a moment to recover. She didn’t have time for this. But all she could do was hope that Shirou was doing alright while she was preoccupied.

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Shirou was still lying in his luxury prison suite when he felt his hand begin to heat up. It took him a second to realize that Saber was drawing power, and quickly. He gritted his teeth and rushed to the door. He couldn’t just sit around waiting to see what happened next. He needed to be out there helping her. The door refused to budge, even when he threw his weight against it. “Come on.” He slammed his shoulder into it again, but the wood held fast. He groaned and rubbed his head. There had to be a smarter way to do this. He had to have something. Then a small smile crossed his face. He was a mage, wasn’t he?

Shirou grabbed the door knob. “Trace on.” He closed his eyes and focused, seeing the inner workings of the lock in his mind. “Reinforce.” He pushed his magic energy into the lock, more and more until he felt the metal going past its breaking point. There was a resounding crack and the lock shattered, allowing him to simply push it open. He checked the hallway to make sure he was alone.
then hurried out of the room. He picked a direction and simply ran. There had to be a way out somewhere. He almost didn’t notice someone ahead of him until he almost collided with her. He forced himself to stop just before he hit her and shook his head. “Ah, sorry… Sella, right?”

The red-eyed maid looked blankly at him for a second. “Ah. No. Leysritt.”

Shirou blinked. He hadn’t realized that Ilya’s maid had a twin. “Leysritt. Sorry, I didn’t know.” She wasn’t calling for help or demanding he return to the bedroom, so that was a good start. “Do you perhaps know the way out?” It was a long shot, but at this point he didn’t exactly have a lot of options.

The maid cocked her head slightly. “You’re leaving?”

Shirou forced himself not to panic. “Saber’s in danger and I need to help. I can’t just stay here and wait.”

Leysritt stared at him for a few more moments. “You’ll come back? To mistress Ilya?”

Shirou honestly didn’t know how to respond to that for a moment. Ilya… had a very strange idea of siblings. And had dragged him here against his will to begin with. But she didn’t seem like was was actually trying to hurt him. And they were family, in a sense. “I’ll see her again when I can. Though maybe next time she could just come to my house instead of grabbing me off the street…”

Leysritt studied him for a moment then nodded, seemingly convinced of his sincerity. “Right, then left. Stairs to the entryway.”

Shirou bowed his head slightly. “Thank you.” Then he rushed off, leaving the pale maid to continue with her work. He ran down the hallway and took the turns as directed, finding himself standing at the top of an elaborate foyer. Carpeted stairs led down toward a massive front door. He took the steps two at a time and quickly pushed the door open. He looked out into the forest surrounding the castle and momentarily wondered where to go. Then a massive pillar of fire exploded in the distance and he raced into the trees.

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“Man, I can’t believe Shirou managed to get himself in trouble,” Ayako groaned as she and Assassin moved through the empty street. “He always used to be so reliable. All this magic stuff makes him crazy.”

Assassin was silent for a long moment. “I never really… understood mages,” she admitted. “They were usually… targets. My methods made getting around most magical defenses simple.” She lapsed back into silence as she hopped on top of a street lamp to get a better view of the block.

Ayako folded her hands behind her head. “No kidding. Rin’s all weird when she’s doing this magic stuff too. Maybe it’s because they spend so much time hiding. They kinda forget how to be normal.”

“Possibly…” Assassin seemed satisfied as she jumped back down. “There are magical defenses around many houses here.”

The brunette raised an eyebrow. “Really? We are getting pretty close to where Rin lives. Maybe we wandered into the magic district.”

The purple-haired Servant nodded. “I see four houses with defenses. One is your friend’s. One is where I was summoned. The owner is… no longer with us. One is under construction. And one a
bit further away that I do not know.”

“The new one is probably that weird foreigner,” Ayako said. “Rin called earlier just to complain about it. So let’s see if Shirou managed to get himself grabbed by wizard number four.”

Assassin nodded again. “You are eager to find him. Do you… care about Shirou?”

Ayako looked surprised for a second. “Yeah, of course I do. He’s a little thick sometimes, but he’s a great guy. You’d have to be crazy not to like him.”

There was no response from the skull masked Servant. “I did not mean that. I meant… do you find him… attractive.”

The school girl jumped and sputtered a little as her Servant looked away. Ayako thought she could see a little blush underneath her mask, but it was nearly impossible to tell. “I don’t really see how that matters right now,” she finally said, trying to deflect the question. “Let’s just go find him before he gets enchanted or whatever mages do.”

Serenity didn’t respond. “I believe he is alright. He is… a good person. God protects those with good hearts.” Then she hopped down the street toward the house. “Please remain safely back. I will investigate the house.”

The stealthy Servant hopped the fence around the building and landed carefully in the yard. The defenses were very impressive. She could sense many Bounded Fields layers on top of each other and filling any gaps that the other fields might leave. She wasn’t sure if she was even still undetected with how many spells were layers on top of each other. Aggressive defenses were attached to each alarm, making it hazardous for anything even remotely magical to enter without being struck down. She was going to have to be quick and careful to even get a look inside without provoking the owner.

She stepped forward carefully, moving through the smallest gaps in the magical defenses and working her way toward the back entrance to the main house. Unlike many of the others in the neighborhood, it was built in a traditional Japanese style, with a wide sliding door leading into the backyard for her to enter.

The door was thankfully unlocked, which saved her some time and noise. The door slid open silently and she moved inside. The defenses inside were nearly as thick, forcing her to take her search slowly. Yet each room she checked was uneventful. Half of them didn’t even look used and the rest were nearly empty. Whoever owned this house certainly wasn’t using it very much. And there was no sign of any place to keep a prisoner. Perhaps they’d picked the wrong location.

She felt something coming almost a moment too late. She faded back into the shadows, hiding herself in the darkness of the nearly empty house. “Okay piggy! One of Master's spells heard you coming! I can’t see you, but you’re interrupting my beauty sleep!” The pink-haired Servant stalked down the hall, her spear already in hand.

Assassin allowed herself a heavy sigh when she recognized Temptress’s high pitched voice. So much for recon. “Must you?” she asked, shifting backwards into another shadow. If she could just keep Temptress distracted long enough to get a clear line to the door.

Temptress scoffed. “What do you want, creeper?”

“I’m looking for someone. But it seems like your Master doesn’t like having guests.” She waited until Temptress wasn’t looked before she darted to another piece of cover. A few more feet and she
could simply bolt.

“So you’re not here to kill my amazing self and my cute little Master? Somehow I don’t believe you.” Temptress spun her weapon. “If you come out I’ll make killing you really quick and painless.”

Serenity grumbled and rubbed her ear. “Will it involve less of your… screeching? I can’t believe your Master can sleep with that around.”

Temptress went deathly quiet for a very long moment. “You swine,” she growled. “You filth. You’re less than a pig. You’re slop! I’m going to bleed you dry!”

“That was a mistake,” Assassin realized as Temptress raised her spear and slammed it into the ground, sending a shockwave through the air and tearing the hallway apart. She turned and bolted, trying to get more room to maneuver. If she was going to fight, she was going to do it where she had room to move.

Rin frowned as they walked along the wharf. Piles of crates lined one side of the concrete while the ocean spread out to the other, shining silver-blue under the moonlight. “This place looks abandoned,” she muttered to herself. “But somehow I doubt that it is.”

“Eh, you’re worrying too much,” Archer said as she absently tapped one of her pistols against her shoulder. “Shirou can’t have gotten himself in that much trouble.”

“Can you really say that about Emiya?” Rin replied dryly. “He’s such a… a dunderhead. A moron with no self-preservation instinct at all.”

Archer laughed. “You’re just worried because you think he’s cute.”

Rin’s cheeks immediately turned bright red and she rounded on her Servant. “That’s not… I don’t… that’s incredibly stupid! We have more important things to worry about right now.”

“Correct!” Archer and Rin both spun around to see the new arrival. “Like me! I am the black powder Servant, master of explosives, Gunner!” The black-clad Servant’s cloak billowed behind her from a gust of sea breeze. “But you might know me better as the great demon lord of Owari, Oda Nobunaga!”

“Gunner. Really?” Rin muttered. “What the hell is this Grail War?”

Archer just grabbed her by the shoulder and shoved her behind another crate. “You really want to stand around and muse over it when I’m about to fight someone who calls herself the master of guns and explosives?”

“Point,” Rin admitted as she rushed clear of the blast zone. “Just be careful. I have a feeling this one’s another crazy one.”

“What, the one who jumped up onto a pile of crates like a TV character, declared her name, and called herself a demon?” Archer said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “No shit. Just run!”

Gunner threw her head back and laughed. “Splendid! Yes, protect your master from me! Only a hero can defeat a demon after all!” Three flintlock muskets manifested in midair and fired down at the pink-haired Servant. Archer cursed under her breath and threw herself sideways, avoiding the shots as they tore up the ground beneath her. “Fight me with all your strength!” Gunner cackled as
she drew her sword and pointed, redirecting the muskets so they fired again.

“I think you’ve got it all wrong, buddy,” Archer said as she dove behind a large shipping crate to buy herself a few moments. “I’m no hero. I’m a pirate!” She leaped straight up into the air, vaulting over the crate and getting a clear line of sight on the other Servant. Her pistols roared as she met Gunner’s next barrage with one of her own, forcing the other Servant to finally move. “And more importantly, I’m the bloody Dragon. You’re out of your weight class.”

Gunner grinned ear to ear. “A dragon? That’s fine by me. Sounds like fun! I’ve always wanted to fight a dragon.” She manifested more guns, firing rapidly as Archer and forcing her to duck and weave as she picked her shots.

Standing well back, Rin winced as she saw Archer take a hit across her hip. She absently fingered one of the gems in her pocket. In theory, she could do some serious damage if she could get one solid opening, but the little maniac on top of the crates was jumping around and laughing too much to get a good shot. “This war keeps getting crazier.”

“Yes, she’s a little… eccentric. But she does make up for it in a lot of ways.” Rin nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard another voice coming from behind her. She spun around, her hand already aiming an attack spell. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.” The voice came from above somewhere, moving through the upper levels of the shipping yard.

“You must be Gunner’s Master,” Rin said, not letting her guard down for an instant. “Here to pick a fight?”

The voice didn’t respond for a moment and there was a sound like metal thumping against metal. “Well, I felt like I should give you at least one chance to surrender peacefully. There’s no need to fight to the death over this.”

Rin gave a flat look in the direction of the voice. “Somehow I don’t believe you. And even if I did, I wouldn’t give up to a Servant like that.”

“You’re the Tohsaka heir correct?” the voice continued. “I suppose your pride as a magus won’t allow you to give up easily. For what it’s worth, I understand completely.” The sound of metal against metal grew louder and Rin felt a bead of sweat on her neck. “Allow me to introduce myself.” The sound finally hit its peak as a figure emerged from the shadows between two rows of crates, suspended in midair. Long metallic legs anchored her to the sides, holding her high in the air and allowing her to look down on Rin. “My name is Fiore Forudgeth Yggdmillennia. And I’m afraid that I’m going to have to defeat you now.”

Rin felt her eye twitch at the sight of the bizarre set-up. “This Grail War is completely insane.”

Fiore just smiled and one of the limbs detached from the walls. “Mars, shoot.” Then the claw opened to reveal a glowing barrel charged with mana and Rin was forced to start moving.
Chapter 30

Assassin barely made it to the door before the second shockwave hit. She grunted in pain and curled into a ball, riding the blast wave as it sent her tumbling across the backyard. “The Temptress class Servant is vain… should have known.” She took an instant to take stock of her body and was pleasantly surprised to find that she wasn’t actually injured. The blast had sent her flying, but it hadn’t done much damage. To her at least. Judging by the size of the hole, the house wasn’t doing nearly as well.

“You can’t run away from me piggy! I’m going to slaughter you!” Oh, and Temptress was still angry. So that was a problem. Assassin jumped back as the spear impaled the ground where she’d been standing a moment ago. A noticeable wave of sound and a flash of pink light erupted from the impact zone, tearing up the ground around the tip. She brought up one of her daggers and managed to catch the follow-up thrust by jamming it between the two blades of the unusual spear. Their weapons locked for a moment and Assassin felt her arms trembling. For being so tiny, Temptress had a fair bit of strength behind her blows. She dropped the dagger and twisted, letting her body bend unnaturally and spin away from the pink-haired Servant’s strike. The momentum carried her into a spinning kick that nearly collided with Temptress’s side until the other Servant managed to get the haft of her spear between her body and the blow.

Assassin flipped back again and hurled a few daggers to give her a moment to consider her options. A direct retreat was possible, but that could put her Master at risk of Temptress catching up. That was unacceptable. So she would have to find some way to distract the other Servant so she could disengage using her Presence Concealment and make a clean get away. “You’re going to wake the whole neighborhood…” Assassin jumped backwards again as Temptress followed up with another strike and landed in a tree against the back wall. She fired off several more knives, managing to land a cut across the other Servant’s arm and hip before Temptress managed to fend off the rest of the barrage.

Temptress scowled and spun her spear, knocking the daggers away. “I thought Assassins were supposed to be quiet.” She jumped forward and stabbed at the tree, causing it to shudder for a moment. Then a spray of bark and wood erupted from the tree and a huge chunk exploded out of it, causing the tree to topple over.

Assassin frowned and jumped clear, landing on top of the wall around the property. “I see now. Your spear… It vibrates with your screams.”

Temptress scoffed and put a hand to her chest. “Well duh. All of my abilities are focused on making the most of my amazingly talented voice.”

Assassin wasn’t sure that was the right term for it, but it certainly made the spear even more destructive than it already was. She pulled two more knives from the pouch at her waist and hurled them at Temptress as she dashed along the top of the wall, focusing on keeping her at a distance and not having to actually deal with her physical strength. “Assassin!” And she nearly lost her footing anyway when Ayako voice rang out in her head. She’d almost forgotten about the link. “What’s going on in there?”

“Nothing that you need to concern yourself with Master.” Her hand glowed with sickly light as she coated her next two daggers with her poison and hurled them at her opponent, forcing Temptress to dodge back and give her a moment to breathe instead of pressing her attack.

“There are explosions. Something has to be going on. I’m coming in.” Assassin didn’t need to see
Ayako to picture the exasperated look on her face.

Assassin sighed. “There is a minor… confrontation going on with Temptress. Please stay back. Your safety is significantly more valuable than my own.”

“Don’t be stupid! You don’t need to get yourself killed fighting some loony!”

Assassin saw Temptress coming again, wings flaring out behind her, and came to a decision. “If you die… I will vanish shortly afterwards.” Not technically a lie. Even with her abilities, she’d be lucky to last a few days without a Master to support her. “Please do not get yourself killed either”

She could feel Ayako’s resignation. “Fine. But get out of there soon.”

“Understood Master.” Assassin jumped down from the wall just as Temptress leaped up at her, letting the dragon girl shoot over her head and stab at empty air before she alighted on top of the wall where Assassin had been standing moments before.

Temptress seemed to be getting progressively more annoyed as her hits kept missing. “You slippery little…” Assassin didn’t bother with a response. Her hand simply began to glow with sickly purple light and she punched the wall. The stone hissed and cracked as her poison melted through the material and the entire wall gave way. Temptress squawked and flailed her arms, trying to keep her balance as the stone crumbled under her feet, but to no avail. The pink-haired Servant tumbled back, falling on her ass on the other side of the destroyed wall. “Ow! That’s just rude! I’m going to make you pay for that.”

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Miyu had never thought of herself as that much of a heavy sleeper. So she was slightly surprised when it took her until the third explosion to fully wake-up. She rolled over in her futon and blinked as she heard splintering wood and the sounds of Temptress shouting. Then she snapped up in bed and grabbed around for anything at hand. “What is going on?” she muttered to herself.

She hopped to her feet and pulled the door open to feel a cold breeze rush by. She stopped dead for a second and the cool outside air rushed through the brand new hole in her house and past her legs, making her nightdress swirl around her. “What?” she repeated. “Temptress!” She stormed outside. Then she had to just stop and take in the scene in front of her. Her backyard was torn up and there was a second hole in the wall around the property. And a skull masked Servant in black was standing in the middle of the yard, facing down a red-faced and panting Temptress.

Assassin half turned to see Miyu standing the the hole in the wall. “Ah…”

“Master! Watch out, she’s an Assassin!”

Assassin flashed forward, appearing directly in front of Miyu. For a moment, she met the Servant’s eyes through her mask. “You look familiar…”

“I don’t believe we’ve met.” Miyu said, trying very hard to keep her cool. The Servant wasn’t trying to kill her, so that was a start. She didn’t have time to say more as Temptress finally regained her footing and jumped between Assassin and her Master. Her spear lashed out and whistled through the air, forcing Assassin to fall back a few paces to get out of reach.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Temptress snarled. “You aren’t good enough to even look at my Master. She’s almost as amazing as I am!”

Miyu had the distinct feeling that Assassin was more amused than threatened. “I was… investigating
something. It seems your Master’s home doesn’t contain what I’m looking for.”

“Goody for you. Allow me to send you on your way. Here’s my special farewell show!” Temptress lifted her spear so it was in front of her mouth and Assassin had just enough time to cover her face before a wave of pure sound explode outward and threw her off her feet. The dark Servant slammed into the wall at the far side of the yard and kept going, tumbling head over heels from the force of the attack.

Miyu decided not to be angry with her Servant and just dove back behind the wall to get out of sight. She closed her eyes and focused on her magic, willing the walls the repair itself and giving her some more cover from the enemy Servant outside. The rough spell forced the wood back together, at least getting her out of the other Servant’s line of sight. “Don’t break the house again!” she ordered over the sound of Temptress’s shout.

Temptress pouted and gave her a look. “It’s alright if I break the yard a little more, right? I mean, it’s already broken and everything.”

On second thought, Miyu decided to be a little angry with her Servant. “I don’t even care. Just don’t blow up the whole neighborhood. I don’t want to have to explain that.”

“Fixing up the lawn can’t be that hard,” Temptress said with a shrug. “Now let’s…” She stepped back outside and fell silent. “What?! Where’d she go?”

Assassin winced as she hurried down the street, hidden in the shadows. Thankfully, Temptress’s last attack had shattered every piece of glass within ten meters of the house, giving her plenty of dark spots without street lights to disappear in. One of her hands came to her side and she gingerly felt around for her injuries. She wasn’t sure how well broken ribs healed on a Servant, but she had a feeling that she was going to find out. But that could wait until she made sure that her Master was safe and she hadn’t been followed.

The first question was answered as she rounded the corner of the block and saw Ayako running toward her. “Assassin! You’re okay. For a second I thought…” She reached out a hand to help her, but stopped suddenly.

Assassin was glad that her Master had some sense. “A Hassan is not so easily killed. Let’s just go and never come back to this place.”

The pair set off down the street as quickly as they could walk with Assassin’s injuries. They made it all of a block before Ayako let out a deep sigh. “This is ridiculous. You can barely walk and I can’t even help.”

Serenity just shook. “It’s nothing I can’t deal with. You shouldn’t worry about…” She didn’t have time to finish her sentence as she felt a familiar sensation. “Master, you should go.” She looked down the street as another pair appeared from out of the darkness. The first was a silver haired woman dressed in something that vaguely reminded her of the garb of the Christian priests who had accompanied the armies invading her homeland back in her time. The second was obviously a knight, though a clearly female one.

“Hmm, I didn’t expect such a loud fight to involve the Assassin,” the silver-haired woman said. “And it seems that we’ve already missed the good part.”

The knight simply hurried forward. “She looks like she’s hurt.”
Ayako’s eyes narrowed. “Have we met before?”

“I suppose we haven’t. My name is Caren Hortensia.” The silver-haired woman offered the brunette a hand. “I am the arbiter from the Holy Church. This is my Servant, Shielder. We’ve met some of your friends, but I don’t believe that you were present for our meeting. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” She bowed her head a bit stiffly.

Ayako looked a little flustered at the formal introduction. “Right. I’m Ayako Mitsuzuri. It’s a pleasure to meet you too.” She bowed in return. “We were just… leaving.”

“We’ll help you get to Emiya’s place,” Shielder said, hurrying forward to help Assassin.

“Hang on a second,” Ayako tried to reach out to the Servant, but Shielder was quicker.

The skull-masked Servant tried to recoil as the black armored Servant grabbed her arm and hoisted it over her shoulder. Then she stopped dead as she realized that Shielder was responding beyond shifting her weight to help support her. “Wh… what?”

Shielder cocked her head. “Is something wrong? I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Assassin took a moment to respond. “You… you’re not dying. Or screaming. Or recoiling in pain as your flesh melts off. But… my poisons…”

There was another moment of stony silence. “Oh my, what a frightening Servant,” Caren said, covering her mouth with one hand to hide her expression.

Shielder blushed gently. “I’m resistant to most poisons and curses. I should be fine as long as you don’t actually activate your full powers.”

Despite her hidden expression, Assassin’s entire body showed how utterly stunned she was. “I can touch you…” For a moment she just stood there with one arm draped over the knight’s shoulders. Then she suddenly pulled Shielder into a hug and clung to her tightly.

Shielder’s blush instantly grew, turning her entire face luminescent pink. “A… Assassin!”

“You’re warm,” Assassin murmured, completely oblivious to Shielder’s flustered stuttering.

“Oh, please be a good knight and carry the princess if she can’t walk,” Caren said. “I’m sure we don’t want to run into more trouble with an injured passenger.”

Not able to turn even redder, Shielder simply took a moment to try to figure out the best way to carry her before she hoisted her up onto her back. “Let’s just go.”
Chapter 31

Archer scowled and made some distance from her opponent, firing off half a dozen rounds at Gunner as the other Servant simply fired an equal number of shots in return. The two Servant’s bullets collided in mid-air, shattering into tiny shards of metal. Archer growled. “This is getting absurd,” she muttered. “Ranged combat is supposed to be my shtick.” She fired again, laying a few shots in a wide arc across the open ground.

Gunner just cackled, laying down a volley and forcing Archer to step back. “Firearms are the finest innovation war has ever seen, don’t you agree?” she grinned like a maniac as she manifested yet another wave of muskets. “I was expecting some crusty old man with a bow and arrows to fight. To think that I would get a chance to fight another gunslinger. Perfect. Absolutely perfect!” She threw back her head and laughed as she blasted shot after shot with frightening accuracy.

“Is she aiming without even looking at me?” Archer wasn’t sure if she should be offended or just impressed. What she did know was that Gunner had a lot more guns than she did and seemed to be able to pull them out of thin air. She dodged backwards, avoiding the barrage and launching herself behind a row of shipping containers and getting out of sight. “So if I can’t fight head on, fight with tricks. Just like when I burned the Spanish.” She took a breath and closed her eyes, listening to the sound of the gunpowder detonating and the bullets pinging off the metal crate. It would have been comfortingly familiar if all of those bullets hadn’t been aimed straight at her. She raised her pistols and focused. Then she smirked and fired three shots. “Three impacts.” She focused on the sound of her own pistol shots as they ricocheted across the field. “Two crates, then the crane.” Her lips twitched up into a smirk as Gunner’s fire suddenly stopped and she squawked in panic.

“Oh, that’s a fun trick,” Gunner called out. “Maybe I should learn it. Good, good. It’s not fun if the enemy just keeps running away.” She leaped up above the row, trying to get a clear line of sight on Archer. Her rifles tracked her movement unfailingly and tore chunks of concrete out of the ground as Archer tried to keep ahead of the shots.

Archer just smirked and kept moving. She picked her moment and fired again, letting the pistol shots bounce and rain down on Gunner’s position from above as they bounced off of the crates, forcing the other Servant down to her level to avoid getting a large number of new holes. “There we go! I thought you’d never get down on my level.”

Gunner had just enough time to look surprised as Archer’s pistols roared, firing shot after shot in a wide spray in front of her. Gunner ducked low, avoiding two shots as they wizzed past her head. Then she heard the sound of the lead balls ringing off of metal and half turned. The shots all ricocheted precisely, even striking against each other and redirecting in mid-air. “Oh shit.” The bullets closed in from different directions, trapping her in the middle of the crossfire.

Archer’s grin was outright predatory. “The only one who’s allowed to be cocky here is me.” Then the shots converged and the air around Gunner exploded.

“I can be whatever I want!” Gunner exploded forward from the smoke, half a dozen ruined muskets hitting the ground with Archer’s bullets lodged in their bodies. Blood ran down her side from a wound on the right side of her chest, but it hardly seemed to slow her down. “That’s what being the demon king means!” Her sword came out with a steely hiss and she closed the gap in a flash, the saber coming down toward Archer’s head.

The red Servant threw an arm up and took the strike across lower arm, sending a spray of blood into the air. She let her other pistol drop and pulled her boarding axe from beneath her coat, whipping it
across Gunner’s stomach. The short blade cut through her uniform and flesh alike, leaving another shallow wound across her abdomen. “Fighting in close? Alright, I’m game for a change of pace.”

“Of course, of course. To be inflexible on the battlefield is something only a weakling would do!” Gunner grinned wickedly and slashed again, aiming to cut across Archer’s torso. The red Servant’s axe came up and the steel blades clashed in a shower of sparks.

Archer winced under the force of the impact and felt her arm shudder under Gunner’s strike. “You’re strong for someone who’s four feet tall.” She grunted and lashed out, kicking the other Servant right on her wound. Gunner’s eyes widened slightly and she couldn’t help flinching back, allowing Archer to leap clear and fire off a few more shots.

The small black-clad Servant gritted her teeth as she cut the bullets from the air. “What’s the term? Good things in small packages? This time has some lovely turns of phrase.” She pointed her sword toward her opponent in a dramatic flourish. “But enough word play. Have at you!”

Archer stepped back as their weapons clashed again, skipping back a few paces to land back out in the open again. The moon shone down on them from above, glinting off their blades as Gunner forced her back against the wharf. “Oh no.” Her voice was completely deadpan and dripping with sarcasm. “You’ve pushed a pirate back to the sea. Whatever will I do now?” She couldn’t keep the faux startled expression on her face for more than a second. Her lips twisted into a smirk. “Oh. Right.” The water exploded behind her, the massive wooden shape of her ship rising from the depth with all its cannons aimed at her opponent. “That’s what I’ll do.”

Gunner looked up at the vessel with a mix of surprise and excitement. “That’s the Noble Phantasm of an Archer? Alright then. Let’s see what you’ve got!”

“Just don’t think I’ll let you regret it later.” Archer’s mana spiked and her cannons began to glow. “Golden Wild Hunt!”

Gunner’s face split into a manic grin as crimson fire blossom around her feet and an aura disturbingly like a skull formed around her body. “Oh yeah. This is going to be fun.”

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Rin had thought that she was ready to handle a fight against another mage. But as she ducked behind a forklift to avoid being torn apart by a rain of magical blasts, she was starting to rethink her plans. She had plenty of options, but almost all of them would involve spending some of her hard earned gems. Not that she had much of a choice at this point. She just needed a momentary opening. “Hey you! Master of Gunner! You’re from an old family, aren’t you?” she called out over the din. “One from the Clocktower, right?” One of her gems dropped into her hand as she hope that she got the moment she needed to prepare the spell.

There was a momentary pause. “I suppose word of my clan hasn’t reached the Far East quite yet.” Fiore sighed. “Perhaps introductions are in order after all. I am the representative of an alliance of families that seeks to surpass the Magecraft possessed by the Mage’s Association through our alliance. I am here representing the combined might of all of the mages who have aligned with us. So I’m afraid that I cannot allow myself to be overcome here.”

Rin froze for a moment to process that. “I’m not sure if that’s reckless or just crazy. But I won’t back down from a fight just because you’re taking this seriously.” She jumped out of cover before Fiore’s Mystic Code opened fire again and tossed a glowing emerald into the air. It shattered, blanketing the air around her in a greenish haze as the bronze arms opened fire. The concentrated mana bullets struck the cloud and dissipated, fading into nothingness before they got anywhere near
Fiore’s eyes widened slightly. “An anti-magic field? So this is the Tohsaka family’s magical ability.” She yelped as another shining stone launched from the Japanese magus, careening through the air and leaving glowing contrails. “Venus, release!” She dropped to the ground letting the stone fly over her head and explode against the container she’d been clinging to a moment ago. “Mars.” The blasts resumed, raining down on the defensive field and slowly but surely wearing the field away.

“You haven’t even seen the beginning of my abilities.” Three more blue gems shot through the air, aimed directly at the Yggdmillennia Master.

“Jupiter, Mars, defense.” The upper arm on the right side of her body shot up, firing a barrage of shots and managing to catch two of the jewels, shattering them. The third shot flew through the barrage and nearly collided with the Master before the other arm on her right raised up and swatted it out of the air, causing it to explode against the ground and leave a small crater.

Rin dashed off to the side before her opponent could resume her attack and vaulted over a low wall. She scowled at the necessity of spending another jewel and tossed a small one behind her, lighting up the air with a massive flash and giving her a few moments to dive to cover behind another crate before Fiore could open fire on her again. “So a direct attack won’t work.” Rin gritted her teeth and took stock of her remaining resources. She still had nearly a dozen gems on her person, including her pendant, but each one she spent trying to break the other Master’s defense was an attack she would never get back. Every single strike had to count. She peeked around the corner as Fiore’s arms carried her slowly toward her, stopping only to allow her to check behind cover for Rin’s hiding spot.

“Your skills are rather remarkable,” the brunette said. “And you truly live up to your clan’s reputation. The Tohsaka Jewelcraft is beautiful to witness. I wish I had a chance to learn more, but I’m afraid that I can’t afford to spare an enemy Master.” Her claws scraped against the ground as she drew closer and closer to Rin’s hiding spot.

Rin made a split second decision and pulled out a large ruby. It began to glow as she poured more and more mana into it until the smooth surface began to crack and she could feel the gem growing hot in her hand. “You talk too much.” Rin jumped around the corner and hurled the gem in burning arc.

Fiore’s eyes widened as the blazing light shot straight for her chest. “Jupiter!” Then the claw came down and smashed the stone against the ground. The badly overcharged stone discharged all of its mana in one blast, catching the Yggdmillennia Master and throwing her off her feet. The bronze limbs lost their grip as the blast knocked her senseless. She shook herself, trying to clear the ringing from her ears and regain some sense.

Rin grinned in triumph and shot forward, her limbs glowing as she reinforced her body as much as she could handle. She shot forward, pushing her body to its limits as she closed the gap in the blink of an eye. “Don’t you dare think…” Her knee collided with Fiore’s stomach. “That the heir of the Tohsaka family…” Her other foot lashed out, knocking the wind from her enemy and sending her flying backwards against the wall of shipping crates. “Has nothing more than flashy tricks!”

“D… de… defend.” Fiore gasped as Rin shot toward her again, her Reinforced fist aimed straight for her skull. Two of her arms responded, crossing in front of her face and taking the full brunt of the Tohsaka’s strike.

Rin winced as she felt the shudder run down her arm. She had a feeling that if her body hadn’t been
bolstered by her magic, she’d be nursing a broken hand. The metallic arms pushed out, forcing her back a little. Just then, she felt a pull on her mana and her head turned back toward the waterfront. “Again?”

And the entire wharf lit up with golden light and the roar of cannons filled the night.

Archer felt a wave of fatigue wash over her as the blanket of fire on the wharf finally ended. “And that’s that.” Her ship began to fade out of existence and she jumped back down to the cracked ground, landing at the edge of the closest blast crater.

“Mwahahaha!” Archer froze in place. Could she actually be…? “Wonderful! How absolutely wonderful! I haven’t seen such a cannonade in all my years as a warlord. To do battle with such an enemy is like a dream. A glorious dream of Hell.” The smoke finally cleared and Gunner seemed to have survived. Her cloak was completely shredded and her cap lay lopsided on her head as blood ran down her face from one of several new wounds. Her uniform was stained with blood and dust, but she seemed to have survived after all.

“Half the world called me a dragon and a demon,” Archer said with a scowl. “And I still think you’re nuts.”

Gunner doubled over and kept laughing. “You’re hardly the first person to tell me that.” She finally managed to restrain her cackling and shook herself. “I like you. Yes, why not? A truce? How about a truce?”

Archer stopped dead. “What.”

“We demons should stick together, and I like anyone who can work cannons like that.” Gunner laid her sword across her shoulder. “And I could always use more retainers. So how about it? You can be my naval commander. I never had one of those before.”

The pink-haired Servant felt a drop of sweat roll down her forehead. “Uh… I’ll have to get back to you on that one.”

“Very well then. I’ll give you time to think. I’m sure my Master and I can come back another time.” With that, she jumped back and vanished into astral form.

“Shit.” Archer reached out to her Master. “Rin, I think Gunner’s withdrawing. Get out of there before she decides to go through you to get to her master.”

Rin scowled as she heard Archer’s voice in her head. “Fine. I’ll meet you back near the entrance to the docks. I don’t think we’re going to find anything about Shirou from these two anyway.”

“Oh, right.” Archer managed to sound a little contrite, even speaking through the telepathic link. “We kind of forgot about that, didn’t we?”

Rin just sighed. “It looks like our battle will have to wait until another time.”

Fiore sighed and hoisted herself up again. “Yes, it seems that it will. I look forward to seeing the full extent of your Magecraft the next time we meet, Master of the Tohsaka.”

Rin couldn’t help a smirk. “I don’t back down from a challenge. We’ll meet again. I promise you
“I have no doubt.” With that, Fiore’s Mystic Code launched her into the air and carried her away, the sound of the metal limbs on the steel crates growing fainter until Rin was entirely alone on the waterfront.

Rin sighed and rubbed her eyes. Her limbs ached from the hurried Reinforcement and she’d lost half a dozen stones without much to show for it. “I hope the others are having a better night than I am.”
Chapter 32

Saber gritted her teeth as her invisible blade collided with Avenger’s burning one. The other warrior was strong, far stronger than she looked. She had long since learned not to judge strength by appearances, but her enemy was almost unreal. Her arms trembled under another overhand blow and she was forced to back away as Avenger slashed out with her banner, cutting a burning line through the air. Arturia growled as a series of burning stakes appeared in the air, raining down on her position. She swung her sword in a wide arc, scattering their shattered remains to the ground.

“If you wish this to be a battle knights,” she said, settling back down carefully. “You could at least stop fighting like a maddened Berserker.”

Avenger cackled. “Between knights? How foolish.” She rammed the butt of her standard into the ground, sending another wave of spears at Saber. The blue knight chopped through them, keeping the attack at a distance. “I am no knight. I am merely a witch who desires to see you burn.” Fire crackled along the ground and the nearest trees to the enemy Servant cracked and burst into flames. “I am the Dragon Witch who made all of Britain her enemy and burned in retaliation. I am the Witch of France, Jeanne d’Arc!”

Saber’s eyes widened slightly. “You are the Saint of France?” The resemblance suddenly made several things make a shocking amount of sense. “ Somehow I don’t believe a Saint chosen by God would be so bloodthirsty.” She flashed forward, forcing Avenger back on the defensive as she hammered against her defenses with a series of strikes. Her arms shook on each impact and her breathing began to become heavier as she battered against her opponent. One or two strikes cleaved through her defenses, leaving shallow slashes across Avenger’s cheek and arms, but she couldn’t land a decisive blow.

“What the hell would you know about the wishes of an arrogant god?” Avenger growled, spinning to flag to force Saber’s sword back and give her an opening to slash across her body. Her blade glanced off of her armor, but the sheer force of the strike carried it across Arturia’s body and cut into her shoulder. “Well now, it seems we’ve both drawn blood now. I just have to keep spilling it until you stop moving.”

Saber frowned and rolled her shoulder, testing to see how deep the cut was. Satisfied that it wasn’t deep enough to interfere with her swordplay, she flicked her blade clean and slid back into her fighting stance. “I wouldn’t be so confident. Such a minor injury will hardly impede my abilities.”

“It doesn’t matter if it slows you down or not. My fury will keep me going until you’re dead on the ground.” She grinned. “But I think I can guess who you are, knight who carries dragon’s blood. There aren’t many Heroic Spirits who that could possibly be. Isn’t that right, King of Knights?”

Arturia’s eyes widened slightly and she tightened the grip around the hilt of her sword. “How did you…”?

“I would be a very poor Dragon Witch if I couldn’t sense the blood flowing through your veins.” Avenger sent an arc of fire tearing through the air, forcing Arturia to blast through the attack with a burst of wind. “Facing down someone with the power of a dragon…” Her grin grew wider and even more vicious. “Somehow makes me want to fight all the harder!” She leaped forward, both blade and standard held out to strike.

Arturia braced herself as their blades met again. The fight was already consuming far more energy than she had been planning to spend tonight, and she likely still have a fight with Berserker ahead of her if she was going to free Shirou from Ilya’s clutches. But that was pointless if she fell here.
“Then I cannot afford to hold anything back either. Strike Air!” She forced mana into her blade and the shifting shield of air around it exploded in a cyclone, throwing Avenger back and slammed her into a tree hard enough to shatter the bark and crack the truck.

“That’s more like it.” Avenger grinned as she righted herself, brushing the splinters from her shoulders. “Come at me with all of your anger!”

Saber simply straightened, her sword shining under the moonlight. “Please hold on until I can finish here Shirou. I’ll be there soon.”

Shirou panted as he ran through the trees. He could hear crashes of metal in the distance and see smoke rising over the trees. There was only one thing that could be. “Saber… Please don’t get killed.” He pushed himself harder and kept running.

“You there. Boy from the Einzbern castle. You are the Master of Saber?”

Shirou froze as the voice echoed through the trees. He turned seeing a woman standing on a small rise. Her long blonde hair billowed in the night air and he quickly averted his eyes as they flicked downward toward her extremely generous bust. Her top was a tight white blouse with a puffy neckline and extremely tight dark pants covered her legs, with a dark half-skirt covering her hips. “Yes, I am. That means you must be a Master too, aren’t you? Is your Servant the one who Saber’s fighting?”

The blonde’s expression remained completely neutral. “That is correct. Does that mean you are also the Master of the Einzbern family?”

Shirou couldn’t keep the look of curiosity off his face. “The Einzberns?” Did that mean that she had some connection to Ilya? Or was she here to try to kill her? “Why do you want to know that?”

The blonde said nothing for a long moment. “I am here as the representative of the Ainsworth family, Angelica Ainsworth.” Shirou just blinked. “From your expression, I’m assuming that name means nothing to you. So you are not the Einzbern’s hope for this war.”

“No, I’m not. I’ve entered this war for my own reasons!”

The blonde nodded. “Then there is little reason for me to continue speaking with you. I will make this quick so I can move on to my original goal.” With that, she waved a hand and the air above her shimmered and split open for a moment as half a dozen rocks larger than Shirou’s head manifested and launched themselves at him.

The red-head barely had time to jump out of the way as the heavy stones crashed against the ground, leaving small craters on impact. “What are you doing?! I have no reason to fight you right now!”

“You are an enemy Master. That is all the reason I need to oppose you,” the woman said. “Removing you would end your Servant’s hold on this world and bring me one step closer to obtaining the Grail.” The air shimmered again and several large chunks of wood appeared above her and continued to bombard her target.

Shirou dove out of the way, ducking behind a tree to give him a little cover from the attack. “Is what you want from the Grail really worth killing me over?”

The barrage ceased for a moment. “I can’t really say,” Angelica finally replied. “But this is something that I must do.”
Shirou flinched away as her attack struck the other side of the tree again and the wood shuddered against his back. He stumbled away as stone tore through the tree like bullets through paper and buried themselves deep in the ground. Angelica’s answer was familiar, in a sense. “That’s it? You don’t have any real reason to fight for the Grail?”

“It’s hardly your concern.”

Shirou’s fists clenched as the other magus raised her hand and summoned another wave of attacks. He couldn’t just stand here and let her keep trying to kill him. He had to get to Saber. If there was no way through other than fighting, then he would do what he had to. “It is. Because I have something that I have to do too,” he said as the rocks lifted high into the air. “I don’t want to hurt you, but I can’t let you stop me here.”

“You are welcome to resist as much as you wish,” Angelica said. “Or to surrender your Command Seals to me. It makes little difference how we end this.” The rocks came down hard, raining on Shirou and trying to crush him beneath their weight.

The young magus didn’t think about what he was doing. He simply let the magical energy surge through his body as his circuits burned. “Trace on!” Blue light flashed around his palms and two blades burst into existence, one black and one white, but otherwise perfect mirrors of each other. His arms moved like they had a mind of their own, slashing the rocks aside. Shirou blinked and looked down at his own hands like he didn’t recognize them anymore. Or rather, he did recognize them. His dreams came back to him in full force, the image of the man in red wielding the dual blades filling his mind. As her stared into the blades pulsing with mana, their names suddenly came to mind: Kanshou and Bakuya.

Angelica looked at the swords with a single raised eyebrow. “So you do have some capability as a mage.” She called up a shower of wooden spikes. “Perhaps I’ve been too lenient so far.”

Shirou didn’t really have any idea what was going on. It was like his body had decided to act entirely on its own. But it was better than nothing. “Not really,” he admitted as she fell into a fighting stance. “But it will have to be enough.” Then he charged as Angelica let the razor sharp spikes rain down on him. His hands moved in easy patterns, slashing through the wooden stakes and leaving the shards behind him on the forest floor.

Angelica’s passive expression finally broke as Shirou closed the gap and the twin blades slashed down at her. Her limbs pulsed with magic and she leaped well out of the way, narrowly avoiding the strike. “We’ll see if it is.” She waved her hand causing a wave of earth to appear from nowhere and give her a moment to breathe.

Shirou cut forward, driving his swords into the wall and cutting a large gap to step through. His limbs burned in pain as he flooded them with energy and he reinforced his limbs to match her. The earth beneath his feet crunched as he jumped forward, moving faster than he ever had before. The trees shot by in a blur and he landed right on top of Angelica again, the twin swords swinging in an arc.

The blonde’s eyes widened and she leaned back, desperately leaning away from the shining edges of the blades. She skipped backwards, large chunks vanishing from the trees around them and causing them to fall towards her opponent. Shirou was forced to back away, slashing at a few of the branches to keep them from collapsing on him. He jumped up, vaulting over the fallen logs and going after Angelica again just as another shower of boulders was called into being. Not that he was going to let that stop him. Kanshou and Bakuya cut wide arcs in the air, severing the rock as easily as they cut through wood or dirt.
“What a ridiculous tactic,” Angelica muttered as Shirou just kept coming. She could respect his determination, but it was bordering on insane as he forced his way through her attacks. Her whole body shimmered softly as Shirou closed in to attack her again.

“This ends now!” Shirou closed the last few feet between them just as the air shimmered and Shirou was suddenly behind her, his swords swinging through nothing other than empty air. “What?” Shirou bit back a cry of pain as two stone spikes appeared in the air above him and slammed down, driving straight through his legs and driving him to his knees.

“I seem to have underestimated you. I’m not used to mages being so physical.” Angelica calmly stepped back as Shirou struggled to stand with his legs impaled. “Or encountering mages with such unusual weapons. But a single trick cannot overcome a fully trained magus.” Once she was far enough for her own comfort, she raised her hand again and called up a massive chunk of earth and stone. “For what it’s worth, you seem like a decent person. And I’m sure that what you’re fighting for is noble to you. So know that I take no pleasure in this.”

Shirou gritted his teeth and tried to move again, forcing the stone spikes from his legs and stumbling forward. He hit the forest floor hard, falling to his knees as a wave of pain shot through his body. “To protect everyone.”

Angelica paused before she could launch the boulder at him. “What?”

“Why I’m fighting.” Shirou grunted in pain, but his legs still refused to respond correctly. If they would just move, he might be able to get out of the way. “I want to protect everyone. I don’t even care about the Holy Grail.”

Angelica finally let her utter confusion show on her face. “A magus acting purely out of altruism? I almost don’t believe you.”

Shirou laughed. It came out more like a pained chuckle, but he couldn’t help himself. “My father always said that magi were selfish. But I’m fine being a terrible magus if it means that I can help the people who need me. Even if it’s stupid to try to help everyone, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t try my hardest.”

Angelica smiled in spite of herself. It was refreshing to see someone with drive for something other than personal glory and unlimited power. “And I cannot return home knowing that I didn’t do everything in my power to reach my family’s dream. So I cannot let you walk away. Goodbye.”

Shirou clenched his fists as the boulder fell toward him. He had to move. His legs twitched and he felt the torn muscles screaming for him to stop moving while he was still bleeding. But he couldn’t stop here. He still hadn’t helped Saber reach her wish, or Rin, or Sakura. His friends were still waiting for him to get home. He forced himself to stagger forward, but he couldn’t make it more than a few inches before he went down again. He braced himself on one of his swords, driving the point into the ground.

“Hold it!” There was a thunderous crash and the boulder shattered, reduced to pebbles in a single blow. “Hey kid, you still with me?” Bazett landed smoothly on the ground in front of him, her gloves glowing with carefully inscribed runes. “Don’t fade out on me now. Get back on your feet. We’re both going home from this.”

Saber slid backwards, the sheer force of Avenger’s attack sending her skidding across the ground.
She hadn’t even realized that Servants could feel fatigue, but her sword felt progressively heavier in her hands every time their blades crashed. It was more than just exhaustion. It was almost like… Her eyes widened. “Of course. I should have realized it sooner. You called yourself a witch after all.”

Avenger laughed and hopped backwards, giving Saber a moment to breath. “It took you this long to realize the truth? I’m disappointed. I thought the King of Knights would be smarter than that.”

Saber kept a cool expression, but internally she cursed her carelessness. She’d fought plenty of witches before. Hostile magic should have been a basic expectation, not a surprise. “Your ability is very subtle. With my resistance to magecraft, I nearly overlooked it entirely. How appropriate for a witch to possess a curse skill.”

Avenger smirked as the flames began to spin around her. “Not quite. I probably shouldn’t monologue at you, but you’re about to die anyway, so I suppose I can explain. My Dragon Witch ability allows me to empower or command dragons as I see fit. A Servant with a weaker mind would have bent to my will already, but it seems that you’re strong enough to simply feel my powers wearing on yours.” Her smile became downright predatory as her flames burned higher and hotter. “All the more reason for me to kill you.”

Saber winced as she felt the heat licking at her skin even with the distance between them. She could feel her mana running dangerously low even as Avenger’s climbed higher and higher. It seemed that she had no choice. “I will not allow myself to fall here.” She raised her blade above her head as it began to glow with golden light. She just hoped that she had enough mana left to unleash her Noble Phantasm without destroying herself.

Avenger’s flag began to glow with ruby light. “Yes, unleash your full power. Overcoming a holy blade such as that will be a fine blasphemy.” The flames leaped high into the air around her. “Now! Roar my resentment! Purge all before me in fire! La Grondement Du Haine!” And the fire raced forward, shaping into bloody spears as it blasted outward.

“Ex-“

Suddenly, a blood red spear slammed down between the two combatants, marked all along the shaft with glowing blue runes. The blue light expanded out into a wall between the two and the flames crashed against it. The magical barrier shuddered under the impact, wavering against the cursed flames before it pushed back with equal intensity, smothering the flames and dispersing Avenger’s Noble Phantasm. “What?!” The Servant of Resentment looked up in shock, searching the tree line for the source of the attack.

The golden light of Saber’s own Phantasm faded away in sheer shock as her own eyes moved upward. “You’re…”

Lancer’s face mask was pulled down, revealing her placid expression. “You know, I came out here expecting to pick a fight with Berserker. But I can’t help thinking this might be more interesting. Mind if I tag in?”
Angelica sighed, but managed to keep her annoyance off her face as she stared Bazett down. “I assume that you’re here looking to eliminate the Einzbern Master as well then? Why are you interfering with my battle?”

“Well, I admit that I wasn’t going to say no to a fight if she tried to stop me,” Bazett said with a shrug. “But the kid’s girlfriends are looking for him and I figured I’d be a Good Samaritan and help out.”

One of the blonde’s eyebrows popped up. “So I suppose that means you intend to attempt to defeat me instead.”

“You assume correctly,” Bazett said as she cracked her knuckles again. “You think you can move kid?” She glanced back over her shoulder at Shirou.

Shirou grunted and slowly forced himself back to his feet. The twin swords vanished as they left his hands, their points still buried in the ground for a moment before they dissipated into the air. His legs burned with pain, but it was starting to fade a little. Or maybe he was just starting to get used to the injuries. “I’m fine,” he said. “I’m still alive, aren’t I?”

Bazett chuckled. “You’ve got spirit but maybe you should stay down and let a professional handle this.”

“I can still keep going,” Shirou insisted.

“Look, just…” The Enforcer trailed off and stared at him for a second. “Huh, that’s a thing. Not a bad spell.”

Shirou blinked, not sure what she was talking about. Then he looked down and his eyes widened slightly as he looked at his injuries. Blue threads of light were weaving back and forth across the tears in his legs, filling the gaps left by the spikes. “What?”

Angelica looked a little annoyed. “I should have known better than to let you talk. I won’t make that mistake again.”

“Oh hell,” Bazett muttered. “Move! Here she comes!”

Shirou gritted his teeth and forced his half-healed legs to move as he threw himself one way and Bazett threw herself the other. A shower of earthen spikes rained down on the forest floor, gouging deep into the soil and narrowly missing the pair. The young mage forced the magic to start flowing again. “Trace… On!” The twin swords flickered for a moment the solidified in his hands.

Bazett didn’t seem to need to bother with weapons. Her shoes lit up with a faint greenish glow and Shirou was sure that he saw runes on the soles as she kicked off the ground so hard that she left a small crater where her footprints should have been. Angelica had just enough time to look shocked as Bazett flashed forward, closing the gap between them in the blink of an eye. Then the Irish woman’s fist slammed into the blonde’s gut and sent her hurtling backwards.

The Ainsworth had just enough time to gasp in pain before she collided with a tree hard enough to knock any thought of speech from her head. She shook herself, trying to focus as the Enforcer lunged forward again. Angelica rather unceremoniously threw herself forward, diving to the ground just in time for Bazett’s fist to hit the tree instead of her. She rolled across the ground and managed
to catch a glimpse of Bazett’s glowing fist shattering the bark of the tree and leaving a gouge the size of her head in the wood. “What a ridiculous person,” she muttered under her breath. She rolled back to her feet and waved a hand, launching a barrage of rocks at Bazett’s back.

They never made it to their target before a pair of black and white blades tore through the air, carving through the stone and sending the broken fragments scattering to the ground. “Are you alright?”

“An attack of that level isn’t going to faze me,” Bazett said. She paused for a moment to brush splinters off of her sleeves. “But if you want to cover my ass, I can work with that. Then I can focus on offense.”

Shirou’s eyes flicked down to her hips for a second. They were actually rather nice. Then he mentally chided himself for getting distracted. Apparently the evening with Ilya has left more of an impression than he’d thought. “That’s fine. I’ll focus on defense.”

“If you’re done talking in the middle of our fight…” Angelica said dryly. Then she snapped and the air filled with wooden stakes.

“Stick close kid,” Bazett said as she shifted her stance.

Shirou tightened his grip around the hilts of his blades and nodded. “Shirou.” Bazett cocked her head. “We’re fighting together, right? You can call me by my name.”

Bazett’s lips twitched up. “Okay Shirou. Let’s see if you can keep up.” Then she exploded forward, tearing across the ground toward their opponent.

Shirou pushed energy into his limbs, forcing himself to keep up with her rune enhanced speed as she burst across the clearing. The movements seemed to come easier the longer he held the twinned swords. They almost seemed to move on their own as they slashed the spikes from the air, keeping them from impaling Bazett as she charged. “Go now!” he called out as the near constant shower of wood began to be replaced with stone and earth instead.

“I’ve got the opening!” Bazett surged forward again.

“How absurd,” Angelica growled and she leaned back, trying to escape the incoming fist. For a moment, Shirou thought the blow was clean, but then something shifted. There was a flash of blue and suddenly Bazett was hurtling past Angelica, her hand hitting nothing but air.

“What the…” The Irishwoman didn’t have time to finish her thought before a stone spike slammed down into her shoulder. She cried out in pain, but kept moving, managing to avoid the rest of the barrage as they buried themselves in ground where she’d been standing a moment ago.

“Was that teleportation?” Shirou muttered, not really meaning to say it out loud.

Angelica huffed and jumped back. “I had hoped I wouldn’t have to reveal this much of my abilities yet,” she said flatly. “But this fight is getting us nowhere. I see little reason to continue this.”

Shirou couldn’t keep the surprise off his face. “You’re just leaving?!”

The Ainsworth Master cocked her head. “Do not assume that I’m letting you go. We’ll finish this at another time.”

“Wait!” Shirou called out. “I want to ask you something. You said… your family’s dream is for the Grail. Is that really all you want here? You’re taking this so seriously…”
Angelica gave him a look that was surprisingly Rin-like. It said ‘are you an idiot?’ rather clearly. “My family… is complicated. And also none of your concern.” She hesitated for a moment. “You are a very strange magus.” Then she waved her hand and a rippling blue portal appeared around her and she vanished into the night.

Shirou stared at the empty air for a long moment. Then he heard Bazett groan again. He dropped his swords and let them vanish then rushed to help her.

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“Who the hell are you?!” Avenger growled as she looked up at the new arrival.

“Well,” Lancer said as she casually laid one of her spears across her shoulders. “I’m throwing spears at you. So clearly I must be Archer.”

Saber swore that she could see veins bulging in Avenger’s forehead. “You think I’m going to stand here and let you mock me?! I’ll kill you both at the same time!” She roared and rammed her standard into the ground, sending a wave of burning stakes straight up the tree, erupting from the bark and tearing the trunk apart.

Lancer hopped back, falling down past the attack and landing smoothly on the ground. “Not like that you won’t,” she said plainly. “But you seem to be fairly powerful, so maybe this will be a decent fight after all.”

“I don’t need help,” Saber said, immediately taking her fighting stance again.

“That wasn’t what it looked like from up there,” Lancer said. “To be honest, it’s not hard to tell that you’re running on fumes. You’re not going to do any good for your Master if you literally burn yourself out fighting.” She twirled one of her spears and pointed it at Avenger. “Besides, this one looks fun.”

Avenger clicked her tongue and readied herself. “Alright Lancer. If you want to die first, that’s fine by me.” She stabbed her sword into the ground, causing a fiery blast to erupt around the spear-wielding Servant.

Lancer just jumped back, letting the flames lick at her heels as she moved. Then she spun her spear into a throwing grip and Saber’s eyes widened slightly as half a dozen more identical spears appeared in the air around her and launched themselves at Avenger. “A Noble Phantasm that makes copies of itself?”

Avenger growled and the next explosion went off right in front of her, shattering the slimmer spears. “That’s an interesting trick. I feel kind of ripped off.”

“Somehow, I feel like anything I do would anger you more,” Lancer said dryly. She tossed another spear into the air and whipped her foot around, launching it at Avenger with the force of her kick. The dark knight tried to move, but the spear was fast, scraping across her armor’s side and leaving a deep mark in her armor, though it didn’t quite break her skin.

Avenger looked down at the near wound for an instant. Then her smile turned outright manic and she charged. Lancer brought one spear up to intercept the overhead blow as her sword came down and tried to counter-attack with her other weapon. Avenger’s standard came around, redirecting the blow with the haft and forcing the spear aside. Lancer frowned slightly and lashed out with one foot, forcing the other Servant off-balance enough to free her first spear and stab at her head. The blade slashes across her cheek as Avenger’s eyes went wild and she dodged sideways, making sure to
keep her standard between her body and she second spear.

The exchange took only moments, but Arturia suddenly felt the weight of her exhaustion weighing heavier on her shoulders. She wasn’t sure she could even hope to move that fast in her condition. She was lucky to still be standing tall and straight.

Avenger’s blade flared up again, this time using the explosion to clear a little distance and back away from her opponent. The silver-haired Servant chuckled. “You know… I think you’re absolutely right. Just looking at you is pissing me off. So just die for me already!” She rammed her flag into the ground, firing off another wave of burning spears. Then just as Lancer jumped clear, she swung her blade, sending an arc of fire straight at her opponent.

“Algiz!” A rune burst to life in the air and a circular barrier appeared in front of Lancer, intercepting the wave of fire before it could touch her.

Avenger ground her teeth together and brought her sword up for a second strike when she suddenly stopped. “What?” Both of the other Servants looked at her curiously. “You can’t be serious! She’s right in front of me. I can still…” Then the Servant cut herself off and growled. “Fine.” She glared at Saber. “You and me have something to finish next time we meet. I can’t stand someone with that face looking so earnest.” Then she vanished into astral form and was gone.

For a few very long seconds, Saber just stared at the empty space that Avenger had occupied a moment ago. Then she remembered why she was out here. “Thank you for your help Lancer. But I need to go rescue my Master immediately.” She turned to hurry further into the forest, but attempting to move faster than a walk proved to be her undoing and she stumbled.

“How’s it going?” Lancer said, catching her by one arm. “You and your Master need to work out the whole mental communication thing. Bazett already found him. She and your partner are headed this way right now.”

Saber visibly sagged with relief. “Thank god.” She moved to get going again, but Lancer didn’t let go of her. “I can walk on my own.”

“Sure you can,” Lancer said flatly. “But let me help out anyway.

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“Just pull it out,” Bazett said as Shirou examined the stone spike buried in her shoulder. “I’ve got a healing rune spell in my jacket. Just get it out so the skin can close.”

The red-head hesitated for a moment, considering the best way to do it without making things worse. “Alright. Just hold still.” In the end, he just grabbed the end and pulled hard, earning a sharp hiss of pain from the Enforcer. For a moment, the blood ran freely, staining her jacket’s shoulder. Then she muttered a word he didn’t understand and a green glow moved over the hole, patching it closed. Bazett carefully poked at the raw, pink skin and seemed satisfied that it at least wasn’t going to start bleeding again.

“Well, that was fun,” she said as she straightened up, careful not to stretch her arm too far while the spell was still at work. “Come on. Let’s go get you back. You’ve got people waiting for you.”

Shirou nodded and tried to get back to his feet, only for another surge of pain to shoot through his legs. As the adrenaline of the battle left him, his injuries throbbed and he struggled to stand upright. “Damn it.”

“Ouch. Looks like you could use a little more work on your healing spells. I’m impressed you
managed to push yourself as hard as you did with injuries like that.” She offered a hand and Shirou took it, letting her sling his arm over her good shoulder and help him walk as they started off through the trees.

“That wasn’t me,” Shirou admitted as they walked. “I have no idea what that was.” Bazett raised an eyebrow. “You can heal stab wounds in seconds, but you don’t know how? You really are a strange kid.” They lapsed into silence for a few minutes as they made their way through the forest. “Good news,” the Enforcer suddenly chimed in. “Lancer is with Saber and they’re just up ahead.”

Shirou immediately brightened as they passed through a thick patch of undergrowth and saw the blue-clad Servant just ahead. She was leaning on Lancer’s shoulder, much the same way he was leaning on Bazett’s, turning them into a strange mirror image of each other. There was a long moment of silence. Then a smile spread across Shirou’s lips. “It’s good to see you, Saber,” Shirou finally said. “I’m glad you’re alright.”

Saber just stared at him for a moment with a surprised look. Then she chuckled. “The same to you, Shirou.” She shook her head. “Please, let me escort you home. I have a ride just up the hill.”

“Alright king charming,” Bazett said dryly, “Let’s focus on getting you two up to the road before we talk about letting you drive.”

Shirou and Saber both blushed for a moment. Then they broke down in chuckles. “That sounds like a good start,” Shirou said.
Chapter 34

Rin was still nursing her sore knuckles when she finally made it back to the Emiya household. Perhaps punching magically reinforced metal wasn’t the best idea she’d ever had. Still, she’d at least learned who another Master was, so that was something. “There’s something very wrong with this Grail War,” she muttered.

“It’s definitely unique,” Archer replied, completely deadpan. Her clothes had repaired themselves by now and Rin could feel the slight pull on her mana as the Servant regenerated from her injuries. “I kind of feel like that Gunner chick is stealing my style though.”

Rin felt her eyebrow twitch. “But you’re not worried at all about her existing at all.”

The red Servant just shrugged. “We’ve got a Ruler, a Shielder, and something called Temptress already. Honestly, another extra is the least surprising thing about tonight.”

Her Master huffed. “I don’t even know what’s happening anymore.” She stopped in front of the gates of the old house and pushed them open. “Hopefully someone else at least found the idiot while we were busy.”

“Worried that your idiot got himself hurt?”

Rin rounded on her Servant and glared, but Archer just replied with a teasing smile. “He is not my idiot. He’s just a valuable ally. His stubbornness is helping hold our team together right now. It would make things much harder if he were to get himself killed.”

“Whatever you say, Master.”

Rin refused to meet her Servant’s gaze again and threw open the front door. “We’re back!” She stepped out of her shoes and headed down the hallway.

“Welcome back,” Sakura said as she stepped out of the dining room, bowing her head slightly.

Rin took one look at Sakura’s face and felt her heart drop. “No luck?”

The purple-haired girl just shook her head. “We didn’t see anything all night. The school and the temple were both completely abandoned. Fujimura-sensei headed home to rest, but she didn’t have anything to say either. I think she was worried, but she was exhausted. Ayako ran into Temptress, but it doesn’t seem that she had anything to do with senpai’s disappearance.”

“Ayako’s back too?”

“She just got here,” Sakura said as she turned back to the kitchen.

Rin walked past her sister and into the room. Then she froze when she saw the table. “And what is she doing here?”

Caren looked up at her. “Well, Shielder was helping Assassin and I thought it would be rude to leave after Matou was kind enough to offer us tea.” She lifted her steaming cup and took a small sip. “It really is quite delicious.”

Ayako was sitting to her side with a similar, but untouched cup sitting in front of her. Assassin had elected to sit on Shielder’s lap. The skull mask made the dark-skinned Servant’s expression
completely unreadable, but Rin could practically feel the satisfaction radiating off her. Shielder on the other hand looked slightly uncomfortable with the whole arrangement. “Nothing at all then?” she asked, deciding not to ask.

“I sent Saber after a lead earlier,” Caren said as she set her cup down with a soft clink. “But she’s the only one not back yet.”

Rin dropped heavily at the table. “Lead? What lead?”

“I saw the young Einzbern in town, quite possibly in the process of capturing Emiya.”

Rin’s brain ground to a halt. “You saw her kidnap Shirou. And you sent Saber after Berserker.” Caren nodded. “Berserker who fought three Servants and came out even. Alone.”

Caren shrugged. “I have faith in the king’s abilities. Surely she wouldn’t do anything too reckless with her Master’s safety on the line.”

The Tohsaka heir ground her teeth together. “Archer. We need to get going. Now.” Before she could get to her feet, they heard the hummed of an engine out front. The women sitting around the table looked at each other and leaped to their feet, nearly falling over each other as they rushed for the front door.

Sakura managed to claw her way to the front of the pack and throw up the front door. They were greeted by the sight of two figures coming through the front gate. Shirou and Saber were leaning against each other, keeping each other standing as they made their way up the front walk. Both of them looked slightly stunned to see the front hall stuffed full of their friends. “Oh. Hello,” Shirou said, nodding his head. “I’m sorry for the trouble tonight.”

There was a long moment of silence from the group. “You idiot!” Rin yelled as she pushed to the front. “You got yourself kidnapped! What are you apologizing for?!”

“I’m so glad you’re alright, senpai,” Sakura said as she visibly sagged with relief.

Caren allowed herself a small smile. “I told you that they were fine,” she said.

“And thank you for sending Miss Bazett to help us. We encountered more trouble than I was expecting.”

Sakura gestured for everyone to get back and Saber and Shirou slowly made their way into the house. “Sit down and rest. Then you can tell us what happened.”

“Avenger and Gunner…” Sakura said softly. The entire table was silent as Rin and Shirou shared their stories. “This is getting more and more dangerous.”

“I apologize for my weakness,” Saber said, bowing her head. “I could have stopped Avenger tonight if I’d been a little stronger.”

Shirou’s face fell. “Saber…” He placed his hand gently on top of hers. “It’s not your fault. I’m not much of a Master either. Don’t blame yourself.”

Rin sighed. Why did she have to deal with this? “He’s right, sort of. You can’t blame yourself for running into the worst possible opponent. Especially when Emiya had to fight too.”
“Still. If I could provide more mana…” Rin felt something twist in her gut as she saw Shirou and Saber’s eyes meet. She glanced sideways at Sakura. The purple-haired girl had a pensive look and her mouth was a thin line. Ayako had a nearly matching expression.

Then there was a sigh from across the table and all eyes turned to Caren. “As much as I would love to see where this goes…” The looks turned to glares. “I think that we’ve done our part for the evening.” Shielder looked more than a little relieved to have an excuse to get Assassin out of her lap. “Good luck with Miss Saber, Emiya.”

Shirou looked slightly confused as the exorcist got to her feet and she and her Servant beat a hasty retreat. Then he glanced sideways at Saber. “I didn’t mean…” He trailed off with flaming cheeks.

Saber blushed, but didn’t pull her hand away. “I… appreciate the thought. But there are other ways to restore my energy supply.”

“Saber…” Shirou looked her in the eye and they sat in silence for a moment.

Rin looked between the two. “Oh my god.” She jumped to her feet. “That’s it. I’m done. I do not need to be here for this.”

“You can stay in one of the guest rooms tonight if you’d like,” Sakura said as Rin and Archer got to their feet.

“That sounds fine,” Rin said.

“Maybe you can actually sleep tonight,” Archer joked. “As long as Saber isn’t too loud.” The pirate winked at Saber and disappeared around the corner before the knight could respond.

Shirou groaned and looked at Ayako and Sakura. “I should get home,” Ayako said quickly. “Before mom and dad notice how late I’ve been out.” She hopped up and fled with Assassin before Shirou could say anything else.

“Sakura?” Shirou finally tried, turning toward his… lover? Partner? They hadn’t exactly put a label on their relationship.

Sakura looked at him and Saber thoughtfully. “Senpai… I love you. And I can see that you and Saber… you two need each other. Especially right now.” She walked around the table and leaned down and kissed him on the cheek. “It won’t change anything between us. Just like Rider didn’t. I trust you.”

“Of course not,” Shirou said reflexively.

Rider gave him a pointed look. “I trust you too,” she said. “Sleep well.” The final pair departed, leaving Shirou and Saber alone at the dining room table.

“If you don’t want to…”

Saber raised a hand to cut Shirou off before he could finish. “Shirou…” Her cheeks were still slightly flushed. “You’ve done so much for me. You’ve treated me like a partner and a friend. More so than anyone ever has before. But I don’t want you to do this just because I’m weak.”

Shirou was silent for a moment. “Saber, the first time I saw you, in that little shed out back, I thought you were the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.” Then he decided to do something impulsive. The red-head leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers. Saber’s eyes widened and she stiffened. Then she tilted her head and leaned in to the kiss. One of her arms wrapped around his
waist and pulled them closer together.

“Can we please go somewhere more private?” Saber murmured as they finally broke apart. “I can’t do this in your dining room.”

Shirou didn’t say a word. He simply took her hand and led the way down the hall to his room. The interior was dim, but the moonlight streamed through the windows, casting a silvery light over the bed. Saber stepped inside ahead of him and her armor vanished in a swirl of light, leaving her with her blue dress. She reached back and carefully unlaced the cloth, letting it fall away from her body and pool at her feet. Her skin seemed to shine in the light and for a moment Shirou almost forgot to breathe.

Saber blushed again. “You don’t have to stare,” she said.

“You’re amazing,” Shirou said. He peeled his shirt off and crossed the room in two steps. Then he kissed her again. The blonde leaned into him, pressing her body against his tightly as they stood there. He could feel the heat radiating off her form as they lost themselves in the moment. His hands felt around for the clasp on her bra and he released it with both hands, letting the white top fall to the ground.

Saber gasped and pulled back to catch her breath. “Shirou…”

“Just relax. I know what I’m doing.” He was slightly grateful for Sakura’s natural talent and enthusiasm. He had learned a lot over the last week. The red-head leaned down and caught one of Saber’s nipples in his mouth, sucking the hard little point gently while his hand ran over the other small mound.

Saber moaned and allowed Shirou to lower her down onto the futon. “Yes you do.” His mouth moved down her body, leaving a line of kisses from her breasts down to the hem of her panties. “Please,” she groaned as he paused at the top of her last scrap of clothing. “Don’t stop.”

Shirou’s finger hooked over the top of her panties and pulled them down, revealing her soft, pink pussy, already glistening with arousal. His tongue slowly moved up and down her slit, tracing along the folds of her pussy as the blonde moaned loudly. “Are you ready Saber?” he asked softly, leaning back and taking in her flushed form and panting chest. The blonde nodded, not able to find words. Shirou unbuttoned his pants and pulled them down along with his boxers, letting his very hard cock spring free. Despite his earlier activities, he was more than ready to go. “Just relax.” He lined his cock up with her pussy and slowly pressed his hardness into her slit.

Saber’s eyes widened and a loud moan echoed through the room. Her back arched slightly and she pushed her hips against his, taking him in deeper as he pushed into her wet pussy. “Shirou!” Her mouth hung open slightly as he moved inside her, beginning with slow, shallow thrusts to let her adjust to his size. He began to move faster as Saber’s gasps turned to moans and he could feel her inner walls squeezing around him as he fucked her. His cock throbbed and he leaned down to capture one of her nipples again. The Servant panted and her hips moved against his, matching his pace. “Shirou. When you finish… please. Kiss me again.”

Shirou felt her pussy clench around him again and had a feeling that they were both going to get there sooner rather than later. “Of course.” He lifted his head and kissed her deep, their tongues intertwining. He felt her moan into his throat and her pussy clench one more time as she came, her body arching against him. His balls tightened and he lasted only a few more seconds before he came hard, pouring a thick load of cum deep into her pussy.

Both of them collapsed onto the bedding, their bodies coated in the thin sheen of sweat and their
faces flushed. Shirou let his cock slide from Saber’s body and rolled to the side, still looking into her eyes. “That was…”


“Always,” Shirou replied softly.
Shirou woke up to the familiar feeling of a warm body pressed against his. The sheets slid down off his naked chest as he sat up and looked down at Saber’s form curled up on the futon next to him. “Good morning,” he said softly, reaching down to put a hand on the Servant’s shoulder.

Saber yawned and her face scrunched up for a moment as his touch roused her. Her eyes cracked open slowly and she slowly pushed herself up to a half sitting position. “Oh. Good morning, Shirou.” A smile crossed her face as they sat there for a few long moments, enjoy each other’s company. Then there was a soft rumble from Shirou’s midsection and both of them chuckled.

“I guess we slept in longer than usual.” Shirou pushed the blankets off completely and felt around for some clothing to see him through the day. “Any requests for breakfast?”

Saber tried to look like she wasn’t watching Shirou’s naked body as he pulled boxers and a shirt over his trim body. She turned away from the red-head quickly as he turned back to her, her cheeks a pale pink. “Oh, no. Nothing special.”

Shirou turned back to her, finally properly dressed, and smiled again. He leaned down and placed a small kiss on her lips. Both of them stayed there for a moment, their faces flushed before Shirou shook himself and straightened. “Alright then.” He rubbed the back of his head. “I’ll get something together then. Just… take your time getting ready.” Saber nodded as her partner left her to find some of her own clothing and join him in the dining room.

The morning sun poked through the windows as Shirou made his way down the hallway toward the kitchen. Ahead of him, he could hear voices already talking rapidly in the kitchen. Sakura must have already started on breakfast for their guests. He rounded the corner and yawned again, covering his mouth and rubbing his eyes. “Good morning everyone.”

“Good morning onii-chan!”

The red-head stopped dead in his tracks as he saw the dining room. Rin, Rider, and Archer were all sitting along one side of the table, all stiff backed and wary. Sakura was in the kitchen tending to a sizzling pan, but she constantly seemed to be looking back over her shoulder at the table, a displeased frown on her lips. On the other side of the room, Ilya and Berserker were sitting cross-legged, looking remarkably satisfied with themselves. Ilya was dressed in the same skirt and blouse that he’d seen her in several times before, while Berserker had exchanged her spandex for a remarkably ordinary looking sweater and jeans. Well, as ordinary as a sweater and jeans could look clinging to the curves of someone with such an unbelievable figure. “Ilya?” Shirou finally managed after a moment. “What?”

Ilya smirked. “Did you forget that you invited me to visit sometime?” the short, silver-haired girl asked. “Right after you so rudely left without telling me?”

“Oh.” He had said that, hadn’t he? And she was his sister, sort of. Was there a way to make this any less awkward than it was already going to be? The silence dragged on for a long moment as he considered it before concluding that there probably wasn’t. “I wasn’t expecting you to show up so soon.”

Rin’s eyebrow twitched and she glared at Shirou. “We’re going to have a long talk about who you invite into your house,” she said. The tone of her voice said far more than her words did.
Shirou sighed and bowed his head. He was very quickly learning when to shut up and listen to the large congregation of females in his life. “I always appreciate your advice, Tohsaka.”

Rin’s cheeks colored a bit and he could see the vein in her forehead bulge a little bit. “Then maybe you should try to consider what I would do more before you open your mouth?” She crossed her arms and slumped back, looking rather petulant for a teenager. “Dumbass…”

“My apologies,” Shirou said with an internal sigh. “Let’s all just… try to get along. At least until after breakfast.”

“Of course,” Ilya said with a cheeky smile. “I’m a guest in onii-chan’s home after all.”

“Right.” Said onii-chan had a distinct feeling that Ilya was having far too much fun forcing Rin and Sakura not to get vengeance for her insistence on Shirou paying her a visit the night before. He sighed externally. “Sakura, do you need any help?”

“I’ve got it, senpai,” the purple-haired girl said. “Would you mind just making sure our guest stays on good behavior?” Her words were noticeably strained as she shifted the eggs around in their pan.

“Right…” There were more footsteps behind him and Shirou turned to see Saber joining them, dressed in her usual blue skirt and top.

“Good morning every…” The blonde Servant cut off as she took in the scene in front of her. Her sword immediately appeared in her hands and her eyes narrowed. “What’s going on here?”

Shirou winced. “Saber, Ilya stopped by for breakfast with us. Would you please make sure everyone behaves for a few minutes while I check the mail?”

Saber’s eyes narrowed and she glared at the tiny Master sitting at the table. “I’ll make sure that she doesn’t cause any trouble.” Her sword vanished again and the blonde dropped down at the nearest side of the table, with Rin and company at her left and Ilya and Berserker at her right.

Shirou decided that it was the best he was going to get and dared to leave the tense situation for a few minutes to head outside. The cool morning air blew past him as he opened up the front gate and raised a hand to keep the morning sun out of his eyes. He flipped open the mail box and peeked into the empty container. Nothing much showed up most Sundays anyway.

“Well, someone is looking tired this morning.” Shirou turned to see a familiar old man in a greenish-grey kimono coming down the street. His skin was weathered and wrinkled and his hair had long since gone completely grey.

“Good morning, Mr. Fujimura,” Shirou said, nodding to the old man. “Just a rough night I guess. And not getting any easier.”

The old man laughed. “I’ve told you before to call me Raiga, Shirou.”

“If you insist,” Shirou said, finding himself smiling just a bit. Anyone who had met the head of the Fujimura family could immediately tell where Taiga had gotten her own energy from. “You know, I don’t usually see you in the morning.”

Raiga smiled and strolled over to the gate to pat the young man on the shoulder. “Taiga came home in a tizzy last night because you’d apparently gotten yourself in trouble somehow. I was about to send some boys out to look for you when that girl of yours called to tell my silly granddaughter that you’d managed to make it home. So I thought I’d come and make sure you didn’t need any more help.”
The red-head chuckled awkwardly. “It’s alright. Just a… family issue. Apparently Kiritsugu had a
daughter that he never mentioned and things got… complicated.”

The old yakuza boss frowned. “That man,” he finally muttered. “Always keeping even more
secrets. Really, you’d think that he’d have learned better at some point.” He laughed loudly and
shook his head.

He was still laughing when they heard the buzzing of a small engine and Taiga’s scooter zipped
down the street with its owner and her Servant both perched on the back. “Grandpa?!” The brunet
almost failed to stop her bike in time as it skidded to a stop in front of the Emiya house. “What are
you doing here?”

“Just checking on your boy after last night,” Raiga said, waving his hand in Taiga’s direction. “We
could have come together if you managed to get your bum out of bed in the morning.” He poked his
granddaughter’s shoulder playfully, earning a pout from the energetic teacher.

“What do you mean my boy?!” Taiga squawked, her face immediately turning bright red.

Raiga just burst out laughing again. “You certainly wanted him to be!” the old man teased. “I
remember how you used to look at old Kiri when you were a teenager. He really might have been
the most stubborn goat I’ve ever met, but that attitude really was a lady killer!” He grinned from ear
to ear. “Come to think of it, you really do take after your father like that, don’t you?” The mobster
clapped Shirou on the shoulder, his hand shaking slightly from his mirth.

“Grandpa!” Taiga made a sharp choking sound as she hastily shoved her hands over the old man’s
mouth. She turned to Shirou with flaming cheeks and sputtered for a few moments. “Ignore
everything he just said! Grandpa is just getting old, you know how it is.” She tried to laugh it off,
but her flustered expression ruined the attempt.

Shirou fought the urge to sigh yet again. He was trying to limit his exasperation for the morning.
When all else failed, divert attention in the usual way. “Would you like to join us for breakfast?” he
interrupted.

Raiga brushed Taiga’s hand aside. “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble. I know you’ve had a full
house the last week or so.”

“I think having an outside presence might help everyone remember their manners,” Shirou
deadpanned.

The old man chuckled ruefully. “And maybe keep my granddaughter in line a bit?” he joked.
“Though her new friend has been doing a decent job of that so far.”

Ruler shook her head as she climbed off of Taiga’s scooter. She had traded out her formal robe-like
attire for an ankle-length burgundy skirt and a white blouse with a simple golden cross necklace
resting just above her generous bosom. “It’s no trouble,” she said with a gentle smile. “She reminds
me a bit of my sister. Though Mary was such a good girl and Taiga can get into a bit of trouble if
someone doesn’t keep an eye on her.”

“Shiiirooou,” Taiga whined with faux tears in her eyes. “Everyone is picking on me this morning!”
She clung to the red-head dramatically, looking him right in the eye and pouting.

Shirou gave her a flat look and flicked her forehead. “You make it easy when you behave like that
Fuji-nee. Just try not to make a fuss. Ilya decided to come over for breakfast too and everyone is a
little tense.”
“What?!” Taiga immediately straightened up and Shirou could almost see the fiery aura around her. “I need to give that girl a piece of my mind!” She stormed inside before Shirou could do so much as say another word.

Raiga just chuckled again. “Well, at least it will be a lively breakfast. Hopefully it’s not too much for an innocent old man like me.”

The red-head just let his shoulders slump. “Well, it can’t get any worse I guess…”

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