Fate: Servant and Cook

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Summary

Shirou is forced back in time to save Arturia from her downfall, though he doesn't know how or what to do about it. He's not a fighter, but an idealist. Is he supposed to use his ideals to oppose, or supplement Arturia's?

Notes

Messed up and accidentally deleted this. Oh well.
"Von meinem Befehl, loslassen!"

Shots of white light in multitudes stormed down on the demons, purging through their darkness and whispering tendrils of evil. Aqua-blue eyes narrowed as the woman who had released the bullets stared over at her enemies. Growling softly, she gazed down at the last remaining jewel in her hand into which she had painstakingly transferred her own prana for the past seven years. The woman grimaced slightly. It was her last jewel, and it had cost a year of boring evenings with someone she wished she had never needed to speak to. However, she frowned, looking up at the oncoming demons, she didn't really have a choice. Especially if a certain someone wasn’t going to get his butt in gear and help her out.

"Shirou!" Tohsaka Rin shouted out, her patience waning. "Emiya Shirou, I swear, if all you were going to do was sit there and play with your bow, then I should never have brought you along in the first place."

Frustrated golden-brown eyes fixated on the raven-haired woman far away from him. Disgruntled, the young man fell down to one knee, bending down as low to the ground as he could to further stabilize his aim. He narrowed his eyes, drew back the several projected swords in his drawstring, and released swiftly. He grunted slightly as he made sure to maintain the energy required for each sword, and followed the arrows with eyes as they neared their targets.

Rin, having already seen the arrows whizzing straight towards her position, had quickly created a small, but strong barrier around her to protect herself from the blast. She watched the five arrows, or swords, split into multiples and slammed straight into the head of every single existing demon. Shielding her eyes from the resulting blast, Rin stood up to her full height, right hand on her waist as the barrier dissipated. Hearing oncoming footsteps, she peered back her partner as he came jogging up.

"Sorry for the delay, Rin," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. "Every time I lined up my sights, you always killed off a few more, so I was waiting until you ran out of juice."

His partner sighed, shoulders drooping as she realized she couldn't blame him for absolutely everything. "No, it's partially my fault, I guess. We should've made up some kind of code system, or something. But, then again, I figured you might take your sweet time. Again."

"Can't save the world every day," Shirou joked, shrugging his shoulders.

"Mm, yes."

Rin reached into her pocket to pull out her smartphone, and scrolled down the contents of one particular application. Shirou edged closer to her to check their mission list alongside of her. As Rin continued scrolling, she realized there weren't any more outstanding missions for them to complete. While she felt that to be a bit annoying – she was still in battle mode after all – she felt the tension ease out of her shoulders.

"Hm," Shirou muttered. "Nothing left that the Association wants us to do then?"

"It certainly seems that way," Rin drawled out, speaking while simultaneously thinking about what to do from that point. A message from another application popped up on her screen, slightly surprising her. Looking at what was written, she turned to Shirou:
"It says we have a month of leave. They want to keep track of the going-ons of an evil presence somewhere in Prague, but until they have a firm grasp of what's going on, they don't want us taking unnecessary risks."

"You mean they don't want their investments dying and leaving them high and dry," Shirou remarked sarcastically. "They'd hate to lose their precious wonders."

"Well, I can't say I blame them. We haven't failed a single mission since we were signed on a couple of years ago."

"We're not even demonologists or anything. I didn't come all the way to Europe with you just to be their dog."


She sighed again as Shirou turned away, running a hand through his auburn hair. "Look, I know you hate them, but that's why I take care of all of the communication relays, remember? That's why you stay at home like a good boy while I go out and deal with all idiots in control of our financial situation, although it is in bad taste for you to never go to see them at least every once and a while. I don't like seeing them any more than you do, you know."

"I don't hate them. I think that they're possessive and complete control freaks, but I don't hate them."

Rin's annoyed expression softened as she gave him a small smile. "Well, we won't have to see them for another month, until they give us our next mission. What do you want to do in the meantime?"

"First, I want to go home and take a real shower!" Shirou exclaimed, noticing the oncoming helicopter heading for their position. "This place freaks the hell out of me, and I think I've had enough of Russia to last me for a while."

"It's better here in Siberia than it was in Kuwait, at least."

"Oh, geez, don't bring up that place. I still have nightmares about that thing."

The two of them looked over at the helicopter, and started walking over towards their gateway back home.

It had been around seven years since the end of the Fifth Holy Grail War. After Saber, Shirou's Servant, had vanished at the dawn of a new morn, Shirou had almost felt as if he was living on borrowed time. It seemed more like, his life was no longer solely his to live; that if he wanted to see his ideals through to the end, he needed to stand up and take charge and forge his own path. That didn't mean that he wasn't sad, or upset – far from it, Shirou had been ready to crawl into a ball and stay there until the hurt vanished. Of course, she would never have desired for him to sulk around, so he put up a good front for when he returned to school. Tohsaka Rin, who was unquestionably more than likely his best friend, was probably the only one who had seen through his façade, but she played along to make him happy.

Ever since that war had ended though, Shirou knew, more than anyone else, how insufficient his knowledge of magic and the world around him was. He knew, and so he trained with Rin on a regular basis up until the two graduated from high school. It became easier to shut down his emotions and focus more on specific tasks, and while it was difficult for him to change his views, –
he couldn't help his stubborn nature – Shirou had gradually become able to differentiate between a woman living a normal life and when she was fighting to pursue her own goals or ideals. It wasn't necessarily wrong that she take up that role, but because she had a cause worth fighting for, that only made it fitting that she do so.

Then again, he had to admit that as of the start of his third, and last year in high school, he never once considered Rin to be a woman. No, she was a demon. Shirou knew as much when she constantly picked on him and poked at this wounds, but no. No, no, no. She got even worse when she trained him as her apprentice. She set up situations in which he was only doomed to fail. She would give him mental tasks that would cause a normal magus to falter, and when he did mess up, Rin would simply smile gently, with an evil twinkle in her eyes, and make him do it again. And again, and again, and again, and when he didn't manage to pass on the tenth time, she shoved him in her basement and forbade him food.

"Perhaps staying down there will help you think more clearly next time you try," she had said with a wide grin. "I'm not here simply to feed you, you know."

"Don't you think this is a little counterproductive? How am I supposed to think when I'm hungry?"

"Hm, that's not my problem though. Saber managed well enough, as I recall."

"She didn't even need food!" Shirou had protested, though to no avail.

Though, thinking back on it, he realized that his desperation had made him a bit stronger. No, she was still a demon. A maniacal demon who thought of him as a toy to play around with. Yes, his last year of high school had been hell.

After high school, Rin had gone off to London to the Mages' Association, after having received an admission recommendation. While she had originally invited Shirou to go with her, he’d had to turn her proposition down. While she could have taught him a great deal her first year, Shirou had preferred that she get used to her surroundings first instead. He also hadn't been particular interested in dealing with the Association yet either, considering it was partially their fault he’d been dragged into the war in the first place. As such, he had chosen to try refining his abilities on his own for that year after graduation.

Shirou hadn't bothered looking for a real job for stable income, but had instead picked up a few part-time ones here and there to support himself while he continuously trained. Saber had taught him how to survive, so what needed to focus on was how to take the initiative. Unfortunately, the only person who would have been a match for him was Fujimura Taiga, and while there hadn't been anything particularly wrong with sparring her, she'd demanded a bit too much of him outside of the battle – like three-course meals, for every meal. He hadn't had the income for that, so he'd had to pass on her assistance.

Well, if he couldn't work on his fighting, he would work on his aim, Shirou had surmised. It would have been impossible for him to visit the archery club at his alma mater, so he had to join a resident archery range in Shinto. When he hadn't been training his aim, or working, he would train his body. Pushups, sit-ups, running – anything that could possibly give him more stamina and a possibly stronger resistance to oncoming magic was precisely what he'd wanted to achieve. Every night before bed, he had also attempted to create a Reality Marble, just to see how long he would last each time. When that one year had ended, Shirou had managed to hold out for nearly two hours, if he did nothing but stand or sit around. When he'd attempted to move around, attack the air, rely on a massive number of swords to attack for him, and push himself to his limits, he had barely lasted half an hour.
When the next September had rolled around, a good two and a half years after the Holy Grail War had ended, the wannabe magus found himself in the capital of England, having packed his bags, and locked his house until he next returned. Saying good-bye to Taiga hadn't been nearly as difficult as he'd imagined it might be, but that might have been because he was just ready to move on to a new chapter in his life.

The day Rin had met him at the airport, with her flowing, long, black tresses tied up in a single ponytail hanging across her left shoulder, Shirou had felt his heart pound hard. Her aqua-blue eyes had looked him up and down, apparently appraising his build or whatever. She had been wearing a short-sleeve black t-shirt that, he recalled, had hugged every part of her curves. Her blue jeans had been simple, but looked wonderful on her. Honestly, it wasn't as if her outfit had been particularly stellar – it had actually been rather peasant-like for someone of her disposition – but the two crystal earrings (how much had those cost her?) enriched her image a bit. Yes, for a moment, he had been reminded of why he had idolized Tohsaka Rin in the first place, but then she'd opened her mouth and said:

"You seem like even more of a bum than you did in high school, Shirou. I hope you at least brought me a gift."

Was that the kind of thing people were supposed to say when they reunited? That their friend looked like a bum or a hobo? No normal person would say something so devoid of kindness! And, what gift? Buy your own damn gift!

Shirou had grunted, his pride wounded a bit. "Tohsaka, that's the first thing you say to me after a year of not seeing each other? I hadn't known I was supposed to dress up to ride on an airplane. It took me nearly a day to even get here, you know."

"That's what you get when you don't tell me when your flight is until the second you land. Ridiculous. I don't exactly live near here, I hope you realize. I could have paid for your flight myself."

"That's what you get when you don't tell me when your flight is until the second you land. Ridiculous. I don't exactly live near here, I hope you realize. I could have paid for your flight myself."

And put himself even more into her debt? Nah, that just would have been asking for trouble, and he had enough to deal with.

Despite their rocky reunion, Rin had lived up to her promise of helping him get into the academy and getting him the quality teaching he needed. However, as he simply wasn't aligned with the main five elements, many of his teachers hadn't known what to do with him. Rin had warned him not to tell them about his Reality Marble, or ability to project, unless he'd wanted to become a lab rat. As such, most of what they taught him was how to protect himself against outer magical influences, and to strengthen his own abilities during enacted combat. Shirou was the one who pushed his projection abilities to their limits – his alignment may have been swords, but he was more than capable of projecting everyday objects, and a few other types of weapons like spears, lances, war hammers, and the like. Shirou honestly just feel better dealing solely with swords, though.

In Rin's fifth year, six years after the end of the Holy Grail War, she had been invited to take part in missions as a representative of the Association. As there were many different kinds of evils out in the world, not all entirely related to magic, of course, that meant there was also always trouble to be found in every corner of the globe. However, since whenever trouble appeared to the fantastical degree, there was always doubt amongst those involved in magic that perhaps the Association was somehow involved. Even were the Association not involved in the least, discussions over why it was complacent in allowing these issues to crop up would start making headway among the people, to the point where even those who knew nothing of the magic world would begin making their own assumptions.
The second the normal citizens began getting involved was the moment the Magus' Association resolved to stamp down the abnormalities themselves by sending out accomplished magi and having them take care of the issues. In accordance, Rin, recognized as an official magus and of an upstanding quality, was invited – read: commanded – to assist in the cleansing process. The cleansing would take act as her fifth year studies, where she would use everything she had learned up to that point for the benefit of mankind.

Of course, she hadn't wanted to. She was still technically in training – why couldn't they send more accomplished magi to take care of the issue? Rin wasn't their dog, existing solely to take care of their issues for them. When they decided she would either do so or have to stay another year for further training, she, undaunted, agreed under the condition that her apprentice be her partner, and none other than him.

Her apprentice, a boy who could hardly even restore broken glass to its former self? How laughable a condition for her to place on the table. If the boy happened to somehow die during a mission, though, that would take away the shame of a such a low-level magus attending the best academy known to magi across the world. Yes, that would take care of two birds with a single stone. So, they did indeed agree to her terms, and that is how Shirou ended up becoming Rin's partner to eliminate undesirable fantastical events from the world as they knew it.

"Ah, geez. Every time I talk to those geezers, I feel like they're all just copies of Kotomine come back from the dead to haunt me," Rin had said, coming home to their shared apartment and lazing on the couch in an unladylike manner. "Those morons don't have a clue of how amazing your abilities are. Taking care of a few demons or whatever here and there won't take up much of my time at all with this."

"I don't know, Rin," Shirou had muttered, his arms crossed over his chest. "I'm kind of perplexed myself. I don't know the first thing about taking down demons. I don't have light magic or anything."

After living in such close quarters together for the past four years, what wariness or hesitation they may have demonstrated earlier on in their friendship steadily dissipated into a feeling of comfortable ease. With all of their arguments, reconciliements, and happy days of learning magic together, they had surely grown to have a strong, unbreakable bond with one another. Shirou wasn't even sure when he started calling her "Rin", but it had come out as naturally as breathing. Rin hadn't seemed to mind in the least, either.

Rin had popped her head back up from where it rest on the back of the couch and fixed him with a solid glare. "If you were that ridiculous idiot filled to the brim with unattainable ideals and no sense of self or magic, I wouldn't have bothered even arguing. I probably would've just settled with the extra year of tutelage and told them to shove it. Luckily, even you aren't that stupid anymore and besides, I know you. There's no way I could work with a Kotomine imitation. I'd kill him and have to go into hiding."

"Yeah, but, I don't have any holy water or anything. And I'm not a priest, either."

"Don't be ridiculous. Manifested demons will die with a bullet to the head just as easily as any other corporeal matter. We aren't talking about some fictional demon that can't be touched except by everything good and holy. Even if we were, the Association wouldn't bother sending us out for something that preposterous. There are actual demonologists and people involved with that line of work to do all of that."

"Still, it seems kind of dangerous."
"Says the guy who pushed a magical being out of the way so he could be nearly blown up by a barrage of arrows and a noble phantasm," Rin had countered dryly, waving him away to get her some tea. "Right, being put against monsters we can actually beat is so much more dangerous. Let me go retract the statement solidifying my participation right now."

Shirou hadn't been able to mask his disgruntlement. "You are never going to let me live that down, are you?"

"And miss out on that face? Hah."

From that day forward, Shirou had been roped into going on every single mission presented to the two. At first, they had been restricted to just the United Kingdom area – they were still in training, after all. When their number of successful endeavors began to increase, the two began to receive more and more missions leading out of the UK into mainland Europe, and then into the Americas, Africa, Asia, and there was even a mission down near the South Pole. That one was an oddity though.

Shirou leaned back on the couch, taking in a deep breath as he looked out the front windows to his left. It was hard to believe it had already been seven years since all that mess back when he was in high school. He and Rin were no longer students at the academy – she had officially graduated back in July, and it was currently October. Without a doubt, Rin was unquestionably a genius. Her English had been spectacular, her grades were top-notch, she managed everything with flair, and still somehow made time to kill Shirou's ego at least three times a day.

He, on the other hand, had trouble figuring out heads or tails of English when he first got there. He could tell out simple things, certainly, but discussions about magic had been far beyond him. Now, he could more or less manage a normal conversation with other magi, and led a fairly carefree life outside of the walls of the Association. It made things a bit easier on him, too, being able to understand a different language. He also had the means to show up his older sister in the language she was supposed to know well enough to teach. Hah, he finally beat her in something outside of chores.

Shirou leaned forward and rolled back up his sleeves to above his elbows. At night, it got pretty chilly in London the closer it got to winter, – far more so than Fuyuki City had been – but the sunny days were still warm enough to not need a jacket. As he heard footsteps coming down the stairs, Shirou stood up, adjusting his light-blue buttoned shirt. He shifted the belt holding his jeans up a bit more and fixed his shirt collar before Rin made it down to the first floor. They locked eyes the second she came into view, and she took one glance at him before snorting.

"I'm sorry, are you going on a date or something? What's up with the shirt?"

Shirou frowned, crossing his now toned, muscular arms over his chest. "Well, I'm wearing this because you said the other one was too shabby."

Rin flipped her ponytail off her shoulder, and frowned herself. She wore a red cashmere sweater over a thin, laced long-sleeved shirt, with a sleek pair of black jeans to accompany the outfit. He had to admit: she looked good. Really good. He had known she would, too, so he tried to dress to impress. It seemed to have had the opposite effect though, he supposed.

"Shall I go buy you a horse and some boots with spurs to go with your look there, Shirou?" she teased with a slightly evil grin. "How about a ten-gallon hat?"

"Hah, tease all you like. If you haven't stormed into my room to get me a new outfit by now, then I must look pretty damn good."
"Eh, don't get too full of yourself, Emiya."

Shirou shrugged his shoulders, a gesture that reminded Rin an awful lot of Archer, her Servant from the war. Shirou may not have turned into a Counter Guardian like Archer had, but his mannerisms were starting to assimilate with what Archer's had been. It was actually a bit unnerving the more she saw and recognized them. When Shirou grinned at her, Rin felt her heart begin to pound slightly.

No, no, no. This wasn't going to happen. This was Shirou, her best friend. Damn it. Evil thoughts, be gone! Besides, he was still very much in love with Saber, and that was something that she never wanted to intrude upon. Rin smiled wistfully, and shook her head.

"Whatever. If we're going to go shopping, we'd best hurry. I hate walking around this neighborhood when it gets dark."

"We could've moved," started Shirou, opening the front door for Rin as she walked outside and down the three steps, "but no, that would've been too much work. Let's not mention that this area has one of the highest crime rates and that we're just waiting to get mobbed."

"You think I care about some petty thief?" she asked him as he locked the door. As soon as he slipped the key into his pocket and checked to make sure he had his wallet, she began to complain again.

"Even if we weren't magi," she whispered, before continuing in a normal volume, "I could handle any thief who is dumb enough to come at me. No, I wish we'd moved because this area reeks. I don't know who's practicing in this area, but they must not be the brightest bulb in the lot."

"I believe you'd be referring to Kristoff," Shirou said, pointing down the street at a light-blue house. "He uses various combinations to put that bit of oomph into his dishes. They actually taste pretty good."

"Not that guy, I know about him," she scoffed. "He makes a mean curry, considering he's from Russia. No, there's some amateur that moved into the area, but I've been too busy to check with Ana to find out who it is. Well, as long as the smell doesn't permeate through our house, I suppose it's not that big an issue. It's just a pain."

"I'll bet that if the place smelled like roses everywhere, you'd still find some way to complain about it."

"I am of the opinion that roses aren't as wonderful as everyone makes them out to be."

Shirou sighed, and slipped his hands into his jean pockets. "There's just no pleasing you, my lady."

"As long as we're clear."

After walking another couple of blocks, Shirou noticed one of the houses that used to be chockfull of gadgets everywhere was now empty and devoid of life. Tapping Rin on the shoulder, he gestured for her to look over at the house. "Hey, that guy moved out."

Rin hesitated and cleared her throat. "No, he was...disposed of."

"Oh..."

Shirou knew what that meant, but had never thought the nerdy-looking old man would've, or could've, done anything bad enough to get himself marked by the Association. Usually people who
have pursued witchcraft or something with less than noble intentions, they could still work within the good graces of the Association, so long as their research led to inventions or abilities that would benefit the world of magi as a whole, or lead to more or better awareness of the world in general. To be marked and killed, however, would require something a bit more dire, like killing people in the Association's name, or... He was actually having some trouble coming up with possible reasons, since even a coup d'état wouldn't make the Magus' Association flinch, so long as it ended up bettering everything in the end. "The end fits the means" – something he didn't necessarily agree with, but recognized as being a pretty common trend in the real world.

"I wonder who's going to take his place."

"Who cares? Let me see that shopping list again."

Shirou gave the empty house one last glance before turning away from it for good.

A little over a couple of weeks had passed since their mission in Russia, and Shirou was left lying on his bed at home, staring at the ceiling while he thought over what to do that day. Rin was in Los Angeles, having been called over for an emergency, which meant their vacation would be extended by another week to make up for her lost time.

"I'll be gone for one week, just one!" she had said, pinning him with another one of her glares. "Do you think you can keep from causing trouble with the Association this time? If I'm asking for too much, just let me know. I'll tie you up and throw you up into the attic."

"Ugh, Tohsaka," referring to her like he'd used to back in high school to show his irritation, "everything will be fine. I won't blow up anything."

"And damn it, Emiya, if you're going to do projection, would you mind doing it when you aren't in a position to be seen by every single person in the whole city? I don't exist just to clean up your messes."

He hadn't projected intentionally, but he'd needed a wrench to help fix a kid's bike. Projecting something that small and handy had been like breathing to him – he hadn't even realized he'd done it until a crowd had gathered. Rin hadn't exactly been pleased. Shirou supposed he should've been thanking her for all her work behind the scenes, but it really annoyed him. It had been a mistake, and he could've attributed it to some kind of make-believe magic trick. In fact, that's what he did, and the crowd loved it, but Rin had been pissed. No, not just pissed, but absolutely furious. Rin had worked very hard to make sure the Association would never discover his true abilities, and he had nearly tossed her efforts of the past four years out the window within a single moment. It had practically been a year since then, but Rin seemed to still be fuming over the matter.

Shirou groaned and turned onto his side, still wondering how to go about his day. The sun was high and bright in the sky – it was really nice, considering how most of what he would be seeing during winter would be grey skies all the time.

"Hmph. I should go out and enjoy the day while I can. I don't have any orders to take care of right now, either."

Shirou rolled back, lifting up his legs as he coiled into a tight ball. Then, pushing off of hands, he leapt off of the bed and landed softly on the hardwood floor. After running a hand through his hair, he patted his lean, muscular stomach with a grin, murmuring, "I'd better get dressed if I'm going to head out."
He grabbed a pair of trousers and a long-sleeved shirt, dressed quickly, and dashed down the hallway, passing Rin's room along the way. Racing down the stairs, he jumped off from the third step and upon landing, threw his hands up in the air as if he had made an amazing Telemark.

"And the crowd cheers!" he exclaimed, turning back and forth and bowing all the while. "Emiya Shirou has just made the landing of a lifetime. Jim, I think he just made a new record! I think you're right, Bob – that was quite the landing!"

Scoffing at himself, Shirou shook his head and headed into the kitchen. He grabbed an apple out of their fruit bowl, rotating it in his hand as he opened the refrigerator door. As he'd expected, Rin had made a dish for every one of her scheduled cooking days. There was more food stored in there than there were raw materials.

"Geez," he muttered, reaching for a Ziploc container filled with nikujyaga, "I told her she didn't have to take the schedule so seriously. There's no point in me cooking anything if there's this much food around."

After taking out the container and shutting the refrigerator door, Shirou lifted up the top a bit before tossing the bowl into the microwave. While watching the container rotating around on the microwave plate, he crossed his arms and thought back to when he'd first moved in with Rin.

It had been tough at the start, to be sure. Both of them were far more used to living alone, and suddenly living together in the small apartment provided her by the Association had been train wreck. Naturally, Shirou was a morning person with Rin being the very opposite. He also liked to do things by the book, while she preferred to cut corners to save time if she could. The one thing they could agree on was that they both needed their own space, but Shirou wasn't in a position to go out and live in London on his own. For one, he couldn't speak English all that well yet. For two, an apprentice wasn't supposed to be living separately from the magus residing over them, anyway. The last matter was while Rin hadn't apparently cared about living with someone of the opposite sex, Shirou had felt like he was walking on eggshells the entire time.

The microwave beeped, indicating his food had been warmed up, so he took the container out and moseyed into living room with a pair of chopsticks in hand. Opening up the container fully, Shirou grinned.

"Wow, this looks great. She really outdid herself this time."

Taking a bite, he realized it was as good as it looked. Rin hadn't lost her touch at all.

So, upon deciding that they needed a bigger place, Shirou reminisced, both had set out together to find a decent sized apartment. With as much money as Shirou had saved up, and with Rin's trust fund, it would've been simple enough to rent something big enough for the both of them. However, since they were magi, there was always the risk of there being an accident occurring, so condos and apartments were out of the question. The only option left would have been to buy a house, but neither of them had ever dealt with mortgage paperwork before, so they had needed help from the Association to get everything taken care of.

After all of the big issues were settled, then came the small, pointless ones that continuously seemed to build up into big ones. Shirou wasn't an interior decorator by any means, but even he had his limits with the things Rin had wanted to hang up or buy. He wanted simplicity, and she wanted comfortable luxuriousness. He had ended up choosing the furniture types and she'd dealt with the comfort and intricacy levels. Then there was the wallpaper versus painting issue, and the real versus fake plants issue, and then the workshop size issue, and the chore rotation issue, and...
Shirou groaned as all of the memories from years before came flooding into his mind. Then there was the main problem for him, where he couldn't sleep well for the first few weeks knowing that Rin was sleeping in the room next to his, only a few meters away. He clung to the idea that he wasn't attracted to her at all, and even forced himself to recall Saber and the two weeks or so he had been with her. Then, one day, he'd woken up, gone to cook breakfast, had turned around to see Rin glaring at him (as she normally tended to each morning) while still in her nightgown, and had felt absolutely nothing. It had felt like a typical day, where Rin wasn't quite awake yet, and the fact that she was in a nightgown did nothing to him. It was like he'd forgotten what had made him anxious in the first place. When he had realized his ease, he'd burst out laughing as he'd handed Rin a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast. Shirou recalled that she had been rather bewildered by his sudden outburst, but had ended up smiling a bit herself.

He slurped the last bit of konnyaku down before standing and going to wash the dish immediately. Rin had been good to him – that much he could definitely admit. She had taken care of him, and seen to all of his immediate needs, though she did complain some along the way. Honestly, Shirou thought, casting his gaze down at the sink, he wished he could love her, the way he knew that she loved him. It wasn't right, and he knew it wasn't, but try as he might, he could never forget Saber. After only two weeks of being together, she occupied his thoughts for the better of nearly ten years. Shirou had considered moving out a number of times after Rin had finished her studies, but after all she had done for him, he could never abandon her in that matter.

He shook his head back and forth, as if to clear away his thoughts. No, he'd already made up his mind about that. The only thing left to do was keep moving forward, just as he had been. If he couldn't give Rin what she desired most from him, then the best he could do was only become the best magus possible. Providing that wasn't possible, then he could at least master his Reality Marble and projection skills.

"Ugh, I'm thinking about stupid things again," Shirou murmured, walking out of the kitchen towards the front door.

Grabbing his keys from an end table along the way, Shirou walked out of the front door, and after locking it, starting walking down the street towards the main market area. He scratched the back of his head, ruffling his auburn hair. As he walked down the same street he and Rin always walked down, memory after memory from the years past kept popping up in his mind.

"I kind of wish we had a mission in Mexico or something. I could definitely go for some Mexican food," he said to himself, looking around at all the houses. "Or maybe even some of Kristoff's curry. Yeah, that sounds good right about now. I just ate though," he continued with a grimace, patting his belly.

Shirou sighed and lifted his eyes up look down the street, only to notice a large van on the curb near the empty house. Eyebrows raised, he watched as a single man attempted to move large pieces of furniture by himself.

"Hey, need some help?" he called out, jogging over towards the moving van.

The mover in question jumped slightly, and set the couch back down gently. Turning around, his pure, crystalline, cerulean-blue eyes caught Shirou by surprise. The other man peered down at him from the edge of the truck before jumping down. Waving his midnight-black bangs out of his eyes, the man made a large grin.

"Dude, that'd be great. This stuff is heavy as hell, and I'm too poor to hire people to help."

The man grabbed Shirou's hand, shaking it readily. "Name's Myrus! Nice to meet another mage
that doesn't look like a complete stiff."

Shirou, taken aback, made a grin of his own after only a bit of hesitation. "I'm Shirou. People around here aren't as bad as you think though."

"Hah, sure they are," Myrus said loftily, waving a hand back and forth. "With that ridiculous Association right here in town, there's no way they wouldn't be that bad."

"Uh, okay," Shirou replied, deciding that Myrus didn't seem like all that bad a person. "But, how did you know I was a magus anyway?"

Myrus laughed again, jumping back on the truck. "Bro, do you even know how much magic's roaring around you? You're like a giant beacon, making it so even a blind men would be able to see you. You should probably learn to keep that energy bottled up."

Shirou crossed his arms, smirking a bit. Rin had actually told him something quite similar, years before. She, however, had known why he didn't bother to hide himself – why hide when what he wanted was to be found? Admittedly, it seemed like he was turning into a mimicry of Archer more and more as time passed. His reasons were simple though: he needed to become stronger to protect the ideals he had always boasted of, but he was in no position to seek out evils of his own accord. Rather, he did not possess the ability to do so. However, he was not averse to the idea of broadcasting an invitation big enough to draw every evil towards him. If evil was willing to go far enough to seek him out, then he needed only to bring about its end. That was the outlook he had developed over the recent years – not a reluctance to hunt down those that would hurt others, but a passiveness that would simply force them to come to him, if only to clear their path.

"I'm just here to exterminate those who would cause me, or anyone else, harm," Shirou replied in a soft tone, his golden-brown eyes narrowing. "Are you one of those gnats I'm looking to squash?"

The other man squared his shoulders, hands clenching into fists.

"Them be fightin' words, pardna."

The two men faced each other, each one staring the other down. Seconds soon turned into minutes, and any bystanders who happened to pass by somehow instinctively knew not to pay the two any attention.

"So, can you grab that end of the couch for me?" Myrus said with a grin, pointing back into the truck, quickly dissolving the tension.

Shirou shrugged, smiling himself. "Yeah, I've got you."
Shirou picked up a piece of the banana bread, looking it over. He preferred cooking, and wasn't much of a pastry chef or baker. He could make simple things like gooey, chocolate chip cookies, but breads and pastries were far beyond him. In a way, that made eating the morsels all that much more delicious, though he did wish he could have made one or two different dishes for Rin and himself. Rin hadn't been able to make many desserts either, so if they had wanted something sweet, the two had been forced to visit a patisserie or bakery and buy them. That in itself was fine, but without a doubt, Shirou thought as he took a bite out of the slice, home-cooked food had to be the best over all else.

Myrus, however, was a baker by trade, second only to being a mage. It had nearly been a week since the two had met, but Shirou thought they got along fairly well. At the very least, he had never been bored.

"Hey, bro, I've got three new things for you to try," Myrus said, holding two plates as he walked out of his kitchen. "They're a couple of new experiments. I've added a little special something to all of them."

The red-head turned around, sighing slightly. One thing that struck him as odd about the other man was his need to foist all of his food experiments onto Shirou. He wasn't particularly against being a guinea pig, but once one invention was given to him, there was never a second of the same kind. Shirou wasn't even sure whether each test proved a success or not – every dish he had tried had tasted great to him.

Myrus set the two plates on the coffee table in front of him and placed his hands on his hips. "I guarantee that you'll love these. Oh crap," Myrus said with a frown, looking back towards the kitchen. "I forgot the drink. Hang on a sec."

"You made a drink, too?" Shirou asked, surprised.

"Nah, bought it at the store. I did add a little something to it, too, though."

Shirou made a small grin – Myrus was a bit clumsy at times, always forgetting one thing or another. His knowledge of magic was definitely high-class, though. While Shirou had never actually seen Myrus perform any techniques, there was no way he could've missed the rows and rows of books about magic all across the house. He'd also had the luxury to visit Myrus' workshop, which was a bit odd as well. Most magus' would never allow another magus to see their workshop – it was their private place, where no one else could enter. It contained all of their secrets and mysteries, and knowledge of these secrecyes could bring about their downfall. Myrus didn't really seem to care though, but then again, he didn't seem to care all that much about anything. He was just a down-to-earth, cool, easygoing guy.

Just about to reach for a fork to dig into the two desserts, Shirou jumped when he felt his cell phone start vibrating. Taking it out of his back pocket, he looked at the display to see who was calling.

"Gah," he muttered with a grimace. "It's Rin..."

Shirou stood up, heading towards the front door. Waving back at Myrus as he pressed the "accept" button, he called out, "Hey, I've got to take this call. I'll be outside for a bit."
"Then I'm going to rummage me up some grub," Myrus replied in kind. "Take your time, daddy-o."

The second Shirou stepped outside, he hurriedly put the phone to his ear, wincing when Rin started yelling at him.

"You idiot, where the hell have you been? I know you aren't working or anything, since you would never try to cause me any trouble while I'm gone, right?"

"Uh, yeah," Shirou murmured, eyes askance. "Never..."

"But seriously, where have you been? I tried calling the house phone, and whenever I called your cell, it always sent me directly to voicemail..."

She sounded concerned, and Shirou felt a bit of guilt creep up. "I've just been out strolling, seeing the sights...making friends..."

"Friends?"

"Yeah, there's this guy that just moved into the same house that one guy used to live in. You know, the guy who was 'disposed' of? He's a mage, too, and he's really strong. You wouldn't believe the number of books this guy has. Oh, and his name is Myrus. He was born and raised here, but he's been hopping off all around the world, learning new stuff. And can you believe that he likes to cook, too? It's like we were destined to be friends."

"Oh..." came Rin's voice through the phone. She sounded somewhat relieved and skeptical at the same time.

"Well, I'm glad you're safe, but, I don't know, Shirou. Something about all of that doesn't seem, well, normal, you know? I mean, what are the chances that a new mage would move in, become your friend just like that, and happen to have the same interests as you? Something about that just isn't settling right for me."

"Oh, come on, Rin," Shirou argued. "I hardly have any friends here, and now that I've made one, you think he's just someone who's somehow targeted me for some inane reason?"

"Look, if he's a good guy, and you really think you can trust him, that's fine, Shirou," she responded, still sounding troubled. "But, this wouldn't be the first time you've been tricked by another mage. I mean, you make it hard to not trick you, what with how naïve you are."

He grunted slightly, grudgingly acknowledging her worry. He had been tricked a number of times over the years, and each time, Rin had needed to bail him out of trouble. Shirou just honestly didn't want to believe people would think to hurt before helping others. In his mind, people were inherently good – it's just that circumstances would work against them and turn them towards a darker path. He would prefer to blindly trust and believe in others instead of doubting them from the start and potentially missing out on wonderful relationships. He was still an idealist, after all.

"Yeah, and you always had to give me a hand," Shirou sighed, rubbing the back of his neck as a nervous gesture. "Guess I'm on my own this time around."

"Don't say something so discouraging! I can't deal with that from five thousand miles away, Shirou."

"When are you coming back?"

Shirou head a slight pause, before Rin said resignedly, "Well, that's why I called in the first place.
Something...unplanned took place, and my time here has been extended a bit longer.

"How long's a bit longer?"

"Just a few days... Maybe even up to a week. Or, hell, maybe if I can come up with something, I'll be on a flight home tomorrow. I have no idea of what's going on though, Shirou. Well, I mean, I do, but I'm not sure how to go about dealing with it."

"Huh," was the only response Shirou could come up with. Well, Rin didn't seem all that concerned, which meant it was something she was more than able to deal with – it was just a pain for her to do so.

"Yeah, so, seriously, be careful, okay?" she warned him again. "Trusting others is, well, honestly, I think it's ridiculously stupid, but noble, in a way, I guess? Make sure to check whatever food he gives you for poison and try not to, I don't know, fall asleep at his place. Although, I suppose there wouldn't be a need to, considering how close you are to home."

It was at that exact moment that Shirou knew better than to say he had already spent the night at Myrus' a couple of times. He had also completely forgotten to check all the food items for poison, but...since nothing had happened yet, he was sure that Myrus meant no harm. Sure, it had only been about a week since they had met, but, Myrus had had more than enough opportunities to kill him, if necessary, or make him into a familiar or a puppet or something. Yeah, Myrus was just a good guy, through and through. That was the stance Shirou was determined to take until the other man proved otherwise.

"Okay, okay, I'll be careful."

"Who knows? He might be some kind of sex deviant interested in harvesting your nether parts for some kind of séance of sorts."

Shirou coughed, Rin's comment having taken him by surprise. After hitting his chest a few times, he cleared his throat and breathed out slowly.

"Geez, Rin, what the hell?"

"I'm just saying that you'd never know that by just looking at him, right? Just saying."

"Man, I think I'm going to throw up. I'm hanging up!"

"All right, fine," laughed Rin, obviously amused. "I'll get in touch with you later, when I'm sure about when I'll be home."

Shirou felt like he couldn't press the "end call" button fast enough. How the heck was he supposed to look at Myrus now, after being told he "might" be a sexual deviant out to get him. Wait, no, no, Myrus would never do something that horrid. Taking in a deep breath, Shirou groaned as he turned back towards Myrus' house. Now Rin had him feeling jumpy and wary.

"Freaking demon," he muttered, opening the door and stomping into the house.

Myrus stared at him from the couch, blue eyes opened wide. "Whoa, dude, something bite you in the butt or something? Or, what, get some bad news, maybe?"

Shirou plopped onto the couch and rested his head on the back of it. "You have no idea. Hey," he said, turning to Myrus, "are you an evil person out to kill me and use my nether parts for some kind of evil, sick séance or experiment, or something?"
Myrus stared at him for a few seconds, mouth agape. "Wait, how'd you know? Yeah, I'm a wizard here to force you to do my bidding, and disguise different potions and spells as various desserts and treats. What else would I be?"

Then Myrus burst out laughing at Shirou's deer-in-the-headlights expression. "I wouldn't say I'm evil, though."

Shirou sighed. "Yeah, I knew that sounded stupid as soon as I said it."

"Eh, well, you tried though, man," Myrus said with a smile, patting Shirou's back as the latter sat forward. "We can't all get the answer right all the time."

"I guess."

"Now, eat up! These luscious dishes have just been waiting to be devoured!"

Shirou felt his stomach rumble slightly at the mention of food. Staring down at the two different plates, he licked his lips – they looked amazingly delicious.

"Myrus, you've outdone yourself this time! These look even better than everything else you've made! So, what am I looking at here?"

Myrus pointed first towards the darker cake, grinning. "A Black Forest cake, complete with strawberry butter icing, and a touch of mulberry on the top. 'But Myrus, that combination sounds odd and horrible!' No, my dear, you have yet to understand and appreciate the true virtue of chocolate! Not only is it versatile, but it makes everything else something only dreams could possibly be made of!"

"Whoa," Shirou breathed out, reaching for the fork on the table.

"But the brilliance does not stop there!" exclaimed the other man. "For behold and feast your eyes upon my next masterpiece. Hailing all the way from the land of Latin America, see the brilliance that is the Tres Leches cake! A wonderful morsel that winds together three different kinds of milks and turns them into an amazing piece!"

Shirou was nodding along, already digging into the chocolate cake. "Mm, mm!"

"And lastly, some goat milk, with a little special something. Bon appétit!"

"Man, this stuff is so good!" Shirou managed out, already having finished the Black Forest cake and moved onto the sponge cake. "Whoa, this tastes good, too!"

Taking a swig of the milk, he looked down at the bottle, tilted his head slightly, and downed the rest of it quickly. Turning back to the Tres Leches cake, he inhaled the last two bites, set the plate down, and patted his stomach as he lay back against the couch cushions.

"Holy crap, I'm totally full," he said with a satisfied smile on his face. "No evil mage could make something that amazing over and over again."

"Glad you enjoyed it!" Myrus said, his chest puffed out with pride. "I've been working on those two dishes for a long time now!"

"You were raised in England right? How do you know so much about other cultures' foods?"

Myrus smiled, rotating his index finger around as he said, "I've been all over the world. Cape Cod,
Los Angeles, Timbuktu, Perth, St. Petersburg, Haiti, Rio de Janeiro, all over. I like Britain, but there's no way I could stay here forever. Coming back every once in a while isn't too bad, though.

"You look like you're my age, though. Where'd you come up with that kind of cash?"

"Well, my family's rich, for one," Myrus replied. "I'm poor, but they're rich, and believe in a wholesome education, which means going around the world and exploring all there is to offer. And two, I'm way older than you, kiddo. Like, by at least ten years."

Shirou gaped at him. "No way! I thought you were maybe twenty-five, or twenty-six! Whoa."

"Then I can only thank my genetics for that. I'm seriously getting up there in my years. I need to settle down and have some kids or something, maybe."

"You have a girl in mind?"

"I used to," Myrus murmured wistfully. "She was a beauty, always eager to know more and more. But then one day, something just clicked for me, and I realized I was getting into a pretty abusive relationship. Nearly cost me my life."

Shirou frowned, and leaned forward to as he thought over Myrus' words. "Do you mean she tried to kill you?"

"Yeah. She tried."

"How'd you get away?"

"Just shifted gears a bit. Escaped and journeyed to someplace new, someplace far. A place where she would never be able to reach me. I go back every now and then, but, she's either since forgotten about me, or doesn't think I'm worth her time anymore."

"Did you love her?"

"Yeah. Still do."

The auburn-haired man's eyebrows knitted slightly. He wasn't sure he would be able to leave a relationship like that, even if his life were on the line. It was difficult to consider, but knowing himself, he would be more likely to stick with the person and see if he could persuade her otherwise instead of running away. Running away was the smarter decision, but Shirou honestly felt that anything or anyone worth loving was something or someone worth sticking close to, no matter what. Saber... The night he summoned Saber changed his life completely – some might think it for the better, others, for worse. Because of her being summoned, he had gone through hell and back, experienced things he would never again wish to repeat, loved and hated, hurt and healed, gained and lost. Had his luck been any worse, or had he not made the decisions he had, he possibly could have even died by Saber's hands... If he hadn't decided to fight and stick with her the entire way, what would she have done to him in return? Would she have killed him?

Shaking his head, he quickly quelled that thought. No, this was Saber he was talking about. First of all, even if he had decided to stop fighting, her chivalric code would have never allowed her to kill an innocent. Aside of that, she was simply too good-hearted to do anything like that. She killed out of necessity, not desire. No, despite all of the, to put it plainly, shit, that he had to go through with her, he could never imagine having left her side, even if it had been guaranteed to cause him his own death.

Shirou closed his eyes, lips pressed firmly into a line. Myrus watched him carefully.
"I take it you disagree with my decision? That I should have stayed with her no matter what?"

"I don't disagree," Shirou said, denying the observation. "I think that was probably the healthiest choice possible. I'm just not sure I would've been able to do that myself."

"Well, it was pretty hard," Myrus said, jokingly. "That girl was like cocaine. Intoxicating, and yet such a horrible thing for me to be addicted to."

Shirou couldn't come up with anything to say in turn, but jumped slightly when Myrus clapped his hands together and then snapped.

"But enough of this crazy, mushy, really, really depressing crap. What about you, buddy? You got a girl? Harboring a forbidden love?"

"You could say that," Shirou said, laughing. "Yeah, I have a girl who I'm still head over heels for."

"Sweet, I smell a story. Spill, bro!"

"Well, there's not much to say, I guess," the younger man started saying, looking down at his hands. "The day I first laid eyes on her, I was hooked. She was strong, courageous, independent, idealistic, and righteous... Everything she did, and I mean absolutely everything, was for the sake of those she loved. Never did she do anything for herself. It was more like, she never considered herself as anything other than a catalyst to cultivate good in others. She was an avatar, not a person. She loved, but was never loved back. She fought for others' sakes, but was betrayed as a direct result of living for her ideals, instead of living for her humanity. I guess you could say she was pure."

"Hmm," Myrus muttered, eyes downcast. "You keep using past tense, though. Did she...?"

"Yeah, she died," Shirou said, looking up towards the ceiling. "It's funny, though. I was only with her for two weeks, but I feel like we were together for years. What I wouldn't give to see her again."

He yawned, then, covering his mouth with a hand. "Crap, eating all of that food made me tired."

Myrus laughed, patting Shirou on the back. "Nah, all this depressing talk just really got you down, I bet. Hey, why not just take a quick nap on the couch here? I'll wake you in a couple of hours, before it gets too late."

"You sure? I mean, I don't want to keep you for too long."

"Nah, you're good, man, you're good."

Myrus stood up and stacked up the dirty plates and glass. "I'm going to go study for a bit. Don't worry, bro. Just sleep up."

"Yeah, thanks," Shirou said, yawning again.

He shifted around, lying along the length of the couch, hands behind his head as he looked up at the ceiling. Saber...

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He grudgingly slowly woke up as someone started nudging his shoulder.

"Come on, bro. Wakey wakey."
Shirou opened his bleary eyes bit by bit, them slowly adjusting to darkness around him, and the soft, gentle blue light. He closed his eyes tightly and blinked them open a few more times, his drowsiness making him want to go back into the realm of sleep. Shaking his head back and forth a couple of times, Shirou groaned a bit.

"Ugh, what time is it? I feel like I only fell asleep for a few minutes."

"It's been more than a few minutes, mate. More like a few hours."

"What?" Shirou exclaimed, quickly waking up. "It's already that late?"

He attempted to sit up before realizing he couldn't move a single part of his body aside of his head. Confused, Shirou turned his head around in every direction he could manage, first looking over at both of his arms. He tightened his muscles, felt his hand clench tightly into a fist, and watched as his coiled muscles trembled slightly as he tried to move them. While he couldn't look down at his lower body, he assumed it was more or less in the same state.

"What's going on?" he muttered, bewildered. He looked up and tried to see over to where his friend was. "Hey, Myrus, I can't move. I mean, I'm not paralyzed or anything, but it's like there's something pressing my body down and..."

He stopped talking when he saw Myrus' shoulders slump in, was that disappointment? Shirou's breath caught in his throat when the raven-haired man turned to look at him, peering down as if he were a bug meant to be squashed. Gone was the carefree countenance, replaced by an air of superiority and ice-cold blue eyes. Shirou watched silently, heart rate starting to slowly increase as he saw Myrus walk towards him and lean down on one knee beside him.

"Myrus, what's –"

"I'm simply astonished," were the first words out of Myrus' mouth, as he patted Shirou's cheek. "Your friend even warned you not to freely walk into traps without taking the proper steps to ensure your safety, and yet you still, like an absolute fool, blindly trusted me. Trusted me, a man you have hardly known even a week."

Shirou felt a tub of ice water had been dumped into his veins, and gritted his teeth as he glared up at Myrus. "So, you were just targeting me. Are you planning to kill me?"

"Heavens no, boy," Myrus said with a frown. "True, I needed not have worked as hard as I did to lure you in, considering how absolutely naïve you are, but I have no intention to kill you. That would do nothing but have put my effort to waste."

Shirou closed his eyes and turned his head away. Not only had Myrus' tone changed, but his way of speaking had changed as well, as if he was a different person altogether. No, he hadn't changed, Shirou realized, concentrating inwardly on his magic circuit. He had just taken on a persona that would be most likely to make Shirou drop his guard quickest. He clenched his right fist tightly – the magic holding him down was insanely complicated, and he would need a lot more time to dispel it., which meant he had to keep Myrus' occupied enough to do so.

A muscle in Shirou's job jumped as he ground his teeth together. "So, what are you going to do to me?"

"I would much like to kill you," Myrus said, and Shirou had to give him kudos for being so honest.

"However," the older man continued, "I am obligated to fulfill my promise."
"Promise?"

"You see, that girl you spoke of... I am quite well aware of who she is," Myrus stated as he fiddled with something on his work desk. He heard Shirou grunt slightly and frowned deeper. "It only serves to perplex me on how she could manage to fall in love with a simpleton such as yourself. Alas, it is not my place to second-guess the king's emotions – they are hers, after all."

He knew Saber? Shirou narrowed his closed eyes, feeling magic start feeding out to every part of his body. If Myrus knew Saber, then maybe he had been around during the fifth Holy Grail War, or maybe even during the fourth. No, if it had been the fourth, then Saber and he wouldn't have met yet. Maybe he was related to one of the Masters from the war? That couldn't be either – the couple hadn't exactly broadcasted their relationship for the entire world to know. Could he be related to Kotomine?

"A fool granted the luck of God, and the skill of a troll. Yes, how you managed to secure her heart, that is something of which I will never understand."

"So, if you're not going to kill me, then what are you going to do?" Shirou asked for a second time, grunting as the magic seemed to burn all of his nerves.

"It's simple, my dear lad," Myrus replied, turning around to smile cruelly. "I will have you pay for the crime you have committed upon her."

Shirou opened his eyes and looked over at the man. "If you're talking about how we had sex, I don't think that's –"

"Good Lord, lad, are you daft?" Myrus barked. "If she chose to open herself to you, then you should only be grateful that she believed you worthy of doing so. No, boy, I mean the crime you committed when you forced her to destroy the Holy Grail."

"I didn't force her," muttered Shirou. "She told me to tell her to do that..."

"You used a Command Spell, did you not? You fool, no Servant could destroy their birthplace of their own volition! It is as obvious as the unspoken rule that one would not cause harm to his or her parents!"

Inwardly, Shirou wondered how Myrus seemed to know so much about the Holy Grail War, but then again, everyone else seemed to always know everything about it, except for him. How though, did Myrus know about him ordering Saber to destroy it? And, while he was thinking about it, how was that a crime? He closed his eyes, breathing in as he noticed his body was ready.

Shirou sent the magic flying out of his hands as he yelled, "Fury of Earth, Unbind!"

The barrier holding him down temporarily dissipated, and Shirou pulled up his legs and kicked up off of the ground, swirling around and flipping backwards. Quickly projecting six daggers, and holding them between his fingers, Shirou swiftly threw them at Myrus, and then jumped backwards again.

Myrus hardly glanced at the knives as a magical barrier materialized in front of him, sending the daggers flying in every which direction. Lifting up a hand, Myrus said,

"Depths of Night: Wrap and Bind."

Shirou had already projected his two favorite swords, Kanshou and Bakuya, and was quickly charging in towards Myrus. He came to an abrupt stop and flipped backwards again as tendrils of
darkness reached out for him from around him. Releasing his projection magic, Shirou spun, swirled, flipped, and dodged around to avoid each tendril, acting as if they were an extension of Angra Mainyu himself.

He quickly whispered, "I am the bone of my sword..."

Myrus narrowed his eyes as Shirou continued chanting quickly, each word flowing into the next making a mixture of letters. Shirou slid forward on his stomach underneath a couple of tendrils before using his upper body to lift up his legs and push up off the ground into the air. He spun backwards again, before hopping up off his right leg and spinning his entire body in the air to escape more tendrils.

"Steel is my body and fire is my blood," Shirou muttered quickly, one word barely out of his mouth before he said the next. "I have created over a thousand blades. Unaware of loss, nor aware of gain. Withstood pain to create weapons, waiting for one's arrival. I have no regrets —"

Shirou quickly shifted his head left, even while his body was gravitating right to avoid a tendril shaped as a black dagger. "This is the only path!"

He quickly replicated ten daggers above his head, and sent them flying to entrap the darkness directly beside him. "My whole life was..."

Myrus held up both of his hands, palms facing towards him, and spread his arms out, glowing white magic trailing thereafter. The mage clenched his hands into fists and then thrust both fists in front of him, opening each hand wide as the white magic began to disperse. Shirou jumped up high into the air, once again projecting Kanshou and Bakuya and the moment he met the barrier of white magic, just as it started to wrap and tighten around him, roared out,

"UNLIMITED BLADE WORKS!"

Within nanoseconds, the reality of Myrus' lab was soon replaced with a barren field, weapons of all different shapes and sizes scattered in every which direction for miles. Large cogged gears slowly turned above the two men in the distance and Shirou immediately called forth two unnamed swords, holding one in each hand as he leveled his gaze at Myrus.

Myrus glanced around himself a bit, raising an eyebrow while doing so. "I see. This is your Reality Marble, then, Shirou. How fortunate that I had the chance to see it."

"Enough talking." Shirou replied calmly, voice deeper than usual. "I didn't train all of these years just to be beaten by someone like you."

"Someone like me? Dear boy, have you any idea of who I am?"

"No, and I don't care," responded Shirou. "I just know you're in my way."

Myrus barely saw Shirou's hair shift slightly before the auburn-haired man raced towards him like a flash of red light. His golden-brown eyes were like that of a tiger, focused on his prey as he neared ever closer to it. Myrus barely managed a step back before Shirou appeared in front of him, slashing both swords at every vulnerable point he could reach. Myrus shook off each strike with his white magic, eyes darting back and forth before he jumped back out of Shirou's range.

"You're far too optimistic," Shirou warned, the swords vanishing and a bow appearing in his hand. "My eyes will track you down no matter where you go."

In a flash, he let loose three swords, each one filled to the brim with his magic as they bore down
on the escaping mage. Myrus whirled around, hand high in the air as he created a fool-proof barrier, successfully keeping himself safe. As soon as his first barrier dissolved, he had to erect another far stronger one as this time, ten swords came crashing down around him. His blue eyes narrowed slightly as the smoke cleared and he saw ten, twenty, fifty-two, seventy-five...no, one hundred swords float up into the air over Shirou.

"Escape this if you can!" yelled Shirou, pushing his body to the max as each weapon turned towards Myrus and darted straight towards the raven-haired man.

"Even I wouldn't survive that mess," muttered Myrus, as magic started to form around him. "It's been fun, but I'm ending this charade of yours, boy."

Shirou saw the burst of magic before he felt it, seeing the large ball of magic tower above him and his many swords before the magic swept down like a large wave of water, slamming into him and nearly drowning him in its depths. He felt, more than saw, his Reality Marble start crumbling down from the excess magic of his enemy, and felt his body start to be constricted by an outside source. The Reality Marble vanished entirely as Shirou fell to the ground in the middle of an engraved circle. He struggled, trying to loosen the bonds around him, but this was magic he had never encountered before. It felt almost corporeal, but was completely out of his league in terms of ability.

He forced his head up to stare at the man standing over him. After watching him a bit, Myrus took a step back and snapped his fingers, and within moments, the circle began to glow and a circular barrier shot up to the ceiling, encasing Shirou. As soon as the barrier materialized, Shirou's restraints disappeared, and the man shot up from the ground. His heart raced as he looked around him, knowing he could never take down whatever that barrier thing was.

"Good show, boy, good show," Myrus said, grudgingly acknowledging Shirou's fighting prowess. "The way she spoke of you before dying made it seem as if you, while a good lad, were somewhat useless without someone else around."

"Damn it, who is this 'she' you keep talking about?" yelled Shirou, irritated that he couldn't figure out a way to escape his current circumstances.

"None other than the one you knew as Saber – Arturia Pendragon, better known as King Arthur."

As soon as he heard that name, Shirou train of thought came to an abrupt halt, and he glared up at Myrus. "Don't you dare," he growled out, clenching his hands into fists, "talk about her in front of me!"

He raced forward and slammed his body into the barrier, and bounced back from it, rolling across the ground. Breathing hard, he shifted onto all fours, head bowed as he cursed himself for being so weak. Shirou slammed a fist against the concrete floor as hard as he could to satisfy his anger, indenting it slightly. Myrus continued staring at him, arms crossed over his chest.

"Are you finished?"

"Shut up!" Shirou snarled. "When I get out of here..."

"Rejoice child," Myrus said, and Shirou raised his head, glaring at the other man. "for I no longer have any desire to kill you. Rather, you have intrigued me. You might actually be able to hold your own at this rate."

"Why don't you start making some sense?"
"You recall that I said you must pay for the crime you have committed? Due to your actions, Arturia has been reduced to living what she could only describe as Hell. A Hell she would never have wished for in a million years. She died a death full of suffering."

Shirou stood up, brows furrowed as he tried to comprehend what the other magus was saying. "You're saying that I made her suffer?"

"Quite so. You may not realize it, but while Arturia did indeed destroy the grail, that only served to spite the baby whose birth she denied. Angra Mainyu was quite angry because of your actions, but despite you being the one who ordered her to do so, she was punished in turn. When she returned to that bloody hill complete with the dead bodies of her soldiers and that of her son, or shall I say, daughter, Mordred, she did not die."

"What?" Shirou asked, his voice full of disbelief. "She didn't die?"

"No, boy, she most certainly did not. She survived. Imagine the hell she lived, being bound as she was, and you dare say that none of that has anything to do with you?"

Myrus kept staring at him, hoping his point had been driven home well enough. "Well, lad, do you still think you owe her nothing?"

"...No, I mean, if that's true, then how would you...?"

Shirou paused, a fleeting thought crossing his mind. As soon as he considered it, his shoulders slumped slightly. "I see, now I know who you are. No one from that time period who knew her could be here right now, except for one person. Geez, I never thought that could be possible," Shirou muttered, combing his fingers through his hair.

"The ancient wizard, Merlin," Shirou continued, his hand dropping to his side. "I see, 'Myrus' comes from the names "Myrddin" and "Merlinus". The girl you talked about earlier today must refer to Vivian, the Lady of the Lake. You should have died in that tomb, though. How are you still alive?"

"I told you I ran away, didn't I? I'll leave it up to you to guess how."

"Hmph," Shirou grunted, crossing his arms over his chest again. "I get it now. So after Saber died, you must have traveled to this time period and sought me out. Hate to tell you this, but it's been seven years since she vanished."

"Time traveling is an art, son," Myrus rebuked, shrugging. "You can't expect even me to be able to zero in on the exact time and date."

"Whatever. I kind of get what's going on now," Shirou said, cocking his hip. "So, you want to me to go back into the past to prevent her downfall from taking place."

"Fool, you've already angered one hailed as a god, and now you intend to test Fate as well?"

"I'm already on a roll," Shirou replied with a smirk. "In for a penny, in for a pound, as the saying goes."

"Then you consent to this journey?"

"Hah, like I had a choice from the start. Might as well give it my all."

Myrus looked at him carefully. "You may never return to this time, boy."
Shirou seemed slightly conflicted – he hadn't wanted to cause Rin any problems, but it seemed like he wouldn't be able to keep that promise. Even if he did go to the past though, what could he possibly do? Saber, no, Arturia didn't know who the heck he was, he wasn't a knight, he wasn't all that much of a mage or a fighter, either, and he knew he couldn't just walk straight up into the castle proclaiming, "Hey, I'm here to save the king!"

He would be kicked out, or maybe even executed on account of stupidity. Shirou gave Myrus a quick glance before looking away. No, he couldn't count on the Merlin in the past to help him, because that Merlin didn't know about the problem or who he was yet. This Merlin had already known of the king's fall, and apparently what she had gone through as a Servant. Wait, so how long had she lived before finally dying after returning to her own time? How long had she suffered?

Shirou clapped a hand over his face, a gesture he had learned from Rin. He had thought that everything would return to normal for the both of them – she would die without regret and he would continue living, strengthening himself to become a man she would find worthy of her. Sighing, he shook his head. All right, he was ready.

He squared his shoulders, facing Myrus head on. "That's fine. Even if I die in her time, I won't allow myself to regret a single thing. If I'm going to die, I'd rather do it by her side."

Myrus raised an eyebrow, snorting slightly. "You only make me desire to antagonize you further boy, but good. Had you been opposed to journeying back, the dimensional travel would have caused you much pain along the way."

Shirou raised his eyebrows, about to comment on what Myrus had said when the other man threw a tote bag through the barrier and straight into him. He caught it with a small grunt, and held the fading leather bag in his hands. It was heavy, full of who knew what. Then he narrowed his eyes at the barrier – it was prepared as a one-way portal, where anything could go inside, but nothing would ever get back out. Well, there was no point in trying to escape now, though.

"Those are supplies, and some clothing. If you arrive there looking like you do now, you'll be the laughingstock of the entire country. Hurry and change while I make the final preparations."

Shirou grunted again, bending down as he set the bag on the ground. Fiddling with the buckle, he pulled the top lid off and looked inside. There was a bag of something that smelled pretty good, some medical supplies – he didn't think ibuprofen actually existed back then, but whatever – and some clothes, as promised. Shirou pulled out the heavy white, long-sleeved tunic, with red trimming along the base of the shirt and the collar. It was of a simple make, with light blue dyed into sleeves. He wasn't sure about the fabric – cotton? – but it was slightly scratchy and stiff; it wasn't like anything a person could find in the modern world, obviously.

Turning to look back into the bag, he found a pair of black breeches, and a set of long stockings and boots. He looked from one article to another and then back at Myrus, whose back was turned. Slightly disgruntled that he had to wear clothes like these, – they seemed new, too – he sighed, and started peeling off his sweatshirt. He had just pulled off his jeans when Myrus said,

"Take off the boxers, too. Those don't exist yet."

Shirou stared at him, slightly mortified. "There's no way in hell I'm going to take these off. No one's going to see them anyway!"

"Huh, suit yourself."

Shirou grabbed the tunic and pulled it over his head, slipping his arms into the sleeves. Yeah, it
was incredibly scratchy, but he'd probably get used to it sooner or later. The breeches came next, and he pulled them up to find that they were a bit snug, but manageable. He pulled the drawstring at the waist to make sure they wouldn't be falling down anytime soon, and then pulled on his white stockings. Tightening the buckles of the breeches just below his knees, Shirou then slipped on the leather boots, and after he was completely done, he realized something:

"This outfit has to be the most uncomfortable thing I have ever had on."

"I told you to get rid of the boxers."

"It has nothing to do with my boxers, damn it!"

Shirou scratched his chest a bit, before reaching behind to scratch his butt. "I could sure use some fabric softener right about now..."

"Stop your complaining," Myrus ordered, turning back to face Shirou again. "I've finished all the necessities, and the only thing left is to send you back."

"So what," Shirou started, spreading his arms out wide, "do I have to say some crazy incantation or oath or whatever to get this ball rolling?"

"Of course not. I just say a word and off you go."

"Well, that's anti-climactic," Shirou said, pouting slightly. "I was expecting a bunch of lights, crazy incantations, balls of fire, the works. At least give me the satisfaction of something to brag about to my friend, if I ever happen to make it back."

Then a certain question came to him after he had finished complaining: "Wait, back then, the Britons were fighting against the Saxons, right? They didn't speak English, and obviously not Japanese, so how do I go about communicating with them? I'm not really all that great at languages."

Myrus sighed, turning back to him. "Have you really not noticed that you have been speaking to me in Brythonic this entire time?"

Shirou stared at him, stunned. "What? What are you talking about? Aren't we speaking English?"

"Fool, your English ability isn't enough to sustain a conversation of this level. I have prepared you suitably, so you need not concern yourself with the details. You have the same spoken ability as a plebeian. I should only hope you have enough sense to speak more properly when you come in contact with the court."

"B-but, I just spoke with Rin and she –"

"The brain is a miraculous thing," Myrus replied, rolling his eyes. "To think one could automatically switch between languages without some sort of problem cropping up."

Shirou scowled at him. He knew it was odd that he could state all of his feelings clearly and without messing up, but it never occurred to him that Myrus had basically been drugging him from the very start. He must have inserted small doses into every food Shirou had tried, culminating in a self-sufficient ability to speak a different language flawlessly. Shirou had had no idea whatsoever, and that scared him a bit. Had Myrus had less than noble intentions originally, Shirou realized he might not have made it to the second day of their "friendship".

"Damn it," he muttered, bending down to stuff in his clothes into the pack and then close the lid. "I
was completely duped."

Shirou stood back up, hefting the bag up and slipping his arms through the straps. Myrus turned back around and then started to circle the barrier, pouring out a liquid along the way. Shirou followed him with his eyes, until Myrus had made a full circuit.

"What's that stuff?"

"A precaution, to ensure the backlash from opening a time-dimensional portal will not bleed out any further than this."

Myrus clapped his hands together when he finished and then turned to look at the man stuck within the barrier. "Now, I will release the energy necessary to open the portal, and do not worry, I do this all the time."

"Right..." came the dry reply.

"A final word of caution, boy," Myrus continued seriously, a hand on his hip. "Do not so readily release your Reality Marble, or project anything, at all. I doubt it need be said, but take great pains not to project something which has not been invented by that point in time. If others see technology beyond their scope of understanding, you may encounter more problems than you are ready to undertake. In addition, if you are actually capable of it, do be a little more assertive in establishing your safety. Not everyone in King Arthur's time will be nearly as kind as I was to you. They will kill you, without hesitation."

"Can we just get this over with?" asked Shirou, looking bored as he watched the liquid Myrus had poured bubble up slightly. "I'd like to get there before, you know, I start growing grey hairs."

"Petulant to the end, aren't you?" Myrus said, grinning. "Release."

Shirou felt his body abruptly shift down quickly, taken him by surprise.

"What?" he said, bewildered, as his body began to sink into the ground. "Oh, hey, this isn't that ba--"

Then, almost as abruptly as he had sunken, Shirou felt his body blasted up through the rotating crest above him. Myrus grinned evilly as he heard a telling scream as the other man went through the portal.

"AAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Shirou yelled, his body twisting and turning as he was forced through a narrow passage within absolute, pitch-black darkness.

His body would jerk one way before he would best catapulting in the entirely opposite direction. Shirou felt his torso spiral forward as if he were top-heavy before he was pushed back around in a nearly never-ending flip. He spun so much he felt like his brain was turning into gravy and he was only alive by sheer will.

"That assho-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-ole!" he screamed as his body flipped back upright and shot straight into a tunnel of white.

His body shot to the right suddenly, making him groan. "Oh God, let me off of this damn roller coaster..."

Then, almost as if he'd never gone through that traumatic experience, his body slowed down
incredibly, and he drifted now through a tunnel of flashing, glowing lights. The light swirled all around him, but all Shirou could do was hope that none of his vomit had somehow managed to stick to him. He knew he had to be about as green as he felt, though the swirling lights around him did make the experience somewhat better.

"Man, he really is an asshole. He could've told me that there really were going to be flashing li--"

And, just as he was about to finish his complaint, his body was hurled forward at a speed unrivaled, and he found himself so out of breath that he couldn't even let out a single scream. The last thing he remembered seeing was something full of green before he shot out of the tunnel and slammed into something incredibly hard.

Shirou stared at the ground where he lay, unmoving, nor desiring to even move. His breath was raspy from screaming so much, and his hands were trembling from the fear he had experienced. His lips quivered slightly, and he had to blink his eyes a few times to make sure that he wasn't blind. He turned his head back and forth, his body shuddering as he tried to push himself up from the grassy land. Shirou grunted, forcing his body to move as he desired. He looked to his right, and barely saw the dimensional portal crest close up as if it had never existed, and the trail his body had made as it slid across the ground. There was no longer any grass left, just a shallow ditch of dirt and rocks.

Sitting back, his legs folded beneath him, he breathed in and out readily, still shaken from the event. Myrus had said it would have hurt far more had he opposed the travel – the trip had nearly killed him this time around. What would have happened if he'd been stubborn to the end then? Looking down at his hands, he cradled one inside of the other, frowning as he tried to control his trembling. Shirou took in a deep breath before chomping down on his right hand. The pain immediately flooded his system and he felt his fear fade away.

"Guh," he muttered, leaning forward on his arms. "That was Hell. There is no way in hell I'm ever doing that shit ever again."

Sighing, he shifted back again before finally pushing himself up off of the ground. After dusting himself off as much as he could manage, Shirou hefted his pack up on his shoulders, and tied the buckles on the straps more tightly.

"All right. I'm here. Now, let's take a look ar--"

As soon as he had looked up, he felt his eyes widen incredibly when he'd taken a glimpse of the scenery around him. Green was, again, the first thing to pop in his mind as his gaze looked over the rolling fields of grassy plains and hills. A gentle breeze blew ran across the hills, flowing across the grass, large, strong, oak trees, and ruffling through their plentiful leaves. Shirou gaped as he stared down at one of the lakes below him, unsullied, pure, clean, and devoid of the pollution and crap the modern world had put their waters. He bent down to look better at the fish jumping through the air and gliding slightly before plopping back into the pristine waters from where he sat on an overreaching cliff. He looked up into the sky next, seeing the fluffy, white clouds flowing across a crystal-clear blue sky. His short hair flowed back and forth as the wind flowed over it, and he looked down at the ground under his feet, unable to comprehend that he really was in a time entirely different from what he was used to.

Shirou gripped his tote bag straps more tightly as he turned and proceeded to slowly walk down the hill towards the lake he had seen. Approaching it cautiously, he peered across its waters at the few families of ducks quacking from the lake's surface. Every now and then, birds here and there would duck down and grab a flying fish before hastily retreating back into the air with their meal. Shirou kneeled down to the water's edge, cupping his hand and scooping up some water to drink.
Swallowing it down, he laughed and fell backwards onto the grass. It was absolutely delicious!

Something clicked in his mind though, and he quickly sat up when he realized what he was doing, or rather, wasn't doing. Shirou jumped to his feet, running his fingers through his hair.

"Ugh, what am I doing? I can appreciate the nature later," he said to himself, letting out a deep sigh. "I've got to find my way to Camelot and get myself situated. Now then, where to go...?"

He looked at the plains to his left leading to nothingness, and then to the right, at plains leading to nothingness. Shirou didn't have a clue of where he was, but he couldn't see even a single town or village anywhere close by. He kept looking in both directions as well as in front of him and behind him. His left eyebrow raised as he realized his situation was not the best one. He was alive, so that was great, but...he was also incredibly confused. Shirou had no clue of where he supposed to go.

Stretching his arms up to the sky, he yawned. "Let's just go right. Right's always got to be right, and that's why the word's called 'right'."

Letting out another sigh, Shirou turned away from the lake and started to make his way across the green stretch towards...wherever he was going.

By the time he had finally managed to find a dirt path, his patience had already started running out. It had taken him the better part of two full hours – he thought – to run into that stupid dirt path, and even then, it didn't exactly tell him which direction to go. He stomped on the dirt, letting out his irritation.

"Stupid Myrus! At least give me a map!"

He yelled out to release his frustration before falling down on his butt and glaring down at the rocks on the road. Patting his thighs with his hands, he thought of what to do next. "I'm hungry..."

Shirou took off his backpack and set it down in front of him, opening the top lid. Digging into it, he took out a smaller leather bag, held closed by some kind of yarn, or thick string. Untying it, Shirou looked inside to find some rolls, dried meat, and a metal flask. There was also a glass container of thick-looking milk, and he picked that up first. It hadn't been refrigerated for a while, and it would probably have been better for him to drink that first. Tearing off the thin leather sealing the liquid in, Shirou tipped it back and took a big gulp of the fluid, before promptly coughing and spitting it back up.

"Oh, what? Geez, is this churned butter?" he exclaimed as he tried wiping off his tongue. "Gross, ugh, geez!"

Taking a look at the bottle with disgust, he resealed it with the leather, and stuffed it back into the smaller leather bag. Trying to get the taste out of his mouth, Shirou quickly grabbed the flask, uncorked it and took a whiff.

"Gah, alcohol. Smells like whisky. Well, whatever, as long as that butter taste goes away."

He took a small sip and grabbed his throat as he coughed. "What the...? What kind of whisky is this? This stuff is super strong! Well, I guess it's better than the butter," he murmured, taking another quick swill of it.

Shirou grabbed a roll from out of the bag, and looked suspiciously at it. "This is a normal roll, right?"

Setting the flask down, he pulled out a piece of meat. "What kind of animal was this? A rabbit,
maybe?"

First taking a bite from the bread, he was disappointed to find it somewhat tasteless and hard. He then took a bite of the meat and found it ridiculously salty. He felt his head fall – what a letdown. Shirou hadn't known what he had expected the food to taste like, but certainly not like it did. Unwilling to waste the food though, and still very hungry, he broke the bread apart, slapped the meat on one half and slid the other half of bread back over it. Taking a bite of the sandwich, Shirou stubbornly forced himself to chew slowly, to make sure everything went down smoothly. The tastelessness of the bread helped to soften the blow of the saltiness of the meat, and he somehow managed to eat without incident.

Taking another gulp from the flask, Shirou threw it back into the bag, tied up the bag, placed it into the bigger bag, and then flopped backwards onto the path. He folded his hands behind his head, looking up at the darkening sky.

"It's getting dark. I need to find a place to rest, but I feel like I'm just walking around aimlessly."

Which, he was, but that would be too much for him to really admit. Shirou sighed again, watching the clouds float by above him. With his archer eyes, he saw flocks of birds flying higher than most would normally do so in the future, but then again, this time period didn't have planes yet.

He closed his eyes for a few moments before opening them again and blinking a few times. "Oh man, I'm tired. I've got to find a town."

He was about to sit up again when something flying in the sky caught his interest. Shirou stared at it for a few minutes, watching it swoop back and forth and come nearer and nearer to his position. It was incredibly large, Shirou observed. Large, and very nimble, even with its huge body. Its wing span was unheard of, practically a two to three hundred meters across. Shirou had never seen a creature like it. Its tail guided its tailwind, helping it to increase its speed two to threefold. The fire coming out of its mouth was also pretty –

Wait. Fire?

Wait, no, seriously. Fire?

Shirou rolled backwards and shot up to his feet.

"Are you kidding me? Is that a dragon?"
Shirou felt his heart start to pound.

This had to be a joke. Dragons actually existed, and his luck was actually bad enough to go up against one?

*You've got to be kidding me!*

The large beast in the sky raced down towards what it thought to be easy prey and Shirou did the first thing that came to his mind: pick up his bag and run for his freaking life.

"Ah! Why is there a dragon here?" he yelled out, running as if his life depended on it, which it did. "You've got to be kidding me! How do I beat a damned dragon?"

Had someone been passing by, they would have been treated to the amusing scene of a foreign, young man racing down the road with smoke billowing behind him, screaming bloody murder as a large beast drooped down to blow fire at him. They may have also been interested to see the dragon's head slam into the man's back and send him flying one hundred meters forward. Then, they would've have been able to spare a smile as the young man stood back up and continued running away.

Shirou kept running until he saw shapes resembling buildings at least a few kilometers away. Sliding to a stop, he gritted his teeth. If that was a village, then he couldn't allow the dragon to progress any further. Turning his gaze back towards the oncoming dragon, he fell flat onto the ground as the dragon roared over him. Standing back up, he was getting ready to run in the opposite direction, away from the village, when he noticed the dragon had switched targets. The time-traveler stared at the dragon, horrified, as it gained speed and raced towards the town instead.

"No!" Shirou shouted, eyes narrowing.

Myrus' words came back to him: "A final word of caution, boy. Do not so readily release your Reality Marble, or project anything, at all. I doubt it need be said, but take great pains not to project something which has not been invented by that point in time. If others see technology beyond their scope of understanding, you may encounter more problems than you are ready to undertake."

Shirou hesitating, expression full of confliction as he lowered his projected bow and swords. A bead of sweat slid down his cheek as he weighed the effect his actions would have if anyone happened to see what he had been prepared to do. He cocked his bow, drawing back the single sword in the drawstring, before again lowering it as he once again considered what to do. His fingers twitched slightly and he released his projections, fists falling to clench at his sides.

Closing his eyes, he gritted his teeth in frustration, not sure of how to proceed. If he didn't use his abilities, the village was doomed to fall, but if he did, someone might discover who he was.

*What would she do?*

He saw the smoke rise from the village as the dragon reared down on its people, and the bow and arrows immediately materialized back into his hands.

*Like I even have to ask!*
He bent down low to ground himself as drew back his bow's drawstring.

Step one: measure approximate distance from self to target.

Step two: predict expected angle of drift of target, speed of wind crossing and resistance, and all possible angles and courses of fired shots.

Step three: narrow down possible courses to those with a higher than ninety percent rate of execution.

Step four: imbue all ammunition with readily prepared magical energy.

Step five: replicate each "bullet" by two, five, ten.

Step six: bind each set of bullets together as separate units.

Step seven: calculate range and rate of speed, and allocate magical energy accordingly.

"Step eight," Shirou whispered, releasing his fingers from the drawstring "fire."

Each bullet flew away from him, speeding through air like bomber missiles, spiraling, sinking, rising, and zigzagging between one another as they raced for their target. As if they were built with an infrared homing device, each bullet head aligned itself with the target as the dragon looped around the village. The target noticed its enemy and took to higher in the air, drafts blowing back at the bullets as it flapped its enormous wings. The bullets, undaunted by the sudden wind current, stayed true to their path, instead growing ever closer to the beast.

Shirou threw his hand into the air, clenching it slowly as he said, "Trace on: augment!"

Each of the five bullets simultaneously split into ten different swords, pausing temporarily in the air before rocketing straight at the beast's head, ignoring the main body. Shirou knew he couldn't take a dragon – not with his skills, or at least, not the way Saber might be able to. He had to devise other methods of eliminating it. He tightened his clenched fists, shouting, "Trace on: bombardment!"

Each arrow shot forward, and as soon as they touched the scales of the dragon, exploded in a series of blasts, almost like C4 as it is detonated. Shirou focused his eyes to see if his attack had made any kind of dent in the beast at all, but was hardly surprised when the dragon, now raging with fury, turned around and came surging towards him.

Shirou dug his feet into the dirt for further stabilization, and closed his eyes to dig for the remnants of his magical energy supply. He bent his body down, trembling slightly as a light green hue formed around his body. The dragon opened its mighty jaws, a ball of fiery flames whirling around tightly before it launched its attack, and Shirou threw up both of his hands and shouted, "RHO AIAS!"

The second the flames hit Shirou's shield, three petals dissipated almost immediately. Shirou gritted his teeth as he felt something in his body tear and start breaking down. He closed his right eye unconsciously, feeling the strain of the fire against his shield. Shirou had known from the start that he didn't have enough energy to maintain the shield, especially with his back-up plan already in place as well.

Taking a chance with his life – as if fighting against a dragon wasn't risky enough – and released
his shield and dashed to the side simultaneously.

"If I can't take you on," he grunted out, six swords, each strengthened to be like steel, appearing in the air over him, "then I'll just have to take away something that might cumber you forever! Take this!"

The dragon's bright red eyes widened for but a second before Shirou's weapons slammed into their depths, three for each eye. Shirou jumped when the dragon screeched its pain, completely startled by the loud noise. He clapped his hands over his ears, eyes closed as he winced. "Gah!"

He felt his body being nudged away gently by the dragon's snout, and as soon as he opened his eyes, Shirou let out a sound of surprise and fear when the dragon spun around like a spinning top and slammed its tail into Shirou's body. He had barely been able to strengthen his bones a split nanosecond before the tail made contact with him and sent him soaring through the air towards the village. Pain riveted through his body from the attack, and he felt like five Berserkers had all bum rushed at the same time. He hardly felt his impact against something flimsy and as he slid across the ground before eventually sliding to a stop.

Shirou felt his vision fading when he tried to force his eyes open. Everything was blurry, and he was too exhausted to keep them open for much longer than a few seconds. His ears kept ringing, and he briefly entertained the idea that the dragon might come back after him, kill him, and destroy the village as well.

"Ugh," he groaned softly, clenching his fists and tightening his muscles as he, inch by inch, forced his body to rise back up. His body shuddered all the while, and he felt him lose a few inches of air before he caught himself again. Again forcing his eyes to open, Shirou slowly turned to look around him, the muscles in his jaw jumping as he ground his teeth. His body hurt, and he felt like if he got up, that would be the end of his story.

What about everyone else's stories? Whose fault was it that the dragon found the village in the first place?

That was an accident, Shirou argued with himself, still struggling to rise up. I didn't mean to lead that thing so far and put so many people in danger.

If you didn't mean it, then prove it! If you're a hero, then it's your responsibility to save the innocent!

I can barely stand on all fours right now... How am I supposed to save everyone?

So you don't care if everyone dies around you again? You don't mind repeating the same travesty that happened seventeen years ago? You're okay with being the one lone survivor, incapable of doing anything but saving his own hide?

"No," he gasped, his eyes opening fully as he forced his body to rise. He reached deep within him for any magic leftover, anything that would help him, just...something!

"Ahhh!" he yelled out, his body fervently rebelling against his wishes.

Then, as if a switch had been flicked off, he felt himself lose control over his body and fall face forward back onto the ground. Again, I just...

He was shaking. Honestly, why must he have been the one to fulfill this assignment? He wasn't even remotely related to the discussion at hand, but thanks to being the only free to leave the town
without consequence, he had been sent as a result. Lifting up his eyes timidly, he gulped and quickly looked back at the red carpet as soon as he had peered into the other's eyes.

The king's eyes appeared soulless to him – soulless, cold, and calculating. *He's not human!*

"When can we expect the next shipment, louse?" asked a pudgy man, his belly barely covered by his brown robes. "As I recall, we have already sent the appropriate funds."

"Y-yes, esteemed sir, that is true, but..."

The man winced when the king narrowed his eyes. He bowed his head lower until he touched the carpet. "That is true, but the caravan carrying the goods underestimated the band of thieves in the area and was overtaken..."

Arthur Pendragon, born under the name of Arturia, the king of Britain, tapped her index finger against the arm of her throne, the only telling of her irritation. This was not the first, but the second time their supply of iron had been "stolen" or "lost". She didn't doubt for a moment that there was something more to this predicament – if the town had already experienced such an issue, then they should have been more than prepared.

"How can that be?" her king-of-arms asked, standing down the steps to her right. "I personally sent a troop of men to take care of the issue. I have received no word or otherwise of any complications."

"Cedrych," she called out calmly, earning the attention of the entire court. "How long has it been since you've received communication from your men?"

"Hardly a fortnight, sire," Cedrych responded courteously, his torso bowed out of respect.

She felt herself start to grind her teeth. Two weeks without a single letter of communication? Twice already she had requested the town of Puria to send Camelot a much needed source of iron, but this was the second time her demands had been turned down via other means. The first time was passable, as the town was technically on the outskirts of her rule in Logres. Being only nearly two years into her reign, her influence was not yet widespread enough for towns to willingly supply the people of her town with materials.

However, after the battle against the other eleven kings, and two additional battles against the Saxons along the Dubglas river, she had realized Camelot's stock of materials was sorely lacking. While Camelot was pulling in resources from nearby mines, farms, and woodwork factories, it simply wasn't enough to meet the demand of supplying her soldiers with the armor they dearly required. Several men had joined to fight under her banner – far more than originally predicted – after the battle, and the towns Camelot held a treaty with were hard-pressed to keep up with the demands asked of them.

"Gawain."

The blond standing to the immediate right of her turned obliquely, bowing deeply. "My Lord?"

"Take fifty of your most trusted men and march to Puria. Evaluate the situation and take action based on your own judgment."

"It will be done. Providing that this man speaks lies, what would you have me do?"

"As I said previously, I will leave that to your judgment. However, if something smells of treachery..."
She paused, focusing her gaze on the man quaking down in front of her. "...Then purge the town of its curse of lies and deceit and deliver it unto justice."

Arturia's eyes narrowed imperceptibly as she noticed the man smirk for but a moment – the expression was gone so quickly she was not sure if she had really witnessed what she thought she had. Her fingers on her right hand coiled in slightly as she felt something stir from deep in her stomach. Something – she wasn't sure what, but something was off about the entire situation. Breathing out softly, Arturia realized this was one of those times where it was best to follow her instincts rather than consider reason to be a solution.

"Gawain, have Lancelot accompany you."

She knew she had made the right decision the second the man's face paled slightly. Gawain turned back to give her a fleeting glance of confusion before he bowed again. "By your will, Your Majesty. I will inform Lancelot of your command. And what of this man, sire?"

"He will, of course, lead you to the town. I ask that you keep your eyes on him at all times."

"I understand," Sir Gawain responded before rising to his full height and looking down at the man currently bent down on the floor. "Rise, you. We will set off immediately."

The man shook his head back and forth as Gawain grasped his arm and starting pulling him towards the entrance of the throne room. Gawain showed no hesitance when he squeezed the man's arm hard enough to bruise, forcing the other to follow after him.

"Do you mean to kill every villager in my town, King?" the man yelled out, trying to resist as the knight continued pulling him away. "What is the meaning of sending two knights simply to recover something? Your foolishness will bring about your end, mark my words! I swear that –"

"Would you shut up already?" Gawain muttered, letting go of the man's arm to backhand him across the face. The man was so surprised that Gawain had little trouble of pulling him the rest of the way out of room.

Arturia bowed her head slightly, letting out a sigh as soon as the man's screams could no longer be heard. That villager had not been the first one to curse her that week, least of all, that day. Perhaps she had risen on the wrong side of the bed every morning for the past month, as nothing seemed to be going well. Her head cook, Baeddan, had been repetitively complaining to her, directly, for that matter, of his "concern" over their lack of ingredients, seasonings, cookware, and more so than anything else, the lack of helpers to help with cooking all the necessary meals for the soldiers and her knights. She realized the importance of meals for the keep, but really, did he need to complain to her every moment she was unfortunate enough to be seen by him?

Then there was Merlin, yet another thorn in her side. Just a couple of weeks before, he had, again, used her for some experiment with her none the wiser. Arturia could feel her muscles tensing as she recalled how often she had gone to the pot, and found herself cursing the gleeful expression on the wizard's face.

"It's a success!" he had told her when she had come out of the toilet room for the fifth time that day. "Egads, I've done it! Even after boiling it to rid it of all impurities beforehand, for it to be able to induce such a condition by simply using water from the river, I now realize that our sewage system does indeed feed out into the local water systems! This will allow me to work with those in charge of sewage to develop a system that will not filter out into our pure water. Thank you, Arturia, for your help with this experiment."
Arturia had just stared at him, her face first paling as she realized what he'd forced her to drink. Then she had felt herself flush with anger before quickly turning an odd shade of green, and finally blue as she clutched at her stomach.

After hearing about her condition, her foster brother, Sir Kay, had spared her no expense at laughing at her misery. Not even Sir Bedivere had been unable to disguise a snort of amusement, and the meeting she had carried to discuss the future plans with the Knights of the Round Table turned into nothing short of a laughing fest. Her body had quivered noticeably, unable to hide her embarrassment and anger. She hadn't spoken to Merlin again for a full week afterward.

"Sire," came Bedivere's from her left, snapping her out of her reminiscing. The screaming man had long since been "escorted" out of the room, and she had apparently been caught up in her own thoughts to notice the expressions of uncomfortableness on her court's faces.

"Yes, Bedivere?" she asked, acknowledging him without her expression shifting remotely.

"My Liege, I must say that I, too, am curious of your motives for sending Lancelot to take care of as small a matter as securing funds or materials. And fifty men, Your Majesty? Need we send so many?"

It was a decent question, and one she had given much thought to.

"Cedrych indicated sending a total of ten men to Puria with the intent to escort and secure our demanded amount of iron, a trip that should hardly take a week were one to head straight there and back. Yet we have not received confirmation or otherwise within two? Do you not find that suspicious, Bedivere?"

It was Cedrych who spoke up instead. "You suspect foul play, then, Your Highness?"

Bedivere cupped his chin, stroking it as he considered what the king had said. "I see, yes. Of course – Conan the Great has been known to traverse through that area. If bandits are indeed stealing the supplies we need, it would only make sense to first suspect Conan and his band, as they have been quite vocal in their opposition of Camelot's king."

"Precisely my thoughts on the matter, Bedivere," the king said, facing forward and not even glancing at him. "In which case, it would not be pure folly to assume the soldiers we previously sent may have very well met their end at Conan's hands. I am also wary of believing that messenger – his intentions did not seem pure."

"Perhaps I should attend to the issue myself, as well?"

Arturia shook her head slightly. "No, I would prefer that you remain here by my side, Bedivere. Aside of you, all of my knights are out on various expeditions of great importance to the kingdom. Were something to happen in their absence, I want to be certain that someone I have absolute faith in will be my side."

"Very well," Bedivere replied, the bangs of his light blond hair – so light it looked white – falling to cover his eyes. "If we are to secure a trade route with Puria, we will not need to worry about iron or steel for a short time, at least. But what of our copper and coal supplies?"

Arturia raised her right hand, indicating a thin, wiry man to come forward. "Dylan, you have kept score of our trade routes, have you not?"

Bowing, her steward curtly nodded once, his dark-brown eyes downcast as he answered his king's summoning.
"We have successfully communicated with the villages of Dawson, Tirad, Monnae, and Poiran. Each village has acknowledged His Majesty's kingship and is sending a steady supply of copper, while seven other villages, Yustaeia, Losteanc, Worick, Briata, Kronsinae, Ewikwe, and Bron have promised us our necessary supply of coal."

"What about our food trade routes?" Bedivere asked, turning to the king.

"Dylan," Arturia merely said, closing her eyes as she bowed her head slightly.

"Camelot has more than quadrupled the number of plots for farming, and there are currently several teams of hunters exploring beyond the castle's walls, hunting game for consumption use."

"You are quite knowledgeable," Bedivere complimented the steward with a smile. "I see why you are the king's steward. You are most deserving of the title."

Dylan bowed again and Arturia waved him away.

"Now then, if you have no more questions," she began, pausing when Bedivere shook his head slightly and turned away, "I would like to see a few more villagers before retiring from hearings for the rest of the day. Dylan, see the next person in."

After making a quick bow, the wiry man scurried to the entrance, calling for the next visitor. Bedivere bent down slightly to whisper in Arturia's left ear, "After the man from earlier, I wager things will only be better henceforth."

She did not reply, instead watching as a burly man with a pot belly entered, dressed in the rags normally indicative of a peasant of low class. He fumbled with his shirt momentarily before flopping down onto the floor like a jelly roll. Arturia felt her eyebrows raise slightly, unsure of what to make of this commoner, before stealing a quick glance at Bedivere, as if to question his words. He smiled back at her reassuringly, and she turned back to look at the...thing, on her red carpet.

"I would hear your name, now."

"Onion," came the muffled reply, to which Arturia frowned slightly, slightly bewildered.

"I beg your pardon?"

Dylan hissed at "Onion" to lift his head and speak more clearly, and the pudgy man did just that.

"Einion, Your Greatness!" the man exclaimed, flopping back down onto the carpet.

"...Yes, of course," Arturia murmured, taken aback by the man's strange mannerisms. "Then, Einion, was it? Einion, what is that concerns you as of late?"

"It is about my horse, Oh Great One," Einion said, holding out his hands towards her pleadingly. "My wonderful horse and that snake in the grass, Catrin! That fox has given me nothing but headaches since I so kindly took her in, and yet she somehow felt fit to do such a horrid thing! My poor horse, how he must have suffered! He was such a fine steed, and yet she took him away from me!"

"Ah," Arturia said, unsure of what else to say. "So, you are reporting a stolen horse. That is a grave offense indeed."

"No, Your Majesty! My horse has died!"
"...She murdered your property?"

"No, sire! He died of heartbreak! You see, that vixen took it upon herself to have her way with my horse and when she died from her sinister act, my great steed, too, died, but from heartbreak! Whatever am I to do, Oh Majestic One?"

"By 'had her way', you mean...?"

Bedivere cleared his throat. "I believe he refers to what you think he speaks of, Your Highness."

The daughter of Uther Pendragon stared down at the flabby man, unsure of whether or not she had a firm grasp of the situation. As the pudgy man continued whining, moaning, and groaning, Arturia clenched her right fist tightly, her left hand cupping her face as she leaned forward. Why, why, why couldn't she just have a normal day sometimes? Bedivere leaned down and whispered,

"I seem to have lost that wager."

"Only twenty-some more people to go...

Three hours later after listening to villagers from near and far as the talked about their various issues, Arturia could be seen calmly walking up the spiraling staircase to her study, two squires following along behind her. The two followed along silently, two to three paces behind her at every step to ensure she was neither crowded nor too far away. Her blue cape of fur hanging off of her left shoulder billowed around her gently as she climbed, gaze steadfast and cool. After reaching the fourth flight, Arturia turned away from the staircase and walked down the long corridor, the torches along the walls lighting up the way. Dusk had already fallen, but she still had much work to attend to.

Her armor clanked with every step she took, the sounds ricocheting through the stoned passageway. She could also hear the soft padding and scraping of his squire's leather boots as they walked along behind her. Arturia had not intended to take on any squires, much less two of them, but her knights thought it best that there be someone at least somewhat knowledgeable on the roughness of her schedule to attend to her. Of course, she had servants to do that as well, but her squires were the one who polished her armor, sword and sheath, and took care of her various errands when they were not training.

Arturia came to an abrupt stop as soon as a tall, old, elderly stepped out of the shadows in front of her. She frowned as the old man gave her a pearly grin, and turned her head away. Lifting her left hand up, the two squires quickly bowed, took a step back, pivoted, and started walking away to what she assumed would probably be the Great Hall for dinner. She was rather hungry herself, but that would have to wait.

As soon as she felt the two boys were outside of earshot, she folded her arms across her chest, cocking a hip as she met the old man's gaze with her own blank one.

"Merlin. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Her words were dry and sarcastic, though Merlin didn't appear to be affronted in the least. He gestured for her to walk with him, to which she did, albeit a bit grudgingly.

"You seem healthy, lad," Merlin chirped cheerfully, much to her annoyance. "I take it you are no longer living in the toilet room?"

"Rather than any sword on the battlefield, you will be the end of me, Merlin," she rebuked angrily,
eyes narrowing dangerously. "You and your foolish experiments."

"Now, now, child, no need to speak in hyperboles," he said, pausing when she glared at him. "Do not be so hostile. My intentions were pure."

"As pure as my steed's manure, I'm sure," she muttered, turning her head away from him. "You really will one day cause me my death."

"Come now, dear. That is why you were given Avalon: to keep yourself alive for me to conduct my various experiments."

Arturia simply glared at him further, saying nothing in return.

As soon as they arrived in front of her study, Merlin ushered her in like a mother hen would a chick. He then dismissed the two guards standing right outside the doors so he could speak to her in private. Closing the door with a gentle whoosh, and locking it, Merlin turned to look at the young king frowning at him.

"You have been quite irritated lately, Arthur," he remarked after a moment of silence.

"Arthur" sighed, her shoulders drooping slightly. "Something has not felt right lately, though I suppose it may just be nerves playing tricks on me."

"I wouldn't say that," Merlin replied, serious for once. "There has been talk of a dragon appearing to the east, near the border of the Saxons. While I am not certain of its type, it was apparently seen chasing a traveler before moving onto a village."

"A village?" Arturia asked, her fists clenching immediately as she stepped forward. "I have heard nothing of this! What village was it?"

"A village called Tryst. No one was killed, thank goodness, but they did take some damage to their buildings. However, you may not have heard anything because they are far out of our scope, and dangerously close to the Saxons. We haven't been able to reach out to them yet to include them under our protection of safety."

"What of the dragon?"

"Felled, by the traveler, apparently. Of course, I do not know the details so I couldn't say for certain."

"Tryst," Arturia murmured, a finger on her lips as she turned away in thought. "I suppose it is good that the village is safe, though I do worry about what might happen should they be attacked by the Saxons, or worse, another dragon."

She sighed, covering her face with her hand. "Today has certainly been eventful."

The old man nodded wisely, and walked forward, holding a vial of something. She looked at it suspiciously before glancing back up at him. "And pray tell, what is that?"

"I know you haven't been sleeping well lately. Trust me, I'm fairly certain you may come to need it rather soon."

Arturia took the glass vial warily, looking at the pasty white mixture inside. "And you say this will energize me? It will not kill me?"
"Lad, I have invested far too much of my time in your life to kill you so easily," Merlin said with a small smile. "Just drink it. I guarantee it won't do anything to you."

She had her misgivings, – and who could blame her after what had happened two weeks previously – but gingerly popped the cork and tilted her head back to drink it down. Her eyes opened as wide as physically possible as she felt a burning sensation go down her throat. Tears flooded her eyes as she coughed a few times, feeling as if her throat had been burnt all the way through.

Merlin grinned so happily at her that she wanted to punch him.

"How's that? Do you feel rejuvenated yet? I call it my Pepper Strike, a drink guaranteed to pep you up!"

"Merlin..." she gasped out warningly, her hand at her throat.

They both quieted down as they heard the sound of someone running down the corridor. Frowning, Arturia moved around Merlin to the door, swiftly unlocking it, and opening it right as a young man came running up to her. Her two squires ran up directly after the man, each one breathing heavily. Pedr spoke first, his chest heaving as he bowed to her and rushed to explain:

"Y-Your Majesty," he gasped. "Th-this courier hails from the town of Tryst! He reports of a travesty that will befall the people!"

"Tryst?"

Arturia gritted her teeth slightly. Was that not the very same town Merlin said was attacked by a dragon not too long ago? If it was close the Saxon border, then it would not take long for the army to burn through the village and march towards Camelot. More so than for the village though, she was concerned about the places with which Camelot had a trade route in place. If the Saxons tried edging forward too much, it would put those towns at risk, which would severely hamper Camelot's ability to function further.

"Not just Tryst, Your Majesty," the courier continued, holding an arm across his body to cover the wound she had been too preoccupied to notice.

"That wound!" she exclaimed. "We must have you treated immediately!"

"No, Your Majesty, I fear my time is near. Tryst, Your Highness, isn't the only one in danger. Perc and Hwol are within barely a few hours' journey from there. They will all be enveloped if the Saxons are not beaten back to where they belong."

"...How much time is there before the Saxons are due to arrive?"

"Within the week, perhaps sooner..."

The courier was starting to sink down, his wound taking a toll on him. Arturia raised to her full height, coming to the realization that if she did not act promptly, those towns would soon be no longer, and the Saxons would be that much closer to vilifying her lands further.

"You have done your duty well. You may rest."

The courier stared up at her as his eyes began to glaze over. "You...honor me, Your...Majesty..."

"Take him away, Pedr," Arturia directed. With that, she turned swiftly, her cape flowing around her.
She walked up to where her sword, Excalibur lay in its sheath, picking it up and promptly secured it to her belt. For a short moment, she bowed her head, almost as if in prayer. Then, she turned back around, she barely gave Merlin a second glance as she glided past him and out the door. Unbuckling her cape, she tossed it into Ynyr's hands. Her second squire peered up at her, an expression on his befitting that of a future knight. Inwardly, she could say she was proud of his progress, but now was not the time for such thoughts.

"Inform Bedivere to meet me at the gate with three hundred men at the ready. It will take at least three days to reach that area."

"You are leaving?" came Merlin's voice, stopping her in her tracks. "I sense something that will change you forever at your destination. Are you sure about this?"

Arturia didn't even bother to look back, and began to walk down the hallway.

"Be off, quickly!" she commanded Ynyr, unconsciously projecting her authority and ability as a king. "We depart immediately!"

Shirou shoveled another scoop of coal into the hearth fueling the forge. Sweat running down his face, he dropped the shovel and moved to maneuver the large bellows attached. Looking down that the forge, he simultaneously pulled down the lever that would manipulate the bellows to heat up the heat. Shirou backed away from the forge as soon as a large, burly man came walking into the enclosed area.

"Alan," Shirou greeted the man. "Forge is all heated up for you."

"Well, there, lad. You've gone done a good job this time, here," Alan said gruffly, grabbing a small steel ingot. "I'll make a blacksmith out of you yet, boy."

"Hah, I'm just here to help," Shirou replied with a smile. "I don't know a thing about blacksmithing."

"Yeah, you magic types don't really know how to work things like true men. Well, be off with you, then. Ceri's been awaiting your arrival."

Shirou waved as he ran away from the forge, grabbing his tunic top along the way. Every day was filled to the brim with incredibly hard work, so he normally didn't bother wearing a shirt around. It often became very sweaty and really uncomfortable. However, he couldn't really stand showing his bare chest to the women of the village, so he would always pull it back on right before meeting any of them.

Dashing down the main road, his boots scraping against the dirt, he ran a hand through his hair, pushing it back so the sweat wouldn't drip into his eyes. Shirou grinned when a young, blonde woman in her late twenties turned to smile at him, gesturing daintily to the cart next to her. He spared her a quick grin and put himself in between the handles to push it forward.

Ceri looked up at him gently as he pushed the cart forward. "You appeared rushed this morning, Ro. Has Alan been working you hard today?"

"Nah, just the usual," Shirou replied. "Smelt some ingots, heat up the forge, shine the weapons in supply, sweep up the area... You know, same old, same old."

"You'll die an early death, you know."
"Nah, it's the least I can do. Besides, I like helping."

It had been approximately two, almost three months since the dragon incident had occurred. The village had been in such a bad state, it had been difficult for the fifty-some villagers to get by. Luckily, the dragon's fire had not reached as far as their farming lands, but a lot of the trade shops had needed to be rebuilt and restocked. Surprisingly, Tryst was a rather well-known place in the area, as they supplied all the weaponry to surrounding villages and their militia. Tryst also made armor, but it wasn't really comparable to Hwol, a village with half its population proficient in armoring and tailoring. Hwol was hardly a couple hours' walk away, so it was relatively easy to trade product among the towns.

As far as he knew, Tryst traded its weapons for Hwol's clothing and armor, resulting in a more or less equal trade. By extension, Hwol would also lend out a number of its militia to protect the town when danger came. They lived on the outskirts fairly close to the Saxon border, so there was a chance of attack at any time. Shirou wondered why they would stay there knowing they could be killed at any moment, but several people had told him that they were under protection of the great King Arthur. If anything happened to them, King Arthur was sure to come to their defense, although they had yet to actually swear their allegiance to the young king.

He and Ceri were actually on their way to Hwol at that moment. One every month or so, the villagers would consolidate a list of necessary items, and hand her a bag of different elaborate trinkets to cover the costs. Shirou had actually arrived halfway through the cycle, and was too out of commission to walk with her when she went the first time. He had, however, gone the time after that, making this his second trip to Hwol total. It was a fairly easy trip, and even as slow as the two of them walked, it still only took them the better part of a couple of hours. The two were carrying an assortment of weapons in their cart to trade for the clothing. The trinkets were simply in case the trade didn't quite match up enough for the volume of clothes they were buying.

"You know, one day Alec is going to fall on his face with how high he always puts his nose when walking near me."

"Oh, don't mind him," Ceri reassured him. "Alec has always been suspicious of anything that was 'different', so to speak. He would be suspicious of a two-headed chicken if ever he saw one."

"I probably would be, too, actually."

The two shared a laugh, content as they walked along side by side.

Shirou really liked Ceri and being around her. She was actually the one who had nursed back to health while the rest of the village had told her to cast him out. The major reason they hadn't was not because of any expert persuasion by Ceri, but because Shirou had ultimately saved the town from an early demise. Shirou had been unconscious for a solid two weeks, having pushed himself to his limits and his body needing a great amount of rest before it could move around like normal again. Upon finally awaking, he was treated to the scene of Ceri vehemently opposing several men storming into her house to get rid of him. She was a small little thing, with a bark to match her bite. Did all women in the sixth century grow up to have fiery dispositions? Both Ceri and Saber scared him as much as they made him admire them.

Actually, it only made sense that the two of them grew so close so quickly. Shirou, being the foreigner he was, was seen as a threat to everyone's livelihood. He had only been spared his life because of the dragon thing. Ceri, on the other hand, was also an outcast, though for an entirely different reason. According to her, her husband had left the village to volunteer his services in Camelot, but had met his end early during one of the battles against the Saxons. Ceri had received a small settlement to compensate her for her loss, but that would never allow her to forget what her
husband had attempted to do. To Ceri, her husband was a hero who fought for what he believed in, and fought to protect not only her, but their town, and their country. Now that he was dead, he would forever be regarded highly in her heart.

The village, on the other hand, felt that by going out and getting himself killed so quickly, he had only brought shame upon them. The husband had been none too popular when alive either, always spouting out his ideals and feeling the need to include himself into everyone else's business. It was unsightly for a man to take such interest in matters of the household, or childrearing, and yet, that is what the man valued most. He had always desired a family of his own with Ceri, but to their dismay, she was proven infertile, and unable to foster any offspring. If the husband could not protect a child of his own, what better than to protect the children of the village? His mother hen tendencies only pushed the other villagers away instead, and in the end, according to the rest of the village, he had escaped to instead prove himself in battle. However, even then, he had only failed as a result.

It was sad, Shirou realized, seeing the telltale signs of Hwol only a few kilometers away. Damned if he did, and damned if he didn't. Ceri's husband seemed to have been doomed from the start. From what Ceri had told Shirou about him, the guy seemed to be rather decent, but born with bad luck. It would've been nice to have had a chance to meet him, though. The town's dislike for Ceri was different though, and he could somewhat see why. If her husband was the most caring man around, she must have been the most beautiful. When her husband had died and left her a widow, Ceri had caught more than a few looks from the other men in the village, married and single. Her eyes were the gentle shade of grass-green, and her lovely blonde hair seemed to glint whenever the sun's rays touched it. She was also ridiculously kind, and always willing to give a helping hand to whomever she thought needed it.

Unfortunately, jealous, older wives had taken notice of their husbands gravitating towards her for something they might have needed mended, or something that they couldn't understand about the "relations between the three villages", or something else equally ridiculous. The men would attend to her at any given moment without her asking for their help whatsoever. The more attention she received from the populous, the angrier housewives became and she was ousted from the circle of women, only receiving their scorn and anger. Very much valuing the friendship of others, and desperately hungry for it so she would no longer be lonely, she instead began turning away help from the men, so they would focus more on their own families and make their wives happy. Expecting everyone to be happy, she was astonished to find out the men were insulted – their help was not good enough for her? After all the time they had helped her out, she was turning them away from her door?

Ceri began to accept it as a truth that she would not be able to satisfy either side, and she retreated to her home, rarely leaving except on her monthly trek to Hwol, and to Perc every so often for meat, and the local market for other groceries. When Shirou had arrived, Ceri had taken care of him not only because she was kind, but to fill in the part of her heart torn away by loneliness. In a way, Shirou helped her to smile again, somewhat. However, she still lived in Tryst, so it wasn't as if she could escape her problems. Shirou was only too glad to help her through her anguish, though, if he could. He knew how it felt to lose someone he loved for eternity – the Saber he had known was gone forever, and even if he did become friendly with the king, she would never be the same as his Saber had been. She wouldn't have gone through everything they had, she wouldn't have already given up on her foolish desire to have the Holy Grail, and she wouldn't have been able to let go of the regret built up within her.

"You know," began Ceri softly, her eyes downcast shyly. "I was born in Hwol, myself."

Shirou looked up, his grimace disappearing as he concentrated on her words. "Huh, not Tryst?"
Ceri shook her head, still smiling gently. "No, I grew up in Hwol, but moved to Tryst after...an incident."

"...Incident?" Shirou asked, not sure if he should have.

"My parents were killed by the Militia Chief when I was all of ten years old, under suspicion of conspiring with enemy spies."

She narrowed her eyes, each green orb hardening as she recalled the past. "Hwol is a town built upon clothing – armoring, tailoring, sewing... Anything that had to do with fabric, material, thread, or any of the sort was something well within Hwol's line of expertise. Naturally, those who could manipulate clothing best were the ones who would receive the most acclaim, and the most envy."

Shirou felt as if she was glaring at the town ahead of them, instead of glaring as a result of being angry. "I take it your parents were good at what they did?"

"They were the absolute best. These are not merely words of pride, but of an absolute fact. Anyone, for all of their jealousy, could say much of the same. The house where I lived was the largest by far, two times bigger than any other, and we could actually afford to sleep on makeshift beds. My parents were that well-off."

"Did they actually talk to any enemy spies?"

"Of course not," the blonde scoffed, as if the idea was nothing short of unbelievable. "All visitors to the town back then were normally regulars – as in, they would come every few months or so on a regular basis. Those who had never been seen before would be trailed by the militia until they had proven themselves trustworthy. My parents were too busy to go out on any trips either – they were always holed up within the shop, making something or another."

"Then how could they have been under suspicion of doing something like that?"

"Someone planted 'evidence' that claimed my father had done something indecent, such as answering to the demands of those foul beasts to the east. He had hardly ever taken a single step out of town, and his contacts were limited to the people who visited the village. How could he have ever done something so elaborate as betray the town?"

"Huh? Why didn't they just analyze the paper for DNA–"

Shirou clapped a hand over his mouth as Ceri glanced at him, seeming somewhat confused. "I'm sorry, what was that, Ro? DN...what?"

"Haha, nothing! Nothing! So, uh," he said quickly, clearing his throat. "So, the police, I mean, militia took away your parents?"

"They burned my father on a stake, as if to make a statement and ward away evil. Evil, in this case, of course being too proficient at something."

O...kay. Why were they talking about this again?

"My mother was then raped by the chief, who was insistent that no one but a whore would marry a criminal."

Oh, wow. Really? That was... Uh, okay. He'd heard worse (he actually hadn't), but...

"So, you were ten when this all happened?" Shirou said, trying to be polite and continue the
conversation. He was actually pretty curious on how she could still be so sane even after all that had happened. He probably would've turned into a serial killer or something after that.

"Yes. I had lived a life of relative luxury – of course, nothing compared to what real royalty would have. And yet, the people of Hwol stole that existence from me, for the sake of their own greed. They stole from me my parents, my life, my inheritance, my future, and my soul."

Shirou heard her knuckles pop as she clenched a fist.

"I hated them. Bitterly. I hated them for everything they did, for their greediness, for their ability to hurt the innocent without any concern. I still hate them," she finished, her voice low and brimming with loathing. "I wanted them to suffer in the same way I had. But I was young, without power, without voice and govern. There was nothing I could do, but I couldn't stand to stay there any longer. In rebellion, I fled Hwol. But where was a ten-year-old girl supposed to flee to? I had no choice but to head to a village nearby. I had intended to head to Perc, but somehow found myself in Tryst instead."

"How'd you survive?"

"I sewed," Ceri replied, almost wistfully. "That was all I had known how to do, and Tryst did not have anyone with as much expertise as I had, so a family was quick to take me in. I gained them renown, and they gave me bread and abed. There was nothing more I could ask for at that point."

Shirou tilted his head, smiling a bit. "So, you learned to forgive and forget then?"

"No. I hated. At first I thought I would try to escape the reality I had lived and move on, but then Hwol accused the family I was with of stealing their village's secrets. That was their line of expertise – Tryst, a blacksmithing and farming village should not have been able to reproduce something of excellent quality in that trade. So then, that family, too, was taken from me, after three years of living with them. I returned home one morning after spending the night at a friend's house to find the stabbed bodies of the entire family.

"They would not kill me, but were not against killing those who came into contact with me!"

Ceri had stopped walking, her shoulders trembling as she recalled her past. "Tryst, too, looked to spite me. The family at whose house I had spent the night over claimed I had never been there, and that they had nothing to do with me. I was cursed, they said. Anyone who came into contact with me would be cursed, they said. Was losing my second family not enough? I had to lose my reputation as well?"

Wow, the girl was on a roll. He knew better than to interrupt a woman's tirade, though he had to say that Rin's rants had never been so...dramatic. No, ex that. They had. They just didn't make him feel bad for whoever Rin was ranting about – in a way, she was always wrong somehow, so he could only pity her instead. It was usually her own fault, after all.

"I wanted to slash open their abdomen, pull out their entrails and hang the people by them like the filth they are. Then I wanted to burn the villages to the ground, laugh as the land scorched to nothing, and revel in the glory."

Shirou snapped out of his reminiscing and stared at Ceri, mouth agape. She wanted to what? Hang them by their organs? What the fuck?

"...Why didn't you?" he asked warily.

"I changed my mind," she answered calmly, as if that answered everything.
He wanted to ask what was the cause of her transforming from a terrifying teenager to the calm, reassuring woman next to him, but they had already entered the village by that point. As soon as the two had stepped foot into Hwol, Ceri clammed up, only displaying a smile for the people she ran into. Shirou watched the blonde carefully as she bent down to talk to the children who would run up to her, patting them on their heads and trading with them kind and gentle words. Then she would stand, smile back at him as well, and continue walking forward towards one of the several shops along the main road.

They would go by several shops, dropping off weaponry and picking up clothing and material instead. Even after trading all of their goods and receiving the requested clothing, Ceri had him visit one more shop with her.

Shirou looked down at the cart of clothing, not sure if it was a good idea to leave it unattended. Ceri pulled on his hand insisting that he come with her. Sighing, Shirou walked inside beside her, looking around with a bit of curiosity. He had never actually gone into any of the shops, and it was always interesting seeing how bare they were in comparison to stores in the future. The future would have clothes upon clothes all ready for selling to interested customers, but the shops here in the past simply had the material on display. Interested customers would choose the material of their fancy and the clothing would be specially made for that one particular customer, and none other.

Ceri greeted the shop owner, bowing her head a bit.

"Do you have what I ordered last month?"

"Yes," the woman behind the counter answered courteously. "Just finished it a few days ago. It should be ready for the young sir to wear whenever he would like."

Shirou raised an eyebrow when the lady gestured to him, confused on how he fit into all of this. Ceri turned to him, teeth showing as she truly smiled at him. He had never seen her look so at ease before. It completely went against the opinion he had formed of her from her story, but coincided well with his opinion of her from the past two months. He wasn't exactly sure of how to think of her.

The shop owner bent down to retrieve something from behind the counter and came back up with a package, holding it out to him. Shirou stared at it for a bit before looking back at Ceri.

"Think of it as a gift. Your own clothes won't last for much longer as it is."

Shirou's heart skipped a beat. She...had bought him new clothes? After living with her, he knew she didn't own much. She couldn't afford to buy many pleasantries, and spent most of her time knitting and sewing by hand to make ends meet. When she traded off her works, they were used to pay for the levies for maintaining the militia in Tryst and to buy themselves food and drink. Her house was old, too, and needed several repairs. Shirou had worked on several already, but even he had a limit. He couldn't make something out of nothing for a long period of time without raising suspicion. To be blunt, there were a lot of things she needed, and he was in no position to get them for her, and yet...she had bought him clothes? He was part of the reason she was having even more trouble buying enough sustenance for the two of them, and the reason she had to work deep into the night to finish her projects.

Shirou didn't know what to think. He reached for the package with trembling hands, unable to express his surprise, joy, or pain. This...was a kind gift. She was kind. Her past didn't matter – all that mattered was what she did now. He had a bad past, too, didn't he? He left all of those people in the fire to die, and again when he went to the basement. They all died so he that he could be saved. Maybe he hadn't wanted to cut them open and burn their livelihood – at least, he didn't think he did...
– but he was no better. Shirou wasn't any kind of saint. He had no reason to doubt her when he wasn't perfect himself.

Shirou pressed his lips together to keep them from quivering. He hadn't wanted to cry for a long time, but it had been a long time since a complete stranger had helped him just because they could.

Not wanting to let the gift go to waste, he grinned at Ceri, forcing his tears back. "Can I try them on now?"

She looked back at him, seemingly taken aback. Perhaps she hadn't expected him to be so happy over receiving something from her, especially after the story she had told. It pleased her that she could make someone so happy over something as menial as new clothing.

"Nothing would make me happier," she responded with a smile of her own.

Shirou placed the package back onto the counter and quickly tore off his shirt – both sleeves had been lost long ago and the trim had been steadily unraveling day by day. Ceri and the shop owner turned their heads away when he took off his boots – they were still in pretty good shape, as far as leather went – and then shimmied out of his pants. He quickly untied the straps around the package and opened it up, holding up the new tunic to look at it better.

It was a brown tunic, made of a very thick and heavy material. It had red embroidering along the shoulders, and for the trim on the sleeves and bottom of the shirt. It was simple, but beautiful. He slipped it on quickly, finding that it was far softer than the one Myrus had given him. He turned to grab the breeches next, slipping them on quickly to appease the nervous women. As soon as his boots were back on, he twirled around.

"How do I look?"

Both women turned their gazes back to him, and Ceri giggled softly, a hand raised to cover her mouth as she did.

"Absolutely dashing."

Ceri turned towards the other woman, bowed her head again and looped her arm through Shirou's, smiling all the while. "Shall we head home?"

"Of course, my lady."

The two walked out of the shop arm in arm, each in a chipper mood. Shirou got behind the cart again and started to push it forward while Ceri matched his pace and walked next to him. They walked back down the main road, heading back towards Tryst. Shirou kept looking down at his new clothing, before looking up to see where he was going with a grin each time. Ceri cracked a joke about him being afraid to lose his clothing as he wore it and he laughed. It was just such a good gift that he couldn't help but check every now and then.

As they walked along the dirt path that fed towards some of the farm plots, Shirou looked down at the cart for a few moments before raising his head again.

"Hey Ceri?" he started, getting her attention. "About our conversation earlier... You said you changed your mind. What changed it?"

Her features were warm – she seemed pleased that he would see past what she had told him before and still be interested in what more she had to say. She fiddled with her own long tunic for a while as she recalled more of her past.
"You know of Tryst's relationship with Perc, yes? Tryst supplies them with vegetables from our own gardens, and our various chicken hatches, and Perc, in return, gives us milk and meat from their cattle ranches. They also give us manure to use for our farms. Perc is a bit farther inland, but it has enough space for a few hundred cattle. They have both milk and beef cows, and when both types of cows die, their leather is used for armoring and tailoring, which is the connection they have to Hwol. In return, Hwol, of course, grants them militiamen to make do with. The horns are also used as a material for blacksmithing as well."

Shirou nodded as Ceri spoke, having only known a bit about the three villages' relationship.

"I would often go to Perc to trade my wares for milk – I believe I made the trek at least once a week, if I could. Times were difficult, and I sometimes had to pull all-nighters to get anything finished. I was a horrible girl, never wanting anything to do with anyone anymore. My personality had become twisted and horrid, cruel. I treated the shopkeepers as if they were mongrels, or bugs far beneath me. They were a good sort, though, the people of Perc. They would wait for my tirades to finish before completing the deal as usual. In fact, thinking back on it, they treated me far too well for my attitude towards them."

Her expression turned solemn. "I hadn't known that there was a man who would offer them his body for whatever chores they needed doing so long as they continued to see past my horrid exterior and trade with me. He would be up well before dawn and asleep well past dusk, performing whatever duties the people of Perc asked of him simply so I could keep trading, and living. The man – Rhys was his name – was in love with me, I later found out. Had been for years, but I was too invested in my schemes to pay him any notice. He even asked me to marry him when I turned twenty."

"Wow, that's pretty cool. So, that's when you got married?"

"Absolutely not. I hardly knew the man, didn't care for him at all, and thought his proposal was preposterous."

Shirou chuckled, believing she would think something like that. "But you did eventually, right?"

"Eventually. His ridiculous proposals only grew more ridiculous, and at some point, I wasn't even sure why I had turned him down so much in the first place."

Ceri squared her shoulders, looking towards Tryst only a little ways ahead of them at that point.

"I hated Tryst. I hated everyone. But he...somehow, managed to make me see things I originally couldn't. He made me learn to appreciate the things I had, in spite of the things I had lost. He truly loved all of the people, and would have done anything in his power to protect them. I thought him to be a complete and utter fool, but perhaps it was I who was the fool for falling in love with him."

Shirou let out a sigh of relief – her life had changed around because her Rhys had healed the scars in her heart. It was nice to know that at least love was no different no matter what the time period.

"I'm glad you were able to change for the better," Shirou said happily. "You're a great woman. I'd hate for that greatness to be overshadowed by regret and hatred."

"Oh, no, Ro," Ceri corrected Shirou. "I still very much hate them. Absolutely loathe them. But I will protect them and help them to the best of my abilities, because that is something he would have done, without fail. I will honor his memory by protecting the people he loved most."

Shirou sighed again. Well, as long as her heart was in the right place, he guessed that was okay.
About half an hour later, the two were back in Tryst, delivering the orders of clothing. After completing the deliveries, the two of them went to go get some vegetables. Since Shirou had been doing favors all around the village ever since waking up, they got plenty to go for a few nights' dinners. Shirou stole a few heads of cabbage from Ceri and ran off down the street, much to her surprise. She was further surprised when he came back, holding a bleeding package and a couple of eggs with a large grin on his face.

"I'll make us a dinner fit for a king!" he exclaimed happily, gesturing towards the package. "Ceri, if you warm up the hearth, I'll start prepping everything!"

"How exciting!" she said, clapping her hands joyfully after setting down the bag of vegetables. "I would never have thought I would meet a man who could cook, and would happily do so!"

"Heh, I'm no ordinary guy," Shirou said with a smirk. "Watch and be amazed."

The two paid no attention to whoever might have been staring at them and each one laughed readily. Then, together, they headed back to Ceri's house, with her immediately putting some firewood into the hearth and starting a fire. Shirou set the bleeding package on a large stone block, grimacing when the blood began to form a small cesspool.

"Oh yeah, Ceri, can you get the seasonings for me?"

"Of course. Basil, salt, pepper, and...honey, right, Ro?"

"Yep. Thanks."

After being with Ceri for so long, he had finally gotten used to her nickname for him: Ro. Most of the villagers couldn't pronounce his name, but for the most part, no one bothered to acknowledge him directly anyway. Ceri had come up with the nickname, and unfortunately, it had stuck. He supposed it was better than "Dragon Vanquisher," which is what most of the kids had run around calling him.

_Oh yeah_, Shirou thought, looking up from chopping the slab of steak. _I'd forgotten all about that..._

Honestly, Shirou had never intended to stay in Tryst for the near three months he had, but one thing had led to another, and before he knew it, he was helping out every single villager that demanded something of him. In a way, he felt bad because it was his fault the entire village had been in such a disarray – thanks to the dragon, he had flown through an entire row of houses. It was a wonder he was even still alive.

When he'd woken up two weeks after the incident, he'd already been in Ceri's care, though, most of the village cursed the idea of his existence. Shirou hadn't found out what had happened to the dragon until much later.

Apparently, he'd somehow killed the dragon, though it had definitely been a fluke. When he had pierced the dragon's eyes, the magic in his weapons had turned the beast blind. The smoke from the village must have confused its senses, and it tried to flee into the air to regroup and restart its terrorization. When the dragon had come down to take vengeance on Shirou, it had flown in the wrong direction entirely towards the ocean instead. As a result of two of its senses having been destroyed, the dragon ended up flying out towards the North Sea where it ended up sinking and drowning. All in all, it had been an anticlimactic end.

The villagers, in their ignorance, had simply thought that had been his intention from the start. Hah, no, he wasn't capable of planning anything that far in advance. As time went by, the villagers
grudgingly realized he was not there to kill them, stake them, or whatever else they thought he would do, and starting warming up, slightly. However, with his red hair, most could not really take him too, too lightly. They apparently thought he was Scottish, but his eyes were too slanted to be a normal European. So then they thought he was a demon Scot, risen from Hell to spurn them all. So, he went from Dragon Vanquisher to Scot Demon.

Shirou sighed. Now, he was just known as Errand Boy, though the old people still called him Scot Demon on occasion.

He knew that he should have moved on from Tryst, even if he had wanted to help out. Who knew what was going on with Arturia, or if she was in danger. Wait, no. She was always in danger, it was just a matter of how much. He wanted to leave, he truly did, but he felt like there was a reason he had to stick around for a while longer.

Shirou turned around, having cut all of the vegetables and the steak. "Ceri, is all the stuff ready to go?"

"Yes," she replied, looking over at him from the cooking spit. "The water is boiling for you in the pot, Ro."

"Great. Let's get started."

Ceri pulled Shirou by the hand towards a large hill a kilometer or so away from Tryst. She had pulled at him the entire way through, but the temperature had sunken sharply within the past week since they had returned from Hwol. His breath came out in white puffs of air each time and he shivered a bit, wanting to sit and do nothing next to the fire instead of venturing out into the cold.

"Ceri, what's going on?" Shirou complained while he followed her to the top of the hill. "It's cold. I swear that it's like less than ten degrees out here. I'm freezing."

"Just a moment," she chastised him, hands on her hips. "This won't take long. I just want to show you something."

It was already dark, so dark that it was difficult to see much. However, the sight Shirou saw when they made it to the top made him gasp out with pleasure.

The moon glittered down on the faraway ocean, causing each wave and crest to shine brightly through the pitch dark night. He watched, with his archer eyes amplified, as the waves rolled over and over, crashing into the beach sand with a gentle rumble. He couldn't hear it, of course, but he imagined that the sound would definitely be gentle. It was odd, having come from Japan, but he had never actually been to the ocean before – not even when he moved to Britain. He simply hadn't really been interested in going to the beach, and didn't think he really deserved to enjoy life much anyway back then.

Shirou frowned slightly. Beyond this hill, barely some fifty kilometers away, was Saxon land, and just beyond that was their home territory. Tryst, Hwol, and Perc really were incredibly close to the enemy, but he knew they were far too proud to move away. As Ceri had put it, that was the land their fathers and forefathers before them had worked so hard to build up, so they had a duty to ensure everything stayed as it was, come what may.

He ground his teeth slightly. Shirou just couldn't understand the importance of pride and duty that every single person in this time period stressed so much. Something like pride shouldn't force you to put your life in danger knowingly, especially when there were other ways to achieve the same
thing. Saber's ridiculous pride and desire to see things through on her own terms had caused him no end of trouble, and if she could have just sucked it up a few times, neither of them would have gotten kicked around so much. Her pride though, had been the only thing she'd had left after losing both her country and her people. Perhaps, it was the same thing for these people – maybe their town was all they had left to live for. If so, could he really say they were so stupid for believing what they did? He had his pride, too, as a man, although that was comparing apples to oranges.

Shirou was snapped out of his train of thought when he felt something wrap around his neck. He looked down at Ceri in front of him, blinking a few times as she smiled back at him. Shirou touched the cloth around his neck, feeling the thickness and warmth from it.

"Ceri..." he started, stopping when she shook her head.

"No, this is a present from me to you. You've truly been a godsend, Ro, no, Shi-ro-u. Shirou. I really was lonely and you have brightened up my life so much lately... I am not good at thanking people with words, so, I worked really hard to make sure you would have this in time for the cold weather."

Shirou looked down at the knitted scarf, closing his eyes as he tilted his head back. There it was again, that feeling that he couldn't express. He was gracious, but...did he truly deserve this kind of present, when he'd only brought danger upon the village? His fists clenched tightly and he gritted his teeth. This was too much.

Ceri jolted forward slightly, her eyes wide before she closed them with a soft sigh. Taking a couple steps forward towards Shirou, she wrapped her arms around him, causing him to stiffen up.

"Shirou," she sighed out, burying her head in his shirt. "Those who come in contact with you are blessed, more than anyone else. I don't know why you hate yourself, but I plead that you not follow my example and look toward the future as a new life, instead of focusing so much on the past. The chains of the past will only drag you down to the depths of Hell with them, and once you get that far, there will be no chance of escape for you."

Shirou opened his eyes, looking at the moon as Ceri continued speaking.

"Shirou, I know this might be too much for me to ask of you, but I want you to stay and be one with these people. I may hate them, but you... You are too good for that. Much too good. Their ignorance blinds them, but you can make them see. I ask that you stay, and protect them as I have been unable to. They deserve that much."

"Ceri, I..."

Shirou looked back down at her, ready to tell her that he couldn't do something like that when he noticed it. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her off of him, staring into her eyes. He felt his heart stop when he saw her beautiful green eyes glazed over, a smile frozen on her face.

"Ceri...? Ceri? Ceri!"

He shook her back and forth a bit, before turning her around to look at the arrow embedded into her back. His teeth clacked a bit as his lips started to tremble. Shirou's eyes widened and his hands started to shake as he gripped her shoulders tighter.

"Ceri! Ceri, Ceri, wake up! Wake up, Ceri!"

He heard the whisper of an arrow flying past him before he saw it. Turning back away from the fallen Ceri in his arms, Shirou looked down at the arrow lodged into the grass and dirt.
Ah, so that was it...

Ceri had been killed by the enemy...

The Saxons had killed Ceri...

She was dead, now...

He laid down her body, looking over the ridge at the now obvious troop of fifty coming his way. Shirou felt his blood start boiling, his anger over losing Ceri to such a stupid situation causing him to lose hold of rational thought.

"You killed her," he muttered, his golden-brown eyes flashing as a switch flipped from within him.

He heard the sound of armor clanking as the enemy started running up the hill to take care of him as well.

"You," he murmured softly, anger beginning to peak as he swirled around with two long swords in his hands, "KILLED HER!"

The two soldiers must have thought him to be helpless and incapable of battle as Shirou's swords easily sliced through the breaches in their armor, effectively killing them. Shirou didn't even bat an eye as the two men fell at his feet – his eyes were on the enemies roaring ahead towards the town.

"NO, I won't let you!" he screamed out, thrusting a hand forward with several swords appearing over his head. "You'll die here, by my hands!"

Several men at the vanguard turned around when they heard blood-curdling screams as soldiers died behind them. They looked up at the hill to see a man with flowing red tresses and golden-brown eyes silhouetted by the shining moon behind him. A few of the fifty men took a step back, some mumbling of magicians as they saw one sword after another suddenly appear in the air above the redhead. Had they been able to see Shirou's expression, they might have run away without even considering striking back.

"Archers, take him down!" cried one man, the apparent leader of the group. "Britain will be ours!"

Then several archers immediately took aim and let out a barrage of arrows. Shirou raised a hand as five swords sped forward, easily slicing through the iron arrows and piercing each archer through the slits in their helmets.

The leader hesitated before pointing his sword up at the red demon, shouting,

"Charge!"

Shirou simply stared down at them, his gaze cold as he clenched the two swords in his hands. He didn't need any special tricks to take any of them. The bugs were swarming towards him like gnats to a flame – he needed only apply some pesticide to rid himself of them.

"Not a single one of you is leaving this place alive," he warned softly, raising the sword in his right hand straight up.

The oncoming soldiers rushed him, and he let loose a toothy grin, eyes burning as he yelled,

"Now die!"

The swords tilted down before plunging through the air, slamming into one soldier after another
and sending them flying back down the hill. Shirou created so many swords that three or four swords would hit each surprised soldier, killing them instantly. Bending down close to the ground, Shirou rushed down the hill, his feet pounding against the ground as he leapt up into the air. The leader stared as Shirou flew down and couldn't even raise his sword to block as Shirou slammed the swords through the man's chainmail.

"You bastards... I'll kill every last one of you if I have to..." Shirou growled out, his hands still shaking as he forced his anger back. "I'll make you suffer..."

"You won't have the chance," the leader gasped out, blood spurtng out of his mouth as he attempted to talk. "We're just the reconnaissance team... There are more than five hundred men on their way here... You can't stop them all..."

"You bastards!" Shirou shouted, plunging the swords in further as he grew even angrier.

*The chains of the past will only drag you down to the depths of Hell with them, and once you get that far, there will be no chance of escape for you.*

Shirou's head popped up as Ceri's words rang through his mind. He looked down at the soldier had just killed, seeing the man's eyes staring back at him, cold and lifeless.

"Ah!" Shirou cried out, falling backwards and pushing himself away from the body until he felt his back hit something else. Shirou looked back behind him at another soldier who had fallen by his hand, the projected weapon already having long vanished.

"Ah..."

He looked around him at the fallen bodies of all of the soldiers. He stood up quickly, his face stark with terror at what he had done – he'd killed another human being! He'd killed, and hadn't cared at all as he'd done so! His mouth gaped open at the destruction before him, his right eye twitching as he realized what all he had done. Grasping at his head with his hands, he took in deep breaths, knowing he couldn't turn back time. He'd killed people...

Shirou had never killed another human being before. Demons, corporeal spirits, sure, but actual humans? This was...what was he supposed to do now? He was supposed to save people, not hurt them. What kind of superhero would he become if he lost his senses and killed without discrimination? No, Shirou was not that type of person. Ceri had died, but...they were the enemy. Of course they would attack the first citizen they saw.

No, he would not make excuses for them. They deserved to die. No, they didn't deserve to die, they were just...

They were the enemy.

They weren't his enemies.

They were her enemies.

That made them his enemies.

Shirou's hands fell from down to his sides as he finally calmed down. Yes, they were her enemy, so he would've had to kill people like them at some point. It's just that it happened sooner than he had thought, and at his own discretion. He covered his face with his right hand, sighed once, and opened his weary eyes.
"More are on their way. I have to warn the village... But before that, one last thing."

Shirou walked slowly back up the hill where he had just enjoyed the sight with the first friend he had made in this time period. He stopped just short of where her body was, looking down at it with little emotion on his face. If he'd been more attentive, he could have saved her, but because he was still lacking, she had to die to make him understand his position better.

Wordlessly projecting a shovel, he walked past Ceri's body and dug the shovel into the hard ground. He shoveled one pile of dirt after another, never saying a word nor thinking a single thought. He wasn't able to do anything for her when she had been alive, and now he would never have the chance to pay her back for everything she had done for him. Building her a grave overlooking the view she had loved so much was the least he could do.

Shirou pulled himself out of the hole, and walked back to Ceri's body.

"I wish I could bury you next to him, Ceri. But I'm afraid this is the best I can do for you."

He picked up her cold body, the body that had been hugging him less than an hour before, and gripped it tightly. Shirou turned back to the hole, jumping down into it and lying down her body in the dirt. He didn't have anything to wrap her in, and didn't have enough time to make a coffin, so he could only return her to the earth and hope she would be happy enough with that. After laying her down, he pulled himself back out of the pit and after making one last glance at her, started shoveling the dirt back into the hole.

Fifteen minutes passed before he was finished entirely, and he patted the ground a few times with the shovel, ensuring it was packed enough. Shirou dematerialized the shovel, and turned his back on the grave. His eyes closed and he began to walk away when he heard,

"Thank you, Ro..."

Shirou's eyes widened and his head spun back to stare behind him. His shoulders dropped when he realized she wasn't there, and that she really was dead. Gritting his teeth, he clenched his hand into a fist and aimed the fist at Ceri's grave.

"I promise you, no, I vow to you, that I will protect the villages with my life. I will not let a single person be harmed!"

He turned back around, expression determined as he walked back down the hill, the moonlight casting its glow over him all the while.
Arc I: Trials and Errors 4

Five days. That was all the time Tryst had had left to prepare for the oncoming assault of the Saxons.

When Shirou had made it back to town, he had immediately gone to the head of the militia posted in Tryst, warning him of attack. At first, the man had simply laughed at him, thinking the foreigner had told a very interesting, though wrongly placed, joke. When Shirou had told him to simply check the large hill overlooking the ocean in the distance, the chief had seemed curious, but not enough to venture out there himself.

The chief sent ahead two men to see to the hill, only to find out an hour later as they ran back, their expressions panicky, that Shirou had indeed been telling the truth. The chief had only frowned before quickly sending an urgent letter back to Hwol to the head chief to see what their next move would be. Within hardly a few hours, a notice came back, notifying the chief that they were to immediately prepare for battle. A messenger would be sent from Tryst pleading for reinforcements from Camelot, though since none of the three villages had made a treaty with the king, the chances that their pleas would be met would be quite low.

Starting that day, no villager was allowed to leave the village grounds, and the militia preferred that they stay locked up inside of their houses until the danger had been assuaged. However, the people still had to go out to get vegetables from the farms for eating purposes, so one guard was posted to each person who left their home. From what Shirou could tell, there were around twenty guards posted in Tryst, supposedly another twenty in Perc, and thirty in Hwol. He knew that wouldn't be near enough to contain the oncoming army, and had been preparing for the attack for the entire five days himself.

Shirou had been sleeping in Ceri's house off and on, replenishing his magical energy for the upcoming battle, but there was only so much he could do. Aside from concentrating on his projection technique, and patrolling the village every once in a while, there was nothing he could do. Five days passed in this fashion.

On the fifth day, Shirou woke up to the clanging of the village bell warning of an attack. Shirou jumped out of bed quickly, already dressed and ready for action as he opened the door to the house and dashed out into the street. He was soon met with chaos – women were screaming, children were crying, and men were howling as more than one hundred Saxon soldiers stormed through the streets. He hesitated only a moment as he saw one soldier stab a spear into the belly of a child, laughing as he kicked the dead body away from him.

Kanshou and Bakuya were in his hands before he even realized it, and he sped forward at a group of soldiers trying to break down the door to the blacksmith's shop.

"Alan!" he yelled, dashing into the middle of the group and spinning quickly enough to slash the necks of three men.

"Alan, come out! They're here!"

Shirou flipped back through the air to narrowly dodge a sword swept his way, and quickly sped forward, dematerializing his twin swords and instead projecting a long broadsword. Using his momentum, he spun around as if on a fulcrum and slammed the sword into the nearest soldier. As soon as the soldier had fallen, Shirou immediately ducked instinctively as a spear slashed the air right where his head had been.
"Damn!" he cursed, jumping to the side and running down the street.

He wasn't a fighter – at least, not a close-quarters one. If he was going to fight, it had to be from a distance.

Shirou dropped down the ground and rolled as three more soldiers moved in to attack. Skidding around in a semi-circle, he back-flipped again and spun his arms around in an effort to regain his balance.

"Damn it!" he yelled again, jumping back away from another sword slice, and then quickly dodging a spear thrust.

The enemy was everywhere, and the screams he had heard initially suddenly became starkly quiet, and Shirou realized that the village was quieting down only because people were dying, not because the soldiers were. The militia were, however, doing their job well. For every one or two men Shirou might have been able to take down, the militia cutting down at least three to four men. There had been nearly a hundred men on the Saxon side who had made it into the village, but with the militiamen being as experienced as they were, the numbers were reduced dramatically.

Shirou barely blocked a spear with his broadsword before two of the soldiers in front of him suddenly fell forward, arrows embedded in the backs of their heads. The third soldier ran through the gap as their bodies fell, thrusting his spear again. Timing it right, Shirou slapped the spear down with his sword, ran up the spear and delivered a powerful kick to the soldier's face. The soldier stumbled back a few steps, but just as he regained his balance, Shirou flew forward again, slammed another kick into the man's chest, jumped up and delivered the final blow with the sword.

He sighed as the last man fell, and raised his head to look down the street at the destruction. He supposed they had been lucky – not much damage to the buildings had been done, and only a few people had lost their lives. Stepping over the dead Saxon bodies, Shirou walked forward, coming to a stop right before the slain bodies of the child from earlier and his mother. They were both from the bakery down the street – the woman's husband had died a number of years earlier from disease, and she had continued raising her son alone. They had been good people who sometimes would pass him a loaf of bread, on the house. He closed his eyes for a moment, clapping his hands together to pray for their safe travel to Heaven.

"May you rest in peace," he murmured, turning away as a few militiamen came walking towards him.

They gave the bodies a glance, and each one bowed their head slightly, before looking back up at Shirou.

"So the Demon of Scotland can fight," one remarked.

"How many times do I have to tell that that's not my–"

"We're concerned about Perc and Hwol, and need someone to check things out."

"That's not my problem," Shirou said back. "I need to go check on a few things here and make sure Alan and some others are still okay."

"Alan and his son Alec are dead. They were stupid enough to try fending off soldiers on their own before we could get a handle on the situation," one man replied, his tone frosty. "And it is your problem because you're the person we're sending."

Shirou glared at them. "What, are you going to make me go?"
"We're the ones who saved your hide back then, kid. If you can't pay us back with your life, at least do something worthwhile to us."

The other man chortled. "Besides, our hands are tied here for the moment. We may have taken down a hundred of them or so, but they'll be back, in force. We need to make sure Perc and Hwol aren't suffering any more casualties than we have, plus, if Hwol's okay, we'd like to request some extra men to secure this village.

"Why aren't there more of you anyway?" Shirou questioned, tugging on his torn-up tunic. He had traded out his newer clothes for his old ratty ones because he didn't want to ruin one of the gifts given to him by the one person who mattered most to him in that village.

"Quality's what matters most, boy. That's why we're all still alive and the enemy is dead. Think about it, but do that while you're running to Perc."

One of the bowmen barked at Shirou like a dog, causing him to jump back with surprise. Shirou clicked his tongue, unable to hide his look of anger as the bowmen laughed. He turned around and walked away, heading down an intersecting street going toward Perc.

"Fuckers," he muttered, not at all happy with being their little gopher.

He wanted to stay and fight the enemy, too, but not because he had any interest in killing more people, but because that was the only way to keep the people of Tryst safe. He knew killing to save others was, in a way, counterproductive and would only lead to more problems down the way, like hatred, vengeance, and even more killing. However, Shirou knew that in this time period, at least, there weren't many other ways of negotiating. In his honest opinion, fighting for the use of more land, when there was already plenty for the Saxons to use as it was, was ridiculous. This could be because he was also from a country with a very small land mass, where every bit of space was used to the most of the people's abilities.

Of course, it wasn't as if Japan wasn't guilty of committing heinous crimes in an interest to gain more land. Japan, too, had conquered over other lands, hurt, brutalized, humiliated, tortured, and killed an incredible number of people, and had been beaten back as a result. However, the Japanese had reflected on their actions, and looked toward the future with an interest in bettering their society and becoming a country of good standing overall. It had simply taken the entire world to beat some sense into them.

Shirou looked down at his palms, frowning all the while. In this time period, though, the world wasn't anywhere near as united as it was in the future, and there wouldn't be any other world nations working to help Britain regain the land the Saxons were trying to control. All they had was a girl acting as a king, leading a small army with only a small supply of hope on the side. In this time period, land wasn't just a way to measure wealth and stability – it was also a source of pride. The pride of the people as they tilled it, farmed it, cared for it, gave back to it with their death, that was what the land was worth in this time.

When Saber had first come to him, he thought he had understood, to a point, why she was so prideful over a land and people that had turned their backs on her and spurned her. For him, a man born in a world where pride came in what you owned or were capable of doing as opposed to what your roots were, it simply wasn't something he could clearly understand. After living in the sixth century for a while though, and after watching the people of Tryst live their lives, he started to realize that what one gained wasn't things, as the villagers certainly didn't have much claim as far as that was concerned.

Their pride was in their line of trade – a baker was proud to be a baker, because it had its own
particular strength. Bakers provided bread for people to enjoy their meals with. That was something to be proud over. Farmers provided the food, food materials, and other various things necessary for life anywhere. Ranchers provided milk and goods, beef, pork, and often times, chicken. Sewers, tailors, and armorers provided an assortment of clothing for the people to wear. Hell, even the feral cats were useful as they would often catch the rats that scurried everywhere and limited the sources of disease.

While Shirou couldn't say that he was particularly proud of his projection and strengthening skills, he supposed that, in a way, he was proud to be part of something that was hardly even noted down in history books. King Arthur may have supposedly been only a legend, but here Shirou was, in a history he never thought he would ever glimpse, making, well, history. He was proud that he could lend a hand in some way to the fight, even if it meant he had to kill to save. He was proud he had become such an integral part of someone's life, even if she was no longer around. Lastly, he was proud, and hopeful, that he would become a strength to someone who had done so much for him in the future. It would happen – he just had to figure out how to go about meeting her.

Now that Shirou thought about it though, what was he supposed to do even if he did meet her? He had already considered this situation several times over the past few months, but each time, he came up short of an actual plan. Even if he were to, say, find Camelot and get into the town, how would he go about attracting her attention? Myrus had told him not to be too flashy with his powers, but then, nothing short of taking down a knight would make him stand out. Maybe he could act as a worker who took provisions into the castle, and work his way up from there? No, that would take far too much time. Who knew how much time he had left before Mordred’s betrayal.

Okay, fine, well, maybe he could go up against Morgana? No, that was a ridiculous idea – Rin would’ve slapped him for that one. How could he, a novice mage, even dare consider going up against a pro who rivaled Merlin himself? Well, maybe he could go seek help from the Lady of the Lake? No, that was a double-edged sword, and he didn’t even know where the lake was. Okay, how about saving different towns from dragons and making a name for himself that way? No, that was stupid. He couldn't even kill the one that attacked Tryst. Fine, then maybe he should just defeat all of the Saxons and free Britain for good! Well, no, that would require actually becoming a fighter strong enough to do so.

A-a-a-and I'm back to where I started. I'll have to think harder on this later.

He was so deep into his thoughts that when he finally looked up see the village of Perc from half an hour's walk away, there was no missing the long trails of smoke filtering up into the dirty-grey sky. It seemed almost as if there was a halo of smoke swirling around Perc, swarming it. Shirou gaped over at the burning village, swallowing hard as his heart began to beat harder and faster. He began to walk forward faster, bit by bit, his gait becoming a jog, and then eventually turning into a flat-out run. Shirou saw his breath come out in several puffs as he gulped in air while running towards Perc. What would have normally taken thirty minutes sank down to close to ten when he ran at his fastest speed.

Shirou slid into the town, seeing the destruction to not just buildings, but the streets as well. His gaze looked all around him, and he pulled up the neck of his shirt to cover his nose from the density of the smoke. Everything was burning so much, that it was hard to see much of anything any further than a few meters away without using his archer eyes. Shirou took a small step backwards, unsure of where to go, when he heard a scream from behind him. He spun around, immediately projecting Kanshou and Bakuya, and sped forward through the billowing smoke. He broke through the barrier of smoke, with it swirling around him as he jumped out.
Right in front of him, barely twenty meters ahead, he could just barely make out the forms of several people. He could tell there were several women within the group as few of them screamed for their lives. Grounding himself quickly, Shirou sped forward as fast as he could manage, slamming his body into a soldier with his sword raised high in the air. The soldier fell down against the few others with him as Shirou rolled across the ground, before quickly rising again.

Shirou cocked back Bakuya in his right hand and threw it hard at the three soldiers, watching as it swirled around, angling back by cutting through two of the men's necks and flying straight back to his hand. Before Bakuya had even come back, Shirou had already dashed forward, sliding to a rolling stop before using his momentum to jump up and execute a flying lateral spin through the air. As he was coming down, Shirou again used his rotational force to heave Bakuya, strengthened within barely a second, at the remaining soldier, the sword cutting through the man's armor like a knife through butter.

Slamming down onto the ground, Shirou jumped back up, grabbed his twin sword and spun around, eyes darting back and forth for more enemies. He heard the weeping coming from behind him, and frowned a bit. Turning around slowly, Shirou looked down at the four women and six children cowering against the side of a torn apart building. He frowned a bit more deeply when he saw how terrified the children were as they looked up at him with big, wide eyes. Clearing his throat, he asked,

"Are there any other survivors around?"

One of the women licked her lips and pulled her two children in closer towards her. A young brunette peered up at him, distrust obvious in her gaze. "If you're going to kill us, then be done with it already!"

"I just saved your life," Shirou retorted, dismissing her words quickly. "I'm not here to hurt you – I'm from Tryst. I was sent to check out the situation here in Perc to make sure everyone is okay."

Turning his head to look around, he continued, "Though, obviously, things are a lot worse here than expected..."

"The militia protecting us was killed off long before," spoke up a blonde, her voice deep and hoarse, probably from the smoke. "We were barely able to hide away, but when those...brutes destroyed our hiding place, we were forced to come here."

Shirou nodded. All right, he now had a better understanding of the situation, but that put him in a bind. There were undoubtedly more soldiers still running around, but he had to protect these people. Would it be a good idea to hunt down the soldiers first, or secure the safety of the villagers first? Even if he wanted to make sure they were safe, where could he possibly hide them? Most of the buildings were still on fire, or on the verge of collapsing.

"Are there any more survivors like you guys?"

The silence that met him was answer enough. He had a good idea of what had happened – most of the women and children who hadn't been killed off initially were hidden away while the men and militia fought off the enemy. Shirou betted that the enemy count was more than Perc had bargained for, and they'd been overrun. That would mean the men would have all been massacred, and that it was only a matter of time before the women and children would be discovered. Judging by the condition of the area, Shirou was of the opinion that most of the women and children had been caught along the way, and that these ten people had been lucky to last as long as they had.

Well, even so, what was he supposed to do with them? Perc obviously wasn't safe, and Tryst wasn't
in any better of a situation. Maybe it would be better to try to hide them away in some kind of
cubby hole somewhere where the soldiers were least likely to look, but then again, what if they
were caught? Shirou would have never been able to forgive himself if anything had happened
because he didn't take the right precautions.

"All right," he said, making up his mind and turning to the ten survivors. "I'm going to take you
guys to Hwol. We should get going."

The blonde who spoken up before hesitated. "What? But that's so far away. We'll never make it."

"Well, you can stay here, but I can't guarantee you'll be very safe. Hwol's militia count is bigger,
and it's way further away from the border than Tryst or Perc. I doubt as many soldiers went there,
so it's got to be a lot safer than here, at least."

"You... Are you sure you can get us there safely?" asked the brunette, still unable to give him the
benefit of the doubt.

"I gave an oath to someone that I would protect every single person to the best of my ability,"
Shirou explained, still looking around for possible enemies. "I may not be the best fighter out there,
but I won't let anything harm you while you're in my care. Now, come on. We've got to get out of
here."

One by one, the women and children stood up, warily looking at him. He nodded once, turning
away from them and looking down the street. He gripped his twin daggers tightly, raising his chin
as he readied himself for the journey ahead.

"No matter what happens," he warned them softly, "don't ever stop running. I'll take care of every
enemy I see, so don't even pay attention to them and keep running."

With that said, Shirou ran off down the street, briefly checking back to make sure the women were
keeping up. Grunting slightly when he realized the children might hold them back a bit, he slowed
his pace and looked straight in front of him.

Left, right, up, oblique left, oblique right, upper right, upper left, in front, maybe behind? No, left
again, right again, were they above?

Shirou kept looking around him as they finally escaped Perc and headed down toward Hwol. They
were making good time, and there weren't any enemies in front of them at all. It would be nice if
their luck could –

He barely heard just the smallest clink of metal before he turned his head around to glance behind
all of them. Just as he saw a soldier running up behind one of the children, maybe a child of nine or
ten, Shirou quickly stopped, shifted his weight, spun around and dashed around the group to parry
and counterattack the Saxon warrior.

His own blow was blocked and he spiraled around, lashing out a foot and slamming it into man's
side. He launched Kanshou around to the side, and sliced through the air at the soldier with
Bakuya. The soldier jumped back far out of Shirou's reach before yelling out when Kanshou
delved into the back of his right leg. Shirou sped forward, jumping and slamming his foot against
the left flank of the man, sending the enemy tumbling down. Repositioning his grip on Bakuya, he
slammed the sword into the man's neck, grabbed Kanshou, and ran away again to meet up with the
group.

As he had told them to do, they had continued running forward even as he was fighting the enemy
at their heels. He was about to run up and take point when an arrow flitted past him and sank into
the ground right behind the older child. Shirou grunted again as he shifted to the side quickly and
batted away the next arrows out of the air with his swords. He cut through a third arrow before
quickly dematerializing the swords, projecting a bow and arrow, fueling his archer eyes with
magic, and taking aim.

Shirou's first arrow redirected the trajectory of an enemy's arrow before he quickly fire off his own
attack, aiming the arrow to fly directly through the eye slits of the man's armor. Changing targets,
Shirou projected two more arrows, and let them zoom straight at two more soldiers, hitting one in
his left thigh and the other in the gap between his torso and shoulder armor. The one with the leg
injury fell to the ground hard, but the one he'd hit in the shoulder was still running towards him.
Shirou strengthened an arrow, set it in his bow, drew back the drawstring and let it soar to strike
the man in his chest, sending him flying back against the ground.

Seeing three to four more soldiers charging out of the smoke, Shirou quickly loaded another arrow
before something caught his eyes. Recalculating, he turned his aim over to the supports of one of
the larger building, strengthened his arrow, and sent it flying. The arrows zipped straight through
the heavy, wooden support of a tall, guard tower, completely smashing apart the support beam. The
heavy tower buckled, and he supposed the groan of the wood must have caught the attention of the
soldiers. They turned back to look up once before quickly trying to run away out of its reach.
Shirou readied five more arrows, letting them fly quickly to land in front of the fleeing men,
making them hesitate just long enough for the tower to fall down atop of them.

Shirou turned away just before the tower touched down on them, instead running forward to catch
up with the others. He readied more arrows as the group ran, slipping three into the bow's slots. His
eyes glanced left and right, with an occasional glance back to ensure they weren't being followed
by anyone else.

Pushing forward, he ran to the front of the group, taking notice of their conditions. They were
normal women, who didn't indulge into too much exercise apart from their specific trades, but he
knew for a fact that every job in the sixth century seemed to require remarkable endurance and
stamina. In a way, it was enough that they were able to run for so long – it had already been twenty
minutes – without stopping. A trip from Perc to Hwol was about two hours under normal
circumstances, and that was while walking. A jogging or running pace would knock that down to
approximately an hour, maybe less. He only hoped that they would be able to make it there in one
piece – the women were starting to slow down from exhaustion. Shirou wasn't sure how much
longer they could go for before they had to rest completely. The children were already beyond
exhausted – luckily, only the older children were the ones running, with the younger ones being
carried on their mother's backs.

He heard a yell come from behind them, and quickly spun around, leveling his aim at the
disturbance. Coming up fast were another ten soldiers – where were they coming from? – with
their weapons raised as if in declaration. Shirou quickly drew back his three arrows, aimed, and
released the drawstring as fast as he could. Three soldiers fell, but that left him with seven others.

Just think of them as demons! You've killed a bunch of those before! Pretend that Rin's behind you,
ready to kill you with a Gandr Shot if you're stupid enough to mess up!

The bow disappeared from Shirou's hands and just as he was about to project Kanshou and Bakuya
again, a somewhat evil and demented idea flickered through his head. He'd have to be quick about
it – two of them couldn't technically exist in the same time. Shirou was sick of these people though,
and that weapon would be enough to kill them all in one fell swoop. Besides, who would believe
that he possessed something like that? There was no way he would get into trouble over that.
A long, golden sword materialized into his hands, the blue grip fitting in his grasp easily. The golden guard glimmered under the rays of the setting sun and he drew the blade back, his prana flowing through his body and into the sword.

"EX–," he began, mimicking how she used to always say the command phrase. He raised the sword until it was over his right shoulder, ready to be slashed down.

Almost as soon as he was ready to launch the attack, he realized it was really stupid of him to be pulling this stunt. He didn't have nearly the prana that woman did, plus he was just being ridiculously stupid, period.

"CALIBER!" he shouted, sweeping the golden blade down across the nearest soldier and letting the built up prana burst from the sword and slash through every remaining soldier.

A faint golden light filtered up through to the sky, glimmering slightly before fading from sight. Shirou flopped down onto his butt on the ground, breathing hard as he realized what he had just done. *I just copied her attack... A very bad version of her attack... I'm wiped.*

He thought he now had a better clue of just how strong a Servant Saber had been. He'd only been able to pull off an attack worth maybe fifty of his prana, and it had barely killed seven soldiers. Her attacks usually ranged in the two hundreds, and leveled buildings, rivers, and maybe they could even level mountains. Shirou gasped for air as he breathed in and out. His archer eyes were still activated, but he couldn't see anyone anywhere near them.

Back when he was training with Rin, she had always become so frustrated with his lack of prana, that she had researched incessantly for ways of producing more than normal. Due to Shirou having so many circuits for a normal person, she had realized that he was capable of increasing his capacity, and had forced him into doing an incredible number of experiments; most experiments involved him drinking something and feeling sick for a week afterward.

"Technically, Shirou," Rin had begun, holding up her finger as she always did when about to enlighten him about something, "it shouldn't actually be possible to increase your natural output of od. It's simply something you're born with. What we're doing here is bending the laws of magic itself to accommodate for our own selfish goals. Well, I don't really consider that a problem, but this could actually kill you. It will also provide me with a decent source of research for my final exam project."

"So, I'm just your guinea pig..."

"Ah, so you finally realized your position," she had countered with a small grin. "Don't worry though. I won't let you die. After all, you still owe me rent and for all of the gems I used to help you take out Berserker. You did promise to pay me for the rest of your life, if you recall."

Demon.

Shirou shuddered as he recalled her evil grin and the torture she had inflicted upon him. She had been a demon – a demon that luckily Sakura had never quite spawned into. Maybe it was good that she had been sent to the Matous, in a way. He couldn't imagine having two Rins together in the same town. That wouldn't have been good for his sanity.

At some point, she had finally recruited help from various "friends" of hers, and they had worked to increase his od output by around two to three hundred. It required him feeling and looking like death for a couple of months, but it did come into handy. He was able to project more and more, and it helped him create his Reality Marble more often than usual. It had also helped him keep up
with Rin when they were fighting out in the field. If she hadn't done all those experiments, there is no way he would have ever been able to take anything down, and there would have been no way to replicate Saber's attack at all.

Using his Servant's Noble Phantasm may have worn him out, but he couldn't help but reminisce over those two weeks she had been with him. Shirou couldn't remember being yelled at so much in his life, and all of it was done over a period of two weeks. She'd yelled at him for his recklessness, his inability to consider future actions, his inefficient manner of thinking, his ridiculous questions, — asking her for a super attack that would take out a Servant in a snap had seriously, seriously been a bad idea — and for his general incompetence. In a way, though, he really missed just hearing her yell at him. He missed seeing how happy she'd become when she ate something delicious, and how embarrassed she'd been after they had...

_I miss Saber..._

Shirou popped his head up, thinking that he was forgetting something. He cleared his thoughts quickly before a light bulb flashed on in his head.

"Oh crap, the villagers!" he shouted, coming to his senses.

He pushed himself up and spun around, ready to rush to their rescue. All of them had already stopped running though, simply staring at him with large eyes. Shirou frowned, his body complaining as he pushed himself up, and he looked back at them, somewhat hesitant.

"...Uh, hey guys...?"

The blonde woman stepped forward slightly, her hands clasped in front of her chest.

"Your Majesty?"

"What?" Shirou asked, his face blank. "Huh?"

All of the women, except for the one brunette who continued to glare at him, fell to their knees, bowing their heads.

"His Majesty has come to help us! Lord willing, how I have awaited this day!"

"What?" Shirou repeated, thoroughly confused.

"My apologies, Your Majesty. We were unaware that it was you, come to save us. Will you please forgive us for ever doubting you?"

"What?" This was the third time Shirou was forced to repeat his words.

"His Majesty has come to aid us!" another woman chimed in. "Children, what do you think you're doing? Bow down to the king who has come to save us all from the evil conquerors of another land!"

What were they going on about? The king was here? Who? Where?

Shirou looked around to see if he could see Saber anywhere, but all he saw was the smoke from Perc in one direction, and a bunch of prairieland everywhere else.

"Are you people stupid?" the brunette spoke up. "You think this weirdo is the king? Why would the king be all the way out here, _alone_, just to save some people who are too dumb to move away
from the border? Besides, the king was supposed to be a handsome young man, not some Scot
demon! And he definitely wouldn't be wearing peasant's clothing either!"

That part stung a bit. True, he was nowhere near the level of Saber's beauty, but still, did she have
to go that far? And what was this about them thinking that he was some sort of king? Nothing
about him screamed out "king".

"Who else but the king can wield the sword of Excalibur?" argued the blonde from before. "Only
one man is able to use that sword, or did you not just see that golden light? Who else could he be?"

"It's got to be a fake!"

"He even yelled out the word 'Excalibur'! What more evidence do you want, child?"

"No, she's right," Shirou was quick to say. "I'm not the king, I'm just..."

Ignoring the smirk on the brunette's face, he swear he saw something die within the eyes of the
other women and children. What was it?

Thinking back on it a bit, Shirou realized that these people had just lost everything that was
important to them: their town, their families, their work, their livestock, their lives, everything.
Even if Hwol was okay, and even if they did beat back the Saxons who had stormed through the
area, these people would never regain what was brutally snatched from them. It might not be such
a big deal at the moment, but once all the dust settled, their pain and fears would catch up with
them, leaving them with little to no hope for the future.

Hope. That's what it was that he saw dying bit by bit in their expressions.

In his time period, kings and such are simply figureheads that exist simply as an extension of
former times, but here... Here, the king really was everything. The king managed everything, and
made the country whole. The king took on the task of keeping the people safe, giving them reason
to look forward to another day, giving them hope. Just as the king could take away lives, he could
also give them back to the people. He was an essential existence to those in this time period, and
without him, the people would be lost.

But, Saber's not here, he reminded himself, his eyes closing. Who knew if the messenger had made
it as far as Camelot without incident? Who knew if Saber would ever make it in time to help them
purge the area? What was Shirou supposed to do, just let the people die never knowing if their
king even knew of their existence?

This is part of what it means to be a hero, Shirou thought to himself as he clenched his left fist.
These people need help, and I think I have the ability to do that. And, if the real king comes along,
then well... I'll figure that out later when it happens.

"I just...didn't want anyone to realize who I was. I came here in secret," Shirou muttered, though
loudly enough for the women to hear.

No. This was stupid. Who the hell was he kidding? Who would believe a lie like that anyway?
Besides, seriously, what would the real king do to him when she found out he was impersonating
her? This was stupid. He wasn't doing this.

Shirou was about to take back his words, again, until he glanced up at the women and saw their
faces slacken with relief. The brunette frowned at him suspiciously, but not even she could hide the
slight drop her shoulders made as her tension began to fade away. Another woman clutched at her
chest, genuine tears beginning to fall. A few of the younger children began to cry as well, though
they weren't actually aware of why their mothers seemed so happy. The blonde simply bowed over and over, whispering, "Thank you, my king, thank you!"

"We knew the king would not forsake us!"

"We will be triumphant in this battle!"

"The Lord has graced us so!"

"With this, we're saved!"

The brunette looked down at the women, grasped at her left arm gently with right hand, and shyly turned towards him. "You... You are truly the king?"

Shirou was a terrible liar. He couldn't lie to save his life. He knew this, so he decided that instead of a simple yes, he'd try:

"Only if you really choose to believe I am."

Oh, awesome. It even sounded cool! Which was good, because on a "cool" scale of one to ten, Saber always managed to score around five hundred or so.

"Then, I'll choose to believe that you are who you say you are," came the soft reply.

Shirou smiled a bit. Girls were girls, no matter what the time period. He was pleased, in a way, to see that her tough exterior was just a wall protecting her softer self. Then, with a small frown, Shirou took a step back to his oblique right, and looked back at the burning village in the distance.

"I will make sure to get you all to Hwol safely, but we have to move," he said, glancing back at them. "Have you rested enough?"

Each woman rose slowly, the children following soon after them. No words were traded between him and them, but even without saying anything, Shirou realized they were ready to follow him to Hell and back if it he demanded it. He felt his heart begin to pound harder as he realized the amount of responsibility that had just fallen onto his shoulders, and he gritted his teeth. It was a heavy responsibility to take on. Shirou turned once more to look at the burning village behind them, and to check to see if there were any other soldiers making their way towards to the group. Seeing nothing with his archer eyes, Shirou walked to the front of the group and took the lead.

"We're leaving now," he said softly. "Make sure to stay close, and remember what I said earlier. No matter what happens, keep running. I will keep you safe."

He started running forward, listening to the footsteps and brushing of clothing as the women began to follow him as well. Shirou was nervous – not only because he was trying to impersonate someone so far above his level it might as well have been in outer space, but because he had to make sure to project Excalibur more frequently now, instead of his usual twin swords. He wasn't a swordsman by any means, but if he ever did attempt to use any swords, he would always use two at a time. Having learned his fighting style from watching the back of Archer for a brief amount of time, he felt his body automatically adopt a dual-wielding technique. Shirou may have hated how his "future" self had turned out, but there was no denying that Archer had optimized his abilities to the best they could go.

While Shirou could manage two-handed swords somewhat okay, his mediocre technique would not do justice to Excalibur. Then again, there was also the issue of two identical weapons existing together in the same time. That wasn't technically possible, but perhaps it was possible since
Shirou's version was only a replica, not the genuine article. He frowned, realizing he would have to apologize to Saber whenever he finally met her, even if she wouldn't understand why. Then again, he didn't really want to explain that he had impersonated her – who knows how angry she might get if he did.

Looking up, Shirou narrowed his eyes as the group closed in on the town. They were about fifteen minutes away, but he could tell from this distance that Perc hadn't been the only village to have been alight with flames. Hwol was definitely in worse shape than even Perc had been, and he could barely tell out the clanging of a sword fight.

Suddenly, he felt his instincts scream out at him to stop, and barely within a moment, Shirou had Kanshou and Bakuya in his hands. He blocked an oncoming arrows before shifting his weight forward to send Bakuya flying through the air as fast as he could throw it. Shirou used Kanshou to knock another arrow out of the air and held out his right hand as his white sword came spiraling back, soaked with red. He flicked Bakuya to the side to shake off the blood and frowned as he readied himself for more oncoming soldiers.

Shirou glanced behind him, seeing that the women had intended to keep running, but their way was blocked by more soldiers branching out from Hwol. The redhead edged around the group, motioning silently that they back up in the direction they came from before they were all completely surrounded. He knew that as soon as took a fighting position, the real battle would begin, and he wanted to sure they were far out of reach before he began.

Looking both to his left, right, and directly in front of him, he counted around thirty soldiers. That was a lot more than he was really ready to take on. Honestly though, Shirou didn't have much of a choice if he planned to keep the villagers safe from harm as he'd promised. He crossed his blades, readying himself to attack the men opposite of him.

"I'm going to punch a hole through their lines," Shirou said aloud to the group behind him. "As soon as you think it's safe, get out of here and head to the village. I'll keep them busy."

He didn't wait for a response from them before dashing forward, reinforcing his tattered clothing as he readied his swords. He sped towards the group blocking the path going directly towards Hwol and slid down underneath their swords to land in the middle of the group. Then, he rose and, after dissipating his twin swords, rematerialized Excalibur again and spun in on his heels, slamming the golden sword into every man circled around him.

The men who were not slashed down took a few steps, not even paying any heed as the group of women and children ran slowly past them. Most of the men's eyes were on the sword Shirou was holding, looking both astounded and perplexed as Shirou grunted and shifted back into a fighting stance.

"That's the sword Excalibur – the one the Briton king owns!"

"What's the king doing all the way out here? I thought he was supposed to still be in his castle!"

"The king can't possibly be alone! His forces must have us surrounded! We must warn the rest of the troops!"

Shirou frowned, his eyes shifting left and right as the soldiers backed up. One soldier, who appeared the oldest of the entire lot, raised his sword and pointed it directly at Shirou.

"And what if the king was indeed stupid enough to come alone? Look at him – he is nothing but a boy, as the rumors had said! I say that we take his head here and now, and declare this war won!"
This wasn't good, Shirou slowly came to realize. The older man was raising the morale of all the others with his words – well, Shirou just had to eradicate the source of the danger before it grew to be too big. He adjusted his grip on the sword, bent down as he'd always seen Saber do, and burst forward, heading straight for the older man. The older soldier, while seemingly shocked that he had suddenly been targeted, managed to raise his sword to parry Shirou's forceful, upward slash.

Shirou jumped back quickly and then dashed forward once more, opening his guard as he released his left hand from the sword's grip and used his momentum to slice through the air at the man. Once again, the Saxon blocked his strike before following up with one of his own thrusts. Shirou quickly projected another sword in his left hand, wincing as it took the man's blow and shattered into several pieces. That had been his goal though, and Shirou once again grasped at Excalibur with both of his hands, planted his left foot forward to his oblique left, lifted the golden sword high over his head, and slashed down as hard and fast as he could manage.

It was an attack combination that would have never worked against someone of Saber's level, of course, but it was more than enough to work against grunts like these soldiers. The sword slammed into the base of the man's neck and sliced through his body diagonally, quickly killing him. As soon as Shirou had repositioned his grip on the sword again, he felt his torso duck down automatically, just barely missing a sword slicing across where his head had been.

Shirou dematerialized the golden sword and jumped forward into a somersault roll, quickly grounded himself, spun around, and flipped back a few times to create some distance. He wanted to take them out from a distance with his bow, but since the men kept rushing him, he wouldn't have enough time to line up his sights to take them out. Shirou barely dodged another thrust from a lance as he shuffled backward, his eyes flashing left and right. He hadn't taken a hit yet, but it was only a matter of time before his stamina ran dry.

Shirou quickly traced another sword to block another sword, only to have his hastily projected sword shatter again like his previous one. He didn't have enough time to thoroughly think up the composition of each weapon before another attack would come, that he would narrowly dodge.

"I never heard that the king could use magic!"

Shirou ducked down beneath another slash and dove forward into another somersault, quickly tracing the composition of the Bakuya. He raised it up just in time to block a downward slash from another swordsman, giving himself enough time to stand up and trace Kanshou as well. Parrying a blow coming from his right flank, Shirou leaned down on his left leg before springing to the side and landing a solid side kick on the soldier.

"Why is the king here?"

A different attack clanged against Shirou's clothing, denting it inwards and sending Shirou sprawling.

I need time! I can't defeat them all on my own like this!

Just as Shirou felt a icy shiver run down his spine as a soldier loomed over him, a barrage of arrows zipped forward, striking the three soldiers around him and taking them down. Shirou breathed in and out hard as he saw the three soldiers fall, and after swallowing, pushed himself back across the grass away from the rest of the soldiers coming towards him. They were too close – he didn't have enough time to get up and strike back!

"It's the king's reinforcements! They're coming!"
What? Shirou thought, taking his eyes off of the enemy and looking back behind him.

He saw the glinting of silver metal as a few men rushed past him and engaged the enemy. Another man dashed forward and quickly offered Shirou a hand to lift him up from the ground. Shirou stared at the other man – he wasn't part of the king's guard, but was just one of the militiamen from Hwol. As soon as Shirou was on his feet, the man let go of his arm and slid in front of him, sword bared.

"The evacuees informed us of your situation, Your Majesty! We will take them down!"

Shirou stood in place, frozen as he heard the man's words. So, the women had made it to Hwol safely and apparently relayed that the "king" was fighting the enemy on his own right outside the village. That meant they were okay. Feeling the burden on his shoulders lift slightly, he frowned and glared in front of him at the remaining enemy. No, he wasn't finished yet – not until the last man fell.

He had enough od in him to produce another weapon, but only just. He wanted to use his dual swords, but if he had to keep up appearances with these troops, then he had to produce Excalibur. The issue with that was Excalibur required a significant amount of prana to form, and he wouldn't have another shot until he rested a bit. Well, it was now or never. Who knew if he would even have a "later" if the enemy in front of him was not taken care of beforehand.

Golden light once again swirled around in his hands, forming into the glorious Excalibur for everyone to see. Dashing past the men who had come to his aid, he zeroed in on two men hanging back from the others, ducked down right in front of them, and let loose an upward slash that crossed over both of them, effectively slicing through their armor and putting them down.

With Shirou's attack, the offenders were eliminated, and the redhead was left breathing in and out hard, his energy nearly depleted. The sword in his hands slowly vanished into nothingness, and he turned his tired gaze over to the militiamen who looked at him with steady gazes. The man who had helped him up walked towards him, bowing slightly.

"Your Majesty, we have come to your aid. However, we must respectfully ask that you instead venture to Tryst instead, as we will be sure to keep Hwol safe from the Saxon curs. Rest assured that we will fulfill our duties as expected."

Shirou grunted slightly, not sure how to respond. "Yeah, but, if I can help out Hwol somehow..."

"I will have five men escort you to Tryst," the man said, interrupting Shirou. "Please, leave Hwol in our capable hands."

"Uh, okay," Shirou agreed hesitantly.

It was actually good that they didn't want him to help them fight in Hwol. His energy was completely spent, and he wasn't sure he even had enough od left to augment his eyes, much less project another sword – at least, not without burning his circuits out, he didn't.

Five men stood at attention, bowing in front of him before forming a circle around him.

"Shall we be off, Your Majesty?"

Shirou nodded, his breathing still harsh as he pushed himself to walk forward. The man who had saved him before nodded at him as he passed, a small smile on his face. Shirou wasn't sure how to react to that, so he just ignored it since that was easier.
"May your journey be a safe one, King of Britain."

Shirou gave the man an odd look, feeling like there was underlying message the militiaman had wanted to express within his phrasing. He turned away and continued walking forward with the five men guiding him. They had a long way to walk, and Shirou wasn't sure he would make it, what with how tired he was and all.

It wasn't until the group of six was nearly twenty minutes away from Tryst that Shirou began to fall back. His feet kept catching on rocks or patches of grass, and he would trip a bit or stumble. He had help up for that long, but his stamina had finally run its course, and he simply couldn't keep up with the militiamen as much anymore. His stumbling began to happen so often that one of the militiamen was forced to hold onto his elbow as they continued forward at their snail pace.

"Your Majesty, I advise caution while you walk."

There it was – that phrase he had gotten so sick of hearing. He couldn't take it anymore. Shrugging out of the man's grip, Shirou stopped walking, his head down.

"I can't take this anymore," he said, giving voice to his thoughts. "You guys, I'm... I'm not the king. I just... I just wanted to..."

"Of course you aren't," the man in front of him said, his arms crossed and expression bored. "No one thought for even a second that you were."

Shirou's eyes widened and he abruptly rose his head. "What? But then why...? You guys kept saying 'Your Majesty, Your Majesty' all the time, but if you never believed I was him, then why would you...?"

"It's easier to hold out hope for a lie than continue fighting with the belief that we have been forsaken," came the response. "We knew who you were – you always came along with that seamstress, what's her name? Ceri?"

"B-but," Shirou stuttered. "Those women... They, and you... And those Saxons...?"

Another militiaman laughed, slapping his own thigh as he did. "That was a good one, I say! Did you see the look on those bastards' faces? The king is here? 'Why's the king here?' 'I didn't know the king could use magic!' Jolly good show if I've ever seen one!"

"Yeah, those idiots can't tell the difference between a real king and an impersonator. All the more reason for us to give them the boot out of our country," chimed in the fourth militiaman. "Siencyn, remind me that I need to behead another few hundred of them to make up for that ridiculousness."

Siencyn, the one who had initially propped Shirou up while he stumbled along, continued to look bored as he looked at Shirou. He indicated they keep moving – standing around while there was a large battle going on wasn't safe for any of them, and they only had a bit more of a ways to go before they would reach Tryst again. In fact, all six of them could see the town from where they were, with the smoke billowing up into the dark sky.

Shirou stared at the village from where their position was, mouth agape in horror as he saw the flames licking the sky, the whole area looking like a large bonfire. Tryst looked so vastly different from the condition it had been in when he had left that he couldn't believe it was actually the village he'd resided in for the past few months. He felt anger begin to boil up – that was his home those Saxons were burning down. Sure, he hadn't been born there, but he had made a friend there, and made a life for himself there. They were ruining the lives of so many people who struggled
"Look, boy. We know you aren't the real thing," Siencyn said after the long silence, cutting into Shirou's thoughts. "Those women back there probably had known as well, but, we can't deny that your version looks like the real Excalibur. Everyone knows the king can't wield magic, though. We also know he doesn't look as foreign as you, and that he would never falter in battle as you've done."

Shirou frowned and placed his hands on his hips. "So, why did you keep up with the charade?"

"Like Teilo said," Siencyn continued, "it's better to have something to believe in than keep fighting without hope of saving our home. King Arthur would never journey this far out to save three villages stupid enough to continue living on the border. This was our problem, and even if the messenger did reach him in time, and even if the king chose to ride out to our aid, he would never make it in time."

Shirou narrowed his eyes, unwilling to believe that Saber wouldn't try saving all the citizens she could. "She... I mean, the king would never forsake his own people! He'll be here!"

"No," Siencyn said with a frown on his own face. "His Majesty will never make it in time. We are doomed to fail. Nothing could have prepared us more for this eventual fate."

"We can't just give up! What about all of those people who will die because all of their protectors just gave up?"

There was a slight pause and Siencyn turned to look at Shirou fully as they walked, his expression now serious. Placing a hand on Shirou's shoulder, the man said,

"Boy, do you know what it means to be a king?"

"How the heck would I know something like that?"

"To be a king is to be a beacon of light to those who are weary and tired," Siencyn continued, undeterred. "Kings stand for justice and all that is good, while at the same time, they are the very reason we suffer in the first place. To be a king means undertaking the burden of one's people and giving them a reason to hope and fight again."

Shirou said nothing, only turning his gaze away.

"In which case, you have been the perfect king for those of Perc, Hwol, and Tryst. A king is not simply something you become because of your lineage, it is a figurehead that stands for the people. It is a source of strength. Lad, no, Your Majesty, you have instilled hope as a king should, and made your people want to fight harder, no matter what fate their battle might lead them towards. You fought bravely, and if you must curse anything, then let it be your inexperience that impeded your ability to continue forward."

Shirou turned back to look at Siencyn just as he felt a fist slam into his hardened clothing. Shirou grunted, falling back a couple of steps as he glared at the other man. About to voice his complaints, he felt something hard smash into the back of his head, sending him flying forward. He groaned, feeling his consciousness fading as he tried to turn his head around to look up at the men surrounding him.

"However, your reign as king has now come to an end. Forgive us, for we are not strong enough to keep you alive and fight at the same time. May you grace others with your presence and give them a will to fight as you have us. I sense something special within you. It would be a shame for your
life to be lost in a battle such as this."

A strained noise escaped the redhead's mouth as he struggled to stay awake. "...Wh-

"Teilo, take him somewhere safe, and then return to fight with us. This man must be -"

Siencyn's voice faded as Shirou lost consciousness.

The first thing Shirou noticed aside from his pounding head was an absolutely putrid smell that seemed to infiltrate his nostrils and hang about, relentlessly torturing him. He tried to raise a hand to cover his nose as his eyes opened, and the hand only ended up clapping over his mouth as he bit back a scream. Right above him were the open, glassy eyes of someone who had died a good while before. Shirou, his heart beating fast from his shock, turned his head back and forth, seeing various body appendages of other random people, with some even still attached to the actual bodies.

He cried out softly as his hands reached up to shift the body on top of him away, and get out of the pile of dead bodies. His hands trembled gently as he pushed aside the body, only to see yet another one atop of that one. This one, though, he'd known when the person was still alive.

"Alan," he murmured, mind reeling as the man's clouded eyes stared back at him, as if blaming Shirou for his death.

"No," Shirou gasped, shaking his head from side to side. "No, Alan... What happened to you, Alan?"

He shifted his body around, on the verge of breaking down. "Where am I? What's going on? Am I dead? Did I go to Hell? Why is everyone dead?"

Frenzied, Shirou hurriedly pushed body after body off of him, burrowing a hole up – down? – through the pile of bodies before finally breaking a hole through. The rays of a full moon basked him in light as Shirou pulled his shaking body out of the mound. His golden-brown eyes dashed back and forth as he tried to get a bearing on his surroundings. Shirou tried crawling off of the mound of bodies, but ended up tripping and tumbling down, his face slamming into one of the many bodies at the base.

Shirou clumsily pushed himself up and away from the large hill, stumbling back and hastily looking around him. The view that greeted him was not a welcome one, but the place was certainly familiar. Shirou walked around the mountain of bodies to see that he was in the exact place he had been when it had all begun: Ceri's grave. Just up the hill was where Ceri had gifted him with a handmade scarf, and where she had fatefully met her end.

His face was stricken with horror, and his eyes wide with disbelief and pain. Why had it come to this? What was going on? Why was he still alive? Why was he always the last one alive? Why, why, why?

Shirou turned around to look at the still burning village of Tryst in the distance. He felt like he was dead inside as he watched it burn. All the people, all of their lives, all of their dreams and desires had been snatched away in mere hours. Shirou wasn't sure what it was that forced him forward step by step towards what very well might lead to his own death.

"You have instilled hope as a king should, and made your people want to fight harder, no matter what fate their battle might lead them towards. You fought bravely, and if you must curse anything, then let it be your inexperience that impeded your ability to continue forward."

"..."
He had been too incompetent to be of any help to these people. He, the one who hadn't mattered, was again the person to survive everyone else. Once again, everyone else's lives had been thrown away simply so his could be saved. Was he doomed to repeat what had happened seventeen years before?

With every step, he neared closer and closer to the place alight in flames. In his mind, he no longer saw anything but the horrifying images of death and burning. He heard the same screams from all those years before, felt the hands of the people dying grab at his boots, and felt the pain of those who had suffered while he continued moving forward.

Shirou wasn't sure when he actually made it into the town. Everything in his mind was a mess – was he still seven years old, back in the fire caused from the fourth war? Was he twenty-four, roaming aimlessly through a village in the sixth century, a village that had had people full of life, hopes, and dreams? Was he in the depths of Hell, burning for all eternity? Was he in a nightmare, fated to repeat forever?

Shirou never even noticed that he was being attacked until his swords were in his hands and a soldier was falling down in front of him, blood spurting out from the man's gaping wound. The next three men to see him fell as well, though Shirou wasn't entirely sure how. Maybe he was actually back with Rin, just doing some maintenance cleaning of demons in the area. A grin crept across his face. That was it – he had to be with Rin, just doing some run-of-the-mill mission for the Association.

He heard laughter come from behind him, and Shirou turned to acknowledge the sound, blood splattered across his face and clothing.

"Hey Rin," he gasped out, his throat strangely hoarse, as if he had been screaming. "Let's take care of these and go home, okay? I really need a vacation after this."

Yes, he had found his happy place. When he was with Rin, things were hectic, but nothing bad ever happened. Rin was always right behind him, protecting him from anything that might hurt him. She was always shielding him from the inevitable, scolding him for his stupidity, shyly assisting him when he needed her most. That's right, she had always been there for him.

A flash of golden hair styled up in a tight bun with a braid wrapped around it and eyes the color of the richest shade of emerald crossed his mind.

Shirou frowned. What was that? It was interfering with his happy place, the place where everything made sense and he was warm and peaceful.

"I became your sword, defeated your enemies, and protected you."

Who was that? Who was talking to him?

Shirou eyes stared on emotionlessly as more blood splattered across his face from something. That's strange, he couldn't ever remember fighting a demon that had blood still in its body. Most of them were the undead, or just energy in corporeal form. They couldn't possibly spurt out blood.

"I am glad to have fulfilled this promise."

It was that voice again, Shirou realized as his blade sliced through yet another demon. Where were all these things coming from, and what was that voice in his head? What had that flash been? Why did he feel as if he was forgetting something important?

"In the end, there is one thing I must tell you."
No, don't, Shirou pleaded inwardly. Somewhere deep within him, he felt that if he heard the words the voice wanted to tell him, he would lose his happy place. He felt like he wouldn't be able to go home anymore, see Rin again, hang out with Myrus some more, finish working on the several projects that were always lining up in his side business. He felt like something would end, that something inside of him would die if he heard those words.

"No," he whispered, swords slicing through something else, before finally, silence surrounded him.

Shirou felt the heat, and heard the crackling of the flames, but the cries of the demons were gone. The whispers of those he had left to die while he continued living faded away. The pain he felt for surviving began to ebb.

"Shirou," the voice begins, eating away at him, desperate for its words to be heard, "I love you."

Then, just like that, Shirou felt his warmth and happiness turn cold and barren, with the world he had invented from bits and pieces of his memories breaking, cracking, and crumbling apart. Shirou's eyes focused as his mind was thrown back into the reality of his situation.

"Saber," Shirou murmured, still gazing absently at the flames of one of the burning houses in front of him.

"Saber," he repeated as he looked down at himself at all of the blood that painted his body.

He looked around him, seeing plainly for the first time all of the dead bodies of the soldier he had fought lying around. There were so many bodies that he felt like he couldn't count them all. In order to forget the reality of his situation, he had automatically diverted to his subconscious, bringing up memories that he enjoyed to make him feel safer and less vulnerable. He chose to believe that a dream was better than reality, a reality where he was insufferably weak and too powerless to protect those he needed to most. Shirou sank down to the ground, his body feeling cold and detached from his consciousness.

"I'm so sorry, Saber," he whispered, falling forward onto his hands, his fingers sifting through the blood as he clenched his fists. "I forgot what I came here to do. I lacked the ability to save your people. I'm only repeating my mistakes. Why am I always the one left alive?"

Shirou lifted his head to the sky, wanting to cry but feeling that he shouldn't be allowed to. So, the tears stayed within him, dying as he retreated within himself, afraid of what would happen if he chose to pick up the sword again. What if he just got more people killed again? Or worse, what if he couldn't save them even after determining that he would fight?

"Saber, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Saber, I'm sorry..." he repeated over and over as his rage and desperation threatened to overcome him.

He continued sitting there before finally rising. Navigating slowly and almost drunkenly through the bodies of several soldiers, Shirou walked towards where Ceri's house would have been before it burned down. He plopped down in front of the scorched hearth, looking at it blankly before crawling over to where one of the corners of the house had been. The ground was soft and easily maneuverable as he dug his fingers into the dirt, looking for what he had buried before the fight had begun.

The dirt crumbled apart as Shirou reached into the hole and pulled out his knapsack full of the things he had received from Myrus. Shirou then reached in further and pulled out the clothes Ceri had bought for him – he hadn't wanted them to get too dirty or bloody, so he had hidden them away beforehand. Then, after doing so, he then pulled out the scarf Ceri had knitted for him. His body
shuddering, Shirou's trembling fingers clutched the clothing to his chest, desperately wishing he had been stronger.

"Ceri," he gasped, clutching the clothes more tightly. "Ceri, I'm so sorry! I couldn't protect them! Ceri, Saber, I'm sorry!"

Lifting his face to the smoky sky, he cried out his frustration and miserablenes to the world.

"AAAHHHHHHHH!"

As soon as Arturia and her men crossed over the hills leading to Tryst and she saw the smoke billowing into the beautiful, sunlit sky, she realized they had come far too late. While she could only see Tryst for certain, she had an inkling that Hwol and Perc were in no better state. Pulling back the reins of her snow-white steed, Arturia turned back to face the soldiers lined up behind her and Bedivere.

"Captain Alwyn, send forth fifty soldiers to both Hwol and Perc. Have them check every nook and cranny of each village, down to the last grain of dirt. If there are any survivors, treat them, and provide them with sustenance. If they should run into any enemies, quickly have them dealt with. I will not allow this atrocity to spread further inland. Twenty soldiers will accompany me to Tryst to search there."

The captain bowed from where he stood before turning around and walking towards the soldiers under his command. Arturia then turned to Bedivere, who looked at her from atop of his own chestnut-brown horse.

"Bedivere, judging by what we have already come upon, I cannot say with confidence that some Saxons did not make it out of this conflict alive. I want you to take the remaining men, split them into teams of your own determining, and run a perimeter search within three leagues in every direction. Do not venture too close to the enemy border, however. Stay vigilant, and strike down those who would oppose you, should it come to thus."

Bedivere bowed to her, though his expression seemed concerned. Noticing, she faced him again.

"Something troubles you, Bedivere?"

"Only twenty will attend you, sire? Surely, that number is too little to properly protect you should something happen."

"My instincts tell me that even twenty may be far too many for this situation," she responded calmly. "Do not stress yourself over this, Bedivere. If something takes place that goes beyond what I have calculated, I will be certain to send for help. However, providing that you sweep the area well enough, I much doubt it will ever come to that."

"As you say, Your Majesty," Bedivere said, bowing again. "The men and I will survey the entire area and eliminate those who might oppose us."

"I await your news with bated breath," Arturia said in return, her facial features warm as she regarded the knight.

Bedivere turned away and directed the remaining 150 men – thirty of the 300 had been lost in a small skirmish with advancing Saxons – into different groups for reconnaissance. Arturia watched Bedivere for a short moment before turning away herself to look down at the twenty men who would go with her to Tryst.
"We set off now," she said simply, shifting her horse around and walking away without paying any attention to the various responses that met her command.

It hardly took another twenty minutes before Arturia dismounted her horse, stroking it along its side gently. One of the soldiers walked up her, bowed, and then stood at attention as he awaited her orders. She stroked the horse a few more times before patting it softly and then meeting the soldier's gaze.

"And you would be?"

"Heini, Your Majesty, of the Fourth Company."

"Heini, then. Take your soldiers and begin searching the village. If you happen upon a body, take it over to that area over there," she said, pointing towards a large, open area beside the village, "and we will give them a proper burial once the village has been swept in full. Inform me if you come into contact with any survivors."

"Sire!" the soldier said, bowing. "By your command, sire!"

Straightening her shoulders, Arturia gave her horse one last glance before walking into the wasted village herself, her emerald-green eyes taking in every detail of all the damage. Her armor clinked as she walked forward steadfastly, and she noted how quickly all of the soldiers had dispersed across the village area to search for survivors. Walking down the dirt path, or what was left of it, Arturia looked around her at the damage that she could see. The village had been small, but spread out, so it was difficult to see how bad some parts were.

Just from looking around in the immediate area, she could tell that a great deal of fighting had taken place. Most of the bodies of the villagers seemed to have been picked up, but she wasn't sure if they had been buried, burned, or simply hidden from the main village. She did see a large number of soldiers' bodies lying everywhere – she recognized the armor of the Anglo-Saxons, but she couldn't place the black leather armor of the other men. It wasn't unheard of for villages to have their own type of security if they weren't under her rule, but this was one of the first times she had actually seen such a sight for herself.

Arturia bent down to turn over one Saxon, tilting her head when she saw one slash going diagonally along the torso. Many of the other soldiers had been stabbed in an effort to pierce the person's armor, but this one had been sliced right through, like cheese. Even her Excalibur would have trouble slicing through metal like what she was seeing on the man's body. Whatever had killed him had been very strong, and perhaps already dead. She rose to analyze the situation a bit more when her right sabaton struck against something hard on the ground, and she paused to look down.

Arturia fell back down to a knee, reaching out with her hand to gently dust off dirt piled upon the sign she had found. It had been scorched badly enough that it was hard to tell out what it had originally said. The best she could make out was a "B" and a "ry". A bakery, she realized, eyes narrowing as she looked at the empty space to her right. Standing up, she dropped the sign with a soft clunk and walked to what had probably been the center of the store. There wasn't much to see or survey, but there was a chance that the wooden supports lying atop of one another might have been hiding something – perhaps a clue of sorts of what exactly had taken place.

Gingerly pushing on one of the large pieces of wood to get an understanding of its weight, she frowned a bit. It was quite heavy, even after being as burned as it had been. Looking up and around her, she found that none of the soldiers were in her immediate area, and so she needed to attempt to move it on her own. That was hardly an impossible task, but it would have been easier without her
armor on. Bending her knees and grounding herself, Arturia slid her hands underneath one bar and after testing the weight again, hefted up the bar onto her shoulder to look at what lay below. Her brow furrowed further when she saw something – a hand? – sticking out from beneath the rubble. Grunting slightly, Arturia pushed the bar up with strength that should not have been possible for her small body, and slammed a kick into the bar to send it falling in the opposite direction. The wooden support hit the ground loudly, but by that point, Arturia was already pulling off a second log. Her teeth ground together as she pulled the second bar, third bar, and then fourth bar off of the victim she had seen. She wiped her face with the back of her right gauntlet, sighing out from the slight bit of exertion. Stepping forward, Arturia bent down again to get a closer look at the person who had been unlucky enough to be buried underneath all of that weight.

Arturia's lips pressed into firm line as she saw how badly the body had been burned. It was a gruesome sight indeed. The man, no, it must have been a woman, was missing half of her face, with the other half looking molten and raw. Her remaining eyeball seemed to have melted and infused with the rest of her skin, and her hair had, of course, burnt to a crisp and fell out. Arturia wasn't sure which killed her first though – had she burnt to death before bleeding out, or had she bled out from the wound severing her torso from the rest of her body before the fire had consumed her?

Taking a closer look at the wound, she reeled back when she realized the woman had been pregnant, very much so. The baby had been taken in the same strike as the woman had, and Arturia clenched a fist when she only saw fetus' lower body. The head itself had broken off and burnt into a charred substance about half a meter away. At least, that's what she assumed the thing to be.

Arturia's frustration was palpable as she leaned back and silently motioned a cross over her chest and bowed her head in prayer. If only they had come a bit faster after receiving news of the impending attack, then they might have been able to prevent such a tragedy from ever taking place. Her gaze drifted back at the body-littered street as she tried to figure out what conspired there. From what she could tell, the citizens had been taken by surprise, and if the rest of the people were found in their houses just as this woman had been outside in the streets, it might have possibly even been a surprise attack at night. However, if the militia for the town had been dispersed, then perhaps the town hadn't had enough time to evacuate everyone?

The bodies of the Saxon far outnumbered the body count of the local militia then, which meant the militia had either been very good at fighting, or that there was far more to this story than she could piece together just by looking around. Standing up, Arturia realized that without a full account from a survivor, she was not going to figure out precisely what occurred in the village. Of course, there was always the chance that her men searching around in the other villages and out around the area might develop some further insight, but she didn't think that altogether likely.

A soldier came running up to her and she turned toward him expectantly. The soldier bowed. "Your Majesty, we have discovered a survivor!"

A survivor in this chaos? That was news, indeed. Arturia gave him her full attention and placed her right hand on her hip as she waited for him to speak further. "I have posted a couple of guards near him though, as a precaution, sire."

"A precaution?" she asked, frowning slightly. "Heini, wasn't it? What could you possibly gain from putting soldiers on guard against a mere villager?"

"Sire, he is not from this land. His hair is redder than the sun at its apex, and he did not speak once
when we addressed him. I fear that he might hail from Scotland, and if so, he may very well be the enemy."

"Preposterous," Arturia said, immediately casting away the soldier's concerns. "What would a Scot be doing this far south? And on top of that, why would he simply be idling about in a burnt down village? Where is this man, so that I may judge his situation for myself?"

"He sits in the northern area of the village, Your Majesty. He is...honestly, quite hard to miss."

"Very well, I will see to this mysterious person," she said, turning away. "In the meantime, dig up this woman and move her in her entirety to the open space as previously directed."

"By your command, Your Highness."

Arturia moved out of the way as Heini began clearing the area a bit more to get to the woman. She stepped around the mess of rubble and stepped out into the street, her focus solely on the two soldiers standing next to someone. It was no wonder she couldn't see the man before – portions of some houses were still standing and had blocked the view from her position. Her eyes narrowed as she drew closer. It was indeed rare to see a man with such red hair around these parts, and while she had scoffed at Heini's claims, she couldn't help considering that perhaps a Scot had indeed filtered down through the country.

Perhaps he was an assailant? A possible ally of the Saxons, or maybe he had some kind of contact or acquaintance in one of the small villages? No, that wouldn't make sense – the hate for their Britain's neighbors to the north was particularly deep, but there were always exceptions. Maybe he was engaged in sexual relations with a woman within the village, or perhaps he had been stolen as a child and raised a Briton? It wouldn't be too absurd for a child who has lost everything to be adopted by a family who could care for him. Children are easily malleable and changed as well, so erasing the child's possible hate would be more than likely...

There were simply too many questions that she had. Arturia walked smoothly up to the two soldiers.

"Have you managed to communicate with him?"

"No, he has not responded to a single word we have said, Your Majesty," spoke up one soldier.

Pursing her lips, Arturia faced the redheaded man. "You there, do you understand the words I speak?"

There was a pause – perhaps hesitance? – and then, the man slowly nodded his head slightly.

"I see, then communication seems to not be an issue in this situation," she said, feeling slightly relieved. While she had dabbled in some foreign languages with Merlin, by no means could she declare herself fluent, or capable enough even of holding a normal conversation. Had he spoken Pritennic, she would have been forced to rely on her minimal knowledge to speak with him.

Arturia looked down at the man. "I ask of you, are you a survivor of this village? Or perhaps you are indeed a Scot that I should treat as my enemy?"

The man kept his head down, almost as if nervous. She could hardly blame him – if perchance he were a simple villager, then she could only imagine the fear that would come from being watched intensely by a king and two of her soldiers. If it was fear, then she needed only create a situation which would allow him to relax a little more. If he turned out to be an assassin lying in wait, then, she would simply rid herself of him.
The king of Britain gestured for the two soldiers to leave her alone with the man. The two hesitated slightly until she looked at each of them in their eyes. Arturia did not say a word when she looked at them – didn't let out a peep, but the two soldiers straightened as if she had drawn her sword, ready to slice their heads off if they did not do as she asked immediately. The two men quickly bowed to her before making themselves scarce.

"There," Arturia said as soon as the soldiers were out of earshot, "we are now alone to speak freely. I would have you lift your head so as to better speak with you."

The man hesitated slightly before slowly and, almost tentatively, raising his head to look at her fully. She wasn't sure which part shocked her more, the beautiful golden-brown eyes that she had never before paid witness to, or the fact that beyond their color, she saw nothing within those eyes. Hatred, happiness, weariness, desolation – these things she could justify seeing, but with this man, there was simply...nothing. They were empty, completely and entirely devoid of emotion. No, this man was as much a victim to this war as anyone else – he had simply lived to survive and perhaps, tell the tale.

This...was unexpected, and she inwardly cursed herself. If only they had run here faster, or if only they had picked off the various soldiers beforehand, then she would not be staring down at the shell of a broken man. This damnable war needed to be ended sooner rather than later to stop such horrors from happening, if nothing else. Arturia unconsciously tightened her fists, one of the only hints telling of her anger.

The man stared at her without saying a word. Well, there was nothing he really could say. When he saw her fists clench, he knew without a word that she was angry. When he saw her eyebrows furrow slightly, he could tell she was conflicted. When he saw her beautiful green eyes shift slightly to the side, he knew she was considering past conflicts and reflecting on her actions. Then, when he saw her once again turn to look at him fully, facial features calm and collected, he knew she had come to a conclusion that she would carry out until its finish, her goal set and her mind unwavering. He knew she would follow through no matter what happened to her, so long as it was in the best interest of her kingdom and people as a whole.

Shirou only stared up at her, realizing with an unbidden sadness that there was nothing of his Saber in those eyes of hers. The cold, calculating, green eyes that peered down at him were ones that would show no mercy if he proved to be an enemy, and would barely reflect any kindness or warmth even if he proved to be an ally. Those...those were the eyes that he had seen when he had first summoned her accidentally. They were the same eyes that slowly transitioned from the cold frostiness of Antarctica to the warmest depths of the sun. Shirou realized, without a doubt, that he would never see that person, the one he had loved most, ever again. She was gone, forever.

He felt his torso shift forward unconsciously, his hands hitting the ground as he stopped himself. He was sure he had taken her by surprise, but Shirou had come to understand that for some reason, he had still held out some kind of hope that she would be in there, somewhere. He had still held out hope that she would smile that smile meant only for him, that she would hold out her hand for him to rise, and then continue dragging him around the city at a pace meant for only the strongest. Why would he ever think that was even possible though? He had been an idiot for even considering such a thing.

Arturia had felt the mood in the air shift slightly, though she was unaware of what had caused it.

"Are you all right? Perhaps you have been injured?"

Silence met her question. She continued unperturbed.

"Ah, perhaps I should introduce myself. Yes, that would be most suitable, I suppose. I am –"
"I know who you are," came a harsh reply, interrupting her.

Arturia, slightly surprised over being interrupted, slowly closed her mouth. "I see. That will make things easi–"

"Why didn't you come earlier?" Shirou whispered harshly, once again interrupting her. "We sent a messenger. Why didn't you come?"

It was slightly irritating that he would dare interrupt her not just once, but twice. However, she realized he had just been through a situation most would not survive unscathed, whether mentally or physically. For that reason, and that reason alone, she would appease him.

Arturia's head bowed slightly, the best someone of her position could do as an apology.

"You have my apologies. Yes, we did indeed receive your messenger, and please understand that we departed soon thereafter. However, the trip here was long indeed. Your messenger may have taken longer than what is usual to arrive at my castle, due to his wound. While my troops did manage to cut down on time, there were simply too many stray Saxons that were necessary to cut down prior to our arrival. I cannot fully express my regret that we were not able to come to your aid far sooner."

"So that's it, then," Shirou said dejectedly. "He didn't make it there fast enough. If they had just sent an actual soldier like I'd warned, we wouldn't have... They wouldn't have..."

Shirou dug his fingers into the hard dirt, glaring at it as if it were the source of his pain. "All of this meaningless death, all of the meaningless suffering, all of the people who died... What was the point of it all?"

Arturia watched the man's shoulders droop as he lost steam, and closed her eyes momentarily. Opening them again, she asked in as gentle a voice as she could manage,

"Tell me. What took place here? I will admit that I may not have any right to force you to recall something you would prefer not to, but if I can somehow prevent the same tragedy from occurring again..."

Silence once again met her inquiry, and she chose to change tactics. "Then, could you tell me what happened to these soldiers? Was it the local militia that killed them?"

"I killed them," Shirou whispered. "I think."

That took her aback. He wasn't sure whether he had caused their deaths?

"I dreamt I was back with my friends, having fun, feeling free, and then...when I woke up..."

Shirou clutched at his head, feeling his body start to shudder again. "I... I was the last one left standing. I was the only one to survive. Why am I always the last one left alive?"

The last part had been shouted out, and she had to raise up a hand to calm down the alerted soldiers within hearing range of it. Arturia dropped her hand, and swallowed slightly. She had an idea of what might have occurred, but...

"So you were angry."

"Angry?" Shirou scoffed. "I was empty. Everything I've known for the past few months was destroyed in a matter of a single day. Just like before, everyone was killed while I was left alive. I
had vowed to protect this town, but all I did was let it get mowed down like a person would be mowed down by a tank. These people had lives, dreams, goals! They had everything before they got here! Everything! And now there is absolutely nothing! Nothing! Angry? There's nobody left! All the history of this place has been wiped clean! There is nothing left!"

Survivor's guilt. Arturia understood, or had grasped somewhat loosely that the man felt guilty for surviving everyone else. He felt guilty that he could live on when everyone else around him had died. That was a feeling she could not empathize with. People around her died, but she had reason to live on and keep reaching for a dream. The second Arturia fell, that was the second that her country, too, would fall in flames. She could not have that, so she had to keep living, pursuing, fighting. There was no option, no other way.

"Then, what will you do about it?" were the words she eventually asked in a low voice.

"Huh?" the man said, staring up at her, seeming slightly bewildered. "What do you mean, 'do'?"

"Will you stand and continue to fight, or will you sit there and await your own death?"

Shirou glared at her, his teeth gritted. "What? You... Do you even have a clue of how I feel right now?"

"No, I don't," came the simple answer. "That is why I ask: what do you intend to do henceforth?"

Shirou couldn't believe she was asking that. What did he have left? Ceri was gone, the villages were gone, Saber wasn't his Saber, he had nothing. She expected him to rise up and try again? But what if he failed and the same exact thing happened again? What was he supposed to, fight and fail over and over until something happened to go his way? Is that what he was supposed to do?

"I don't know," Shirou answered honestly. "I'm just...I don't know what to do."

"You will not continue to fight, for the ones you have lost?"

That simple, innocent question pissed him off.

"I did fight, and look what happened!" he yelled. "I fought until I was practically dead meat, and look what happened! Look around you! Don't you get what this means?"

Arturia gave a brief glance at the wreckage around her before looking at him again. "It means you are weak."

Well, that was a lot blunter than he had expected, although, it was definitely true. Shirou let his head fall forward again, unable to rebuke her statement.

"What of the people you swore to protect, though?" the king continued. "Do you plan to have them die in vain? Do you not have a duty to keep fighting in their honor?"

"What am I supposed to do then?"

He was whining. He knew he was, but he was scared. Shirou wasn't exactly afraid of dying, but he was very afraid of failing again, and being the last one left alive to carry the torch the rest of the way. He was afraid of his weakness, his vulnerabilities, his incompetence. He didn't mean to whine, but what was he supposed to do? Seriously. What?

Shirou chanced a glance at the woman standing in front of him, but was hardly surprised to see she had that expression of annoyance on her face. It wasn't as blatant as it had been when he'd done
something stupid during training with her or anything, but it was there all the same. Actually, he
doubted she even realized she had given him that look, as it was gone almost as soon it had come.

"You would ask that a stranger, whom of which you've only just met, I might add, decide a course
for a future that is yours and yours alone? A course that could possibly decide whether you live or
die? This is what you have requested of the king before you?"

Her voice was certainly ripe with irritation though. Shirou winced. She was definitely right. He had
to get his shit together. Sighing, Shirou sat Japanese-style and raised his head up fully. He bowed
his head in apology.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I shouldn't have asked you something like that."

That seemed to assuage her slightly, and he felt the pressure of impending doom fade from her,
slightly. It was still there, but she didn't seem ready to kill him anymore. When she put a hand on
her hip and looked down at him with that look, the only thing he could think of was whenever he
pissed Saber off. She was teetering on the edge between anger and mere annoyance, so he had to
tread carefully. At times like this, it was just better to stay quiet.

Arturia let out a soft sigh. For him to be confused was only natural. Losing her temper at him
would not make things right, and it would make further conversation with him far more difficult.

"Do you have anywhere to go? Any relatives? Friends?"

"No," came the soft response.

"Then," she began, unsure of whether she should even bother, "would it not interest you to
accompany my soldiers and I to Camelot and begin anew there?"

"Camelot?" the man said, his eyes looking into hers curiously. They really were such beautiful
eyes...

Arturia frowned. This was not the time for that.

"Yes, Camelot. Would you be interested?"

"But... I can't fight, I mean..."

"There are many more duties available if you are averse to fighting, and all exist to help better
prepare Camelot for fighting for a greater, stronger Britain. A gardener, or perhaps you could
become a hostler. Maybe you could help to take care of the castle duties as a sweeper, amongst other things. Far more
duties than you may be aware of exist aside from fighting as a soldier."

Shirou blinked a few times. He hadn't actually considered all of the other stuff needed to run a
castle. Obviously, there wasn't just a military. Someone had to take care of their armor, and their
horses, and their weaponry. Someone had to provide the food, take care of the cleaning, and other
menial tasks. He could even take care of the bathrooms, though that wasn't particularly the first
duty on his list that he'd like to attempt. Shirou rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Besides, wasn't this his chance to possibly get closer and keep an eye on her through her reign?
Well, he doubted they would ever get very close – he hadn't made the best or coolest first
impression. As long as he could remember how to deal with her and what her personality was
generally like, he might, at best, be able to figure something out. He couldn't tell how old she was –
hell, what if Mordred was already in the castle? Or wait, what if there wasn't much time until the
Battle of Camlann? This was his only chance. He cleared his throat and looked back up at the woman who waited for his answer patiently. It was, after all, something he had to give careful consideration to.

"Okay, um, so, let me break this down. You're willing to take me back to your place to work for you? Just like that?"

"'Just like that?'" Arturia echoed, tilting her head. "You mean, without any conditions, I take it? Providing you work your hardest at the tasks you are given, I do not foresee there being any problems."

"And, I could just, you know, join whatever job I want, no problem?"

She frowned, not understanding the point of his endless questions. "I am running out of patience, good sir. I am willing to help you as far as introducing you to those in charge of the task you wish to pursue, but no further."

"Okay, last question," Shirou said, holding his hands up in surrender to assure her. "In your, uh, Your Majesty's opinion, do you think I would be more suitable for fighting or something else? I'm not asking you for an end-all-beat-all option here, but more for some guidance, if you, I mean, Your Majesty could give me that?"

She crossed her arms over her chest, unsure of how to deal with the question. He was also obviously stumbling over her title, though, at least he appeared to be trying.

"In my opinion, though I am not certain why you would go so far as to ask me or why it matters," she started, still organizing her thoughts, "no, I do not believe you are in any position to fight. You have been wounded mentally, and quite deeply at that. I doubt I would much prefer such a loose cannon in my army. However, if you say that you would like to enter as a soldier, I will not hinder you, and will properly introduce you as I have promised."

"Okay," Shirou said simply, for lack of anything better to say.

"And your answer?"

Shirou nodded, standing up and making sure to bow. "I'll go, with your permission."

"Then this matter is settled," she said, her hands falling to her side as she turned away. "Stay here for now while my soldiers and I continue to search around this village for possible survivors."

As Arturia began walking, Shirou had a thought and quickly stumbled forward. He reached out to grab her by the armor but then quickly drew his arm back when he realized what he had been about to do. Saber may have tolerated it, but King Arthur most certainly wouldn't, and most certainly not by a stranger. He breathed in deeply, realizing he could've died from his stupidity just after making plans for the future. Shirou straightened his shoulders, and looked at her retreating figure.

"Wait, please," he called.

The king paused and then slowly turned back to look at him. "Yes? Was there something more you needed?"

Shirou walked up to her, still feeling somewhat uncertain. He held out his hand to her, and she merely glanced at it without moving at all.

"Um, I forgot to introduce myself before. I...my name is Shirou Emiya. I'm really grateful for this
chance."

She shifted to look at him fully, her eyes not entirely as cold as before. She still didn't bother to move to shake his hand, and just as he was about to draw it back hesitantly, Arturia reached out and grasped his hand calmly and purposefully. She had accepted his shoddy apology and he felt the tension within him loosen up a bit.

"Mr. Emiya, then."

"Ah, just Shirou's fine," he said, not sure if he liked being called so formally by her.

"Shirou," Arturia repeated, letting go of his hand. "Shirou. Yes, the sound of that is much more preferable to me. Well, then, Shirou, please give careful consideration as to what you intend to do about your future. I will come to collect you when it is time to depart."

Was he a pack mule? No, don't get annoyed. You don't have the right to be annoyed.

He walked slowly back to the bag he had held so tightly in his grasp when the battle had ended. He still had so far to go, both mentally and physically. He had an in into Camelot now, though. He had a way to make things right for her. Things didn't start off so well between them, but he'd turn her opinion of him around, somehow.

Picking up the clothes he'd received from Ceri, he realized how cold it was. He had been sitting around all night in his torn up reinforced clothes, doing nothing but staring blankly in front of him. Shirou looked down at the heavy tunic, frowning.

"Ceri, I found her," he murmured. "I found her, and now, I'm never going to let her out of my sight. I'm going to protect her, as soon as I regain my courage. I don't think I have the strength, or the right to fight again right now, but maybe someday... Maybe someday I'll become a man that will make everyone proud."

He reached down and pulled off his shirt, after pulling out the magic from it. As he started to put on his brown tunic instead, he thought back on Saber's words. He could become a gardener, or work with horses, or something like that.

"Hm," he muttered, pulling the tunic on and sighing at the warmth. "I wouldn't mind cooking again... I wonder if that's an option. Maybe I'll try asking later."
"My soldiers, today we have paid witness to a great tragedy, the likes of which we have never seen come this day. Before you, in the plentiful beds, lay the bodies of befallen innocents, slayed in cold blood by an enemy that could never hope to comprehend honor, nor the way of the sword."

Shirou walked in between the two horses of King Arthur and Sir Bedivere, his eyes downcast as he recalled the speech the king had made over half a day before. After all of the soldiers had finished digging up all of the bodies they could find, Arturia had held a funeral service so that the spirits of those fallen would have safe passage to their final resting place. Shirou had watched from the sidelines, his head bowed in prayer as Sir Bedivere spoke encouraging, yet somber, words for all of those in attendance. While Ceri had been the first person to come to his mind, Shirou had found flashes of all the people he had seen on a daily basis appearing in his head. It was just...difficult to acknowledge that the people he had seen smiling, milling about, doing their jobs, were now all gone, never to be seen again.

"When a man takes up the sword, he thus declares that he will fight those who would oppose him, using his weapon as a means to forcefully pave his own path. The carnage and destruction that our eyes laid upon was not the scene of men who fought with honor, greatness, and a need to procure something to better themselves or their country. No, my friends, this tragedy was born purely from hatred, lack of pride in oneself and others, and an inability to perform for the sake of something bigger than oneself."

Shirou glanced behind him at the marching soldiers briefly before looking forward again. When they had departed from the outskirts of Tryst to head back to Camelot, the king had initially suggested that he ride with her on her horse. When he refused, saying that was unnecessary, she had more than likely thought he still held some kind of grudge against her, and so suggested he ride with Bedivere instead. Shirou had refused once again, wanting to instead walk the entire way on his own. If he was beginning anew, then he had to learn how to walk on his own and get to his goal by his own power.

"To slay an unarmed innocent is not only beneath a knight, or a soldier for that matter, it is utterly reprehensible. Even a boy knows not to attack those who cannot defend themselves, yet, as you have seen for yourselves, the Saxons know no such boundaries. Unlike yourselves, they have not learned what it means to value life, to value others, to fight for what is right and just."

Their pace walking back was fairly slow and relaxed – he wasn't sure if it was because the men were tired from having rushed over from Camelot with hardly any rest, or if Arturia was being considerate of him, or what. Whatever the reason, he had to say he was pretty grateful for it. He had been awake for nearly two days, and if he wasn't mistaken, had the beginnings of a cold coming on. Shirou didn't want to waste the medicine he had received from Myrus though, so he planned to wait until the symptoms possibly grew worse before he would drink down some pills.

"The enemy we face is not one of man, but that of demons – beings that can only act on their desires and instincts as opposed to the resourcefulness and intelligence that is born from merely being human. I ask of you all, what kind of person would it take to brutally strike those who would mean you no harm? Is that how a soldier should fight? Is that how a human should fight?"

There were small echoes of "no" across the ranks.

No, Shirou realized, absentely feeling his forehead, he definitely had some kind of fever, though it was probably low-grade. He didn't normally get sick, but the stress from the past week, coupled
with his traumatic experience, and the fact that he hadn't slept for a while had probably hurt his immune system a bit. His hands were freezing – he could see blue in his fingertips – but his face was burning up and he was sweating a bit. Shirou wanted to take off his scarf to cool down a bit, but the temperature was nothing to scoff at. For a second, he almost envied all of the soldiers behind and the two knights beside him – their armor might have been ridiculously heavy, but it had to provide some extra warmth.

"We are nothing like our enemies, no, we are far better and more superior than they are! Within our right hands lay the tool necessary for defeating any foe, and within our bodies do we possess the heart and soul to reach for a grander future! Let the tragedy of these people serve as a lesson for all of us to think more deeply about our positions, consider those who are beneath us physically, mentally, and in ability! Let this serve as a motivation to work harder, move faster, and procure better results! Tell me, who would want a repeat of this cruelty? Would that be you?"

The last sentence was belted out with a shout at the men. More men than before raised their weapons high, shouting cries of denial.

Shirou was surprised to see Arturia bring her horse to a stop and turn to look at the soldiers. He heard her shout across the area that they would be resting for the night, and would depart again at dawn. He wiped some of the sweat off his cheek with the back of his right hand and looked up at the sky. Dusk had fallen without him really noticing, so it only made sense that they stop for the night. He watched Arturia and Sir Bedivere move off a ways from the main company of soldiers, while the soldiers themselves grouped up with their friends or close companions. He saw several men gather together piles of dead grass and twigs and dig little holes to make fires.

"Never again shall such a travesty be repeated. Never again shall we allow the enemy to crush beneath them that which belongs to us. Never again will we ever allow trespassers to venture into our lands. We fight not for ourselves, but for better times, better opportunities, and a better Britain! We take up arms not to hurt, but to protect! Not to maliciously cause pain, but to strategically defend and support! My pride demands that this wrong be righted, that this evil be purged, that this injustice be rectified! Tell me, my brothers-in-arms, do you stand with me?"

Cries of agreement traveled through the ranks, all of the soldiers moved by their king's words.

Shirou looked over at the several groups of soldiers, each huddled around their own group fires and starting to eat the provisions they had brought along with them for the trip. He then looked over as the king and Sir Bedivere started their own fire in a position that was neither too near nor far from the regular soldiers. It wasn't as if he could be all buddy-buddy with the soldiers, and there was no way in hell he could lounge around next to the king. He blew some hot air into his hands and rubbed them together quickly as he looked around himself for someplace to start his own fire. Shirou didn't want to sit too far away from the main camp, but it would probably be best if he kept some kind of distance. He plopped down some ways away from everyone and pulled out pieces of grass to pile up.

"Today, we march back to Camelot with much to ponder: how low does one need to go to ruin the lives and futures of so many? My friends, my brothers, let us stand together in a united front. The path before us is clear – we know precisely what we must do. The pain we feel, we will allow it to chip at our hearts and become fuel for our anger. The shame we have suffered, we will reroute it and force it down our enemies' throats. When they show their cowardly figures, we will ride out to them, with our swords there as a greeting. We will show them what it is to be real men, to be real soldiers and knights. We will show them what chivalry and pride truly are.

"My brothers, we will push them back to where they came from. We will prove to them we are lions,
not mere kittens meant to be stepped on. Today, we have seen cruelty like none other. Let us return the favor, let us prove to them, once and for all, what it means to be a Briton. We will stand side by side with our countrymen. We will hold our heads high and continue forth with pride. Our sharpened steel will engage the enemy and show them what it means to have the pride of a Briton. We will find our foes! We will show them the errors of their ways! We will fight them with all that we have, and my brothers... My brothers, we will, emerge, VICTORIOUS!"

King Arthur ended her speech with a yell as she raised Excalibur high into the air. The soldiers roared out in agreement, each one moved and empowered by the words of their king. The tension and pressure racing through the troops was enough to make even Shirou want to scream out his own approval and strengthened feelings.

"Is this what that Charisma rank B meant?" Shirou questioned softly, enraptured as he stared at the magnificent king.

Shirou clicked together two rocks, frowning when they weren't producing as many sparks as he would have like. Luckily, the ground was fairly dry, and the grass even more so, so it wasn't long before he was able to get a flame started. He blew gently into the flames to increase the heat and then crawled back away from fire. He wasn't feeling well, Shirou realized, coughing slightly into sleeve. There was little wind that night, fortunately, but it was still ridiculously cold. He kind of wished he could project a shed or someplace where the heat would stay trapped, but even if he weren't surrounded by all the people, it probably wasn't a good idea to start using his skills willy-nilly. Plus, he was really wiped.

Shirou shifted around and pulled his backpack close before opening it and rummaging inside. He found the bottle of ibuprofen and opened it up, careful to hide it from the soldiers' views. While Shirou wasn't particularly in pain, the medicine should be able to help relieve his fever a bit, if he even had one. Gulping down a couple of the pills dry, he tossed the bottle back into the pack and sighed.

"Okay, let's go over the last couple of days," he murmured to himself, staring into the fire. "The villages fell under attack by the Saxons, and the militia were able to hold them off for a while, but eventually were pressured too much. I helped fight some and escorted some people, but ending up getting my butt kicked and knocked unconscious. I was called King Arthur because I stupidly tried projecting a sword and doing a Noble Phantasm that should have been far beyond me."

Shirou rubbed the back of his neck. "Maybe the cold's numbing my body so much that I don't feel any pain. Or maybe it's thanks to the fact that I didn't actually try to do the attack in full, not that I would've anyway. Damn, Saber would have killed me if she found out what I'd done. No, first she would have patched me up, then she would have attempted murder, and then she would have yelled at me for another few hours. Yeah, she would have called me an idiot and chastised my recklessness."

Hugging his legs close to his body, he looked over at the main camp, seeing several soldiers sleeping and others either sitting by their fires or walking around, patrolling lightly. A few men would occasionally glance his way, but as no one seemed to show any inclination to come up to him, it didn't really matter. The king herself had invited him to travel with them, after all. Even if they were against the king, none of them were stupid enough to say anything in her presence, and no one seemed to want to put his life on the line just because a foreigner was walking around with them. Speaking of kings, he thought, coughing slightly, – damn, now he was coughing, too? – what was she up to?

Shirou turned to peer over at where she and that knight had been sitting. She was resting on the
ground with her back leaning against her horse's side. Considering how her head was bowed, Shirou gathered that she must have been catching up on some rest. Sir Bedivere, on the other hand, was sitting in front of their fire, his eyes focused on its flames. The knight probably had the first watch between the two of them, and it wasn't long before Shirou saw him stand up and begin walking over towards the soldiers who were still awake. Bedivere passed him a single glance, but his expression was so indeterminable that Shirou wasn't sure what to make of it.

So, instead, he looked back over to where King Arthur was. She was as gorgeous as she had always been to him, though quite a bit more hardened in some ways. Perhaps she had been protecting him in some ways, but Shirou couldn't remember her ever barking out orders to him like, well, a king, when she'd been with him. She had been graceful, resourceful, tactically intuitive, amongst other things, but cold and relentless? Not necessarily. Despite her issue with his father, she had been kind to him from the very beginning.

Shirou frowned slightly, cupping his chin as he thought. No, she had indeed been cold and relentless in some ways – he would have never expected a little blonde girl to tell him to kill people as if they were taking a walk through the park. No, he surmised, retracting his previous thought, she was hardly any different than she had been when they first met. The main thing that was different, if anything at all, was probably the pressure.

That was it, Shirou thought, snapping his fingers lightly. True, the very first day he had met Saber, he had been completely unable to react around her, but thinking back on it, that was probably because she wasn't technically human anymore by that time. Her wounds healed as if they had never been there, at least on the outside, she possessed abilities that normal humans shouldn't have, and she was capable of doing things that should have been impossible. That strangeness was what had concerned him about her most, at first. It had left him unable to react properly, and he didn't even want to think back to when he had stupidly thought that she shouldn't fight because she was a girl.

Shirou leaned forward slightly, his eyelids feeling heavier than before. King Arthur, he thought adamantly, making sure to call her that so he wouldn't constantly think of her as the person who had been together with him before, was a different beast entirely in this age. Rather, she exuded a pressure that stunned him. He noticed it when she first appeared in front of him in Tryst, and it had been very difficult to ignore when she gave her speech. It was a pressure that made a person want to bow down without a single word being spoken. It was like it paralyzed his limbs and made him incapable of behaving normally.

However, Shirou also recognized the goodness of the pressure. While it did feel like he could lose his head at any time, there was also this other force within her that he simply couldn't ignore. Something about her simply made him want to believe in her abilities. Even if he hadn't met her at all in the future, he got the feeling that he would follow her to the ends of the earth, if she asked that of him. Shirou couldn't really explain it. It's like, her passion, or maybe her virtuous nature, or whatever it was, grabbed hold of his heart and dragged out whatever courage he may have possessed, and vehemently eradicated his fears and doubts.

There were a number of times where Shirou wondered if he had made the right decision to go with her to Camelot. He was scared, he was empty, and he was hardly a shell of his confident self. This was, since the Holy Grail War, the first time he was left to his own devices to accomplish something of great importance. Before, if he had messed up, Rin was always there to support him through everything. She would dig him out of his messes and pave a new path for him to take. At one point, he had actually asked her why she kept cleaning up after him, and all she had said was,

"That's a good question. I wouldn't bother if I thought for a single moment that you were capable
of standing on your own without somehow reverting back to how you used to be. Do you remember back to before you met Saber? You had a stupid, ridiculous dream, and no way to go about accomplishing it. You were a husk, simply going through the motions of life without actually living at all. You were pathetic, and pissed me off. I mean, you really pissed me off. How can there be anyone stupid enough to not realize how far off the road they’re driving?"

Shirou remembered being confused. Like usual, she had managed to evade his question and insult him at the very same time. On top of that, she made it seem like he was some kind of paradox that shouldn't have been able to exist.

"Mmph," he had grunted, crossing his arms over his chest. "If I'm so bad, then why are you still here? I mean, you make it seem as if I'm incurable."

Rin had turned away from him and flipped a few pages in her book, eyes downcast as her fingers drifted across pages she wasn't actually reading.

"Honestly?" she had asked, head bent down. "Because I'm more afraid of what would happen to you if I didn't. If you were on your own, would you really be able to take care of yourself? Would you remember that there is a life worth living for, something beyond that ridiculous dream of yours? Would you remember that there are some of us out there that actually give a fucking damn about you?"

She had whirled around, her beautiful blue eyes glimmering with unshed tears. He had only stood there staring back at her, unsure of what to say. No, there was nothing he could have said, as he hadn't known for himself, both then, and currently. Rin had looked at him for a short moment before turning away slowly and quietly asking him to leave her alone.

He hadn't been able to answer her that day, or come up with an answer anytime thereafter. She hadn't really spoken to him much over the next couple of weeks, except for work- or house-related things. It had relieved him greatly when, on the morning of the third week, she turned around, gave him a whisper of a smile, and said,

"I'll take my coffee black today, thanks."

He had been so relieved that she had started to talk to him again that he had skipped the bathroom and immediately worked to fulfill her request. Come to think of it, it had been around that time that Shirou had begun calling her "Rin" instead of "Tohsaka". It hadn't been intentional, but had just happened, as if that was the way it should have been. That had been back during his third year in Britain.

Yes, Shirou realized after musing over his memories, that was the reason he had never once been left to his own devices. As Rin had made apparent, he had a habit of filtering out things that determinedly had no place in his life, whether that be fun, desire, whatever. Rin had always forced him to continue living life as a normal human being should – there was no other choice as far as she was concerned, no other alternative. However, that put Shirou in quite a bind.

Before the Holy Grail War, he had simply existed. It wasn't that he worked to do things on his own, it was that he had had a lack of desire to do anything from the start. He'd had a goal, but only a roundabout way of reaching it. After the war, he had no longer been on his own, but had had Rin to help him every step of the way. It was through her that he had gained the confidence to live as a human being would. His decisions had not solely been his either, as he could discuss them with her at any point. In other words, he had had a type of buffer to prevent him from reverting back to how he was.
Now, though, he only had himself. He had to make his own decisions by himself, like a normal adult, while maintaining his humanity. Shirou was certain he could manage back in the future without Rin. He was certain he could carve his own path. Now, though... Now, he was in the past. Any step he took would be an infringement on history, and he took the risk of changing things that were better left as was. Would it have been better to have worked from the sidelines to ensure King Arthur would be safe? Should he have so readily accepted her offer to join her in Camelot? Should he have tried to accomplish things in the most indirect manner, a route that would slowly and eventually end up being effective somehow in the long run?

Both Saber and Rin had brought out his best, and dragged out his worst. Now, he had to forge his own path. Shirou clutched at his chest as he coughed again, his eyes narrowing while he stared into the fire.

"I've made my decision," he whispered, frowning. "Now I have to follow it through. I kept calling myself a man all those years ago, but it's like I've been walking backwards. I have to weed out all of my concerns and fears before I can move forward again, on my own two feet."

He shifted around and laid down on the hard, cold ground, his arms crossed behind his head. "I failed in Tryst, and I couldn't make good on my promise. Saber... No," he sighed, "King Arthur was right. I am weak. If I'm going to do anything and become something of worth, I've got to move forward, get stronger, and avenge all of them. I can't save everyone I see, but I can work as hard as I can to ensure that there won't be as many victims in the future."

His eyelids fluttered a bit as he tried to stay awake. "I should pick a job that will give me more chances to see her. I've also got a keep my emotions bottled up a bit more. She's Saber, but she isn't. Everything about her is the same, exactly like if she'd never met my old man. She never met me. She doesn't love me like Saber did, even if I love her."

And, that was the crux of everything, wasn't it? She was no longer the person who he had been with for those two weeks, but nothing about her was any different. King Arthur was still the same woman who he loved, and probably always would. Right now, he was worthless to her, but, if by some chance, if at all possible, he had to become worthy of her attention. One day, Shirou would be able to fight once again on the battlefield, after he had gathered all of his courage and rid himself of his fears. Until then, he had to pick a job, and do it well enough to be noticed.

"I'm good at cleaning, but, cooking would probably be far more fun and interesting. I don't know the first thing about horses or gardening or anything."

Suddenly, a flash back to when he had asked Saber about food in her own country swept through his mind. He remembered the expression of abject hatred that appeared on her face as she thought back to the food in her time. Maybe Shirou had been lucky, but he hadn't actually had any disturbingly bad food since coming to the past, save for that bread and meat he'd received from Myrus. Most of the soups Ceri had concocted had been more or less okay to him, although he had been quick to hunt down seasonings in the area around the village. Some things just weren't meant to be eaten without some kind of buffer.

Shirou breathed in a deep breath before letting out a long sigh. The fire felt really nice, but realized he had to flip over to his other side since his right side was freezing. He was also coughing a lot more, but the medicine was probably working a little bit. His body didn't feel nearly as hot as before. Shirou, now laying on his stomach, lifted up droopy eyes to look over at where King Arthur was still sleeping. Bedivere hadn't finished his rounds just yet, but it seemed like he was almost done.

"This ground is really cold," he muttered, his eyes slowly fluttering shut as he finally fell asleep.
The first thing Shirou noticed as he woke up some time later was that his body was both freezing and burning up. The second thing was that something cool was pressed lightly against his forehead. Or, maybe it was actually warm but he was too hot to tell? His bleary eyes opened slightly enough to see the expanse of the glittering, starry sky above him. Shirou frowned when he heard the sound of clanking nearby, and tried to push himself up. His body didn't want to pay his orders any attention, but he needed to get up. A quick glance at the tinder where his fire had been quickly told him the reason for his being so cold. Shirou forced himself up to a sitting position.

He felt dizzy, but he had to get up to build a new fire. Just as he was about to shift his weight around to push himself up off the ground, he felt everything around him tilt and swirl a bit. Okay, getting up was not a good idea, then.

"That pack..." came a faraway voice. The sound of clanking and clunking was coming closer and the noise was starting to give him a headache.

"Si—... Shall... You?" Shirou was only picking up a few words at that point. Whoever was talking was still too far away.

"No...him myself." Oh, the voices were closer now. He was able to catch the last bit of that sentence.

The clanking came to a stop beside him and Shirou turned his torso a bit to see someone, no, King Arthur, he realized, looking more closely, standing next to him. Her expression was as cool and placid as usual, though the same couldn't be said for the soldier who had accompanied her to his little spot.

"Sire, if I may," the soldier began tentatively, looking uncertain.

"My order stands," came the quick dismissal. "See to it. When you are finished, clear this area of evidence that anyone was here."

Confused, Shirou watched as the soldier bowed and reached to pick up Shirou's backpack. Not understanding what was going on, he weakly waved a hand in the soldier's direction, trying to reach for it.

"Hey, that's mine," he complained, trying to get up before a gentle force pushed him back down. For a second, Shirou thought they might have considered leaving him behind and thought taking his pack was worth their effort thus far. He pushed off whatever was on his shoulder and tried to crawl to get to the soldier when a hand – he was now certain it was a hand. A hand in armor, but a hand nonetheless – pushed him down again with a little more force.

"Cease your struggles, Shirou," he heard her say.

"But, my backpack..." he argued, frowning slightly as he looked up at her.

He wasn't sure what caused it, but there was a small frown of disapproval on her face as she peered down at him. She let out a small sigh and gestured for the soldier to continue as he was. Shirou sat obediently next to the king as the soldier bowed and carried the backpack away. He looked up at her again like a forlorn child. He wasn't even sure what he was thinking or seeing anymore. He must have been sicker than he'd originally thought.

"Now, come," King Arthur commanded him as she fell to a knee and draped one of his arms across her shoulders.
Wrapping her own arm around his waist, she supported Shirou as he unsteadily rose up onto his own two feet. As soon as he was standing, he tried to pull his arm back and move away from her, but her grip was as solid as steel. He wasn't going anywhere but where she intended to take him. After ensuring that Shirou more or less had his balance, the king slowly walked forward, directing him towards the campfire where Sir Bedivere was now resting. If the king was awake and the knight was asleep, they must have changed rotations already, Shirou realized. He wished he could tell time by the positioning of the sun and stars. These people probably could though – he'd have to ask one of them someday. Even if he could tell time though, it honestly felt like he'd barely slept an hour. He was so exhausted.

The warmth of the fire was incredibly welcome to him as Her Majesty helped him sit down next to it. She pushed him back to rest against her sleeping horse and then went to pick up his bag and set it next to him. Shirou watched her look over at the main camp for a slight moment before she focused her intense gaze on him. He just blinked owlishly as she frowned further. Great. What had he done to deserve her scorn this time?

"Honestly," she let out irritably as soon as she realized he wasn't going to say anything himself. "What else do I find upon awakening but a stubborn man who proceeds to sleep alone in the cold in the middle of December. Never have I come across such stupidity. Is this a regular habit with you, sir? I know you mean to rest, but this must be resolved first."

Oh, man, an argument. He had to focus a bit more to make sure he didn't say the wrong thing.

"What was I supposed to do? Unless you expect me to materialize a nice, big, warm house out of thin air."

His sarcasm didn't escape her, though she did appear to ignore it. "If you could, that would be a blessing indeed."

Ah. She didn't ignore it. She returned it.

"Look," he grumbled, just wanting to rest, "it wasn't as if I could go up to your soldiers and be buddy-buddy with them. I knew how to build a fire, so I just went a little farther away so I wouldn't bother anyone. Besides, you basically said it yourself: I have to learn to do things on my own and make my own path."

"If you were wary of approaching my soldiers, than why did you not simply speak to me or Bedivere? We would have been more than willing to accommodate you, or rather, that is our current duty, until I have fulfilled my promise to you."

Shirou closed his eyes to rest some as he was scolded, but could practically feel her growing angrier. Opening them again and maintaining eye contact with her, he shook his head slightly.

"What normal person could go up to a king and ask something like that?"

"You seemed to have no problem asking me to decide your life for you, and yet you balk at something so obvious and simple?"

Shirou frowned and opened his mouth to rebuke her, but she cut him off.

"Also, while we are on the topic, you spoke of me saying that you should decide your own path. That phrasing I used, I do not think it means what you think it means. What I originally meant was that you should learn to move and think as appropriate to the situation. Do you honestly believe that falling asleep by yourself, near an untended fire, when you are so obviously ill, was
appropriate?"

She let out a small "tch" as she turned away from him, scowling. "Although, I recognize this as
being partially my fault. I should have realized the stress of the situation would wear on you. You
also looked as if you had not slept in a while. Yes, I am also to blame for –"

"That foreigner is getting a right rippin' from the king."

"Serves him right. Why would the king think to pick up a louse like him?"

"That's just part of the His Majesty's charm. You know, paying homage to the poor and weak,
taking up strays, and all that. He's benevolent like that."

"I'd just as soon see that guy's head on a platter though. Scots' heads are so big, but I wonder how
big the insides are."

"What insides? You mean the cotton?"

As the few soldiers continued mocking him, Shirou cast his gaze at the ground. He wasn't
particularly fazed by what they were saying – after all, he had faced much worse when he'd gone to
England to study under Rin. Besides, his hair was red, and these people were fighting a war that
involved Scotland. It was only obvious that they should be angry that their king took a probable
enemy under her wing, even if only for a short while. As long as no one was going to hunt him
down, tie him up, and hang him or something, he was fine. Wait, they didn't do hanging much in
the sixth century, right? No, they did the guillotine thing, right? No, wait, it was hanging. France
did the guillotine thing. Hell, history was not his best subject, truth be told.

To be entirely truthful, though, he didn't care if they jeered at him – he just wanted this discussion
with King Arthur to be done so he could sleep. Ah, blissful sleep. Oh, and he probably needed to
down another couple of pills to fight the fever. He couldn't let anyone see his medicine though.
That was another good reason for being by himself – he didn't have to hide his stuff.

Just as he was ready to stop fighting sleep and close his eyes, he heard the clinking of armor as
King Arthur drew up to her full height. Shirou stared up at her and felt like his body had been
splashed with freezing, cold water as soon as he saw her expression. No, it wasn't just the
expression of absolute anger, – note: she was pretty pissed – it the pressure that was suddenly
engulfing the immediate area. Then tension emanating from her was enough for even the joking
soldiers to slowly take notice. Had they been enemies, they would have long fallen by her sword by
then.

The expression of anger shifted back to calm placidness, her gaze steady as she stared at the awake
soldiers.

"How odd. If my memory serves me correctly," she began, her voice level and low, "I do not
believe I employed you to make fleeting, irrelevant comments about the guests with whom I
convene, or, have I been grossly mistaken all of this time?"

King Arthur did not shout or raise her voice at all. A good two-thirds of the soldiers under her
command were still sleeping after all, and she probably wanted to ensure they would have enough
energy to start the next stretch of their journey. Shirou swallowed slowly, feeling his body grow
even heavier as he stared up at her. Despite never raising her voice, somehow, it seemed to carry
just as easily, and loudly, as if she had indeed yelled. The worst part of it all, Shirou realized, had
to be her tone. It reeked of suffused iciness, that seemed to drip down stalactites of icicles as the
words flowed across the area.
After the king had spoken those few words, there came about a silence and stillness that seemed completely unnatural. It must have been his imagination, since Bedivere never made any move to rise or even open his eyes. Even asking her about possible super attacks that one night so long ago had never incited such ire. Note to self: don't make fun of any guests King Arthur happens to speak to.

She raised her head slightly, with her eyebrows also arching a bit.

"You are staying silent. I will take that to mean that you are indeed soldiers under my command, and as a result, do not have any such freedom as mocking those with whom I seek to speak. Or, perhaps, you feel yourselves fit to intervene on royal business?"

Shirou didn't hear anyone say anything. Actually, he couldn't hear anything but silence.

"Of course," the king continued as her head shifted to the side barely a smidgen, "if you are lacking for entertainment, I am certain there are many things I can find for you to do. Perhaps you would like to scout within ten leagues of our position for our enemies, or participate in more training with me personally? Yes, I suppose some training is long overdue. I will ensure you have no reason to speak idly of matters that do not whatsoever concern yourselves."

Silence continued before a meek voice interrupted it by saying,

"Ah, begging your pardon, Your Majesty. 'Twas all in good fun, you see. Forgive us – we won't say anything more on the matter."

"In fact, we were actually thinking of checking the area ourselves, to make sure no enemies were around to threaten Your Majesty," spoke another cowed voice.

"Forgive us. We will take our leave now," came the last voice.

"Yes, that would be best," King Arthur responded, nodding slightly. "I look forward to the report from all of you."

Whatever sleep Shirou had wanted had taken a seat on the back burner after that exchange. Saber had always been so nice and kind when she was with him. To see her, or rather, King Arthur, in her natural environment and rightful place as king was absolutely terrifying. Actually, she scared the hell out of him, while at the same time, made him impressed beyond belief. She was frightening to a small degree, but the level of respect she commanded, her ability to bring about complete silence out of rough and gruff soldiers like the ones who had made fun of him was incredibly amazing. I feel like I'm falling in love all over again, he thought to himself, still staring up at her, petrified.

Her posture losing some of its tension, she turned her gaze back to look at him, and he froze even more. Gone were the normally cool, yet amiable eyes he had grown accustomed to since meeting her in Tryst, and in their place, orbs as dangerously hard as diamonds and as frostily cold as the arctic. Shirou felt his heart start pounding even harder, but he couldn't be sure it was only out of fear.

She must have noticed his unease, because as soon as she looked away and he saw a muscle in her jaw jump slightly as she gritted her teeth, the pressure weighing him down suddenly dissolved, as if it had never actually been there. He almost felt as if his body had lost some weight, considering how much lighter he was. Then again, as soon as that concern was gone, his exhaustion hit him again full force.

"Shirou."
He compelled his eyes to look back up at her.

"Shirou, I apologize for that interruption. As you appear to be at your limit, allow me to make one last thing clear before I leave you to your rest: you only have one life – there are, and never will be, any repeats. Unless you are very fortunate, or unfortunate, for that matter, there will be no going back to redo what you have already done. I ask that you keep that in mind when you learn to 'stand on your own two feet', so to speak.

"Ensuring that your body is up to par and in good health is the first step to the strength you seek. Rest, and rid yourself of that ridiculous fever so that you may be able to move forward. Well, then," she finished softly, bowing her head, "I leave you to your rest. I will see that you awaken at dawn."

Shirou was sure the irony of her statement would have hit him a bit harder had he had a clear head, but at the moment, he was only barely able to keep his eyes open. He watched through half-open eyes as her skirts swirled as she turned and heard the clanking of her armor as she walked away. Shirou felt around him for his backpack, and as soon as his hand touched the leather, he dragged it closer to him. Not even opening the flap, he stuck his hand into the main pocket, reaching for the hard, plastic bottle. Bringing it out, he uncapped the lid and popped a couple of more pills. As soon as he pushed the bottle back into the bag, Shirou rested his head against the horse behind him.

Readying himself to fall asleep, he suddenly sat up ramrod straight, blinking a few times. Damn it, he had to take a piss. Shirou grunted as he pushed himself onto his knees and then tentatively stood up. As soon as he was up, he felt a wave of dizziness pass through him and he placed his hands on his hips to steady himself a bit. Frowning, Shirou looked up to see the blonde king looking back at him from a few steps away.

"Is there a problem?"

"No," he answered wearily. "I just realized I haven't gone to the bathroom since we left. I'm just going to head over to that bush over there real quick."

King Arthur turned to him fully, her countenance serious. "Ah, yes. My apologies for not even considering that you may have been feeling some discomfort. Then, allow me to escort you."

"It's barely a hundred meters away," he protested, pointing over at one of the many small thickets located a bit of a ways from them. "I'd be able to shout for help if I really needed it."

"It is at times when you least expect danger that you are in the most danger," she rebuked, tilting her head slightly. "Ensuring your safety is part of my duty, and I take my responsibilities quite seriously."

"What, so do you think there are enemies around here?"

"I don't believe so, no," she answered honestly.

"Do you think I'm going to be attacked while I'm over there?"

"The probabilities of that happening are slim to none, so, no, I do not."

"Then I can go by myself, right?"

"I would much prefer that you didn't."

That was a pretty obvious "no" if he'd ever heard one.
She wasn't budging and his bladder was on the verge of bursting. The last time he'd gone to the restroom had been shortly before the entire company had left the burned ashes of Tryst and although he hadn't actually drank or ate anything along the way – oh, he was hungry, too, now that he thought about it – nature still called. Shirou gave her one last glance and after weighing the importance of either using the restroom, with an escort or no, and arguing with her for the sake of just a bit of independence, there was obviously only one answer he could come up with. Shirou just sighed and started walking toward the thicket, with her a few steps behind him.

"Isn't this something one of those guys back there should be doing?" he questioned, genuinely curious as to why a king would be his own personal escort.

"Considering what took place earlier, I wouldn't be surprised if they resorted to violence instead of merely words were I not present," King Arthur answered candidly. "You are still very much an enemy in their eyes, and I am the only reason you still breathe, at the moment."

Well, that was a gruesome thought. So, when she had talked about safety earlier, had she meant security from being killed by actual enemies like the Saxons, or security from being killed by her own people? It made sense in a way – she may have been king, but these were still individual people they were talking about. No matter what any leader did, no one could possibly force someone to stop doing something they so earnestly desired to do. In other words, Shirou was the possible enemy due to his appearance and the soldiers wanted to take care of him. No matter how scary she was – and she had been damned terrifying earlier – if a soldier felt oppressed by a possible enemy sitting near him, it would only be natural to deal with the oppression, even if only to appease oneself.

It was the Holy Grail War all over again – there was just one person, though a very intensely strong one, blocking and shielding him from a whole bunch of people who wanted nothing more than to spill his blood. ...Had he just been born under a dark star or maybe on the night of a new moon to incur so much bad luck in his life? What was it with people always wanting to kill him for some reason?

"Then, I will wait here. Please inform me when you have finished your business."

Oh, they had already gotten there. That was fast. Shirou glanced at her as he passed by her, but her eyes were closed and head slightly bowed as she stood firm. As always, the king's posture was perfectly erect and she was as calm as a trickling brook. He was quickly reminded of when Rin, him, and Saber went to the church together. She had simply waited outside of the gate in much of the same position, her only duty to stand guard until her services proved necessary.

Shirou quickly went into the thicket, did his business, and was wiping his hands on a couple of leaves as he returned to her side. Her eyes opened to look at him, silently questioning if he were done or not. He let the leaves fall to the ground – what he wouldn't do for some antibacterial soap – and looked back at her with a small grin.

"Thanks for waiting."

She merely nodded her head and began walking ahead. Her pace, however, was slow and it was easy enough for Shirou to fall in step with her.

"So..." Shirou began, trying to fill the silence. "What's Camelot like?"

"You will find out within three to four days' time. Could you contain your curiosity until then?"

"Uh, right, sorry," he mumbled, seeing that she wasn't in the mood for small talk. Well, that much
should have been obvious – it wasn't like they were friends or anything. Not only that, but who knew if they ever would be able to get as close as Saber and he had been?

When they finally reached the campsite where Bedivere still lay sleeping, the king did not move a muscle away until she was certain that Shirou was settled by the campfire. He let out a long sigh of exhaustion when he sat down in front of the fire. He was still really tired even though the medicine was finally kicking in, but at least his bladder was empty and he was moderately comfortable.

"I will awaken you come dawn," the woman serving as king told him.

He looked up again at her. "Hey, um," he said, catching her attention one last time.

"Um, I know I said this before, but, thank you for bringing me along with you. And, I really do mean 'thank you'. I was pretty unsure after I'd agreed, but, I really think this will be the right path for me. I'll do everything I can to help you in return for everything you're doing for me."

Her green eyes widened almost imperceptibly before she faced him completely. Then, much to his very surprise, King Arthur's facial features relaxed as a small smile graced her face, or what seemed to him like a smile. Shirou felt his heart stop briefly when he saw her expression. It was almost as if their surroundings had disappeared and she had smiled that smile reserved just for him. That was impossible, though, Shirou knew, his heart rate returning to normal. It made absolutely no sense for him to get his hopes up. She was just being nice to him since he had finally resolved to try moving forward. He returned her smile with one of his own as she said,

"I only hope your luck turns for the better once you are situated."

They were kind words. Yeah, she was way better like this as opposed to when she was raging mad. Though, that was fine, too, so long as the anger wasn't directed at him. Watching it was bad enough. He accidentally let loose a small cough, and with that, the moment they shared diffused and her normal, calm expression returned, though she did seem somewhat concerned for him.

"Now, sleep. We have much distance to cover on the morrow."

With that, she was walking away and he was left to his own devices again. Shirou looked down at his fingernails that were a nice shade of blue. He breathed some warm breath on them to get rid of the partial numbness and then scooted a bit closer to the fire. Turning to grab his bag and pull it over for him to rest his head against as he laid down, he sighed as soon as he was horizontal. Still thinking of that beautiful expression she had shown him, the one that wasn't supposed to exist according to the dreams of her past he’d had, Shirou slowly closed his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he allowed the darkness of sleep to flow around him.

"How odd," a voice to his left spoke, surprising him, and ultimately dragging him out of his near sleep.

Shirou shifted his head around to look at the figure lying down on the ground, his eyes wide.

"Huh?"

Bedivere opened his dark eyes for a moment to meet Shirou's gaze. He looked the auburn-haired man up and down briefly before letting out a sigh.

"You must have been born under a special star."

"Star? What?" Shirou asked perplexedly.
"Never once have I seen the king smile, and so warmly. I must now reconsider my opinion of you," the man said simply before turning over onto his other side and going back to sleep.

Shirou stared at the now sleeping knight, eyes wide with bewilderment.

"What?"

He frowned at the knight before repositioning himself again.

"No," he murmured softly, his eyes slowly closing. "You're wrong on that account..."

His muscles slackened and relaxed as he finally fell asleep under the clear, starry night sky.

Shirou took in a deep breath as he woke from his slumber some time later, his eyes opening to still see the strip of starry sky covering the expanse over him. Had he only been asleep for a couple of hours? It had seemed like so much longer than that. One thing he could say, though, was that he was feeling way, way, way better. It was almost as if he slept the entirety of like a week within the span of a couple of hours. He stretched his arms out above him as he let out another yawn. The fire in front of him crackled and popped, sharing its warmth for anyone nearby to enjoy. He took in another deep breath of the clear, unpolluted air. He really did feel a lot better.

"You are awake, I see."

His head popped up and he looked to his left to see where the voice had come from. Staring at him through eyes full of suspicion was none other than Sir Bedivere himself – an awake one at that. The knight sighed softly, his eyebrows knitting together with some slight annoyance.

"How fortunate indeed. For a moment, I believed the king's efforts to have been in vain."

"What do you mean?" Shirou said with a slight frown. "I've only been out for a couple of hours."

"Is a 'couple of hours' what they call three full days from whence you came? What, then, would you call a full day?"

"Huh?"

Shirou stared back at Bedivere, not really understanding what he was hearing. Blinking once, then again, he slowly pushed himself up off of the hard ground and took a look around at his surroundings. The geography around him had changed incredibly. Gone were the flat lands with trees a splendor, with the rich, beautiful environment being replaced by an assortment of rolling hills, a scarcity of trees, – though, there will still quite a number to be seen – and an inability to see far into the distance in any one direction. If he were to wager a guess, where Tryst had been was far more similar to the location of London than where he was now.

"Where are we?" he asked, gazing around with archer eyes – his prana reserves were finally back at full. "It's been three days? I've been out for three days?"

"We will soon be back in Devon," Bedivere answered calmly. "Yes, you have been asleep for the entirety of three days, much to my displeasure, to be sure."

Shirou turned back to look at the knight again. "What could that possibly have to do with you?"

"Who was it, pray tell, do you think was forced to lift your unruly carcass for travel each and every single time? Honestly, I agree with the men. We would have been better off leaving you back in
the remains of that village, or dumping you somewhere along the way."

The redhead scowled slightly as he sat back down. "Okay. I get it. You don't like me."

"Was it so obvious?" came the retort.

"Fine. Why?"

"Must I entertain you so, stranger? Think for yourself. Since the day you came, the king has bent over backwards just to see that you feel comfortable and safe. What reason would a king have to do that much for a villager unless there was actually some merit or benefit to doing so?" Bedivere ranted – and yes, he was ranting, Shirou realized.

Bedivere gestured in Shirou's direction. "Tell me, boy. What reason is there for the king to so concern himself with the needs of a peasant? Are you a fighter? Perhaps an astute and intelligent scientist? Maybe you can foretell weather and plot map guidelines of time? Might you even be a powerful and wise mage?"

No, he wasn't any of those at all. He used to be able to fight, but that was before he got sent back in time, before he'd turned into a whining sack of nothing. Shirou crossed his arms over his chest, unwilling to admit how pathetic he currently was. To be truthful, Bedivere was pretty much right. There weren't much of a reason for a king of England to bother with saving someone like him. Sighing, Shirou simply shook his head to Bedivere's question, with the latter looking none too surprised.

"Yes, I had not believed so, and yet, here we are. I do not despise you for being powerless, for all man is until a certain point. I despise you because you force others to make up for your complacency and weakness. Had you instead refused His Majesty's proposal, I would have thought you brave and courageous. A peasant who had suffered so would choose instead to march his own path without the help of another to encourage him along the way – now, that is someone to be respectful of.

"But you," Bedivere continued, "you did nothing of the sort. You took the king's proffered hand and used it as a means to level yourself, and that is all. Indeed, you did not even simply use His Majesty as a mere stepping stone, but sit dumbly next to him without a care in the world."

Next to him? Shirou turned to his right to see King Arthur resting beside him, having heard not a word of the conversation. The time traveler continued to stare at the young king as the blonde's chest rose and fell in time with her breathing. Across her lap lay none other than the sword of Excalibur, the real and genuine one. She seemed nothing short of defenseless, though he knew that was as far from the truth as possible. Shirou gulped slightly. How had he not noticed that she was right there beside him?

"That's the king," he managed softly.

"Yes, that would be King Arthur," Bedivere agreed dryly. "How wonderful that your eyes do not fail you as much as your ability to function as a normal human being appears to."

Something about Bedivere bothered Shirou, but it wasn't until that comment that he realized what it was, exactly. Bedivere, someone who Shirou had thought of as being a quiet, loyal knight to King Arthur – emphasis on the quiet part – was acting just like a certain Servant that Shirou had hated with all of his being. The sarcasm, the accusations that were right on point, the unwillingness to let him alone after he'd made mistakes, all of these things were exactly what Archer EMIYA had done.
Shirou hadn't even known who the Servant was until the day Rin had made several comments on how similar they had seemed. He wasn't sure when Rin had made the connection – he hadn't exactly been her Servant for that long. However, maybe it had come about years later when Shirou had developed the Kanshou and Bakuya on his own. Then, there were the several connections as far as his Reality Marble and projecting went, and well... It had probably been an easy answer for her to devise.

Ugh, just thinking of the guy ticked him off, and to think that Bedivere was like a living predecessor of him was enough to make Shirou hate his unfortunate luck.

"For some reason," Shirou muttered, "I'd always thought you were kinder, more laidback, and you know, less talkative."

"Your whining offends me," Bedivere retorted, just as softly. "I'll be kinder once you have proven your worth and become something of use to the king."

The Japanese man grunted slightly. The knight had a point there, though Shirou didn't really want to admit it.

"Now that we have approached that particular topic," Bedivere continued, sitting forward somewhat eagerly and yet unenthused at the very same time, "what do you intend to do once we arrive in Camelot?"

"I'll become a chef," Shirou said, having given his future quite a bit of thought. It was one of the only things he could really do at that point.

"I'll wow the entire kingdom with my culinary might." That was sarcasm.

"Chef?" questioned Bedivere. "I am unfamiliar with this term. From 'culinary', however, I assume that to mean you are an expert concerning food and meals. You intend to join the kitchen then."

"Yeah. Just have to run it by the chief, first."

Bedivere merely cupped his chin as he mused over Shirou's words. Shirou knew good and well that the food in the sixth century was terrible – again, he had been lucky in that regard. They also had very little of the foodstuffs he was so used to working with in the future. How could they not have potatoes? That was like the basic of the basics. Those, however, did not come to Britain until further along in the future. No tomatoes, either. That had definitely caused him some distress.

The one thing that did seem to grow aplenty here had to be the spices. Of course, most of them were used as herbal remedies and not as actual cooking spices. While he could find basil and rosemary growing out in the fields, and although he could find peppercorn, prepping it into pepper was a bit of a pain, and took a lot of time. He was lucky that a lot of the spices had been discovered or known about during the reign of the Roman Empire. So, they definitely existed in this time period, it was just hunting them down that took so much of his time.

Then, there was the problem with meat. So, apparently, cooking meat thoroughly was not exactly a thing, or so he had come to understood when Ceri criticized him the first time he'd cooked any. All of the flavor dies when a person cooks the meat too, too much, she had complained. Well, that was true, but he hadn't wanted to deal with E. coli or anything either.

Speaking of E. coli, there was a whole slew of things he had issues with in the past, not all of which including food. Firstly, no baths! He hadn't had a freaking bath in months! Two: no toilet paper. He had to use leaves to wipe his butt. Three: insects! Mites, lice, bedbugs...they were everywhere! He
had contracted lice within the first two weeks of being in the stupid time period (after he had finally woken up), and had had to dunk his head into a vat of alcohol for a decent amount of time before the itching would stop, only to replaced by a lot of pain from the alcohol. Four: water! No one drank water, like, ever. He had constantly been fetching water from the nearest stream and boiling it for a fresh supply. Five: boobs. Okay, this wasn't exactly an issue, but bras had been invented with good reason. Seeing boobs bounce around and essentially say hello to him was not the way to maintain his chasteness. Ceri had thought he had seen the devil the first time she had clung to his arm and bounced with glee.

"How long, precisely, have you devoted yourself to the art of food?"

Right, so enough ranting and back to food.

Shirou ran his fingers through his hair as he thought back. Before the finale of the fourth war, he had never cooked a single day in all of his life. He had been about seven-and-a-half-years-old when Kiritsugu had adopted him, and it only took a few months for him to realize that his old man and Taiga were simply not meant to be in the kitchen, or working with anything even remotely sharp. Plus, since Kiritsugu had been gone for so long all the time, Taiga had been the only one around to take care of him, which meant he would have to deal with horrible dishes, like her intending to make tamagoyaki and instead making okonomiyaki over rice. Dishes like that were absolutely and positively disgusting, so he'd had to make his own way through the kitchen.

The first things he had made couldn't have been called, well, food, no matter how you looked at them. Shirou had been content initially to make cup ramen, before he started wanting things that weren't processed at every corner. He had forced Taiga to buy him an assortment of cookbooks – it was around that time that she started popping over at the Emiya house on an almost daily occurrence. Let's see, then he had finally learned to make the simplest dishes possible, like nikujyaga and sukiyaki. So, that had finally happened when he was eight, give or take a few months. In other words...

"I guess it's been about sixteen years or so," Shirou murmured, still thinking back. "Yeah, give or take a few months here and there, about sixteen years, since I started when I was around eight-years-old."

Bedivere looked pleasantly surprised. It was the first time that a genuine smile had crossed his face. "I had merely thought you to be a beggar, but even you have something in which you take such pride. That is good, very good. Rather, having you in the kitchen would be a delight, I'm certain."

Shirou frowned a bit. Sure, it might have been a delight if he had even a fraction of the food choices that were available for him to use in the future. All of the key components to Japanese dishes were, obviously, inexplicably unavailable to him, and although he had studied some about European food, he had been more intrigued with the French and Italian dishes as opposed to English dishes. There was nothing wrong with the English dishes – they were delicious enough as they were, but that had been more Rin's territory than his. She also made a mean chow mein once she had discovered the right way to make Chinese food. That had normally been Sakura's forte, but hey, sisters were sisters, right?

In any case, unless someone was willing to hook him up with a supply route, then Japanese food was just not going to happen. He could do something with fish – there was plenty of that in this time period. Plus, Camelot was only like a couple of days travel away from the ocean or so, if his memory served him correctly. The map he'd looked at that supposedly charted Arthurian places was somewhat bogus, if Shirou was to be honest. If he had fish, and access to a bunch of
vegetables, and various meats and stuff, then he could probably come up with some decent dishes. They weren't going to be amazing, but they'd be better than anything this time period had ever seen.

"I'm not a beggar," he stated grudgingly. "I guarantee I can out-cook anyone you put me up against. I am the best damn cook you will have ever met."

That was more than likely a fact, and not simply bravado. After all, these people didn't know how to cook – there was no way Shirou could possibly lose in any cooking contests. He hadn't fallen that far from who he'd originally been in the future.

"A challenge if I have ever heard one!" Bedivere claimed, looking eager. "Well, then, I would like to think a demonstration might be in order."

A demo? Well, Shirou was hungry, as he hadn't eaten or drank anything in well over three days. Of course, thanks to that, he had no need to go to the restroom. Silver lining where it counted, he guessed.

"Uh, sure, I guess," Shirou said with some hesitation. "I don't exactly have any food with me, though."

Bedivere was only too happy to spin around and dig into one of the several pouches hanging from the saddle on his resting horse. He looked into it, nodded, untied the satchel from the horse, and then tossed the entire thing over at Shirou. The latter caught it, and raised an eyebrow when he felt something squishy. Opening the bag, Shirou was blasted with a smell of death – whatever was in the bag reeked, horribly. Shirou had smelled worse, sure, but he hadn't been prepared for it this time around.

Setting the bag on the ground, Shirou used the light of the fire to peek inside. It was a couple of legs of something on the smaller side – he was going to guess a rabbit. That was encouraging actually. Rabbits were rather tasteless and dry on their own, but with some seasoning or soup, they would naturally absorb the flavors they were bathed in. Unfortunately, Shirou wouldn't have time, and didn't have the ingredients for that matter, to make a broth or cook it with any vegetables. He had to use the materials he had on hand.

Ignoring the foul stench, Shirou pulled his pack closer to him, opened it up and looked inside. Luckily, he had all of the spices that he'd taken from before the battle in Tryst, and even some churned butter and whipped eggs. It was cold enough that both were still in good condition, although it would be far better if he chose to use them now. He had his basil, some pepper, a decent amount of salt, and some lard taken from a number of wild animals. There was also some honey left, but he wasn't really in the mood for a sweet base.

Hm, he could use the eggs and butter as a simple base, which meant he wouldn't actually need the lard unless he wanted make some fried rabbit legs. Realistically speaking, the fried legs would probably last him and Bedivere for a longer period of time than simply broiling or grilling them. It was also way unhealthier, but this wasn't the time for considering stuff like that. The main problem was that he didn't want to use all of the eggs for just two little, rabbit legs. If they had some other type of meat to work with as well, that would balance the ingredients just a bit better.

"Do you have anything else I can work with, too?" Shirou asked. "Like, some more meat? Two rabbit legs might not be enough."

Bedivere seemed somewhat disappointed. "That is all I have on my person. Perhaps the king..."

Right, the king, who was calmly and blissfully sleeping next to him. Shirou took a chance glance
at the aforementioned person, only to find the blonde awake with a slightly disgruntled expression. What? Why was she upset this time? He hadn't done anything wrong for once.

"What is that foul smell?" she muttered, her torso rising as she sought out the virulent odor.

"Dead rabbit, Sire," Bedivere said simply, and King Arthur grimaced slightly. "This boy means to cook it."

She turned her annoyed gaze over to Shirou, who backed away slightly unconsciously. "You are familiar with cooking?"

"Yeah," Shirou started, before wincing as he corrected himself. "I mean, yes. I was going to cook this, but the thing is, it may not be enough to hold the both of us for very long, plus I don't want to waste any of my ingredients."

"Yes, wasting would not be a satisfactory course to take," the king agreed, still rather groggy and out of it. "Perhaps I can be of service."

She reached behind her blindly for another much larger pouch. Unhooking it from the saddle, she held it out for Shirou to accept. When he gingerly took it, King Arthur sighed again softly and rested back against her horse again. Shirou frowned a bit – she was obviously dead tired, and, if the grumble of her stomach was any indication, also quite hungry. Oh man, he wasn't just dealing with an exhausted king, but a hungry one, as well. Scary thought. Waking her up with noxious fumes from the get-go probably hadn't been a good idea either.

"Splendid," Bedivere said excitedly. "There is now enough meat for you to work with, is there not? You are ready to cook, yes?"

Well, no. He needed something to cook with, though that would be more difficult to track down. First, he needed a knife, but he could technically tear apart what had apparently been two full rabbits within King Arthur's pouch. Did people in this time period just carry around dead carcasses just because?

So, knife aside, Shirou still needed some kind of large pot to fry the stuff with. He also needed a relatively small bowl for dipping purposes, and then utensils to eat the crap with. Of course, if he had just the small bowl, then he could make do somehow. Tongs would've been nice, but those didn't exactly exist where they currently were. A couple of knives would've made up for that. Anyway, first and foremost, a bowl. They didn't have plates back then, sure, but what about bowls?

"Do you have any bowls?" Shirou asked, wary of the answer.

"Bowls?" Bedivere inquired. "What do you mean by this?"

King Arthur, surprisingly, was the one to answer. "A container, Bedivere," she stated, eyes still closed. "A container with which to hold soup, or something of the like."

"It is but a small one," the knight said, "but might this do?"

Bedivere pulled off one of the crude, metal things attached to his horse's saddle. Shirou took it in his hands. It was about the size of a small soup pan, and fairly convenient. He wouldn't be able to fry everything at once, but it would have to do. It really was rather simple, but it wasn't as if he had expected anything really detailed. Shirou rolled the bowl in his hands before placing it down on the grass. It probably wouldn't be a good idea to start projecting in front of the king, and any and all people who had known of his magecraft were long since dead. Again, silver lining and all of that.
Grimacing slightly, Shirou reached into Bedivere's pouch and pulled out one of the legs. It hadn't been skinned just yet, so he would have to work on that first. He glanced over at Bedivere, and made a cutting motion with his hand. Luckily, the knight was quick on the uptake and immediately produced a dagger for Shirou to use. The cook took it and made a tentative slice through the rabbit skin. The skin came apart like sliced butter, causing Shirou to grin a bit. It was nice and sharp. That was good.

It was simple work skinning the two legs and both of the full rabbits. Shirou didn't even realize he had an audience of more than just the two knights next to him as he tossed in pieces of the rabbit onto the ground. He wiped his hands on the grass around him to clean them up a bit – some alcohol would've worked better, but he wasn't really complaining. Next came out the butter, eggs, and lard. Shirou dumped about three-fourths of the container of butter, both of the whipped eggs, and a good majority of the lard into the bowl, and started mixing them up together with his hands. A wooden spoon would've been nice, but that obviously wasn't happening either.

King Arthur, Bedivere, and some curious soldiers who had heard Bedivere's voice full of eagerness watched with heavy interest as Shirou reached back into his pack for some of his seasonings. Out came the pepper, salt, and basil, each one filtering into the pot without hesitation. When satisfied, Shirou then tossed the seasonings, the remainder of the butter, and the lard back into his backpack.

Now, came the tough part, Shirou realized as he glared at the large fire as if it were his enemy. He needed to bring the contents to a heavy boil, but he didn't exactly have the instruments to do so. There wasn't a ladle on the bowl, so he was going to have to be careful about how he did this. There wasn't a cooking spit to be found either, so, he'd instead have to use a couple of knives to carefully hold the bowl over the fire. He also needed another knife for turning the rabbit around.

He turned to look at Bedivere, who met his glance readily. "Yes, is there something more you needed?"

His readiness to help Shirou completely surprised the latter. Only half an hour before, the man had been ready to cut his throat, and yet now, he seemed nothing short of keen to be of service. Shirou exhaled slightly, eyes wide as he stared back at Bedivere.

"I need another couple of knives, if you've got them. I also need someone capable of holding the pot after it starts boiling so I can fry up the meat."

A soldier from behind Shirou raised his hand up high as he proclaimed, "I would be more than honored to take part in this practice!"

Another soldier, too, much to the surprise of Shirou, Bedivere, and King Arthur, also exclaimed, "I, too, would like to be of service, if I may!"

Both soldiers relinquished to Shirou their own personal daggers, and Shirou took them hesitantly, his eyes never leaving their faces. Uh, what was going on? Why were there so many people watching what he was doing?

King Arthur must have sensed his distress. "This manner of cooking is unknown to us, Shirou. It is but a matter of course that so many would be intrigued by your display of cooking proficiency."

He wasn't exactly proficient unless the stuff tasted good, but who could say with rabbit? Wolf meat, or some other animal, like some kind of bird, would've been much better to work with. The thing that was really bothering him though, was that everyone was looking at him like he was in charge. Wouldn't that be the blonde next to him?
"Why do you hesitate, Shirou?" the king asked. "My soldiers await your commands."

"Uh," Shirou started, looking back at the interested soldiers. "Is it really my call to order them around?"

"Who else if not you? No one here is particularly astute with cooking, and it does seem to fall into your line of expertise. My soldiers are at your beck and call."

No one had even tried anything yet, but they were so eager to say he was an expert? Well, he knew he could manage something, but, weren't their expectations just a bit too high? What the hell did these people eat to make him mixing together ingredients appear so entertaining?

"Uh, okay," Shirou said, just accepting that he was apparently in charge. "So, you," he said, pointing at one soldier, "hold both of these knives to the bowl as hard as you can, and make sure it stays level over the fire. Make sure not to get too close to the fire, or your armor will burn you from the outside in."

The other soldiers seemed a bit put out when he didn't assign them anything to do. He didn't have enough ingredients to feed all of them anyway, so he hoped that wouldn't be a problem.

As soon as the soldier gingerly held up the bowl over the fire steadily, – his arm strength was really good. Shirou shouldn't have been surprised – Shirou began rubbing blades of grass over the skinned rabbit. The grass would add a small touch of sweetness, but not overload it as much as honey would. It was also the only green thing around, and would have to do for the moment.

No one seemed to question him at all as he worked and he was granted sweet silence. It was somewhat awkward that everyone kept staring at everything he did, but that was just as well. Better that they stare than glare with animosity. Just like that, fifteen minutes had passed by without any trouble, and Shirou rose up to his feet.

"Are you doing okay? Do you need to trade out with anyone?"

"No, sir!" the soldier barked out in response, his eyes focused. "I am perfectly fine and prepared to hold this for four more hours, should that be necessary. Even more, if it were requested of me!"

Yeah, hopefully it wouldn't take Shirou four hours just to fry up some meat. If so, he may as well have given up before even making the attempt.

Shirou reached down to pick up some pieces of meat and tossed them into the bowl. Everyone could hear sizzling almost as soon as the contents had swallowed the pieces of meat. Still seeing some room left in the batter, Shirou tossed in a couple of more legs and shifted each one around a bit with Bedivere's dagger. Each leg wouldn't take more than five minutes to cook, but now he had a different issue. How were any of them supposed to eat it? He looked at his lone knife and frowned. He was going to need a few more knives. That, or if they had some more bowls... Nah, knives were easier.

He turned back to face the soldiers, feeling a lot calmer now. Shirou was finally in his element now, and nothing could really throw him off of his groove now. He gestured towards one of the fifty soldiers – how were there suddenly fifty of them surrounding the knights' corner? – and asked for another few knives. Within moments, ten knives with their handles turned towards him appeared without hesitation. It would've been intimidating had he been doing anything other than cooking.

Shirou took three of the knives and held them in his left hand as he stirred the pot. Stabbing one
particular piece, he pulled it out to see its condition before letting it fall back into the pot. It would need another five to eight minutes or so. It had already been five minutes since he'd first let them start frying.

"Shirou."

The redhead looked back down at the blonde king as she glanced up at him. "Uh, yes?"

"While you wait for the food to finish cooking, I would like to inquire as to whether you are feeling all right."

Shirou frowned. That's right, this is the first time she had seen him up and ready to go for three days. A glance from Bedivere and Shirou immediately knew what the knight had wanted to say: I told you so.

"I'm great," Shirou responded calmly, again checking the meat. "I feel way better. You're the reason I'm doing so well, right? You carried me on your horse, right? I'm really thankful."

"That is good to hear."

She'd sounded relieved, but he couldn't tell because he now knew that the rabbit was fried up and ready to be eaten. All four pieces were ready to go, actually. Shirou picked up one piece with one knife and then used a different one to cut it open and check the inside. It was a nice white color on the inside, perfectly cooked. He held the knife up with the rabbit leg dripping hot grease down onto the grass. Turning to the king, he was about to hand it to her when Bedivere asked him to wait.

"Is it not customary that the cook first taste his meal before the guests?" Bedivere asked, looking at the leg with a bit of suspicion. "How can we be sure all of what you put in was fit for consumption?"

Murmurs erupted in the audience of soldiers and King Arthur merely tilted her head, neither supporting nor denying Bedivere's inquiries. Shirou blinked a bit and then looked down at the rabbit leg. They'd seen every single thing he had done, but it was true that he hadn't exactly explained the process to anyone. For all these soldiers and knights knew, he may well have added some poisoning. Come to think of it, taste testers were big at that point, right? It wasn't like they had technology to automatically pick up on poisonous traces, and this was the king he'd been about to give food to. It was only obvious that everyone should be so wary, even if they were curious about the entire process. Well, whatever. He had no problem eating it.

Shirou took a large bite from the rabbit, and found it wonderfully crunchy, though a little bit too bland. He nearly smacked his head as he chewed, only remembering right then and there that the butter he used here in the past was not imbued with salt, and so he should've added more salt to flavor it up a bit. Well, it was considerably better than if the rabbit had just been flame-broiled or something. Shirou took another bite as he used the other knives to take out the remaining legs.

Handing one knife to King Arthur first, who just looked down at it with an eyebrow raised, and then one to Bedivere, he wondered what to do about the fourth piece. Spotting another metal bowl attached to the king's saddle, he asked if he could borrow hers to stick the rest of the cooked food in. She obliged him, albeit slowly, as she continued staring at her piece of rabbit. Bedivere looked closely at Shirou, but as he showed no obvious signs of collapsing due to poison, and considering the king obviously wanted to eat her portion, he tentatively took a bite.

"This is fantastic!" he exclaimed, surprising himself. "I have never once tasted a food as wonderful as this. Surely if there is poison, it must be something that only brings out the best flavor of the
There were a series of "oohs" and "ahs" from the crowd. Was this really a campsite or some kind of food game show?

It was just fried rabbit, Shirou thought, finishing his piece quickly before throwing in more uncooked meat. Not only that, but it was just bland, fried rabbit. He would've preferred to sprinkle some more salt on the cooked pieces, but he was running out as it was. Besides, if a badly fried rabbit piece was all it took to make a knight like Bedivere happy, then Saber really hadn't been joking when she said that the food was crap. She was hardly one to tell jokes in the first place, but Shirou simply couldn't imagine something tasting *that* bad, unless they were eating it raw, or something.

The king did not say a word as she ate her piece, not a single one. Shirou only saw the barest of nods that indicated her appreciation for the taste. Well, he hadn't expected her to jump for joy or anything – she, rather, Saber had never done anything of the sort. Well, as long as she wasn't grimacing or glaring at him for cooking something terrible, then Shirou guessed that it wasn't all bad.

*Now, what do I do about them?*

Shirou turned back to look at the crowd behind him, with several of the soldiers drooling a bit as they looked at the cooking meat. The one holding the bowl seemed to be staring at the boiling pot the most as he licked his lips slightly every now and then. Crossing his arms over his chest, he didn't know what to say. He wanted to give them food, but it wasn't exactly his to give. He was also still really hungry, but the soldiers looked so pathetic that he really wanted to let them try it. If nothing else, letting them have a bite might improve his relations with everyone. No one seemed to care that he was a supposed enemy now that food was on the table, and Shirou would've much preferred they kept thinking of him as harmless.

He bent down to be face to face with the king and she looked away from the forlorn rabbit bone to make eye contact with him.

"Um, so, about the rest of the rabbit meat..."

Her soldiers' antics had not gone unnoticed by her either, apparently. Eyes closing, she turned her head away and said,

"All those desiring an opportunity to taste this food are to line up in their particular groups. As there is not enough food to feed every individual, it is unfortunate, but you will need to share each piece. Only those present may partake in this meal. Do not even think to wake anyone else, and do not let it be known that you were given this opportunity. Might I suggest you show your gratefulness for this man's, and my, charity."

The soldiers were quick to dash back to their own group campfires, with one representative from each group coming up holding a metal bowl. The soldier who had been holding onto the main boiling bowl seemed nervous, and Shirou spared him a grin.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure there's enough left for you to have your own piece."

Both the eyebrows of Bedivere and King Arthur raised, though neither said anything. The soldier in question seemed taken aback, enough so that the bowl teetered a bit in his hands. Shirou continued to smile at him though, and checked the pieces of meat every now and then. They were cooking faster now that the heat had stabilized, and another plus was that Shirou couldn't even feel
the cold as much anymore. His focus had been shifted entirely to cooking, so he didn't really take notice of the nearly below freezing temperatures.

For the next couple of hours after Shirou had finished cooking everything and cleaned both Bedivere and King Arthur's bowls to the best of his ability – water would've been nice, as cleaning with straight up whisky had probably been a bad idea – found the redhead sighing as he looked back up at the starry sky. The men had loved the rabbit – they were so easy to please – and apparently, their opinion of Shirou actually went up a few notches. Most of them actually thanked him with happy expressions, although most of them hadn't been able to eat more than a couple of bites total, due to sharing amongst their group.

Bedivere had long since retired for the night, probably as much as an hour before. He did make sure to tell Shirou that his outlook over the time traveler had indeed changed, slightly. What was that saying again? "The way to a man's heart was through his stomach"? That was probably the only thing going for Shirou right now, and at least King Arthur didn't have to pull another one of her ice-cold moments to get the men to leave him alone anymore. Well, at least not those fifty.

He was tired again, but in a good way, this time. After handling that raw meat, he had really wanted to wash his hands thoroughly, but the best he'd been able to work with was the alcohol. Luckily, he hadn't had any cuts or wounds on his hands to make it a painful experience.

Now, though, the only thing he was doing was staring up at the sky as he sat in front of the fire. The king next to him seemed to have fallen back to sleep, or, at least she appeared to be asleep. Her eyes were closed and her head was down, so he wasn't sure, but probably? Her serene expression also made his heart skip a few beats, but it was nice seeing her like this. There was no pressure, and it was almost like they were normal comrades again. Shirou smiled again slightly without mirth. As if that was actually possible.

"You displayed yourself well, Shirou."

He jumped. He couldn't help it. Shirou had completely thought that she was dead asleep, but the second she spoke, she had scared him out of his thoughts. He calmed his breathing quickly and looked back at her.

"Huh?" That, quite possibly, had to have been the most unintelligible comments that he could have come up with. "Uh, sorry. I just...sorry. I thought you were asleep."

She opened her eyes to look at him directly. "Just with that one feat, you have managed to not only obtain their good faith, but establish yourself as something more useful than a simple peasant. To that, I give you my commendation."

"Huh? Oh, no," Shirou said, stuttering a bit. "I feel bad that I couldn't do anything else, you know, like something bigger. Or, I mean, something."

He wasn't making any sense, though King Arthur seemed to ignore his rambling. She shook her head slightly with a frown.

"You have done precisely what appeared to be within your ability to do. In any case, what could be more important than feeding good food to those incapable of feeding themselves such?"

"No, I mean, I'm not... I can't fight like you guys can." Well, at one point, he'd been able to, up to a point, but now he had to find himself all over again. He had lost something back in that skirmish against the Saxons, and now he had to figure out precisely what it had been.
"Is the ability to fight what you believe makes someone important?" she asked. "It is not. The ability to hone your technique, whatever it may be, in a fashion that will suit you and be beneficial to others is what gives you worth. For me, yes, holding a sword and fighting for the sake of my kingdom is what gives me my worth. There is nothing else for me, and nothing else I know how, or better, to do. That is both my destiny, and my fate. I have spent years perfecting my skill as a warrior, and it would do no one any good for me to fail at my one trade.

"However," she continued, making sure that Shirou was listening, "that is not the same for you, is it? If you were a warrior, that would be all you would think about, is it not? If you are a cook, then you would consider food and its preparation techniques the most – they would fill your mind and leave you without a means to doubt anything concerning it. If you are a fighter, then you will work to strengthen yourself in a way that will benefit you most. If you are a pacifist, you will strive to ensure no wrongdoings ever take place. Whatever you choose to become though, holds worth. Above all, you, as a person, have worth."

Shirou took her words to thought as he looked down at his hands. "What if I don't want to be just a cook?"

"Then," she started, rising to her feet, "I would suggest that you start training yourself into that which you would like to become. You are the only one who can forge the path in front of you after all. I said this before, but being independent demands that you learn how to act and move when appropriate."

Her features relaxed slightly as she looked down at him. "Asking for help every once in a while does not make you weak, Shirou. It only shows your determination to become stronger. If you need that help, be certain to ask for it, such as asking to sit next to a king and his knight for warmth so that you do not perish to the cold overnight."

Ah hah, she was still mad about that. Shirou looked away quickly, uncertain of what to say. Her point had been made and was fairly clear. In other words, he wasn't alone on his journey, but he had to be the one to execute every single action. Well, that only made sense. Who else was going to make him stronger if not he, himself? He didn't have Rin to rely on, but that didn't mean he couldn't simply use whatever was available to him. Shirou looked up again as King Arthur walked away, thanking her silently for her advice.

Shirou clenched his fists tightly. He had a lot of work to do.

It had taken them hardly more than half a day afterwards to finally reach Camelot. Now, Shirou had thought it an incredibly impressive sight the moment he had seen the castle in the distance. After all, this was the legendary castle of Camelot, the castle of King Arthur, and right now, he was legitimately walking, sometimes jogging, next to the King Arthur. Of course, he had been well aware of who she was, but even if he had met her before, seeing the castle that had been erected for her rule was another story entirely. It was incredible to believe the place had actually existed, but for there to be no traces in the future, the Saxons must have done a real number on it.

As Shirou walked along the wide main street leading from the main gates of the outer garrison wall, he took time to take in the magnitude of the town – no, city was probably more accurate. For all the men, women, and children who weren't taking the time to point and stare at him, or reveling in the majesty of their king, there were several hundred more bustling about doing whatever work necessary for the city to function. Shirou wasn't sure, but the entirety of Camelot had to have been at least a good five to six kilometers around in circumference alone. It was widespread, and just full of unbelievable energy. It made him realize the vast difference between it and Tryst – there was simply no comparison.
The gates of the castle itself towered above him as he walked through with everyone else. He continued staring at the humongous castle, his mouth gaping open slightly even as King Arthur and Bedivere dismounted from their horses and the soldiers dispersed – more than likely to rest or get some food to fill them. Shirou looked left at the expanse of land – the training fields, barracks, archery range, smithery, and other military-related stuff seemed to be over that way. To the right and furthest from the main castle itself were a few housing units, probably for the main staff for those who worked outside to sleep in. Nearest to the castle on the right, however, were the gardens, and some kind of place for a possible outside event. On the left nearest to the castle was the place where they probably ran the executions.

Frowning, Shirou looked at the execution stand with a bit of presentiment. Seeing it with his own eyes was more than enough to convince him that execution by hanging, and, Shirou grudgingly admitted when he saw the platform next to it, by beheading, was a thing here. Then again, in a way, it was hardly any better to hang or behead someone than it was to stick in a lethal injection. He turned away from the sight and focused again on the large castle itself. Something about the building gave him hope, even though it was just a building. It might have been because it was her building that he felt as much.

Shirou made sure to stay out the way as several people came out to talk to the king. A brunet-haired man in armor and beautiful, petite brunette woman stood next Bedivere and King Arthur, with the man's expressions varying widely as he spoke with both of them. He kept taking peeks at Shirou every now and then, much to the latter's disconcertment, and flailing his arms wildly. Shirou just turned his gaze away after a while – it was weird having someone constantly look at him like that.

He heard some clanking heading straight for him and he looked back up to see the brunet suddenly right in his face. Backing away, Shirou stared back with wide eyes, unsure of what to make of the situation.

"Is it true that you made a wonderful feast for His Majesty and Bedivere?" the brunet eagerly asked.

Just who was this guy?

Shirou noticed King Arthur, Bedivere, and the gorgeous woman coming their way, but was forced to back up again as the man came even closer to him.

"Is it, is it?" the man continued to ask excitedly. "Please do say it is so, and that Bedivere is not merely jesting with me as per usual!"

"Uh...I wouldn't call it a feast but I did –"

"By the God in Heaven above, I knew it!" the man exclaimed. "I said to myself, I said, 'By golly, now that is a man who knows his way around a kitchen! A warrior of food! A master of that which is meant to fuel and empower man! A true saint!'"

The brunet posed with his right index finger pointed to the sky, his left hand firmly placed on his hip as he made a fierce expression. Shirou had met some odd people in his life, but this guy had to take the cake. He looked up and down at the brunet, taking special note of the armor that was so similar to Bedivere's. Was he a knight too? Was he a knight of the Round Table? Shirou was slightly hesitant to believe as much, though.

King Arthur and her company reached the two of them and she raised an eyebrow at the brunet, not even seeming to be fazed by his antics. Shirou shifted to his left a bit to try and hide behind her
when the brunet clapped him on the shoulders.

"SIR!" the brunet shouted.

"YES?" Shirou shouted in return, really wishing he could run away instead.

"Might you do me the honor of marriage? I certainly love a man who can cook and –"

Bedivere slammed a fist into the back of the brunet’s head, his own expression annoyed. The brunet grasped at the back of his head, looking at the other man and whining pitifully.

"Bedivere, you cruel beast! How could you hurt me in such a manner?" the brunet complained, before his eyes sharpened and his entire countenance seemed to darken and grow fierce. "I’ll kill you, you bastard."

"I have a father who loves me," Bedivere replied simply, clapping a hand on the brunet’s shoulder and shoving him away. "Besides, this peasant isn't someone here to become your friend. His Majesty saved him from a terrible plight and has allowed him protection here within these walls."

Was this a convent now?

The brunet frowned, obviously not pleased with how Bedivere had worded his comment. His dark sapphire-blue eyes turned to look at the blond king, his arms folded.

"King Arthur, I will not stand for this. I wish to become friends with this man. He is a man after my own heart, with the ability to make scrumptious, wonderful food meant for actual consumption. Quite unlike that slop your wonderful, brilliant, mess up of a cook named Baeddan makes in that castle. Do you fault me for this, Lord?"

The king looked as if she wanted to be anywhere that wasn’t where she currently was at that moment. She glanced at Shirou briefly with an expression that he could only describe as contrite. The brunet walked a step closer to her, though she didn't bother moving whatsoever herself. He put his face right into hers and she completely took it in stride. Shirou gawked at the two before looking over at Bedivere and the woman accompanying them. Neither person seemed surprised in the slightest. The man leaned in even closer, enough so that there was hardly even a couple of centimeters in between the two of them.

"Unless you intend to kiss me, I would ask that you back away," deadpanned the king.

Was she being sarcastic?

The brunet blinked once before grinning. "Oh, can I? Can't let the queen have all the fun all of the time."

He'd actually planned to kiss her?

Shirou's eyes widened further. Who the hell was this guy, and how was he so freaking gutsy? To a king, nonetheless?

King Arthur gently shoved the brunet away out of her personal space as he leaned in with pursed lips and cleared her throat. Turning to Shirou again, she seemed slightly remorseful still as she said,

"I'm afraid Percival has taken a liking to you. Please do not become too irritated, and be certain to feed him treats every now and then."
"I'm not a dog!" came an indignant shout.

"Quiet, mutt," quipped Bedivere, an evil grin on his face.

"Fuck you, bastard!"

"I have a father who loves me. We've been over this."

Him? _This_ guy was Sir Percival, one known for his ferocity and natural prowess in battle? The man in front of him who was currently having a spat with his fellow knight, Sir Bedivere, was _the_ Sir Percival? In a way, somehow, Shirou felt cheated. The myths and legends had played him as a fool, but...

"He is no fool, mind you," spoke up King Arthur from beside him. Could she read thoughts now, too?

"He simply does well playing the part," she finished, with a slight nod. "And now, I leave him to you."

"What?" Shirou managed out. "To me? What? Isn't he your knight? What do you mean?"

"Of course he's my knight," she said, frowning slightly. "But, he likes you, so it would seem. That, and you need someone to show you the way to the kitchens. I have other business to attend to now that I have finally returned, and will leave it to him to be your guide. Until we meet again."

Shirou watched her walk away and saw the woman that had been with her take the king's arm as they walked back towards the castle. Wait, he thought, looking over at the still feuding pair, had she just dumped her baggage on him? Percival cast him a grin, and walked away from a frowning Bedivere to wrap an arm around Shirou's shoulders.

"Hey there, mate. So, how about I give you a nice, little tour, eh?"

"Uh..."

Honestly, he just wanted to have a place to settle in. He was tired, and all of the commotion wasn't helping any. Percival frowned slightly, both eyebrows raising as he looked at Shirou's condition. The brunet made a show of sighing before detaching himself from Shirou and crossing his arms over his chest.

"You look exhausted," the man said calmly, all games and mischief apparently over and done with. "I'll show you to where you get to sleep for the night and then we can take the grand tour tomorrow."

Shirou looked at Percival directly, unsure of what to think. "Sir Percival, are you –"

"Just Percival, mate," the knight said a small smile. "I'm not a fuddy-duddy like the king, or some kind of crazy madman like Bedivere. We're both men, no need to consider status all the time. I like who I like and kill those who I hate, or who His Majesty hates, at least. It's simpler that way."

"Okay. So, Percival, are you sure you have the time to do something like that? I mean, I can find my own way around."

"Have you looked around you?" the brunet asked rhetorically, gesturing at the grounds. "I guarantee you'll be lost within the hour."
"All right, if you're sure, then thanks."

Percival grinned toothily at him. "Oh, no problem, mate. Now...about this rabbit I heard you cooked..."

Shirou chuckled a bit.
The room that Percival had taken him to was actually Percival's own, as Shirou wasn't technically part of the cooking staff yet. Percival had also wanted to make sure Shirou was in a place where he would easily be found again, someplace where "that fool Baeddan" wouldn't be able to get his "greasy" hands on him. Shirou had expected a barrage of questions or something of the sort, but Percival had simply lain him on a makeshift cot and bid him a good evening. Apparently, now that the king had returned, there was much business to be discussed among the remaining Order.

As soon as the next day dawned, Percival had dragged Shirou away from his resting place and out into the main wing of the castle. The first place Shirou was shown was all of the third floor where all the knights of the Order and many other highly-ranked officials slept. The fourth floor, he was told, was off-limits to all but the king's closest confidants, and the fifth floor was actually the roof. It was okay to go there, but he had to make his presence clearly known, or he might get shot by someone's arrow.

The second floor was reserved for lower-ranking officials, like Baeddan, as he was the Head Cook. Of course, many rooms on the second and third floors were empty, but that would change as King Arthur grew more influential, Percival had told him. The first floor was comprised of the Great Hall, the Chamber Room, the Throne Room, and other miscellaneous places that would actually have no relation to Shirou whatsoever. There was also the Grand Hall that everyone had to pass through to get anywhere at all, and it led directly to the Throne Room.

The east wing, quite deep in width, was and comprised of the kitchens on the main floor, the buttery, the winery, the storeroom, the pantry, and other food related things. The second floor was composed of the cleaning servants, and a majority of the other servants necessary to keeping the castle running smoothly, like the main cooking staff. The third floor housed various cleaning materials, such as makeshift brooms, towels for dusting, and other necessities, such as blankets and other household goods. The fourth floor of the east wing was currently devoid of anything until even more people moved in.

The west wing, which was approximately as deep in width as the east wing, used the space of all four floors. Up on the very top floor were all of the pages, three to four to a room, with the squires on the third floor, with one to two to a room. The second floor housed all of the appointed knights who were to stay with the castle and main troops. The ground floor was where the armory was located and the intel room. This was the room where the king ordinarily prepared the captains and knights for strategic maneuvers to be taken on the battlefield. Shirou wasn't allowed to go inside those particular rooms, but he did get a tour of the second, third, and fourth floors.

The last and final wing was the north wing. This wing was a bit of an oddity, as it could only be reached by detouring through the second floors of the east or west wings. It entrapped the castle gardens, and by going down to the first floor of the north wing, a person could reach a smaller chapel and a small, albeit wonderfully beautiful, resting place normally only visited by the king, queen, and their closest confidants. The gardens themselves were free for everyone to see, providing they had the time to do so. As for the hidden area that was restricted just to the select few, well, the little, lion cub made sure to guard the bridge entryway well. The second floor was simply a walkway, and the third and fourth floor were home to the several magicians who were employed to the king, and were receiving training from Merlin.

There was supposedly a hidden tower somewhere near the north wing, but a person wouldn't be able to see it unless Merlin wanted them to. It apparently was somehow linked to a trans-
dimensional portal that would allow it to either appear of vanish with Merlin's will, or for those who had the key. King Arthur, Percival had been quick to say, was the only one who had that key aside from Merlin himself. Even if someone else stole the key from the king, somehow, they would just be incinerated as soon as they attempted to unlock the tower door. Shirou had vowed not to bother even considering trying to see what kind of key it was. Well, he didn't have much reason to try seeing Merlin in the first place anyway.

Percival had offered to show him around the grounds, too, but Shirou had asked to see the roof of the main wing first before anything else. Once they had reached the roof, despite Percival grumbling that there wasn't anything up there worth seeing, Shirou had walked to the outer wall and quickly hefted himself up onto it at one of the lower ridges. The archers on the roof stared at him as if he was crazy, but when they noticed Percival didn't make a move to stop him, they turned back to continue their surveillance.

Shirou had quickly funneled prana into his eyes and was immediately greeted with a view of not only the grounds in complete detail, but a basic layout of the city spanning out away from the castle. It really was a huge place and Shirou had been curious about how someone would think to protect a town so large. Obviously, its size had nothing on Fuyuki City, but it was still impressive. After a couple more minutes of looking out at the place, Shirou had jumped off of the wall and gone back to talk to Percival, saying he was finished. After that, Percival stated that he had to get Shirou to the kitchen by the scheduled time or the king would have his head.

At this point, they were walking down the stair column towards the first floor and Percival was warning Shirou about the boss he was soon to have.

"The guy is a complete madman, constantly ranting about this and that and perfection and how everything must be laid down so. 'Tis a shame that he somehow managed to snag himself the position as Head Cook, though the title comes nowhere close to actually fitting him."

Shirou frowned at Percival. "You don't seem to like him much."

"No, mate," Percival denied, "I don't think you understand. No one likes that whelp of a man, and even the king would like to do away with him. What's unfortunate is that he really is the one most knowledgeable about food in that ridiculous place. You understand now why I was so pleased that a man like you would show up out of nowhere and please the king as you have. The best route, of course, would be to make you Head Cook, but that won't happen."

"I don't think it would be right for me to take away that title after just getting here, anyway. I'm fine just helping out around the kitchen."

Percival grabbed hold of Shirou's hands and sniffed. "You, good sir, have a wonderful soul! So humble, so brilliant, you practically glow with magnificence! Are you certain you won't take my hand in marriage?"

Shirou peeled his hand out of Percival's grasp and shook his head. "Sorry, I'm into girls."

"Oh, I am, too, my good fellow. But everyone must have someone cook for them. You would be my husband, only second to the wife that I am to take in the future."

"Your wife wouldn't cook for you?"

"Indeed she might! But, what to do if she turns out to be a shrewd incapable of lifting a cutting utensil?"
The brunet sighed dramatically. "I would be fated to live a life of eating that which does not need cutting. In other words...the same life I currently live. How dreadful an existence to imagine."

Shirou chuckled a bit at the knight's antics. The guy was a real card, all right. Though, with Percival around, nothing was ever boring, and Shirou had no time to think about what had happened only a mere week before. The knight was always frolicking – no, this was not meant to be used as flowery language as the man truly did frolic – everywhere, and sometimes he would even skip. One time, as they were up on the second floor of the east wing, Percival had suddenly dashed down the corridor and flipped up the long skirt of one of the cleaning girls. She, of course, screamed and, for some reason, all the women looked at him as if he were the culprit. Their glares were reminiscent of Rin, Sakura, and Saber's glares and had freaked him out. He'd had to run away after the cackling knight to escape their fury.

"In any case," Percival said, continuing his bashing of Baeddan, "the only good thing about that louse would have to be his sister. The only reason I spoke to him in the first place was because I found out how absolutely, gloriously beautiful she is."

Percival clenched his fists tightly as he looked up at the ceiling with a smile upon his face. Shirou raised an eyebrow. "Did you manage to ever get with her?"

"Of course, my good man. At least once a week, if not seven, give or take a few nights," Percival admitted with a lecherous grin. "You see, I cannot sleep without exercising a bit beforehand. As such, deep in the night, I am always looking for a little bit of, well, fun, so to speak."

The redhead shook his head. "You seem like you have a little bit too much fun, if you ask me."

The knight drew back away from Shirou as they walked, seeming somewhat offended. "You just do not understand, mate. What is life for a man without a woman? Rather, I should believe that it is only by having that significant other that a man truly comes into his worth and becomes that of a true man. He becomes something pure, something untouchable, a powerful presence."

"So, you're trying to say that it's the woman that makes the man?"

"Precisely so! For instance, take a moment to consider the king, if you will. His Majesty is resolute and strong not only because he is naturally inclined to be, but because he has the backing of a strong woman like the queen! The queen would never consider leaving him either, because he also fulfills her in a way no other man could. They are the embodiment of perfection. In a way, I must say that I envy His Majesty's greatness."

Shirou had begun frowning partway through Percival's explanation. No, that wasn't the case at all. King Arthur was strong and resolute, sure. That much was true. However, she wasn't strong because of Guinevere, but because she was born and raised to be that way. Guinevere may have supported her, but in no way was the queen the king's reason for success. Not to mention that it was partially because of the queen that King Arthur had fallen in the first place. Shirou couldn't exactly place all the blame on Guinevere, though. He probably wouldn't have been able to deal with a situation like that either, no matter what the cost.

"I don't think that a person's success should have to be due to the support they have from someone else," Shirou started slowly, carefully thinking of how to word what he wanted to say. "People can succeed from sheer determination even if they have no one backing them. One of my closest friends had no one as she grew up, but she's still one of the strongest, unbelievably incredible people I've ever had the luck to meet."

Percival shook his head, his grin fading as he approached the discussion maturely. "I speak of
matters of love, not matters of life. I believe it to be a fact that one is capable of so much more when they have that love bound to them. Do you honestly believe a person who has not loved could be stronger than one who has, or even one who has loved and lost?"

"I think that would depend on what trials the person who hasn't loved before had to deal with up until that point. If that person had lived a harsh life, and the person who had loved had lived an easy one, I sincerely doubt that the latter could defeat the former."

"Yes, I suppose that is true," the brunet conceded, looking down. "Then let us analyze this particular situation: both men have lived a similar life, yet one continues without knowing the concept of love while the other marries, has a family, and continues forth. Would you not say that the man with the family has much more to lose than the one without? In which case, the former would fight harder and triumph over the loveless one."

Shirou shook his head. "That's being too optimistic. The latter may not have had a family, but what of his pride and goals? Those are enough to propel a person forward through anything, and succeed no matter the strife."

"That is true, too. You present a wonderful point, my red-haired friend. I must consider this more deeply."

Percival and Shirou walked side by side, finally reaching the first flight and turning to head towards the east wing. The silence was welcome and unassuming, and Shirou had to be honest – it was nice having someone to bounce random ideals off of. He and Rin had always discussed a number of things in explicit detail, to the point where they would often lose track of the original question, but it had always been an interesting experience. She brought up so many points that he would never have considered in a million years.

Sir Percival was the first person in this time period Shirou could trade various ideas with and not have the take offense for whatever ideals he may have blabbed on about. Ceri hadn't been one for hypotheticals, but had been more focused on the present. In a way, Shirou supposed he could say that King Arthur had actually been the first person with whom he could talk about what-ifs, but those conversation had mostly been about his own future, so they didn't really count as much. It wasn't like he wouldn't have survived without the mental stimulation, but it did make him feel more at home, so to speak. It was a good feeling to have.

Percival turned to him again. "Perhaps I think this way because I love the idea of a happy ending. Fighting a war doesn't allow me to be so sentimental, not that I would have the time to consider such on the battlefield regardless."

"There's nothing wrong with having a happy ending," Shirou argued softly. "I just don't think you can place all your faith on a specific ideal and expect that to be the one that governs your entire life."

Wait, that didn't make sense. Wasn't that his sole reason for living, to become a hero? That is the only thing he had thought about for the entirety of his life after his father had passed away, and was how he became who he was up until that day. Shirou gritted his teeth as he thought over his comment. It wasn't wrong, but rather, it just conflicted with everything he'd done up until now, in a way. In another way, it entirely supported him.

"Right," Shirou continued. "It takes more than just an ideal. It takes everything you have that comes with zeroing in on that specific ideal. You can't just focus on one aspect, you have to carefully consider everything that comes with acting upon it. I have a goal, too, but if I didn't have the determination or a loose concept of what my goal was, then the ideal itself would be
meaningless."

Yeah, saying he wanted to be a hero was fine, but unless he took the steps to fulfill his goal, then it would just remain an ideal. He had to work to make that possibility a reality, and not just something that floated around in his head when he wanted to feel better. It was why he had trained so hard, and had studied magecraft so feverously under Rin's tutelage. As Rin had made clear, ideals were nothing without gumption and sustenance. Sustenance, for fueling the gumption, and gumption for fueling the sustenance.

It was odd, Shirou thought with a frown. He had somehow forgotten about all of that. He had somehow forgotten, or misplaced in his mind, one of the most important pieces of his essence and being. When had that happened?

"Nary can I deny the words you speak, Shirou," Percival said, agreeing with the time traveler. "After all, it is not simply the love I seek that pushes me forward, but the love I gain from my woman and my tenaciousness that allows me to continued succeeding as much as I have. I also desire to strike down any enemy who would stand against my king or mean him harm."

"That's good to hear," Shirou said with a smile.

"Speaking of love," the knight continued, "have you ever loved a woman in a non-familial manner?"

Shirou quickly lost his smile. "Yes, once."

Percival was quick to latch onto the confession, missing the terseness in Shirou's tone. "Oh? And where do you keep this woman of yours? Do you hide her in a far off village?"

"She died a long time ago."

The mirth in Percival's expression vanished instantly, so swiftly in fact, that Shirou was shaken a bit at the transformation. The knight's blue eyes narrowed as he averted his gaze, mouth set in a frown.

"I see," he said simply, not offering up any more than that.

The two had stopped walking as Percival continued looking down, looking somewhat guilty. Shirou shifted around his shoulders, feeling sore from carrying his backpack all over the castle. The conversation had come to a dead halt thanks to him and the tension felt thick and uncomfortable.

"I'm okay though," Shirou said as he looked at his new friend, and began walking forward again with the knight matching his pace after a moment. "It was a short and sweet relationship, but I don't regret a thing. She wouldn't have wanted me to anyway."

"What was she like?" grudgingly asked Percival, unsure if he even should have.

"Strong, determined, someone who followed her ideals to her end. I guess in a way, she was the reason I came to understand that it's not just your ideals that make you strong, but everything that comes along with them. I was...blessed, to love her as I did and be loved like I was."

"She does seem rather brilliant, I will admit. What did she look like?" Percival ventured further.

Uh, was it really a good idea to say? Well, it wasn't like this was Japan, and besides, even Ceri had blonde hair and green eyes, right? This was Britain. Features like that were common. Yeah, telling
him wouldn't really be a big deal.

"Blonde hair and green eyes," he said honestly.

"Oh, so you're into blondes, you say?" Percival said, cracking a hesitant smile. "Well, I have the very person for you!"

Shirou's eyebrows raised as Percival suddenly dashed forward down the hallway. The redhead had to break into a jog himself to catch up as Percival stopped next to a rather unimpressed looking person standing next to the main entrance of the kitchens. He gulped when he saw the brunet standing behind King Arthur and pinching her cheeks and creating a forced smile on her face. Shirou also took note of how her trembling right hand was barely inches away from where Excalibur was hooked to her belt. He wondered why she was walking around with it – had she been out on the grounds with the soldiers?

"Pershibal," she slurred out as Percival continued squeezing her cheeks, "if you do not get away from me right now, I will be forced to hurt you."

The brunet let go of her cheeks and then nuzzled his face against the king's. "See, Shirou? The king is a handsome blond with green eyes! He already has a wife, but the spot for his husband is still open."

Shirou wasn't the only one to suddenly take a step back away from the two – two boys who had been right behind the king before Percival had bounced over had also quickly separated themselves from the king. They hugged the outer wall tightly and Shirou felt like doing much of the same.

As Percival leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek, he was surprised to suddenly find himself holding nothing but thin air right before something very, very hard slammed into his chest, sending him flying back and sprawling onto the stone ground. Shirou gaped with wide eyes as King Arthur gently drew her foot back and set it back down on the ground lightly and gently touched her crown – wow, she had a crown? That was pretty cool – to fix its position slightly. Her royal blue skirt and the cape attached to her left shoulder flowed around before eventually falling still while Percival didn't even move a muscle. For a moment, Shirou had thought he was practically dead before Percival suddenly raised an arm and pointed a finger at the ceiling, exclaiming,

"How feisty His Majesty is! What a fine husband!"

His arm then fell back onto the ground with a clank as he groaned slightly.

Shirou jumped a bit when the king turned her annoyed gaze over towards him. Her cheeks appeared to be flushed a bit red, but that was probably because of how hard Percival had been pinching them.

"Should you deign to keep him as your company, Shirou," she warned, tone completely serious, "I plead that you never mimic his mannerisms. For your own sake."

For a second there, Shirou thought that Percival really had died from the king's strike until the man groaned again and pushed himself up off of the ground. King Arthur and the redhead watched as Percival stood up, bowed over a bit briefly, and then drew back up to his full height again. He clutched tightly at his chest, looking slightly miserable and yet impressed at the same time.

"I believe that was one of your hardest kicks to date, Your Majesty. Good show, good show."

"I thank you for giving Shirou a tour," the king said, ignoring Percival's comment. "You are no longer needed at this time. I ask that you do not be late to the meeting this afternoon. We have
much to discuss concerning the mission you set off upon."

"As you say, Your Majesty," Percival said, bowing deeply. Then, he looked at Shirou with a grin and added, "I am telling you, the king would make a grand husband!"

"Percival," King Arthur warned, her mouth firming with disapproval.

The brunet spared the two one last grin before turning away and walking back down the corridor, head held high. Both the blonde and the redhead watched him walk away, and once he was far enough away, King Arthur turned towards Shirou, face expressionless. He looked back at her expectantly, but she didn't say anything and merely frowned at him as the occasional person walked down the corridor doing whatever task necessary. Then, she appeared to strengthen her resolve and steel herself – for what, he wasn't quite certain.

"Behind me, as I am sure you are now more than well aware," she began, "stand the kitchens necessary for preparing the food meant for all of the people within the castle. Within those kitchens is a staff of approximately nearly one hundred people: Baeddan, who is the Head Cook, ten to fifteen others who make up the 'upper echelons', so to speak, and the remaining members who act as normal servants. All of your orders will ultimately either come from Baeddan himself, or filter through the upper echelons through a branching system. Do you understand what I have said thus far?"

Shirou nodded silently. Percival hadn't had too many good words to say about the man, but after dealing with Matou Shinji at his worst, how bad could this guy possibly be? If nothing else, Shirou thought, he might be able to keep his head ducked down and stay out of trouble.

"Good," King Arthur acknowledged with a nod. "Then there is no need to explain myself any further on that matter. As I have promised, I will introduce you to Baeddan and have you accommodated appropriately. However, as I have declared once before, this will be the end of my direct support to you – you will need to find your own place as a cook and come into yourself on your own. Do you understand?"

The redhead nodded again, noticing the two boys passing him glances every now and then. Was he that interesting to look at? He turned his gaze back to the king as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"I wish to hear your vocal assertion that you have heard and understood my words."

"I understand," Shirou said simply.

"I do not believe you have replied in full, Shirou."

He stared at her, not sure what else he was supposed to say. He shifted his gaze left to think about a word more formal than "understand", but wasn't really coming up with anything. Then he shifted his gaze to the right, feeling somewhat troubled. One of the boys standing next to the king mouthed a couple of words, and Shirou had to narrow his eyes and concentrate on the mouth movements really hard. Hearing the old tongue and actually recognizing it without sound were two completely different things. King Arthur followed his gaze and turned to look at the boy herself, but he had quickly reverted back to a serious countenance. She frowned further and turned back to face Shirou.

"Shirou. Your reply."

"Uh," Shirou muttered, paying very close attention to the boy who had renewed his efforts to help
the confused redhead, "uh, uh, oh. Oh! I mean, right! I understand, Your Majesty."

King Arthur let out a light sigh and scowled softly at the two boys standing behind her. Shaking her head slightly, she said, "Very good. Though it is worrisome that you needed to confer to another person before you realized your mistake."

"Right, I'm sorry."

She raised an eyebrow, and Shirou quickly added, "Your Majesty."

"Better late than never, I suppose," she muttered. "In any case, as I have said, I will no longer be able to help you directly. If you need something of me, though I could not possibly imagine what situation would require as much, you must request that assistance through the proper chain-of-command, which, in your case, would be to start off with your upper echelons. That will allow for seamless communication to occur.

"Which brings me to the foremost important point," King Arthur affirmed. "You are no longer directly under my protection. Of course, should there be an attack, and you are, for one reason or another, within range of me, I will protect you as a king and a knight. However, with this, you truly are on your own. If a problem occurs and you are at the crux of it, I will not be able to spare you due to any pointless or random sentiments. Should you do something grave enough to require my attention, I may be forced to imprison you thusly and have you prosecuted and publically executed. Also, depending on the nature of your transgression, perhaps tortured as well."

She said all of that without a hint of embarrassment or hesitation. In other words, she meant every word – if something happened and someone claimed he was the cause of it, that would be the end of him. Period. No ifs, ands, or buts. Shirou blinked a few times as he averted his glance, thinking about what she had told him seriously.

"I doubt it will ever come to that, however," she said, though Shirou definitely detected a hint of warning in her tone. "So, and I ask this in the most sincere manner possible: please do not cause any unnecessary trouble, whether in the near future or far. You are now a person of my kingdom, and I do not wish harm to befall you, but should that happen, there will be nothing more I will be able to do in such a situation. I am bound to the oaths I vowed once I became king. Now, shall we proceed with introductions?"

She turned to open the kitchen door before turning back and looking at him again. "Ah, and one last thing: the food you made during our journey – it was more than acceptable. I had meant to make that clear, but did not have the opportunity. My apologies."

King Arthur pushed the door open as Shirou pondered over her words and the two walked in, with the two boys remaining outside to wait for the king to come back out. Shirou wasn't sure what he had been expecting when he first went into the room with her. If nothing else, he hadn't ever thought kitchens could be so large. Not just large, either, but overwhelmingly so.

The entire room spanned the length of nearly fifty meters at the very least from north to south, was around twenty meters deep from east to west, and was the room closest to the southern side of the castle. The tall ceilings arched far over his head, each stone brick blackened with soot and coal used to maintain the cooking hearths. Metal pipes ran along the edges towards the outside, filtering out the hazardous fumes from the main area. All three of the comparatively small fireplaces were placed against the southern wall, each crackling and popping violently as they fueled heat for the food cooking over it. The northern wall opened up to an inner passageway that probably traveled to the other rooms alongside of the Great Hall.
Practically forgetting that he was supposed to stay close to the king, Shirou took a few steps forward, his golden-brown eyes shifting back and forth as he took in everything there was to be seen. Several tables laden with plates – wait, didn't Saber say there weren't any plates to be found in her time? Maybe she meant *serving* plates, because there were definitely a ton of plates to be seen, mostly stocked with a lot of meats or other goods. Vegetables, fruits, and different cheeses lined the many tables running along the length of the room, with several iron bars hanging down from the ceiling to hold onto the several hanging pots, pans, and other materials.

Shirou navigated around someone, hardly noticing them as he approached the table closest to him and traced the shape of a few knives laying down its top. He looked up again towards the hearths, and the spinning wheel up in the corner nearest to northernmost hearth caught his curiosity. Shirou looked closely at the wheel and his eyes widened when he realized there was a dog running inside of the wheel, and the wheel was, in turn, connected with each spit as they spun the meat attached to them. He hadn't realized that in the medieval period, they'd used dogs as a type of electricity. That would probably have fallen under animal cruelty in his time.

The westernmost wall was where all of the, by his standards, old fashioned ovens were. The metal pipes he had seen before were funneling the fumes from the coal beneath the ovens and essentially keeping the area nice and clean. There were nearly six ovens lining the wall, each one right beside the other. That was a safety hazard if he'd ever seen one. Lining the easternmost walls, near the doors he and the king had entered through, were a great number of shelves that held a lot of odds and ends. He mostly saw a lot of bowls, but – and Saber had been right – no plates.

How was there not a single serving plate to be found anywhere within the entire castle? Did they really just eat their food right off of the table? *Royalty* ate their food right off the table? Where were the forks, spoons, and knives? It wasn't as if they didn't exist in some form or fashion. Shirou rubbed his face with a hand – the kitchen was amazingly overwhelming and it had plenty to offer him, but he had definitely taken things in the future for granted. Using dogs for manpower definitely couldn't be a good idea, either. The entire kitchen was unbelievable, though. Even if he didn't have state-of-the-art materials and appliances to work with, it was definitely a souped up kitchen for the sixth century.

The thing that blew his mind away the most, though, had to be how busy it was. She hadn't been kidding when she said there were nearly one hundred people buzzing around, preparing meals. It was after noon, now, right? That meant that people were actually eating lunch or whatever as he stood there gawking, and as he'd looked around, he'd had to jump out of the way of a number of people as they darted back and forth. He was pretty sure, actually, that two hundred people could fit within the kitchen alone, but he also saw a number of people racing in and out of the room performing various tasks.

Some people were taking care of the meat specifically, others were mashing things into bowls – mortar and pestles? – some were cutting up something or another, others were attending to the ovens, a few were feeding the fires with wood and the ovens with coal, a number of people were washing a good amount of dishes in the sinks lining the walls to the left and the right of the door leading to the passageway, and an incredible amount of other things were being done as well. Was it a good idea to be sweeping as people were cooking? That was probably not very hygienic, and what were they using to wash those dishes? Liquid soap obviously hadn't existed back then, so, were they just soaking them in regular water? How did they scrub them?

"Is that cold water?" he asked himself while frowning a bit.

"Is cold water a problem?" asked a voice from beside him, and Shirou felt himself jump a bit. Holy crap, he'd forgotten that she was still there.
"No," he sighed, willing himself to calm down as he turned toward the king next to him. "Hot water would probably help make them a bit cleaner though. But wow, this kitchen is unbelievable. It's so busy and lively. It's incredible. A lot of work has obviously gone into this place."

Though King Arthur didn't physically express anything, he could feel the warmth in her words as she responded,

"I am glad to hear the kitchen meets your expectations, Shirou."

She gestured to her right and Shirou took notice of the man standing next to her. Standing at nearly 175 centimeters, he was of an average height for a man. His rich, raven hair was cut short and his chocolate-brown eyes seem to pierce through to Shirou's soul as the man looked him over. The man wore a jet-black tunic that was tied at the waist with a yellow sash. The blackness of the tunic carried on down to his breeches as well, which were also accompanied by blackened leather boots. He kind of reminded Shirou of an assassin of sorts, save for the yellow sash that added just a bit of color. The man looked less than impressed with the redhead in front of him.

"Baeddan," King Arthur said, "this is Shirou, the man I spoke of before. And Shirou," she continued, turning back to look at the time traveler, "this is Baeddan, the person you will be working for starting today. You will report to him for your future duties."

Baeddan and Shirou measured each other up, Shirou unsure of what to say. He didn't get the sense that Baeddan was a bad person overall, and definitely not to the extent that Percival had made him seem. Rather, he seemed to just be a serious person and –

"I suppose I could put him in the spinning wheel with the dog."

And, Shirou took that back – the guy was asking to be punched in the face.

Shirou didn't even bother to mask his look of anger and King Arthur didn't appear very happy with Baeddan's response either. She fixed the Head Cook with a glare, obviously somewhat irritated.

"You will do no such thing, Baeddan," she stated clearly, lest the other man try to ignore her in some manner. "You have pestered me daily for months for more assistants, and with each demand, my steward has procured yet more and more people to work under your service. Yet, you dare turn down the one person that I have personally found fitting for this profession, and have given a solid recommendation?"

"Would working with the pigs and oxen prove a better job then, Your Majesty?" Baeddan questioned, seemingly genuinely curious.

For a moment, the king merely stared at the other man who seemed undeterred in the slightest. She took in a short breath, let it out slowly, and turned to face Baeddan, green eyes cloudy and dark.

"You test my patience, Baeddan. Perhaps I have been too lax in allowing you such freedom to this day," she spoke slowly, her voice deeper than usual. "Allow me to be more specific: you will be using this man in the main kitchen, not as a runner, not as a server, not as a bottler, not as anyone who does not actively participate within the kitchens where we currently stand. Do you understand?"

"I would sooner cut the cur up and serve him as slabs of steak than have him prepare food and potentially bring harm to Your Majesty."

Oh, whoa, this guy was, for lack of any better words, a dick. Cut him up and serve him as pieces of steak? Shirou couldn't even fathom such an idea, but after thinking over it, he took a quick peek
down the collar of his tunic. He hadn't been exercising like he'd done so much in the future, but he hadn't really lost any of his muscle tone and there was hardly any flab on his body at all. He wouldn't make much of a good steak, he surmised in the end.

"Cur?" King Arthur repeated, almost with disbelief.

"You would have the enemy traipse around in one of the most important rooms of the castle, a room where miracles are made and people are essentially resuscitated and able to continue with their existences?" asked Baeddan, placing his hands on his hips. He snorted as he turned and walked away to direct a few people handling the fires of the hearths.

Shirou just watched him walk away before looking back at the blonde beside him. She hadn't bothered to chase him down or anything, but simply stood there, the index finger of her left hand tapping the hilt of Excalibur with an uneven rhythm. Her narrowed eyes were closed as she appeared to be deep in thought. He looked around them and saw that no one dared approach the door they were right in front of, instead darting through the inner passageway and taking the long way around to get to where they needed to go.

Well, it looked like he wasn't going to be working in the kitchen anytime soon. That was a shame – he had kind of been looking forward to it, especially after seeing what the kitchen looked like. What else was there left for him to do, though? If worse came to worst, Shirou could try becoming a soldier after all, but he didn't think himself ready for that kind of leap yet. Maybe he could work with the cleaning staff? As long as he was still in Camelot, maybe it didn't really matter all that much what he did. Cooking had seemed like it would be an interesting experience, though.

"I sincerely despise that man."

The words were spoken softly enough that Shirou could barely hear them over the roar of the kitchen itself, so softly that he wasn't sure if he had heard correctly at all. As she wasn't paying him any particular attention, her glare focused on the retreating back of Baeddan, he wasn't sure it was even an admission that he had been meant to be privy to in the first place. In a way though, Shirou thought as he crossed his arms over his chest, it was nice to hear words like that come out of her mouth. She had such deft control over her emotions and speech that she didn't seem human most of the time, which he knew had been one of the reasons that led to her eventual downfall.

That...was incredibly depressing to consider. Shirou still didn't know how much time he had left, but what he did know, or what he assumed, was that she was somewhere in the earlier years of her reign. The castle wasn't as busy as it could possibly be, her influence was still lacking, and something about her just made him feel like there was still hope. She still had her humanity, as opposed to the person he had met that one fateful night, the one who had lost everything and more. The King Arthur next to him still had time – there was still hope. There was, but, what was he supposed to do about that?

King Arthur cursed softly and looked at Shirou, saying, "Remain here. I will return with Baeddan shortly."

"Wait," he spoke up, reaching out for her. "Maybe this isn't a good idea after all. Your Majesty."

She frowned at him. "Did you not desire to work in the kitchen?"

"I do, but not if he plans to cut me up and feed me to people. Or treat me like a dog."

"Hm, indeed," she agreed softly. "You need not concern yourself with that empty threat. I will deal with this problem accordingly."
He felt the air chill a bit as she straightened her shoulders even more than usual. She turned away from him, lowered her chin slightly, clenched her fists, and marched over to where the other man was talking to – read: admonishing, berating, chastising – a person who was working the hearths. Without the slightest bit of hesitation, her right hand shot forward and grabbed hold of Baeddan by the front of his tunic. He seemed appalled when he looked at her, and she pulled him down to her eye level, green eyes glaring fiercely.

"My business with you is not yet finished," she spat out softly, so soft that the people around them would hardly hear her, if at all. "Now, do you think yourself able to walk back on your own, or shall I assist you in that endeavor?"

Baeddan glanced around quickly to see who might have been watching them. The king had been quiet enough with her words that no one had paid them any more attention than when she had first strode in. However, being that she was the king, there was hardly any possibility that they weren't being carefully watched at that very moment. He swatted her hand away, righted his tunic, and with a small "hmph", walked back over to where Shirou was standing warily.

King Arthur followed after, her gaze focused on Baeddan's back until she was again took a position next to Shirou. Scowling, she let her left hand rest on Excalibur's hilt to serve as a warning to the Head Cook, just in case he had any plans to cause her further aggrieve. Baeddan, taking the hint, merely glared back at her with his head held high.

"Really, Baeddan," the king started, voice still rich with anger, "must you cause me so much stress? Introductions should be a simple, timely action to deal with, and yet, you make any conversation we have so very difficult on a regular basis."

"What can I say?" Baeddan retorted. "Your charm leaves much to be desired, King."

"I could not hardly care less," came the biting reply. "Who are you to walk away in the midst of our discussion? Did you not learn any manners as a child?"

"An interesting question. Perhaps I should entertain my father with such a discussion. Should I tell him that King Arthur bullied me into following his every whim?"

"I shan't have to say that, as a king, I need not 'bully' you to do anything."

"Hmph, what a child you must be to always rely on your status to have your way. Perhaps once you finally grow into a man, you'll recognize what it means to have a real discussion."

Shirou saw the king's fists clench and tighten to the point where he could practically hear the steel of her armor grind together slightly. Aside of her eyes growing an even darker green and the quickness with which they defocused and refocused, if he hadn't been well-acquainted with her, he would never have known that she was ripe with fury. Of course, that was to be expected – Baeddan had both stomped on her pride as not only a king, but a man, and given a swift kick to the rear on top of that by saying her age made her incompetent. It was probably safe to say that she was pissed, and Shirou was only too happy to note that he was not the target of her anger.

"I will have you pay for that slight, Baeddan," she mustered out as calmly as she could.

"Throwing a fit now, are we, Your Highness?" Baeddan remarked lightly, crossing his arms across his chest and appearing slightly amused. "Take that demon and be gone from here with your jests, Your Majesty. Though I do find it amusing that you are capable of leading me on like so. New help, indeed."
"I see no demon present," King Arthur was quick to retort through clenched teeth, "but what I do see is someone who will soon regret his words if he does not care to recall the position he currently is in."

"Quite the empty threat," Baeddan countered with a grin. "Your Majesty and I are both well aware that I am the best cook within the whole of England, and that is why I work here at Your Majesty's castle. The best, and most qualified. You would never do away with me."

"How odd. As a matter of fact, I was of the mind that there was someone even far better than a person of your standard standing here in this kitchen with us."

"Impossible," Baeddan rebuked with a frown. "If nothing else, I have utmost confidence, to the point of arrogance, in my cooking abilities."

"Ah, but 'tis true. And yes, the person I refer to is the very one you wished to have sliced up into steaks."

The sarcasm is strong with this one, Shirou thought.

As Baeddan's intense gaze suddenly switched over to look at him, Shirou had to wonder what kind of relationship the king had with Baeddan. In a way, they seemed like a bickering couple – a couple that should have divorced before even getting married in the first place. However, with the amount of enmity they were emitting, he knew there was some real hatred being passed between the two, despite their light banter. If she hated the guy so much, why didn't she just get rid of him?

"Perhaps he is capable of cutting a few carrots here and there."

Shirou felt a headache coming on, but noticed that King Arthur didn't seem the least bit surprised. Had she expected the man to say as much?

Man, Baeddan was way too much – he had to be about the biggest asshole in England, and that was saying something. Shirou ran his hands back and forth through his hair, feeling a bit angry. When he took notice of his surroundings again, though, he saw that both the king and Head Cook were staring at him, with the former's frustration quite palpable to see. Baeddan was grinning fiercely when Shirou made eye contact with him. King Arthur simply glared at him – oh, great, now he was the target of her anger...again.

"Oh, I'm an asshole now, am I? I cannot say that I disagree with you, but I am less than keen on hearing such words from a fool such as yourself."

Damn it, he'd given voice to his thoughts again. That was seriously a bad habit.

Baeddan turned to the king, bowed, and said, "Your Majesty, I will be more than happy to take this...man, off of your hands. With pleasure, truly."

"See that he is taken care of, then," sighed King Arthur.

Then, as she turned back around, she caught Shirou's worried gaze with a glare of her own, and softly, just so only he would hear, asked,

"Do you take such pleasure in digging your own grave? Did I not inform you that I would take care of the situation? You have just managed to place yourself on his blacklist. Do not cause me any further trouble than this in the future."

She was really mad, though the anger seemed be directed between both him and Baeddan – mostly
at the latter. He bowed his head slightly, making sure not to make eye contact with her as he did. Shirou really hadn't planned to get involved in their little spat, but he apparently hadn't kicked that bad habit yet. If it wasn't his words, - the mouth was the cause of all calamity, after all – then it was his inability to hide his facial expressions, which was practically just as bad. When he opened his eyes and stood up straight again, he saw that she had forgiven him silently, if only just barely.

"Shirou," she said calmly, "I have thus now fulfilled my promise to you. Have you any further questions?"

He hesitated slightly before just shaking his head in the end. He'd have to figure stuff out on his own.

King Arthur nodded. "Then I must now bid you farewell as I have other pressing matters to attend to. You will now report here as ordered by Baeddan, and Shirou... Godspeed."

He noticed there was a warning somewhere in those last two words of hers but was unable to comprehend what had actually just happened as she walked past him, her armor clinking gently all the while. She walked out of the kitchen and Shirou watched as the wooden door closed, creaking all the while. He really was on his own and left to his own devices now. And, just what the heck had she meant when she said he was on Baeddan's blacklist? Well, no, it obviously meant what he thought it meant, but was it all that big a deal?

The clap of a hand on his shoulder brought Shirou back to reality and he turned to see a grinning Baeddan standing right next to him. Scowling a bit, Shirou pushed off the other man's hand and moved back a few steps. Baeddan merely kept smiling, his brown eyes twinkling with delight as he acknowledged the redhead.

"Tell me, friend, are you hungry?"

"Depends," was Shirou's guarded answer.

"I'll have you eat your meals in the Great Hall today then. Only today, though, while I'm in a good mood. I'll also have your rooming situation dealt with, and I'll even relieve you of any duties I might have otherwise assigned you. Ah, 'tis a sweet day."

"What's going on?" asked Shirou, not entirely sure if he wanted to know or not.

"I think I actually will make you cut the vegetables, though. Maybe if you can handle that, then maybe, just maybe, I'll give you more responsibility. Quite doubtful that you'll even know which way to hold a knife at all, though, so, probably not."

Baeddan had completely ignored Shirou's question. He really did appear to be genuinely happy for whatever reason, a fact that was quite easily understood by the way he would raise his hands up towards the ceiling and praise God for blessing him with such a life. Baeddan pumped his right fist a few times before sliding back over to Shirou's side and wrapping an arm around Shirou's shoulders amiably. The smile on the other man's face was beginning to creep Shirou out.

"Friend, I ask you, did you see the look upon the king's face? You," Baeddan remarked cheerfully, jabbing a finger into Shirou's chest a few times, "must be quite the special peasant. Never have I seen the king lose his composure so, well, not to that degree. And did you see his face when I called you a cur? You, my good sir, are quite the man. I like you!"

"You said you wanted to cut me up into steaks."

"Yes, but no, friend! You see, that was before you called me an 'asshole', of all things. You see,
that takes some audacity, and never have I been called such a thing to my face, of all things. I admire that spirit of yours! Normally, I would have killed you with a butcher knife myself, but seeing as I was able to pay witness to such an event, I have thought to spare you. Isn't that wonderful?"

Well, that was another strange person that Shirou could add to his list of oddities. Did he just have some sort of penchant for drawing in strange, nonsensical people? Taiga was downright crazy, Shinji had been a lunatic during the war, Sakura - well, he'd never known what was going on with her, Rin was a nut, – nice and kind, but a nut – Issei had that thing against Rin, Myrus had, well, he was Merlin, so that was self-explanatory, and Saber had been a bit of an oddity, too, in that she loved food far more than a person should have. Now, he could officially add Percival and Baeddan to that list as well. Hm, well, normalcy was overrated, anyway.

"So," Shirou began, trying to grasp an understanding of the other man, "we're cool? I mean, you're fine with me?"

"Oh, no, you silly monkey!" Baeddan denied happily. "I hate you, abhor you, loathe you even, for calling me such a rude term. Who do you think you are, foreigner, to label me like that? I'll have you know that you know absolutely nothing about me, and yet, you dare to insult me? Such cruelty, but what else is to be expected from a mere plebian?"

Baeddan lost his smile with his next words. "However, Shirou, was it? I'll just call you Ro" – damn it, there was that name again – "because it's easier. So, Ro, I now know that you are the key to toying with that fool king."

"Your words sound an awful lot like treason to me," Shirou murmured, his eyes narrowing.

"Of course not. King Arthur is absolute and amazing in every way. He's a fool though – he thinks I'll be taken aback by having some foreigner in my kitchen? He thinks I will rage and destroy everything in my wake and give him a reason to kick me out? Oh no, my friend. That will not be happening. You'll see to that yourself."

"So, you're an egotistical asshole, then."

"Now, there you go with the rude statements again. I will be making your life a living hell starting tomorrow," Baeddan replied, smiling again. "I can't wait. For now, however..."

The egoist turned away from Shirou, his facial expression changing to something far more serious as he sneered at a man sweeping out food particles from beneath the food preparation tables. Baeddan snapped his fingers a couple of times.

"You called?" drawled out "Zagobel", his eyebrows raising as he seemed to feign interest. "And for the tenth time, my name isn't Zagobel. It's Dagobert."

Baeddan slapped Dagobert across his face, the noise barely audible with the backdrop of noise within the kitchen. Dagobert didn't react in the slightest, just rolling his head back around to continue staring at Baeddan with boredom.
"You presume to think I care," Baeddan sniffed. "Well, whatever your name is, you're currently alone in your room, am I correct?"

"Yeah."

Baeddan seemed a bit miffed with the plain manner in which Dagobert answered, but ended up ignoring it.

"Good, good. This boy, Ro, will be your new roommate. You've been lucky to be alone until now, but soon, you, too, will be living with three roommates."

"Goodie."

Shirou bit his bottom lip, unsure of whether to make fun of Baeddan for how annoyed he looked, or just stay silent to keep himself from getting into more trouble. After a few seconds, he realized that causing trouble was the one thing the king had ordered for him not to do, so he could obey at least that much. As far as first impressions went, he was pretty set on the type of person he'd judged Baeddan to be, but Dagobert was rather mysterious. Aside of the assertion of his own name, everything else he said was just one-worded phrasings. There wasn't much to go off of, but since they'd just met, that was only natural.

"Okay. Sure."

Shirou raised his eyebrows as he came back to the present and he glanced at the other two men, one at a time. Dagobert thrust the broom at Baeddan, who looked down his nose at it, as if even touching it was something far beneath him. Dagobert frowned at him a bit, held up the broom and then just let it drop to the ground as he turned away. He walked past Shirou, pulled one of the large, wooden doors open, and then went out into the corridor. Shirou took one last look back at Baeddan, but the other man had long since dismissed him, instead choosing to look at the broom as if it was something distasteful and wrong to touch. Letting out a whoosh of air, he, too, opened the door and walked out of the room.

Dagobert spared him a glance. "Let's go."

"Okay. Where are we off to again?"

"You weren't listening?"

Suddenly, memories of being chastised by Saber and Rin for not paying attention flooded his mind. It was a bad habit of his that he knew he needed to rein in, but he'd always forget. He hoped he didn't anger his new roomie – who knew what kind of temper the man had? Shirou didn't particularly desire to start off on the wrong foot, as he had with practically everyone else in this time period. He kind of had a knack for doing so, though.

He shook his head slowly to answer the other man's question.

Dagobert stared at him for a short while before clucking his tongue and turning away with an expression of frustration.

"Shit. I wasn't, either. Damn, now what?" After thinking for a bit, he then said, "Fuck. Who the hell cares? Let's go get some grub or something."

"Uh, okay, but what about the room thing?"

"I haven't eaten for the past seven fucking hours. We're getting some damn food first."
Dagobert swiveled around and, with Shirou following behind dutifully, headed for the southern exit so they could head around to the main entrance and hit the Great Hall from there. The inner passageways were only for the servants to get around easily when serving food and the like, but if they were going to actually partake in meals themselves, they had to go in through the proper entrance. The Great Hall was actually split up into two separate areas – the real Great Hall was separated by a thick curtain that stretched across the entire room, and was for the explicit use of the king, queen, and highly-ranked knights, with an entirely separate entrance, as well. When there were guests, the curtain could be opened and the entire room used for the entertainment of the guests.

The other area of the Great Hall was technically called the Mess Hall, and was meant for the soldiers and other higher-classed individuals to use. As most of the soldiers ate their morning meals anywhere from six to eight in the morning before taking to their duties, servants were forced to eat any time before that, which usually meant somewhere between four and six, providing there was actually food ready for them, or sometime from around eight-thirty to ten, when the soldiers would be in again for a quick lunch. If the servants were unfortunate enough to miss these windows, they were forced to stand with their meals, or just skip them entirely.

Regardless, what the servants ate was not normally something a person of good sense would call food fit for a person. The early morning hours were the leftovers from the day prior, the mid-morning hours were laden with scraps from the six-to-eight time slot, and so forth. The real food was served to the people who played a more solid role in the castle or battles. Since Shirou was new though, the two would be able to eat the food normally given to soldiers – the food given to the royalty was a dream that would never be attained by the likes of them, said Dagobert.

If what Saber had said was anything to go by, though, Shirou doubted they were really missing out on very much. He peered around as Dagobert led him to a serving table where they would both pick up pieces of their meals and carry them back to whatever table they were going to sit at. They were only allowed to have as much as they could carry, so it wasn't really surprising to Shirou when he saw Dagobert load up as much food as physically possible. Having eaten with Percival barely a few hours earlier, Shirou wasn't ridiculously hungry, but had been sure to grab some meat, hard bread, and a some soup in a metal container. When Shirou sat down next to his compatriot, the latter immediately turned to look at him, both of his cheeks stuffed with food.

"Ro, right?" Dagobert managed in between chews. "I heard that there was this guy who came with the king from someplace, but never knew it'd be you."

"It's Shirou, actually," the redhead grumbled slightly. "No one can ever say my name right around here."

"Oh, hey, man, I hear you," the other man agreed. "My name's actually pronounced Dah-go-berh, you know, because the 't' is silent and shit. No one gets it right, so I tell them to call me 'Dago', but then some stupid fuck called me 'Zago' as a mistake, and that one stuck for some reason. Well, better than 'Bert', I guess."

"Dagobert," Shirou repeated, sounding it out slowly. "That name doesn't seem indigenous to Britain somehow."

"It ain't, brother," Zago confessed. "Let's just say that I'm not really from around these parts."

"So, what should I call you? Dagobert, – am I saying that right? – Dago, Zago?"

"Baeddan hates you well enough, so you must be a good sort. You can call me Zago, I guess."
Shirou took a bite from a piece of meat and found it incredibly bland. Nothing was seasoned at all here in the past – it really was just used for sustenance to survive to see another day. There was really nothing special about it at all. The soup was tasteless as well, and the bread was practically a rock. Shirou was sure he could've skipped it across water without too much difficulty, or he could use it as a baseball, or something.

"What's the deal with Baeddan anyway?" Shirou asked after a while, the question having floated around his head for a while. "King Arthur didn't seem to be too pleased with him."

"He wouldn't be. Baeddan is basically the bane of the king's existence, or one of them, at least. The guy takes a piss on King Arthur every chance he gets. If he ain't doing that, he's constantly complaining about the lack of staff, which is fucking stupid since we've got more than enough people for right now, if he'd actually use us right. The fucker is an asshole, and I'm totally for King Arthur kicking his dumb ass out of Camelot."

Zago glanced around quickly before whispering, "Eh, but you didn't hear that from me, mate."

"You don't seem to like him much either," Shirou whispered back.

"That's because he's arrogant about shit he knows nothing about. You heard that line about how he's supposedly the best cook in all of Britain, right? That's so far from the truth that it kills me to hear it. The fucker."

Shirou tilted his head, and rolled the piece of bread in front of him on the table. He was seriously thinking of just chucking it – it was practically inedible. Maybe if he dipped it in the soup, would that help...

"Isn't that a bit cruel?" he asked innocently. "He seemed pretty confident."

"Yeah, he's got confidence in spades, but the guy has no taste buds. No, don't look at me like that. I mean, literally, has no taste buds. He can't taste the shit he puts out, but is more than willing to make everyone else eat the crap. Actually, we lesser people are way better off. I feel bad for the king. Baeddan actually tries to cook fancy stuff for him."

Maybe that was what Saber had meant by "crude". Well, actually, hearing that information only made him all the more curious as to how Baeddan became the Head Cook in the first place – King Arthur obviously didn't like him, nor did a lot of the staff, seemingly. Shirou tapped his finger on the piece of bread before eventually just putting it into the cold soup and letting it sit there for a while.

"I've been wondering," he said, frowning down at the soup and at the piece of bread that refused to get soggy. "Why is he still here, anyway? Why doesn't the king just toss him out?"

"Can't."

"Why not?"

Zago waved his hand back and forth lightly, looking somewhat annoyed. "Something about some debt or whatever. Don't ask me – don't care, can't find the will to care. I have no fucks to give on that matter. If the guy could actually taste the crap he put out, I'm pretty sure he'd actually be a damn amazing cook. He's got the technique and skills, but his one Achilles' Heel is his damn inability to taste anything. A cook who can't taste. Seriously?"

Zago peeked over at the bread stubbornly refusing to turn soggy in Shirou's soup bowl and pointed at it, asking, "You going to eat that?"
Shirou shielded his bowl of soup away from Zago with a small frown. "You talk a lot more now than you did in the kitchen."

"Brother, I am one of the most talkative people you will ever meet. I just hate that pissant because if anything bad happens, it's always the lower servants' faults, never his. He takes the position of being like a god within the kitchen, so much that no one can even come close to approaching his brilliance there. Besides, speaking in monosyllables when I can makes him unbelievably, incredibly, indescribably angry. When he's angry, he kicks you out of the kitchen. Sure, the next day is pretty bad, but hey, where's the harm in a few extra hours of sleep behind a bag of flour somewhere?"

Zago tapped his fingers on the table rhythmically, his food already eaten. Shirou looked forlornly at the piece of bread that was still too hard to eat, sighed, and just drank the soup instead. As expected, it was completely bland and tasteless and left him wanting for something a bit better. As soon as Zago saw that Shirou was finished eating, he waved for the latter to get up and follow him. The two left the Great Hall with Zago explaining how things worked in the kitchen and in general.

The mornings begin incredibly early at anywhere from four to five in the morning to begin preparations for the morning service, and none of the servants received breaks until approximately nine or so, but only for half an hour, give or take a few minutes. Even then, the breaks were taken in shifts, and, if Baeddan hated the person enough, they might not receive a break for the entirety of the day, disregarding bathroom breaks. The noon service lasted from ten until around two, which meant everyone was usually rushing around for the full four hours, plus some time after for cleaning the kitchen.

It was after the lunch menu that the servants received their largest break of nearly a couple of hours. Then, it was back to work around four in the afternoon for the evening meal which began around when the evening bell usually rang, which was at approximately six in the evening. The evening meal, like the morning one, only lasted a duration of approximately a couple of hours, as most people needed to get to bed early. There was one more service – the midnight one – where some people were arranged to stay in the kitchen from approximately ten at night until midnight to cook for the soldiers who worked the night shift, but that was actually voluntary. Those who signed up received special benefits, but because that would leave them without much rest over the day, not many actually wanted to participate in that shift.

Zago wasn't sure what kind of perks came out of doing the night shift, as they were different for each person. Sometimes they received extra breaks, or chances to eat in the Great Hall during the main meal times, or even permission to skip out on shifts entirely and sleep in for longer. The frequency of receiving more breaks as opposed to other perks was a bit greater, as one was free to do as they wished during the breaks. If they wanted to sleep for a bit, or if they wanted to head out into the city, or whatever the case might be, that was something the receiver could decide at their own discretion.

However, the problem with the breaks was the people who would award the special advantages. Those in the upper echelons, not Baeddan, were the ones to divvy out such rewards, and therein lied the main issue. There were exactly twelve people who made up the higher-classed staff, and for the most part, they were all quite kind. Two of the people, however, warned Zago, were not to be trusted, under any circumstances. Firstly, there was Dai, a man who hailed from a town to the far west, along the coast. He originally grew up as the son of a fisher, but ran away from home at the age of seventeen, having been too buried under responsibility and wanting a new life. After four years of wandering around, he eventually came to Camelot a few months after King Arthur was officially crowned. The castle required people familiar with cooking and he was then recruited after directly appealing to there.
Dai’s personality was that of a miserly man who cared for nothing but himself, for the most part. More than likely, he was only a part of the higher staff because he had arrived at Camelot so early when the kitchen was nothing much to see. He and Baeddan got along rather well as each one aspired to make meals that were not only well-tasting, but looked to be of high-class material. The reality was a bit different from their ideology, but regardless, whenever Baeddan required assistance, it was Dai he would always quickly go to. However, Dai was not only content with his position in the upper echelons, but flaunted the status around, practically boasting to any person who was unfortunate to be close enough to him. More often than not, Dai took to making incomprehensible commands, and then getting angry whenever the person with whom he was speaking wouldn't understand. For example, he would ask someone in charge of handling meat to go empty the chamber pot the majority of the kitchen staff used. Not only did it not make sense, but if the person refused, Dai was known to resort to violence. Zago was quick to point at his shin where he apparently sported a large bruise.

The next person that Zago was certain to warn Shirou about was Telyn, from the kingdom of Lyonesse. Telyn, too, was a runaway, though for a completely different reason. Her father had been an upstanding citizen within the city and had wanted to have her married off to a soldier with a very well-off family. When she had thoroughly, and quickly, refused the demand, the soldier decided to take things into his own hands. One evening, when Telyn was out buying ingredients, the soldier captured her and forced her into a shack that wasn't often used. After binding her down and stuffing her mouth, he then took her that night without a single word. In the soldier's eyes, if she was deflowered, then she would not be able to wed any other man but him, for she would be considered as too sullied to touch. In addition, in the case that she became pregnant, he would be able to swoop in and declare he was marrying her for a better future, for the both of them. When the soldier had released her, Telyn, instead of running home and informing her father, wept and asked for her rapist to turn around while she cleaned herself up. The soldier, not thinking anything of it and already believing himself to be in the best situation possible, was quite taken aback when Telyn jumped on his back and slammed a sharpened piece of scrap metal into his back.

The soldier didn't even have a chance to breathe in to scream or push her away when Telyn pulled the metal out and slammed it in again repeatedly. She had apparently sat there for a long while, her face and dress splattered with the blood of the man who had taken her virginity. She had calmly stood up, walked home and snuck into her room, changed clothes, and vanished that same night. Whatever she might have been before that night no longer existed in the present Telyn. She had changed forever. In running away, she found Camelot kilometers away after months of traveling and turned to it with the hope of escaping her past and building something new. King Arthur was the sign of a new age, and where better to turn than the kingdom he ruled over directly? She was scouted by Baeddan personally when he saw her looking at ingredients somewhere in the city.

Overall, Telyn was not a horrible woman. She could actually be quite gentle – she did not hate anyone as she considered it a terrible emotion, but was unable to bring herself to actually trust anyone in particular.

"Then what's so bad about her?" asked Shirou as the two approached the room they would share starting that day.

Zago snorted and opened one of the many doors in the corridor. "The lady knows how to hold a grudge. She doesn't forget even the smallest slight against her. So, as long as you don't tick her off somehow, she's fine with you. Ah, but let's not forget that the smallest crap sets her off. She's even worse when she's together with Dai."

When Dai and Telyn first met one another, it was more or less a never-ending friendship from the very start. Dai was willing to take action and punish those who might begrudge either him or her,
and Telyn was willing to display a kindness Dai would never have been able to demonstrate. They were like two pieces of a puzzle that fit together admirably and neither one separated from the other if they could help it. Dai, for his part, carried no grudges or ill will against anyone – he just liked to show his superiority. Telyn didn't particularly care to boast, but was very quick to remember any wrongdoings.

As for why it was terrible to receive any kind of award from either of them? Telyn was quick to recall the bad things the person being rewarded had done, and Dai would deliver a punishment that would basically nullify whatever award the person might have received otherwise. If someone were to have received extra time to sleep, but had once arrived to their shift late due to oversleeping, they would instead need to work the shift they would've gotten time off for instead, despite doing the night shift. This meant that the person would have had little to no sleep, but wouldn't be able to go to bed again for hours on end.

"That...actually seems kind of fair."

"Yeah, when you aren't the one who has to deal with it yourself."

That was true.

Shirou looked down at the cot Zago had led him to, sighing as he finally took off his backpack. It had been a long day, but he was really exhausted. Looking back at where his new roomie was, he found Zago lying on his own cot, already snoring. Smiling slightly, Shirou plopped down on the cot and sighed.

It was kind of hard to believe that he was actually in Camelot, sleeping more or less under the same roof as King Arthur. Turning around on his cot and lying down fully, his arms folded under his head, he suddenly thought about the life that he had left behind. What would Rin do when she found out he was gone? Would he be stuck in this time period forever? What exactly was he supposed to accomplish in this time period?

All right, so Myrus had said that King Arthur was suffering due in part to him, and that she had never died after that battle. So, how long afterwards had she lived, then? Had Shirou forced her into a situation where she had to reflect over every single mistake she had made in her life, without the solace of knowing death was close by? So, how was he supposed to do anything about that? Was he supposed to wait until the moment that the Battle of Camlann took place to say his apologies? What good would an apology do in that instance, anyway?

"Oh hey, Saber. I'm sorry you had to suffer for all this time, but, uh, there's got to be a plus to this, right?"

Yeah right. He would basically be shitting on her with that comment.

Shirou sighed again, his eyes starting to droop somewhat. He had to come up with a plan... Maybe if he could somehow change her outlook on life now, then maybe she wouldn't have to suffer a fate like that. Then again, if he did somehow manage to change her outlook, wouldn't that mean that the two of them would never meet in the far future? That filled his heart with sadness, but if he could make up for causing her such pain by making her see the error of her ways earlier, and not have her deal with becoming a Servant at all, wouldn't that be the best thing he could possibly do for her otherwise?

"It's my turn to try protecting you, Saber," he murmured, eyes finally closing as he fell into a deep sleep.
He just needed to get stronger first.

The next day brought with it a flurry of craziness for Shirou. Zago had woken him up sometime around four in the morning – he still couldn't get a handle of telling time by the stars yet, plus it had been cloudy that morning for once – so they could eat an early breakfast together. After eating quickly, they had ran to the kitchen to prepare for the morning service, and since Shirou was new, he had to be there earlier than most others so he could receive training of sorts.

Zago had merely patted him on the back, told him "good luck", and ran off to start sweeping the area. Baeddan had immediately put Shirou to work on cutting vegetables as promised. The knife he had given Shirou was rather crude, but sharp. Baeddan had stood next to him the entire time, arms crossed over his chest, as Shirou skillfully peeled and sliced every carrot set in front of him. While Shirou couldn't read Baeddan's facial expressions very well, he figured he must have done something marginally acceptable as far Baeddan was concerned, because the Head Cook was quick to head down the inner passageway and come back with two baskets full of carrots.

"Cut every single one of these into wedges the width of your pointing finger. Then wash them, and have them given to those in charge of making soup."

When Shirou had looked down at baskets, he had realized there had to have been at least a hundred carrots in each basket alone. That wouldn't have been a problem for him, but by the time Baeddan had finished instructing him on his duties – why did talking about cutting vegetables have to take nearly half an hour? – it was nearly five in the morning, and he had approximately half an hour to get every single cut carrot to the soup makers. He was good, but he wasn't that good.

He had made it through about three-fourths of one basket when Baeddan had come back demanding that he hand over his work. When the latter had realized that Shirou hadn't even finished one basket, he had merely frowned.

"I suppose I shouldn't have expected that much from you."

If Baeddan hadn't taken so long to talk to him about how to slice a damn carrot, he might've been able to actually finish. What had the man expected him to do in just a half hour? What was he supposed to be, Superman?

"Morning service is two hours right? If you just give me another hour, no, even maybe forty more minutes or so, I think I can –"

"You had your chance, knave," Baeddan had said coldly.

The Head Cook had turned to the table where Shirou and a few other people were preparing the vegetables and told everyone to step aside. Then, with strength that Shirou would have thought impossible for the man, Baeddan had flipped the table over onto its side, sending everything that had been atop of it scattering and flying across the sooty stone floor. Shirou had stared at the mess with a horrified expression before sending a glare over at Baeddan. The latter had simply ignored him and gestured at the mess as he had stomped on a few carrots and leaves of cabbage here and there, making sure to smash them into the soot and dirt even further, utterly destroying them.

"Thanks to the new boy, Ro, here, I will now be forced to inform His Majesty and all those who come to eat breakfast that there will not be any soup available for consumption and that they will simply be forced to wait until the lunch session for that. How incensed they will be to find they have little to partake upon but bread and ale for breakfast."
"Are you freaking insane?" Shirou had shouted. "You're going to waste all of this food because I couldn't cut two hundred carrots in half an hour?"

"I assigned you that task, and expected you to fulfill your duty."

"How about not assigning something so impossible next time? All of this food is going to go to waste now!"

"I assigned it because I assumed you could do it," Baeddan had responded matter-of-factly, as if never having considered once that no human was capable of doing something like that. Even seventy-five carrots had been impressive. "And this food won't be going to waste. Obviously, it cannot be served to the soldiers and royal members, but it will not be wasted, nonetheless. This will be the mid-morning meal of you four in particular, if you desire to eat anything at all, so might I suggest you all start cleaning up? Unless you're not interested in eating for another six hours or so."

This was supposed to become their meal? There was soot everywhere!

Shirou had been so angry at what Baeddan had done that he had rushed the man, not thinking clearly of the consequences that might come of doing so. For all of his whining and complaining, the man was built as solid as a tank – there was not any wasted energy in any of his movements and he was as physically fit as possible. He could have been a soldier himself with how healthy he seemed to be.

When Shirou had charged him, Baeddan had, like a judo martial artist in the future, grabbed him by his sash and collar and completely flipped Shirou forward and slammed him flat on his back. Baeddan had then slapped him across the face once and then hefted him back up to his feet. Gripping Shirou's dirtied tunic collar as if with a vice, Baeddan drew the redheaded man closer and asked,

"At any point, did you ever once feel that you could actually cut that many in that much time?"

"Of course not! What normal person could?"

Baeddan had closed his eyes for a short moment before opening them again, rearing back his fist and smashing it straight into Shirou's face. Shirou had flown back and hit the ground hard, immediately bringing a hand up to touch the place where he'd been hit. Wincing slightly, he pushed himself up off the ground to a sitting position to glare back at the other cook.

"And that's where you went wrong, boy. The second you thought you couldn't do it was the second you failed. Now, clean up this mess and think over the mistake you've made and the damage you've caused."

Shirou had gritted his teeth as he'd looked at the mess on the ground. The three people who had been in charge of cutting various vegetables alongside him had stared down at the mess as well, looking slightly depressed. Unlike him, they had been working for at least an hour on all of their cutting and washing, and all that had turned to nothing in the blink of an eye thanks to him. He had reached forward and picked up one cut piece of carrot colored black by the soot and clenched it tightly in his fist. He had made a real mess of things, though it hadn't entirely been his fault this time around.

"Do not worry so much, Ro," one woman was quick to say, her eyes kind. "This is not the first time something like this has taken place, and I can nearly guarantee that it will not be the last."
He later learned that this woman was Eos, one of the few close friends Zago had managed to make within the kitchen. She was a secretive one, and Zago had never seen her with anything but a smile upon her face. She was also, apparently, ridiculously kind and always ready to give a helping hand. Eos, too, was a member of the upper echelon, but took greater pleasure in being around other "normal" servants as opposed to flaunting around her power as most of the others tended to do.

"Don't spoil the lad, Eos!" growled one man who scowled down at the disaster. "Damn that Baeddan. Does he think for one second that I'm really going to get down on my knees and clean up the chaos he created? Damnation!"

The man who had said all of that turned his back on Shirou and walked away with the fourth person who had been at the table.

"You won't see me cleaning up that craziness. That boy was the one who caused this mayhem, so he can be the one who cleans all of the crap up! Damn it, I'll just go hungry then. The things I have to put up with..."

Shirou had gritted his teeth as he scooped some soot into his hands. The rest of the people in the kitchen had made sure to ignore what had gone on and Shirou wasn't able to blame them in the least. Eos had bent down next to him and started picking up pieces of vegetables here and there, her saddened smile never disappearing.

"Nothing's going right lately," he had muttered to himself.

"These things take time. Do not worry – Baeddan will get used to you soon enough. Not everyone can go at the same pace as he can."

That had annoyed Shirou more than anything else. Maybe it was his competitive nature, or maybe he just didn't want to be told he was incapable of doing something at the same rate someone else could, even though he excelled at it. Either way, Eos's kindness had only put him into a worse mood.

With only the two of them working together, cleaning up everything had taken the better part of a couple of hours, and considering how covered with soot they were, Baeddan wouldn't let them go near any other food. On top of that, the Head Cook had still been irritated by Shirou's folly and chose not to acknowledge him due to the incident. Eos and Shirou had been unable to fully clean off every single vegetable, and so every single bit of it had been disposed of. Eos had been considerate enough to get Baeddan off of his back, but Shirou was still incredibly irritated. Baeddan had acted as if cutting up two hundred carrots was a simple task in a mere half an hour, but Shirou couldn't figure out any way to actually go about it. It was really getting to him. He wasn't exactly a master chef, but he'd still had faith in his abilities, regardless.

Shirou sighed as he and Eos walked down the corridor on the second floor of the east wing. She was making sure he could find his way before she went off to brush all of the soot off of her own clothes. As soon as they both reached his and Zago's room, Shirou turned to her with a slight bow.

"I'm sorry about everything. It took a long time to get everything taken care of, too."

"Fret not, Ro. Ah, no, sorry, Shirou, wasn't it?" she amended, smiling softly. "As I stated before, you need not concern yourself. These things do tend to happen, and there is nothing to do about it but allow time to bide as it will. If you try rushing things, nothing good will ever come of that."

"I guess," he said grudgingly. "I promised the king I wouldn't cause any trouble, but it seems like Baeddan is already ready to toss me out."
"Nonsense," she disagreed. "The king wouldn't pay any attention to a single word Baeddan said at such an early stage anyway, and believe you me, he has most certainly tried in the past."

"Thanks, Eos. You're a really sweet woman."

Eos seemed to freeze as a bit of redness spread across her cheeks. It was the first time he had seen her without a smile on her face, though he wasn't quite sure what could be wrong with her at the moment though. Eos cleared her throat, her midnight-blue eyes turning away from Shirou.

"Thank you kindly, Shirou. I am simply here to help."

"Yeah, and you've done a lot of that. I'll try harder not to be so annoying in the future."

"No, no, you're just fine," she countered as he opened the door to his room.

Shirou looked inside and was surprised to find Zago laying back on his cot and just staring at the ceiling.

"Whoa, Zago? Are you on break already?"

Zago waved at Shirou. "Hey mate. Nah, I made a run for it. Working is overrated, anyway."

Eos's eyes widened slightly before she frowned and politely slid in through the opening between Shirou and the doorjamb. The second Zago saw her, he flipped back off the cot and pushed himself up against the far wall. Holding his hands up in surrender, he chuckled hesitantly, saying,

"Oh, hey there, Eos. Long time, no see?"

Eos narrowed her eyes slightly. "Yes, although that may be due to a certain someone always skipping out on work when it's his turn. It's no wonder the kitchen never gets cleaned."

"Hey, hey, don't blame that all on me. I'm just one man. Besides, sleep beckons me."

"I have long since grown tired of covering for you, Dagobert," she pointed out softly. "If you do not intend to fulfill your duties, I may be forced to exert the power I hold over you. I trust that you will not like my doing so in the least."

"I'm innocent! Sleep! Blame the sleep! It called to me, wrapped around me, and made me wanting for more," Zago said, holding his hands to his chest. "I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. It's like the loving embrace you would have from that one, lovely woman. Ah, 'tis agony to leave her be. Sweet, sweet sleep."

She scowled slightly. "I most assuredly would not, I will have you know! And you will never get this woman you speak of with such a lackadaisical attitude. Simply dreadful."

Zago cowered slightly as Eos walked closer to him before eventually reaching out and grabbing a hold of his ear. Shirou couldn't hide a grin as Zago squeaked before begging and pleading with Eos as she dragged him along and out of the room. Initially ready for some relaxation after the mess earlier that day, Shirou thought it might be a little better for his mentality if he wasn't left alone to muse and contemplate over various things. He followed them out into the hallway, making sure to close the door after him as they walked ahead of him.

Eos finally let go of Zago's ear when he started whining nonstop, her expression filled with annoyance.
"God damn, woman, you're like the older sister I never wanted!"

"How dare you use the Lord's name in vain?" she retorted. "Such a child you are, constantly complaining and yet never lifting a hand for yourself!"

"How the hell does that guy deal with you?"

"Don't you dare try to shift the blame to others for where you lack. Unbelievable."

"Bitch! I don't lack shit!"

Eos turned to look at Zago with a soft and gentle smile. Zago frowned at her with narrowed eyes, and seemed to be about to ask what her deal was when her hand whipped out and grabbed his ear again. With a silent yell, Zago clasped his hands over her right one, trying to find a way to get her to release him.

"My, my, perhaps my hearing is becoming faulty. Could you say that again, more clearly this time?"

"You are a beautiful, all-knowing woman who is incredible beyond her twenty-three years! Ah, even as the seasons change, you never will! How I have always desired an older sister such as yourself! Now, could you please, possibly, perchance let me go...?"

She smiled genuinely this time, readily releasing her deadly grip on his ear. Zago rubbed his ear over and over and drifted back to walk next to Shirou.

"Holy mother of Jesus! Why does she do that?"

Shirou chuckled. "I think you were asking for it, honestly. What'd you think was going to happen if you said all of that?"

"Uh, I don't know. Not that, at least."

"Then you deserved it."

"You both suck."

As they walked past one of the windows, Zago noticed that the shutters were open and that a cold draft was flying in. He motioned for Eos and Shirou to wait as he went to close them before they heard him groan slightly. Both of them walked up to his side and looked out of the window alongside of him. Eos frowned as well, sighing deeply.

"What?" Shirou said, confused.

He didn't see what the issue was. The window overlooked the patch of dead grass in between the castle and the outer wall. He looked up and saw a bunch of grey clouds in the distance, but not much more than that.

"See those clouds up there?" Zago said, pointing up at the sky. "The big grey ones? We're going to be dumped on really hard."

"It's just like last year," murmured Eos, looking slightly concerned. "I had hoped that with us so far into December that maybe it wouldn't happen at all, or at least, not to such a degree..."

"What? Rain? Snow?"
"Snow," confirmed Zago. "And a whole lot of it. Damn it, the supplies come in at the end of the week, but we're going to be buried. Ugh, I don't want to go outside now."

Eos nodded, feeling much of the same. "It was difficult enough last year, but I'm not sure anyone is prepared for that to happen again this year."

"Is it really that bad?" Shirou asked, looking out of the window again.

"I guarantee we'll only be seeing white by the end of the week. Who knows," Zago said, shrugging his shoulders as he started walking away after closing the shutters. "Maybe we'll get lucky."

"Aw, it can't be that bad," said Shirou with a small smile.

Eos and Zago looked at him pitifully, but said nothing as they walked away.

True to Zago's words, the snow began falling that very night.
"Here's the last one."

"Yeah, thanks."

Shirou grunted as he picked up the last barrel of wine, feeling the muscles in his arms stretch and tighten as he tried to balance it in his arms. Splinters of the wooden barrel stabbed and pricked at his hands and he barely managed a nod at the man who had brought in the last of the goods. The redhead frowned and hefted the barrel upwards for a better grip before finally making his way back towards the kitchens. He couldn't see over the barrel, so he had to try looking around the barrel's right and left to see in front of him. Luckily, the cart had been fairly close to the doors heading into the east wing, so he wouldn't have to walk too, too far.

After walking down the long corridor, he went directly into the winery and lifted the keg up onto one of the resting stands. Sighing as he leaned against the stacked keg, Shirou wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He righted himself and looked around the room. Many of the stands still remained empty, though Shirou wasn't sure if that was the norm or not. He turned around and headed out of the room, back down the hall, and back outside to see if there was anything else that needed assisting. He wasn't the only person rushing back and forth to get things done though – all of the other servants working in the kitchen had been racing to and fro with barrels and kegs of other things, putting them in place and then coming back out for more. The rush had only begun about a couple hours earlier once the supply carts had finally made their way through the castle gates.

Shirou frowned as he walked outside, his eyes gazing over all of the white covering the ground as far as he was physically capable of seeing. On top of all of the servants, there were also all of the mages out and about, melting down as much snow as they could with simple fire magic. They couldn't melt down too much of it because then the castle would have flooding to deal with as well, so that made things a bit complicated. It seemed they were focusing primarily on creating the primary path from the outer gates to the main doors. The squires and pages, on the other hand, were clearing out the training fields on the other side of the grounds, as most, if not all, of the servants were focused on dealing with the supplies. A decent majority of the soldiers were out helping the villagers shovel away snow or making a path around a couple of kilometers long leading up to the city gates. The knights, for their part, were personally directing groups of soldiers in their particular endeavors, as specifically commanded by the king herself. And speaking of kings...

He looked over at the blonde walking steadily across the extensive castle grounds. As far as he knew, having only taken glances at her every so often while he worked, she had been making rounds all day, personally ordering people to do certain things, like shoveling or assisting the merchants and suppliers. King Arthur had been in the thick of things as usual, and had hardly been a few motions away from taking to a shovel herself. Shirou had seen her disappear down into the main city every so often before coming back up and directing soldiers elsewhere. In other words, she was definitely keeping herself as busy, if not even busier than everyone else.

Shirou turned away and jogged up to one of the merchants who was taking inventory of the items he had left. The merchant glanced up at him once before turning away from the cart.

"I'm from the kitchens. Are there any more items left that need to be taken away?"

"The kitchens?" the man inquired. "No, those are all done. We lost a lot of cargo with the storm, so
that's all we've got for His Majesty, unfortunately."

"How much is 'a lot'?" asked Shirou, frowning as he looked at all of the wagons. There was a good amount of them, but the number of them was apparently far fewer than had been expected.

"We barely managed to bring in about forty percent of the overall stock. Most of our wagons were lost with the snow and wind, and we had to leave the rest where it was."

"So, the rest of the goods is just lying around somewhere out there?"

"Doubtful. If the marauders haven't stolen them, then wild animals surely have, sir."

Not knowing why he was even surprised, Shirou turned away and looked back at King Arthur as she spoke to some other merchants who had brought their portion of the caravan to the east wing. It was a shame, but with how strong the storm had been, it was a wonder the caravan had ever managed to make it to the castle at all.

As Zago had prophesized, the snow storm had come billowing in that very evening, though not without torrents of rain and wind sweeping though and around the whole of Camelot. The wind had been slow and gentle at first, but it was the archers and guards stationed up top on the roofs and allures who first noticed the subtle change in the wind speed. After relay after relay of the new information through the ranks, the news of the upcoming ferocity was communicated to the king who immediately called for the town bell to be rung. In addition to the ringing of the bell, all servants were to prep the castle for the intense winds and make sure the shutters for every single castle window were closed and secured.

The flags symbolizing King Arthur's rule were to be taken down and sealed and all training was halted in favor of putting away and sheltering the various equipment. Hostlers attended to the horses, securing down different sections of the stables and making sure nothing would injure the horses throughout the entirety of the storm. All field hands and servants were forbidden from setting foot outside of the castle and the soldiers were to stay within their barracks through the duration.

When the town bell chimed, the castle attendants weren't the only ones rushing around busily to take care of loose ends. The city itself was in uproar as villagers ran back and forth to secure their houses and buy enough groceries to last them until the storm was finished. Gardens were "weatherproofed", animals were taken into the houses to rest with the families, and shops were closed earlier than usual for the evening to minimize losses. Something else that was extraordinary, as the king was loathe to do this very often, was that the gates, both that of the city and the main castle, were closed to heighten wind resistance and possibly lessen the damage that would be dealt.

Not even two hours after the first chime of the bell, the wind picked up and roared ferociously around the city walls and across the grounds. Shirou could remember the dead silence within his and Zago's room as the wind had bore down and slammed against the window's shutters. For all the effort the two had taken to secure the shutters, there was little to stop some icy cold wind from slipping through the gaps and whirl around the two. In the end, both men had just stopped trying to light the candles on the stands next to them since the wind continuously blew the flame out each time. Eventually, the two had grown cold enough that each one escaped the room and went to the kitchens for the evening. Unfortunately, once Baeddan had found them, he'd quickly assigned them something else to do – with everyone now stuck inside the castle, the kitchens were busier than ever and the Head Cook had been looking for more hands to help with the increased volume of partakers.

The kitchens, although being the warmest room in all of the east wing, – most "normal" servant
rooms did not have fireplaces installed, unlike the rooms for the knights, those of higher ranks, and naturally, the king – it did still have several issues that had needed to be addressed. The pipes leading the coal fumes out of the main area were not completely secured and bound and with the wind, the fumes often had come swooping back into the kitchens, making it hard for most of the kitchen hands to breathe and work efficiently. A number of people had to go retrieve some ladders and towels and plug the holes around the pipes to keep the workspace free of poisonous air. However, because of how hot the pipes often became, many towels had also been set afire, which had required dousing them with cold water and then retrieving even more towels to replace them. Had there been some sort of fan, Shirou remembered thinking, there wouldn't have been as much of an issue, but powerful enough fans for that wouldn't be invented for another 1,400 years, or so.

The night had been a cold and dreary one, with a majority of the servants instead cuddling next to one another in their own particular rooms for warmth. The blankets allotted to the servants were quite thin and shoddy in quality, so it wasn't uncommon for many to come down with colds or even pneumonia during the winter season. Hot water was very much a commodity and something the common people would never experience for perhaps all of their lives.

Zago, very much irritated over their current situation, had guided Shirou skillfully and quietly into the pantry, a room that often fielded a lot of the heat from the kitchens. They had slept there that night, behind all of the flour satchels and barrels. The storm hadn't quickly gone away either, so the two continued sleeping there the entire week, not being discovered only thanks to Zago's experience with the matter – he was very knowledgeable on what flour bags and what wheat would be used for meal purposes.

With all of the snow, the supplies for the castle had been delayed day by day, and it wasn't until a week after its start that the storm finally died off enough for people to leave the castle for more than half an hour at a time. Zago had been none too surprised to see the near two meters of snow that had been dumped down on Camelot and its surrounding area. The first snow clean-up had taken place that day, and it took several hours to whittle down all of the snow and clear away most of the grounds, even with all of the soldiers, available knights, and servants working together as a unit to get things cleaned up. Half of the soldiers had even gone down to the city to help with clean up there, just as they were at present. Due to so much snowfall, however, the castle goods had been delayed indefinitely until the roads could be reopened for service. While King Arthur had desired to open up the main city gates, that proved impossible as another storm was quick to rumble over Camelot yet again.

Before Shirou had known it, a full month had passed since he had finally arrived at Camelot with King Arthur and her entourage, and the city and castle were sorely lacking for supplies. Food portions gradually grew smaller and smaller to accommodate for continuing every single service, but considering how much food was normally used, there was still a good amount that was being served to everyone. With lighter portions, servants had also been given a bit more time off, though in exchange, they had been forced to help shovel snow each and every single day.

With all of the tasks left for him to do, there had never been a moment for Shirou to really take a breather and simply exist. Even Zago had found it difficult to escape and get some much needed rest, as there had hardly been any to be found. The days had been filled with chores and the nights had been uncomfortable and cold. Even the king had seemed to lack much of her usual enthusiasm as her exhaustion and stress gradually took their toll on her over the duration of the month. Shirou had only caught glimpses of her here and there in the castle and out on the grounds when he had been shoveling, but never had he seen her look so ragged – of course, she didn't outwardly show it, but he grasped her situation bit by bit as she walked, spoke, and proceeded along normally. He could hardly blame her, considering how many complaints and grievances she had been forced to handle as the supplies grew more and more delayed.
When the supplies had finally been delivered, the quantity had been less than originally calculated for, but a large number of servants were called out to assist with taking in all of the goods regardless. Shirou had been one of the several attendants who hadn't been busy with anything in particular except for shoveling, so it had been an obvious choice for him to immediately begin helping with carrying everything he could in. The caravan was something that traversed the entirety of Britain, picking up packages or barrels of this and that along the way, as well as making its own specific deliveries. Shirou hadn't known what was in each particular keg, but there had been a lot of wine and ale – the Britons certainly loved their alcohol. With everyone working together, the process had only taken a couple of hours from start to finish.

Shirou continued absently watching the blonde as she rotated around the many wagons. He hadn't even realized the length at which he'd kept watching her until he noticed, with a start, her piercing, green eyes staring straight into his. Grunting slightly, Shirou rose up from where he was leaning against one of the carts and stood straight up as, after a slight moment of deliberation on her part, she turned away from one merchant and walked stiffly over to him. Her demeanor, as always, was serious and controlled, but he could definitely detect some wear-and-tear on her. Hm, she tended to become snippier when she was at the end of her ropes, so he hoped he hadn't somehow earned her ire. Although, it wasn't as if they'd actually spoken over the month he'd been there – it would have been odder if they had, Shirou supposed.

"Do you lack for something to do?" King Arthur asked as soon as she came within conversational range of him.

Both fortunately and unfortunately, no, he didn't. He was so busy with random things that he didn't have much time to think about the previous few months, but then again, he was so busy that he didn't have time for the more important things either, like sleep. Shirou was quite ready to just project a real bed with real covers, or even a futon with real covers, as long as he could actually sleep with warmth for once. Even Ceri's house had had the fire going for a majority of the time, and it had been tended to by one of the two of them whenever they happened to wake up overnight. He was also a bit tired of waking up with his feet practically feeling like blocks of ice, but that was just how things were here. Modern conveniences of the future didn't exist here, obviously, but that didn't mean he had to enjoy it. Sure, Shirou appreciated the simplicity of the Medieval Age, but he certainly didn't enjoy it – it didn't matter how glad he was to be with the blonde again.

"No, I was just resting a bit," he confessed, a bit worn out. "Your Majesty."

She turned her gaze away to look at the doors leading to the east wing and at the several servants taking a breather next to the doors or on the snowy ground. Everyone looked exhausted – it had been a long month.

"Yes, I suppose I can understand what you mean," she agreed softly, her shoulders losing a little of their tension. "This has been a trying month and I had not imagined it would take the suppliers so long to arrive. I also had not been able to foresee such heavy snowfall, either."

"I'd think you'd be more worn out than anyone else here," Shirou said, his head tilting to the side. "Are you doing okay, Your Majesty?"

King Arthur was quick to glare at him, as if he'd said something incredibly taboo. Had he?

"I should hardly think you to be in any position to monitor my condition. I am still more than capable of continuing the tasks required of me, unlike some who must rest themselves against cargo carts."

"What?" he mustered, taken aback more than anything else. "I mean, yeah, I guess I should get
back to the kitchen and get some more work done, but..."

"That is not to what I was referring," the king was quick to say. "It is not simply you, but all of the
servants over whom I am concerned. I realize the current weather conditions are not optimal, but I
do not understand why all of you should look so ragged or tired."

"Let's just say that there isn't much difference between my room and that cold ground we were at
when you yelled at me."

"I did not yell at you," was the first thing out of her mouth before she ducked her head in thought a
bit. "What of your fires?"

"We have candles. Candles that get blown out by the wind within a second of lighting them."

"Blankets?"

"We have them," Shirou said, but as soon as she seemed ready to argue her point further, he added,
"but ones that aren't chew toys for rats or as holey as Swiss cheese would be nice."

"Surely, you must be exaggerating," King Arthur retorted, right hand on her hip. "I am quite certain
I would have been notified of such ridiculous conditions."

"Are you sure about that, Your Majesty?" he remarked, unintentionally sarcastic.

She seemed to take some offense at that. "I am hardly a tyrant, I will have you know. Do not think
for one moment I would allow my servants to live in such inhabitable conditions. For that matter,
do you really take me for someone who would seek the deaths of those who care for my castle?"

"Whoa," Shirou inserted, interrupting her rant before she really built it up into something. The last
thing he needed was for her to get so heated that someone else would need to intervene, or worse,
for her to decide to put that sword attached to her belt to good use. "That's not what I meant, ma'–
sir. It's just, you're the king."

"As grateful as I am that you have finally come to that conclusion —"

"Could you let me finish?" Shirou asked irritably.

The blonde seemed shocked over the interruption for a few seconds before her mouth closed with
an audible clack. He hadn't wanted to cut her off, but he really hadn't made his point yet. Then
again, he didn't know why he was arguing with someone who could ship him off to the dungeons
and have him tortured to death, or someone who didn't know him from Jack.

"Please do," she muttered, obviously trying to be courteous.

"I meant that you're the king, so you have a lot more things to worry about than the living
conditions of every single low-level servant who works for you."

"As a king, I am responsible for every person within my kingdom, even for something as simple as
blankets."

"Sure, you might think so, but I'm pretty sure that your knights or the people who directly report to
you don't think that it's worth your time."

Her eyes still narrowed, King Arthur continued to glare at him as her breath slowly eased out of her
mouth while she considered his words. It was true that she knew nothing about her own servants
unless Dylan or any of her other correspondents told her. It was also true that word of their living conditions never reached her ears, and she had more than likely assumed that no news was good news. However, in the event that the redhead was telling the truth, then it was a reality that she needed to face and rectify, if that was in her power. A larger torch might solve the heat issue and as far as the blankets went... Perhaps she could request tailors and seamstresses within the city to make thicker blankets? No, but then there was the issue of where the materials would come from, and the goods Camelot had received were fewer than originally requested, so it might be far more taxing to request enough blankets to keep every single servant warm...

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. There was little point in thinking of every single negative to the extent that it would deter her from acting in the first place.

"Very well," the once and future king conceded. "Providing your words are correct, what is it you would have me do about it? I doubt it need be said that right now, Camelot is in a dire position, due in no small part to Mother Nature, herself."

Shirou's eyes widened slightly as he blinked once. "Wait, you're asking me?"

King Arthur frowned, an eyebrow raised. "I would like to inquire as to who else you –"

"RO! Ro, stop wasting my time and get into the damn kitchen!"

She and Shirou immediately shifted their attention away from one another and instead towards the man walking towards them. With his short, black hair flowing back and forth gently with the cold breeze and his fierce brown eyes focused solely on Shirou, it looked exactly if he had stepped right out of a shampoo commercial. Baeddan walked up to the redhead and blonde smoothly and his left hand whipped out to grab Shirou by his tunic. Pulling Shirou as close as King Arthur had him a month prior, he whispered,

"You were supposed to report back as soon as you finished stacking the wine as my business with you is not yet finished." He glanced at the motionless king with a small grin, and continued: "Now, Ro, do you think yourself able to walk back on your own or shall I assist you in that endeavor?"

The king hadn't even felt her teeth clench together tightly when Baeddan grinned at her and repeated the exact words she had spoken to him before. Shirou wasn't sure what was going on or what was up with the random grin Baeddan made at the king, but any time he had to talk to the other man, he always felt his patience wear thin incredibly fast. Shirou grasped hold of the other man's wrist and gripped tightly enough to restrict the blood circulation.

"You didn't say a damn word about going back to the kitchen since I haven't actually seen you the entire fucking day. So, back off," Shirou said forcefully, calmly peeling off the other man's hand and pushing him back.

"Oh, I do love it when you fight back," Baeddan responded cheerfully, cracking his knuckles as he grinned. "It makes punishing you that much more satisfying."

Shirou backed up a few steps, ready to block any attack the Head Cook sent his way and as Baeddan's muscles tightened and he coiled back to spring forward, King Arthur cleared her throat once. Shirou flicked his gaze back to look at her, but when Baeddan chose to ignore her and volleysed straight toward Shirou, all the latter saw was a yellow streak as King Arthur first struck Baeddan's chest with her armored left hand. She then spun around, swept her right foot back behind one of his, hooked it tightly and slammed her right arm back into his chest, sending him flying backwards and crashing back onto the ground. Shirou edged away from her slightly as she peered down coolly at the cook.
"Unfortunately, Head Cook," she began, not missing a single beat, "he and I were already engaged in a conversation. I must sincerely ask that you wait your turn and I promise to return Shirou to you once my discussion with him is at an end."

She held out a hand to Baeddan who simply seemed exasperated with her. Shirou glanced around and couldn't say he was surprised to see several merchants and servants gaping at the king who had taken down the Head Cook within a single second. He let out a deep breath – she was scary as hell.

"He's my servant!" Baeddan declared indignantly while swatting her hand aside.

"And you are mine," she informed him. "Your point would be?"

"What need would you have to speak with a peasant servant like him?" the cook asked, standing up and brushing himself off. "It would make more sense for someone of your stature to converse with someone with actual intelligence."

"Fuck off," muttered Shirou.

"As soon as you die, peasant," Baeddan returned happily.

King Arthur narrowed her eyes at Baeddan this time. "I was simply questioning him about the living conditions of the lower-ranked servants, and he apprised me of details I was not aware of."

"Such as?"

"Like shredded blankets," intervened Shirou. "No warmth. Ice-cold prisons. An increased inability to sleep thanks to all of the above."

Baeddan snorted as he turned to the king. "And you were unaware of this much? What kind of king are you?"

The muscle in her jaw jumped as she gritted her teeth, and her fists automatically clenched tightly.

"No, I had not been aware," she said, taking care to be as polite as she possibly could. "And though I am quite loathe to admit it, there is much I am unaware of within my own castle. That is the reason I sought to speak with him. In doing so, I might be able to rectify the situation."

The Head Cook frowned slightly. "You came all the way over here just to find out about how some peasants are functioning?"

"They are an integral part of the castle," she said slowly, instinctively feeling something shift within the atmospheric mood, but unsure as to exactly what. "If it is within my power to better their lives, even if by only a bit, then I will do my utmost to ensure that happens."

Shirou looked at her pointedly. "It's not that big a deal. You don't have to worry that much about things that don't directly correlate to you."

"Hmph," she huffed, glaring at him again. "Nothing would ever be completed if everything needed to directly correlate with me, you realize. Satisfied servants make for a content castle, which in turn makes for a wholesome life. Take care to remember that."

"...Right. I'll just mark that in my schedule somewhere. No promises, though."

She was about to chastise him again when Baeddan held up a hand for her attention. King Arthur turned back to the other Briton, feeling slightly confused but ready to hear whatever it was he had
"If you found out that information, would you see that it was taken care of?"

The king's eyebrows raised somewhat. "To the best of my ability."

Baeddan sighed. "The servants' quarters all require new sleeping cots and heavier blankets as most of the warmth is steered towards the west, north, and main wings. As the shutters are all worn down, they need to be replaced with either new wooden ones, or something of iron and steel to better restrict the amount of wind that flows into the room. Ideally, each room should be equipped with miniature hearths, but considering the cost and material restrictions for such an event, every room should at least have a few torches or some way of trapping heat.

"Every door leading to the corridor is also less than acceptable, as any heat will immediately be lost due to the poor condition of the wood. Might I suggest oak or redwood? Each servant should also be dressed with cloth suitable for winter conditions, or be given some sort of heavy material with which to move around in. Access to running water outside of the kitchen, but inside the castle itself, would also be incredibly preferable, or perhaps a communal toilet facility for the servants, so they would not have to venture outside to relieve themselves. More than anything else, I would suggest focusing on the shutters, blankets, and cots."

King Arthur and Shirou's eyes grew wide with disbelief and the latter slowly turned to look over at the former. She was still staring at Baeddan as if she had just lived through a dream, but eventually turned her attention over to make eye contact with Shirou, who was standing a couple of paces away from her. They looked at one another for a moment before simultaneously once again facing the Head Cook standing in front of them.

Baeddan shook his head slightly before focusing on King Arthur again.

"Now, king, have I answered your question well enough?"

An indescribable expression crossed the blonde's face and she answered slowly, "Yes, you have."

There was a slight pause and then a, "Thank you", with some incredulity unraveling itself in her voice.

"Feel free to come by and ask again anytime should you forget, Your Highness," Baeddan said as he attempted to grab Shirou by his tunic again.

Shirou evaded his grasp, eyes squinted softly. "Don't touch me. I can get there on my own."

"See that you do, peasant."

The redhead merely ignored him and glanced back at the king who was still standing ramrod still. She must have felt his gaze upon her but was slow to look back at him. Shirou smiled a toothy grin at her.

"That shocked look suits you," he said as he waved and then turned and headed for the east wing after Baeddan.

King Arthur froze after his compliment – could that truly be counted as one? – but slowly exhaled and placed her hands on her hips. She watched him walk away with a somewhat thoughtful facial expression and tilted her head slightly. Letting her gaze drop a bit, the king felt her exhaustion hit her slightly now that the two distractions were gone, but was quick to force herself back into a state of alertness.
"Blankets," she murmured, turning around and walking back towards the opposite end of the grounds. "Blankets, cots, shutters... Blankets, cots, shutters..."

Shirou hefted himself up to sit on one of the cutting tables while Zago contented himself with sitting on a stool next to the redhead. Shirou scratched the back of his head and turned to look at the other man.

"So, what's all of this about anyway?"

"Fuck all if I know," Zago replied, obviously not caring one way or another. "Maybe he's here to fire us all and send us packing to some other castle."

"Then who would he boss around?"

Zago snapped his fingers and swiveled to look at Shirou. "Fuck me! You're right! That fucker definitely needs us around. Hey, maybe we're going to get a bunch of benefits, and more food! And sleep! God damn, I need me some serious sleep, brother."

Eos, who was standing behind them on the other side of the table, passed the platinum-blond a frown, although he couldn't see it. She seemed almost bored as she leaned on the table, as if she wasn't sure if she should even bother pointing out the ludicrousness of such a thought. She flicked her gaze up to look at Shirou, who in turn, passed her a helpless smile. There was little point in scolding the other man for his incredible dreams and delusions, but if she didn't, then he would remain on a power trip for the rest of his life. When Shirou just shrugged, Eos let out a soft sigh.

"I can think of more useful people Baeddan might need as opposed to a slacker such as yourself, Dagobert. If there were benefits to be earned, I would think those would go to people who actually do the work they are hired to do."

"Don't patronize me, woman. You're just jealous because I have skills you could never dream of having."

She was spared from commenting on that matter when Baeddan breezed into the kitchen, his facial expression displaying annoyance and frustration. Shirou, Zago, Eos, and all the rest of the one hundred or so members of the kitchen each straightened up a bit when their boss walked to the area nearest the hearths. Every servant had been waiting for about ten to twenty minutes after being ordered to attend a meeting of great importance within the main kitchen. With how serious Baeddan looked, it didn't seem like they were there for shits and giggles.

"I am appreciative that you all could make it here," Baeddan began, seeming somewhat sincere. He gave his audience a sweeping glance before noticing that Shirou was sitting on top of one of the cutting tables. Frowning, he growled out,

"Get down from there. That table is worth more than your life ever will."

"Bite me," came the response.

The room grew incredibly quite as some members turned to look at Shirou for his clear show of insubordination, and the others peered over at Baeddan as the man only smirked. Baeddan glared at Shirou who blatantly ignored him and didn't budge from his spot on the table. Eos rose up to her full height as she glanced back and forth at both of the men, wondering if she would need to intervene. The tension in the room continued growing thicker as neither man backed down before Baeddan eventually let out a soft, evil chuckle and turned his attention away from the redhead.
"I have very important news for you today," he continued in a clear voice.

Zago's jaw fell slightly when Baeddan backed down – that was something he had never seen before. That damn cook never backed down from any challenge, and yet he let Shirou win that fight? Turning to Shirou, he nuded the foreigner hard.

"He let you go! He never lets anyone do what they want, the fucking prick. You ass. How the hell did you manage that?"

Shirou grunted softly. "That's because I do all of the impossible crap he asks me to do without complaint now. I got tired of him badgering me, and worked really damn hard to get to a better level."

The blond glared. "Fuck working hard and fuck you, man."

Shirou just grinned.

Ever since the day he had utterly failed at that first cooking task, Shirou had worked day in and day out to better his cutting skills. In the future, he had had various tools to work with to quickly get jobs done, and although it wasn't as if Shirou couldn't peel, cut, and slice carrots as if he had never made the attempt before, the process seemed different. It was the same action he had done for years and years in his own kitchen, but the second he had tried to do it in Camelot, he had flubbed on the process. Things that would take him all of ten seconds in the future took double or even triple that at present. Eventually, Shirou had grown so annoyed with himself that he'd stolen a knife discreetly and some vegetables just so he could practice by himself. He had practiced late at night when Zago had long since fallen asleep.

Shirou had quickly realized that it was not simply due to the shock of being in a new place and using different materials that had thrown him for a loop, but the fact that the knives were not only dull, but oddly serrated. Rather, the serration of the knives wasn't too, too odd, but the serrated edges were too haphazard and strangely placed. The knives obviously hadn't been cared for in the least, which was weird considering what age it was. There were blacksmiths aplenty in this time period, but no one thought to get the knives rounded and sharpened? He realized there were more important matters than worrying about a bunch of kitchen knives, but he was surprised the people could do anything with the tools given them.

Of course, Shirou had realized with much grimacing, the cuts most of the servants made in the kitchen were neither exact nor precise. It wasn't all that uncommon to see oddly shaped cuts show up in the soups – nothing was evenly sliced, nothing was made with all the finesse of expert chefs, and nothing was presented nicely like Shirou was used to. He was far from being OCD, but he did appreciate decent aesthetic placements and distributions of the food. Most of what he had seen in this time period were things that were put together because, why not? It was this kind of attitude Shirou had faced when looking at soups with huge and small pieces of vegetables popping up and random bits of meat – mostly fat since these people didn't know what to do with a good piece of meat – spiraling around in the disgusting-looking depths of the brews. Saber's reactions to his food in the future had started to make so much more sense with every minute he had worked in that kitchen.

Determined to bring the aesthetic taste of the future to the people of this age, he'd worked on different techniques that could employ the full use of the horrible knives. Initially, he had simply relearned how to cut correctly and quickly, though it had only take him a couple of days to get back to his normal speed. Two hundred carrots within half an hour was pushing it, but he normally managed about thirty-five to forty minutes on average, peeling and cutting both included. When Baeddan had found out about his "newfound" skill, he had been "upgraded" to potatoes, and then
cabbage, and then pretty much every vegetable came to be in his arsenal, so to speak. It had actually taken him approximately a few weeks to get that far along, but Baeddan no longer bothered him as much. After all, no other servant had excelled at the art of cooking as much as he.

Only the week before, – and what with the snow, there had been little else to do – he had devised new cutting styles and started juliennig the carrots, or putting wave designs in each piece. He often did this with leftover carrots, rejects, or molded, inedible pieces. Surprisingly, there were a lot of moldy pieces in the pantry and holding areas – so many that he had just wanted to clean everything out (the place was huge) right there and then, but Shirou had neither the time nor the desire to be placed on the cleaning crew. In either case, Baeddan didn't have much to bug Shirou over nowadays, so Shirou just did as he wanted. He was the only one who had earned his place in just a month, after all.

"It is unfortunate," Baeddan said, his eyes narrowed, "but after taking an inventory of the supplies we have been given, I have come to understand that our currently available stock pales in comparison to what we were due. As you have more than likely noticed, portion sizes for each meal service have shrunken and we need to be more selective with how we serve henceforth. As such, it is with my deepest regrets that I must ask all of you to only partake in meals once a day."

There was an immediate uproar in the kitchen. Once a day? The servants do all the work, so how could they ever sustain themselves with just that much? They were already eating the bare minimum! Why not make it so the soldiers had to eat less and make it more even?

A muscle in Baeddan's jaw jumped as he clenched his teeth, but he held up his hands to calm the crowd.

"I know," he agreed, looking completely serious. "And for once, and without any sarcasm, I wholly agree. However, this is an order directly from the king himself, and unfortunately for everyone, I rather enjoy being alive."

"How does the king expect us to keep working if we're not going to get any food?" cried out Zago angrily. "Go tell His Majesty to shove that order up his ass!"

"Hmph," muttered Baeddan. "You're more than welcome to do so yourself. I am most certain no one would ever realize you had ever disappeared one way or another."

Zago promptly shut his mouth, though not without looking very disgruntled as he angrily crossed his arms over his chest. Shirou was somewhat surprised by the supposed order as well – that didn't seem like King Arthur's style. Of course, Shirou had no real idea of what the woman was like before her life as a Servant, but he knew with absolute certainty that she wasn't the type to throw her people under a bus and expect them to still perform as expected. He took in a deep breath as Zago continued to steam quietly and Eos stayed silent.

Baeddan shook his head slightly. While none of the servants had chosen to say anything after Zago's outburst and Baeddan's obvious warning, they were all, for the most part, very incensed and upset. He, too, was quite dismayed by the whole situation, but was more annoyed by the fact that the orders had not come directly from the king himself, but from one of his follow-ups. That meant the king was either a coward and could not make such an order and see to the repercussions himself, or that someone else in the shadows was extorting the king's power for himself, or herself, even. Well, there was nothing he could do about it at that very moment regardless.

"I have more unfortunate news for all of you," he said loudly, quickly gaining everyone's attention. What could be worse than what he'd already told them?
"Due to the incessant snow that does not seem to know when enough is enough, a great deal of our soldiers who would otherwise be sleeping during the day for the night shift are instead being drafted for morning and afternoon patrols as the snow would provide adequate cover overnight for any enemies who would try to take the castle."

"I thought we were in a time of peace," muttered one servant. "Besides, that snow is as high as our waists, at least. What stupid Saxon would try raging war in such conditions?"

Another servant shook his head. "You fool, so long as Britain is still broken, 'peace' is a word we'll never understand."

"In any case," Baeddan said, clearing his throat and taking the floor again, "because of the increased sentry, many of you have been moved around accordingly to match the overall pace of the more hectic shifts. However, this leaves me with another problem: I am lacking for people to work the night time slot. I do realize that with the shortage of food and increased business that I am asking quite a bit from all of you, so, for the moment, I will only ask for volunteers."

Many people seemed disgusted that he would even suggest they bother. When no one offered to volunteer whatsoever, the Head Cook's mouth firmed as he frowned.

"I am willing to offer further incentives for those who do volunteer."

Again, there was nothing but silence in the kitchen.

"If no one deigns to volunteer, I promise that I will put every single one of you on the night shift whether you like it or not, and you will still only be given one meal a day despite that. You will also receive no particular benefits, and I will not hear a word of complaint when you're 'tired' or feel you are unable to work further. Then, when it comes to that, I will only be too happy to kick you out of this castle and let you freeze to death in the bitter cold."

That particular confession resulted in several murmurs amongst the staff, and Shirou definitely heard a few whispers of death threats and complaints. One glance at Zago told him he was not at all amused with the idea of working even more and gaining far less along the way. Eos, on the other hand, looked incredibly troubled. She obviously wanted to help out, but there seemed to be something holding her back from raising a hand to volunteer. She looked somewhat conspicuous as she attempted not to make eye contact with Baeddan.

One look at the other servants told Shirou that no one was any more interested than anyone else in taking on more hours, and he could tell that the Head Cook was growing increasingly impatient and annoyed. At this rate, the man was going to punish every single person who was unlucky enough to either get in his way or make eye contact with him. Then again, Shirou had no desire to push himself any more than necessary, but there was a chance that... Sighing, he raised his hand.

"I'll volunteer."

All murmurs and mutterings came to an immediate halt as Shirou jumped off of the table and stood at his full height; even if he hadn't grown more after high school (and he had, by a good ten centimeters), he still would have stood tall well over most of the other men in the spacious room. With his height and auburn hair, he was fairly easy to see even through the large crowd, and Baeddan fixed him with an ascertaining stare.

"You?"

"Yeah, me. I don't exactly see people jumping up and down to help out, so I will."
Baeddan bit the inside of cheek before turning away to the crowd. "Anyone else?"

Shirou may have worked within the same room as the other staff, but they were still very opposed to trusting anything he did. It did not matter that the king had given his blessing, nor did it matter that he was very good at whatever job he was given. He still looked suspicious to the castle populace, and nothing would save that for time and patience on his part. Luckily for him, Zago, Eos, and not even Baeddan really cared much about his genealogy or lineage. Being Japanese, he could understand that underlying fear of someone new or different, and that need for wariness when being put together with someone like that. Having lived in England for a few years though, helped him to appreciate the other side of that particular relationship, and so he was very happy to have somehow made friends who didn't care about where he was from, but just who he was. Now, with that in mind...

Shirou smiled, gripped a hold of Zago's arm, who was too surprised to protest, and pulled him to the front of the crowd.

"And...Zago's going to help me out."

"I'm what?" exclaimed the lackadaisical man. "Uh, no, I'm not!"

"It'll be a blast," coaxed Shirou, nudging the other a bit. "And hey, think about the benefits."

"Fuck you, you traitorous –"

"He'll be more than happy to work together with me," Shirou said with a grin as he clamped a hand over Zago's mouth.

Baeddan merely tilted his chin up and met Shirou's gaze knowingly. He didn't try to refute what Shirou had said, but only seemed to be amused.

"Very well," he conceded with a whisper of a smirk. "With these two, and the volume of people who are actually guaranteed to visit us at midnight, there should be enough minor staff. After all, Shirou is worth five of the rest of you. Now, I need someone of the Upper Echelons to take part. Eos?"

Eos paled slightly. She really was the obvious choice, having always been around the two aforementioned men and constantly taken care of them. Honestly, she really did want to help, but other larger and far more important duties to her took precedence. Eos, however, was very poor at turning down invites and she really couldn't say why she had to turn down the offer either. It was very difficult for her to turn Baeddan down, though, as she had never once participated in any night shifts, despite every other Upper Echelon member having done so.

Zago grunted softly. "I'm demanding my benefits up front as a guarantee to my service to you."

Baeddan's eyebrows raised slightly. Zago volunteering to work as hard as he could? That was a rarity in and of itself.

"And what is it you are demanding?"

"Eos never takes a night shift for as long as I work here."

"You are asking far too much considering how invaluable you are."

Zago growled slightly and glanced back at Eos briefly, and she looked at him, concern written all over her face. Shirou noticed them pass glances at one another and had to admit he was curious.
Zago wasn't a man who gave much of himself for the sake of other people, and yet he had done exactly that for Eos. While that was interesting enough to him, he really had to wonder why Eos seemed so against staying for the night shift, especially when she was always so willing to help out no matter what the cost at every other service. Zago seemed rather frustrated himself, which also seemed somewhat odd. Okay, whatever.

Shirou placed his hands on his hips as he let his head fall briefly before he looked back up at Baeddan.

"Okay," he started slowly, causing Zago, Baeddan, and Eos to look at him, while most of the staff didn't bother to listen – it no longer had anything to do with them anyway. "Then, for as long as I work here, Eos won't ever have to take a night shift. That's my demand."

Baeddan nodded curtly. "Granted. I will overlook her inability to work as a normal servant. You have proved your worth, Ro. If you slack off, though, I guarantee that you are finished here."

"Yeah, I think you say that at least once a day."

"I simply look forward to seeing you fail," Baeddan said with a small, malicious chuckle. Then, to the rest of the crowd: "I still require the services of other Upper Echelons. Who is available?"

Eos caught Shirou's eyes, looking flustered and somewhat lost. He held eye contact with her for a brief moment before turning away. He'd find time to talk to her later – it wasn't altogether important at that very moment. Shirou turned back to look at the main mass of people who split open a pathway as a gorgeous woman with flowing raven-black tresses and silver-blue eyes and a thin, scrawny man with raggedy sandy-brown hair and hazel-yellow eyes came walking forward. While the latter scowled at any person dumb enough to stand enough to him, the woman gave Baeddan a blinding smile.

"Dai and I will assist with the night service, Baeddan. You may rest with ease."

Baeddan slowly closed his eyes once and then looked back up at the woman.

"Telyn," he said as coldly as usual. "Dai. With you two working, I suppose everything will run smoothly enough. See that you keep those two ignoramuses on track, would you?"

Telyn continued smiling. "Of course, Baeddan. Never have we done you wrong, and I promise you we never will."

She turned to shine her smile on Shirou next. "Shirou, I believe this is the first time we have met. I have heard much about you. It will be a pleasure to work alongside of you."

Shirou didn't say anything in return as there wasn't much he could say. This was the pair Zago had warned him about before, but this was the first time he had met them face to face. They certainly seemed nice (well, Telyn did, at least), but he'd made that mistake before. Rin had warned him about Myrus and then he'd landed in that trap. So, if Zago was warning him about these two, he was going to pay attention for once. Shirou nodded once at her to be polite but did nothing more than that.

Telyn didn't seem to take offense to Shirou's lack of warmth and ran a hand through her hair. If nothing else, Shirou could definitely recognize her beauty and thought it to be nearly on par with Rin, but she still had nothing on Saber. He looked at Baeddan, but the other man just clapped his hands together.

"All right. Telyn, Dai, Ro, Zagobel –"
"It's Dagobert, you fucking pansy of an asshole."

"– you four take the evening service off. Get your bearings straight, and I expect to see you again tonight. Eos, I want you to make certain those two slackers are on board with what needs to be done. And Eos, be grateful to the foreigner. He has saved you from my wrath. As for the rest of you fools, get to work. Breaks go to those who earn it, and none of you are worth giving even a single second of peace to. Move it!"

As soon as they were dismissed, Zago was very quick to grab Shirou's arm and drag him out of the kitchen and down the hall with Eos following behind, eyes darkened. Shirou protested along the way, but didn't want to hurt Zago in trying to escape, so let the blond continue leading him forward. He looked back at Eos, but she wouldn't meet his eyes this time around. In fact, he was almost afraid to know what was going on when they all made it back to his and Zago's room and Zago pitched him back onto his cot.

"Why did you do that?" Zago yelled at Shirou, looking irate.

Shirou looked back at him and tilted his head slightly. "Uh, you mean signing you up without your permission? I would think you'd be happy – it's a slow shift and –"

"No, you dumbass! Why did you sign away your privileges like that? This has fucking nothing to do with you."

"I was trying to be helpful," Shirou said, growing angry himself. "You seemed really upset that Baeddan wouldn't give you what you wanted, and since I knew I had more room to work with than you, I just went for it. What's the problem?"

Zago walked up to him and pulled him up by the collar of his tunic. The fact that Shirou had a good few centimeters over the blond didn't seem to matter to him.

"You don't have a clue, do you? You're just –"

"Then tell me what I'm not getting!" yelled Shirou, throwing off Zago's hands. "I'm not some damn telepath! I need words just like anyone else, Zago!"

Zago reached for Shirou's collar again but stopped when Eos came forward and set a hand down gently on his shoulder. Zago gritted his teeth when Eos simply looked at him reassuringly, but did not attempt any further violence. Shirou adjusted his tunic and continued glaring at the blond – he didn't know what was going on, but he didn't think he deserved to be yelled at for just trying to help.

Eos took in a deep breath. "He needs to be told, Zago."

"What?" cried Zago with disbelief. "He's barely been here a month! He might run off and talk to the wrong people!"

"Now, you should know Shirou better than that, Zago," she admonished. "I realize we have only known him for a short time, but do you honestly believe he would mean anyone any harm, much less the two of us?"

Zago fell silent, unable to refute her words. Eos smiled gently, appreciating the other man's fierce desire to protect her but also knowing that she now owed a favor to Shirou that she was not certain she could actually repay. Turning back to the redhead who stared up at her with his golden-brown eyes full of frustration and confusion, she let out a soft sigh and cupped her hands together.
"Shirou," she began, gaining his full attention. "If I may, I would beg your pardon for Zago's actions. He truly meant well, and the secret I harbor is great, indeed. To be truthful, I am filled with trepidation that I need say it to anyone else."

Shirou frowned slightly. "Then don't tell me. I'm not the type to run around blabbing about stuff, but if you're really so worried about it, then don't bother."

"No, Shirou," Eos disagreed, shaking her head a bit. "No, you have done me a service I may never be able to reciprocate, and I feel you must hear the reason as to why Zago is so distraught."

She wringed her hands slightly, Shirou watching all the while, and finally held her head up high again.

"Shirou, I am married, with two children. Boys, the both of them; one is five and the other, two."

Was it all that big a deal for people to be married in this age? That didn't seem to be a big deal.

"They live with my parents in the city, and each night, I leave this castle to spend my evenings with them and as much time as I am able. Normally, a woman would stay home with her children, but I work here to maintain a cover so that my husband may continue forth without concern. I do not desire to take the night shift because then I may never have the opportunity to see my two sons while they are growing again. I would not like to take that chance."

Shirou rubbed the back of his head. "I'm not following. Why is this such a big deal?"

Eos bit her bottom lip with unusual hesitation. "If the king comes to hear of our matrimony, the children will be forced into tutelage, regardless of whether my husband I desire it or not. It is part of the custom, you see. The king, even if in disaccord with the rule, must follow it as is expected of him. My husband and I simply desire for our children to decide their own future, though we do not have much time left to give the oldest that choice. Alas, if only we were born with daughters instead of sons, I would not need worry about their plight until they were of age to marry."

He wasn't sure he was following yet. Shirou also wasn't sure if this was just normal for the sixth century and he was just missing something, or if this was just something Eos was prone to doing. Eos saw that he wasn't catching on and cleared her throat slightly.

"Shirou, have you heard of the man named Gawain?"

It kind of rang a bell. Gawain... Gawain...

Suddenly, it clicked. Shirou jumped to his feet, completely thrown for a loop.

"You're telling me you're married to one of the Knights of the Round Table? The Gawain? The one who serves the king directly? You're married to him?"

All of a sudden, everything started making sense. If Gawain was a knight, then he was of some kind of high-class blood, and it only held true that his sons should go through the same training as people of nobility would. Sons of knights were often forcefully put through training from a young age until they were accepted as pages around when they turned six or seven. However, if the king didn't know about the children or lineage, then it would only go to show the kids would be allowed to live a freer existence and the chances of them possibly falling in battle or worse were next to nil. So, Eos was working in the castle, so Gawain would have some sort of link to the sons he probably couldn't see on a normal basis, and no one was any the wiser because they didn't seem like a normal wedded pair.
Shirou ran a hand through his hair as he thought of the possible repercussions that could come of that information hearing the wrong ears. He knew without a doubt, or rather, he instinctively felt that King Arthur would be overjoyed for Gawain to have two children of his own to care for, but also believed that she would follow the rules as expected and force them into the special education to prepare them for possibly becoming knights. If she could keep it disclosed, that would be one thing, but if anyone caught wind of it, even she could get into serious trouble for concealing investments from the rest of her court.

He sighed softly. "I get it now."

Eos continued looking worried, her hands wringing more and more quickly. "Shirou, would you do me the honor of keeping such a secret from others? Of course, if you would will it, I cannot stop you should you desire to tell the king, but if at all possible..."

For a moment, he had wondered why she'd told him at all, but he realized with a start that she really wanted to trust him. After being in the castle for only a month, he had come to understand that people were more difficult to trust in this time period. People never knew who might be plotting against them or who might truly be their friends, and so whatever friends a person managed to gain, they held on tightly and almost religiously.

"I'm not telling anyone," Shirou declared with finality. "Thanks for telling me. I'll protect your secret. I'll make sure to keep working hard so that you won't have to worry."

"Oh, I, uh," began Eos, unsure of what to say. "Th-thank you... If there is any way that I can repay you...?"

"Yeah, there is," he said, and Eos stood up straight, slightly nervous as to what he would demand of her. Shirou grinned and said, "Just make sure to introduce me to the two kids when you get the chance. Any children of yours have got to be amazing."

She blinked once as if unsure of what she had heard before melting into a warm smile. "Of course, Shirou! It would be my pleasure!"

Shirou continued grinning and laughed when Eos leaned in to give him a gentle hug. Zago shifted his head from side to side to pop his neck. He looked slightly abashed for his behavior earlier, but uncertain of how to go about apologizing. Shirou only walked up to him and patted him on the shoulder.

"No offense taken, Zago. Don't sweat it."

Zago made a shy grin. "Sorry, Shirou. I should've trusted you. I've known Eos for a while now and I only found out about her secret by accident. I kept thinking she would be dragged off to the dungeons for weeks afterward. I mean, if I'd found out, who knows who else might've known, you know?"

"I hear you. No worries," Shirou said. "So, Eos, tell us about how this night thing works."

Eos gave Zago a pointed look, but smiled again at Shirou. "With pleasure."

The night shift began without too much difficulty, but it ran incredibly slow. There weren't too many soldiers rotating in and out and Shirou and Zago were normally left to their own devices. Shirou had long since cut enough vegetables and was simply trying to find something to amuse himself with. Zago, on the other hand, had long since grown tired of being static, but since he couldn't find a chance to run away and sleep, he simply busied himself with complaining to Shirou.
"This fucking sucks. I'm so goddamn bored here, man. Plus, that crazy shit Dai keeps looking over at me like I'm some piece of jerky read for him to bite into."

"I honestly don't think it's you he wants to devour," muttered Shirou as Dai continued to glower at him from a corner on the other side of the room.

The man had been glaring at him fiercely since the shift had first begun, not even bothering to help Telyn with any preparations whatsoever, and instead choosing to keep an eye on the redhead instead. Telyn had been welcoming enough – she'd told him to continue cutting as he had been while she tended to the meat and the soups. Once Shirou had finished, she had asked for him to wait patiently as she called in a couple of servants to take in the food to the Great Hall. Zago, for his part, had actually cleaned up everything, but there was only so much soot a person could clear away. Luckily, they weren't using the ovens for anything at that moment, so Zago had been given a bit of a reprieve himself.

Dai scowled even further when Telyn walked away from the hearths and towards Shirou.

"Hello there, Shirou. We have not had much of a chance to speak prior to this day. Allow me to introduce myself properly: my name is Telyn, daughter of Cadell Heir, of the kingdom of Lyonesse. Here is to a hopefully wonderful new friendship."

"Right," he started, almost feeling like he'd be rude if he didn't introduce himself just as formally. "I'm Em-, ah, no, sorry. I'm Shirou Emiya of...the...great, uh, empire of Fuyuki to the far east..."

"Fuyuki," Telyn murmured with wonder. "I have never heard of such a place. And, for you to have a surname... You must be someone of noble descent. What would you be doing in Camelot, so far away from home?"

The redhead popped his neck by shifting his head from side to side a few times. "Uh, well, things happened, and so, now I'm here."

The woman only smiled. "I see. It was rude of me to inquire – we all have our secrets, after all. In any case, I did not come here merely to share names with one another. Dai and I will be taking our meals, and we would like for the two of you to continue tending to the soups and slabs of meat."

"What about us? When do we get to eat?" Zago asked, eyes narrowed.

Telyn hesitated slightly before pointing at the waste pile sitting in a keg on the far side of the room.

"You are more than welcome to see what you can find for consumption in that barrel. I do not have the authority to allow you to eat together with us in the Hall. I only hope that you will be satisfied with that much."

Zago stared at Telyn, his mouth once again agape as he attempted to register her words. He looked over at Shirou, who didn't seem very pleased, before looking at Dai, who was simply smirking.

"What?" shrieked Zago. "Are you fucking out of your mind, lady? You want us to dig for scraps? What the fuck are we, fucking rats? You go fucking dig out some scraps, you fucking bitch! I want fucking real food you pissant!"

The prim and proper woman could do nothing but frown. "I sincerely apologize, Dagobert, but I am not at liberty to give you that opportunity. I honestly wish I could. Ah, but if you feel so inclined, you are more than welcome to help yourselves to the seasonings and cutlery we have available. That is the best I can offer you."
"Fuck that shit! We're not some goddamn dogs or rats! We –"

_Danger!_

There was a sudden sense of imbalance that Shirou couldn't quite pinpoint – he hadn't felt like that for such a long time, after all. Maybe it was the man's eyes, or maybe it was the shing of the knife as the man picked it up, or perhaps it might have been Zago's eyes as they widened upon immediately seeing his oncoming doom. Whatever the cause was, Shirou felt his body move far before his mind could catch up.

_Danger!_

From the moment Dai began rushing forward and grabbed a chopping knife off of a nearby table, Shirou felt time slow down as danger alerted his brain and endorphins flooded his body. Telyn shouted for Dai to stop but to no avail as the brunette sped forward. Shirou slid in right in front of Zago, grabbed Dai's left wrist firmly to halt the movement of the knife, and lowered his center of gravity while letting Dai ram into his shoulder instead. Instinctively wrapping his own left arm around Dai's waist, Shirou made sure the other man wouldn't be able to move anywhere.

_Averted._

His heart pounding hard within his chest, Shirou couldn't believe he'd managed that burst of speed. Considering how long it had been since he had really pushed himself with his training, that should have been nothing short of miraculous. Zago, Telyn, and Dai especially, stared at Shirou as he somehow appeared right in front of the other lower level kitchen servant. Breathing out a deep sigh full of disbelief, Shirou came to his senses and gingerly let go of Dai's wrist. The latter stared at the ring of red around his wrist from the tightness of the grip and glared even more deeply at the absent-minded redhead. He raised his right hand and backhanded the other man across the face. Shirou never saw it coming and stumbled back a bit, his eyes wide.

Dai scowled when he saw that the quick movements earlier must have been a fluke and felt himself relax slightly. If the redhead had actually been capable of things like that, Dai would have surely had his hands full. He turned and pointed the knife at Zago and clipped out,

"Next time, you die."

Then, glowering again at Shirou, he growled, "Touch me again, and you're done, carrot-top."

Shirou glared back as he rubbed his stinging cheek. Dai shoved past him, although Telyn didn't make to follow him until after she said to Shirou,

"Thank you for stopping him, Shirou," she whispered softly, so that Dai wouldn't hear her words. "It is thanks to you that that disaster was stopped in its tracks. Now that I think of it, I do not believe we will need that smaller slab of meat. You are welcome to use it as you wish in exchange, so long as no one catches wind of this deal."

"Thanks," Shirou muttered as Telyn turned and walked away, following after Dai.

Zago came to Shirou's side and grimaced a little. "That was a close call."

"Yeah."

"Oh yeah," Zago exclaimed, lightly rapping Shirou on his chest. "Where the hell did you come up with moves like those? You looked like a knight sweeping in for the final blow! Oh, I get it! You must have been some kind of knight or warrior back where you're from!"
Shirou shook his head slightly as he walked away from Zago and toward the hearths. "Not exactly, but I played the part of one. Not sure what I count as now."

Zago asked what he was doing when Shirou picked up the smallest meat slab off of its stick and carried it back to a cutting table. Shirou ignored him and went to the bin of scraps next for odds and ends of random vegetables here and there. After picking out some pieces with Zago questioning every single action along the way, Shirou laid all of the ingredients on the table and then began cutting a triangle lengthwise across the meat and taking it out. The beef was still fairly rare on the inside, but that would be fine for what he wanted to do. Directing Zago to hand him some butter, Shirou was quick to dip out a good bit into his hand and slather it across the meat. He then sprinkled the odds and ends of the vegetables he had found all over the butter and then fit the wedge of meat back on.

It was a crude version of the beef roll, but he doubted that Zago would really care all that much. His hands still covered in butter and the juice from the meat, Shirou then asked his friend to bring over the salt and pepper and to just spritz his left hand with the former and to cover his left with the latter. He would have liked to wrap the meat in foil and toss it into the fire directly, but didn't want to project the necessary foil in front of Zago. He also would have liked to create a nice sauce or glaze to go over the meat, but it was better to just fix the meal as quickly as he could so that no one would find out that they were eating something normally forbidden to them. It really was a small slab of meat, too – barely big enough for the both of them to be satisfied. However, meat was meat, and was far better than digging around more in the trash.

Zago frowned at the meat the entire time as Shirou put the meat on a metal plate and held it directly over the fire with tongs. It wouldn't take long for meat to cook – Shirou was more worried about the vegetables cooking properly. Well, they were practically basking in a beef oven, so maybe it would be stranger for them not to cook as they should. With Zago turning the meat around every five minutes or so, Shirou found himself with nothing better to do but try to ignore the former's endless questions.

"You can cook? No way. You can't cook, right? You could barely cut vegetables a month ago. You're shitting me."

The longer Shirou ignored him, the more curious Zago became.

"Why would you butter the meat? Butter is meant for other stuff, like bread. Who puts butter on meat? Why did you put those vegetables on there? Are you as much of a dumb shit as Baeddan?"

When Shirou deemed the meat to be finished cooking, he gripped the tongs tightly and moved the plate back over to a table. They didn't have much time until Telyn and Dai would return, so he had to make this quick. Zago kept popping up around him, attempting to peer around as Shirou cut into the slab. Meh, the meat was still a bit pink, but that was doable and oh, the carrots were actually cooked okay enough. Grand. He cut off one more round and handed the roll to his very annoying, but well-meaning, friend.

"Take this and shut up, would you?" Shirou muttered as he took a bite into the roll. Fuck, it needed more salt. Oh well.

While Shirou wasn't particularly impressed – he had made it as quickly as he could, all things considered, Zago seemed mystified. He had taken one bite and then another, and then eventually swallowed the entire thing.

"You can cook," he kept repeating as he cut off two more rolls for himself, and left the last two rolls for Shirou. "This shit is amazing. You can fucking cook. You can seriously fucking cook."
Zago licked his fingers to finish off all of the juices and then licked his lips for a last taste. Shirou, still grumbling on how much better it would have been if he'd been allowed more time to cook the meat slowly and with a better menu, was taken by surprise when Zago gripped both of his arms with the feel of a maniacal man about him.

"Shirou! That's it! You can cook!"

"Uh...that's debatable," he said, unable to agree because of the horrible dish.

"No, no, you don't get it. You took nothing and made it into something. Wait... I think I've got it!"

Zago snapped his fingers, but Shirou merely tilted his head.

"Got what?"

"Shirou, my brother," the blond said with a large grin, "I've got the best damn plan in the fucking world!"
When Zago had first proposed the plan, Shirou had told him pointblank: "No way in hell, Zago."

Unfortunately for Shirou, with the both of them being practically the only two people in the kitchen during the night service aside of Dai and Telyn, he didn't have much of an opportunity to run away either. Of course, after that first night, it wasn't as if they'd really been by themselves after that either. One of the two, either Dai or Telyn, had always been by their side, making sure they were doing their work as was required of them. This did offer Shirou some room for evasion though – Zago couldn't corner him about his ridiculous plan if someone was watching them at all times.

It had been a couple of weeks since Shirou had first told Zago off, but the other man was quite persistent. It wasn't exactly that Zago couldn't take no for an answer, but probably more that Shirou hadn't bothered to even give the idea much thought in the first place. If he was going to stand out, he wanted it to be done in a good way, like by achieving a higher rank through good, wholesome hard work. Maybe if he had been part of the Upper Echelon when Zago had pitched the idea, then maybe, just maybe, things might have been different. As it was, he wasn't, and so as far as he was concerned, no matter what Zago said or did, there was no way in hell that he would ever participate.

"Come on, dude, at least hear me out."

At current, the two were walking down a corridor to the castle gardens in the northern wing. Shirou wasn't really one for flowers, but the gardens had been recommended to him by Eos, so he'd decided to check it out when he got the chance. He supposed they should have been sleeping, – working four shifts every day really wore him out incredibly – but Zago had used his benefits to get them both the evening service off. As Zago was still in the process of proving himself capable of staying committed to his work, it was actually somewhat miraculous that he'd been able to pull that off. Honestly, though, Shirou believed it had more to do with the current happenings at the castle right then.

Shirou had awoken one morning to the sounding of horns, and had jumped out of bed, his heart racing and adrenaline pumping. Apparently, the troops had gathered on the main grounds that day, with the king in attendance, to march off for another battle. Where to, he wasn't quite sure, but just hoped that she returned back safely. Obviously, her lore indicated that up until her final battle, she had only ever known victory and returned unwounded, thanks to a certain sheath, but that didn't mean he couldn't worry.

However, with that being the case, a majority of the soldiers were no longer within the city walls, and so the kitchen help was not required to service as many people as usual. According to Baeddan, though, the king had supposedly said they were still under lockdown with the one-meal-a-day thing. That had caused another eruption of cries from the staff as well, although Shirou still, for some reason, couldn't believe that King Arthur would ever make such a ridiculous order. When they were together in the War, he remembered her tendency to try and shove food down Rin's throat.

"Battles cannot be fought on an empty stomach!" Saber had protested one day to Rin. "What if you're attacked while hungry?"

"How long are you going to ignore me, brother?"
Shirou smirked slightly as he recalled Rin's horrified expression. The mirth he'd felt that day had been almost as great as the time Rin had discovered she would have to pay for every single smartphone she had broken within the span of a month. That, he remembered, had been one of the most amusing days of his life. Of course, he was also happy he hadn't had to deal with the force of her anger at the cell phone shop as well – he had also told her of the stupidity of choosing the most expensive phone there. How could she be such a spendthrift with most things and then the second she has to deal with something that she knows nothing about, she goes out and buys the most expensive and detail-filled one possible? Just because something is pricier doesn't exactly mean that it will be better. Well, she got her just rewards for not listening to him.

"It's seriously not that bad of an idea, man."

In any case, Shirou simply couldn't understand the food situation. More supplies were due to ship in within another month or so, but no one foresaw any storms as bad as the first two sweeping through the area, so he couldn't figure out why the meal restriction wasn't repealed. At first, most of the staff had been able to somewhat deal with the new "law", so to speak, but as the days went by, Shirou saw people start dragging their feet more. More accidents than usual started taking place – fires were raised, destruction was caused, incidents occurred, and Baeddan had grown ever so slightly annoyed with each disaster.

Shirou was actually happy that there was less work to do in the kitchen and more time to wander about as he pleased – Baeddan had such a short fuse lately that it didn't matter how good someone was at doing something as they were guaranteed to be yelled at regardless. Shirou had to hand it to Baeddan though – he was taking heat from both his superiors and subordinates. The latter, on one hand, was furious with the measures, and constantly pestered the Head Cook to get them cancelled. The former, on the other hand, was resentful that a mere cook should even think to bother them about a ruling that the king himself had made.

"That fool king would never have made such a ridiculous ruling. He may know of nothing else, but he certainly appreciates a person's need for consuming sustenance," Baeddan had confided to Shirou one day, only after grilling the redhead as to why he couldn't cut things faster. "There's some other power riding behind this decision – I would bet the person is right under our noses with us none the wiser. I would even hazard the guess that the king himself is unaware of what is happening right now."

"Like what? Are one of his knights rebelling, or trying to act in his stead?"

"No, nothing nearly so dire, I doubt," had come the reply, filled with bitterness. "No. This is linked to someone close to the king, but who ultimately does not hold as much power as he himself believes he does. I would much like to kill this man, or even woman, for causing me as many issues as have cropped up. Preferably with a rusted spoon. Slowly, and decisively."

Shirou honestly did feel bad for the main cook, though. With King Arthur out of town for who knew how long, there was no way for him to personally confront her about the issue. As there weren't any other leads to who might have given the order in the king's place, Baeddan had no choice but to duck his head like everyone else and accept the punishment, so to speak. It honestly didn't affect him whatsoever, considering his status, nor did it affect any of the Upper Echelons, but he had to put more effort in getting people to work harder the longer they were deprived the food they needed to function. What was worse, Shirou supposed, was the fact that the common citizen in the city was probably eating more meals per day than a castle servant. That would have made far more sense were he referring to the higher-class citizens, for Camelot, too, had its shares of social class diversity; the lower-class citizens also had more access to food as well, though, as they could venture out beyond the castle walls with permission and hunt for themselves.
Servants within the castle did not have nearly so much freedom; living within the castle walls was both a blessing and a curse – each member was guaranteed room and board, as well as permission to travel its lengths and see a world that those unaffiliated with the castle would never be able to see, but without the permission of the royal members, the court, or someone else in a superior position, they were effectively trapped with no other places to go. Servants were essentially birds stuck within a cage, with no way out unless they moved up, and common citizens were given free rein to do whatever they desired, within reason, but they would never receive the protection from the less-than-desirable forces of the outside world as the servants would. Life in Camelot, or maybe anywhere in this time period, was a double-edged sword, to be sure.

"It's not like I'm going to just vanish. Dude, I'm right here. Look at me."

Baeddan's indignant fury had only been slightly tempered by the fact that King Arthur had come through on a part of her promise. Now, Shirou didn't know where the hell she'd procured the materials, or how hard she'd possibly had to fight to get stuff done, but by the first week's end, every room housing servants within the east wing had received a package wrapped with malleable, soft leather with a small note written on parchment paper. The leather, they'd had to give back to the deliverer, but the contents and the letter were theirs to do what they would with.

Zago had opened the package immediately as soon as the leather had touched his hands – Shirou had just looked at the deliverer, since the man had seemed none too happy to be giving them anything. When Zago had gasped aloud, which was fairly rare for the laid-back man to bother doing, the redhead had turned his gaze to look at the contents, only for both of his eyebrows to arch up in complete and genuine surprise. In his hands were two beautifully sewn, thick, brown and red blankets. The insides must have been filled with feathers as it was incredibly soft and felt ridiculously warm just by touching it.

"Whoa, what the flying...?" Zago had begun, unable to do much but continue staring at the gift in his hands. "This is some expensive looking shit..."

The deliverer had merely sneered as he'd swiped the leather back, derision creeping into his voice when he'd said, "I don't see what makes you two idiots any more important than anyone else here. Why do you get blankets first, and why are they so much better than everyone else's? I'll bet you two dumbasses cheated your way into getting those."

With that, the deliverer had stomped away, fuming. Zago hadn't bothered to pay the guy any attention – he had been far too busy rubbing the blanket to his face with happiness. Shirou had flipped around the piece of paper before unfolding it and taking a look at what was written. He had soon found that he couldn't read a single word – Myrus obviously hadn't taught him how to read or write with those potions – and he had been forced to make Zago read it aloud for the both of them instead. Zago had pushed one blanket towards Shirou – the red one, to match his hair, Shirou guessed – and read out the words written in perfect calligraphy:

"I confer upon you these blankets made from the furs of the greatest hunters within the walls of Camelot. I ask that you only consider this as a present in gratitude for the information you supplied me previously. My last request to you is that you would eliminate evidence that this exchange ever occurred. May you sleep with warmth. Sincerely, King Arthur, son of Uther Pendragon."

"Whoa..." was all both Shirou and Zago could manage after reading the note.

They had indeed burned the note with the fire of their candle, but that night had been the first one where they neither had woken up midway through the night shivering due to the cold – at least, not more than once. Shirou wasn't quite sure what kinds of blankets the other servants had received,
but he did know for certain they were not nearly as well-made or as expensive looking as the ones he and Zago had gotten. He also wasn't sure why his room had been the first to get anything, but if nothing else, he felt like the king had been trying to prove a point, like not being someone who would "seek the deaths of those who care for [her] castle".

She must have gotten every single one of her tailors and seamstresses to work on those blankets at the cost of having a good night's rest the entire week. Shirou supposed he should have felt bad for them, but he really couldn't be bothered to give a damn. What the king wanted, she got, after all. With King Arthur being gone though, Shirou hadn't had a chance to thank her in any way. Well, he would just have to force his way up through the ranks – that would show her he was at least making an effort to be better.

"Okay, seriously!" Zago said angrily, pushing back at Shirou's chest to make him stop walking. "Stop ignoring me and pay attention!"

Shirou frowned at the blond, and turned his gaze away. "I told you I'm not interested in your scheme. I've got enough problems on my plate."

"Look, just listen to the plan at least, okay? You barely let me say a few words that night and have basically been on the run from me ever since!"

"That's because the idea is moronic, and we'll get into serious trouble if we're caught. Everyone already knows me just from how I look – they'll never let me live down any mistakes."

"I get that, I do. I swear I do. But look, man, this is for the greater good!"

They were right inside of the stairwell that let out into the courtyard gardens. Zago must have realized that Shirou was trying to escape there as visitors to the gardens were meant to stay quiet in respect to the plants and royal court. Shirou sighed when he realized he'd be found out but turned to Zago with his arms crossed.

"Fine," the redhead muttered. "Lay it on me. I'll admit I should probably have the full details before telling you 'no', which I will be doing, regardless."

Zago held up his hands in a placating manner, a grin on his face.

"Okay, lo and behold, the amazing masterpiece that I have created!" Zago began in a hushed tone, keenly aware of how close in proximity the two were to the gardens. "Okay, so, you know how the king ordered that stupid one-meal-a-day thing?"

When Shirou just frowned at him and said nothing in return, Zago just took it in stride. Grinning, he rubbed his hands together, saying,

"So, I was thinking that we could put those cooking skills of yours to good use. Tell me, buddy, how much food do we throw out each day that goes entirely uneaten by the main populace of the castle?"

"Kilos of it," Shirou responded lazily.

Zago paused at that. "What's a 'kilo'?"

"Never mind," Shirou replied with a sigh. "Go on."

"Anyway, so, yeah. All that food just goes to waste. I've been thinking that we could, you know, 'procure' that 'trash' for ourselves and use it in a way that would befit all of the servants more. Like,
a behind-the-scenes market, or an underground chain. I, and some people I know pretty well, could go and reclaim the wasted goods, and bring them to you in a secure location, and we could basically create an area that only the servants know about and divvy out the creations you make to everyone. Then everyone could eat like normal person, and the higher ups would be none the wiser!"

Shirou just stared at him for a short while, neither moving nor saying a single word. Zago kept grinning, obviously proud of himself.

"That's it?" Shirou finally ended up asking. "That's your grand plan? Your masterpiece?"

"What?" Zago asked in reply, taken aback. "What's wrong with it?"

"What isn't wrong with it, Zago?" the Japanese shot back, irritated. "Do you know how many holes there are in your plan? You want to steal that food? You want to create some underground chain in the castle where all the servants just happen to frequent without anyone noticing at all? How would you even steal the food? Where the hell would we even cook it? How would we cook it? And how the hell wouldn't we be found? And you want me to cook everything? I may have extra time now that practically all of the soldiers and knights are gone, but what about when they get back? You and I will both be back to working four shifts a day. Neither of us will have time for some stupid underground chain. It's not even remotely plausible!"

"I know of some places in the tunnels that are never used. We could do it there. As for the food, I know of all the places where they dump the remaining stuff, and it'd be nothing short of simple for me to get my hands on all of it. We could build fires down there and no one would ever notice. It's perfect, dude!"

Shirou continued glaring at Zago. "You're nuts. Does the word 'stealing' mean absolutely nothing to you? What if we're caught? I'm telling you that this has disaster written all over it. Not even I'm dumb enough to attempt something as stupid as this. And why am I stuck cooking everything?"

"Why are you so stuck on this stealing thing? And why do you keep assuming we'll be caught? We'll be fine. I've got it in the bag."

"I assume it because that's what's going to happen, damn it," Shirou argued, pointing at Zago determinedly before turning and walking away. "My luck sucks balls and Eos has an eye on you constantly. There is no way this will turn out for the best. Ever. And your plan has a shitload of holes in it."

Zago followed behind Shirou as the latter walked into the courtyard, a protest dying at his lips as he looked around the area. The first thing Shirou noticed when he stepped into the garden area was the immediate warmth that flowed around him as magic washed over his body. It felt almost like summer, so he was surprised that hardly anyone was around except for one woman with two guards on the far side of the courtyard. He paused to take in the sight in front of him – the entire square garden was filled to the brim with flowers galore. He wasn't a flower fanatic by any means, but even he knew a few of the types: roses, of course, some foxgloves, orchids, violets, daffodils, poppies, primroses, heaths... They were all in a state of bloom as well, which is probably due to it being so warm.

"This place gives me the creeps," Zago whispered, his eyes constantly darting left and right. "Something about it just screams 'stay away'. Dude, let's head back."

"What are you talking about? It's really nice and warm in here. It's got a nice ambiance."
Zago frowned at him slightly. "That should only be possible for those close to the court. All normal servants get this sense that they don't belong here, so that's why you don't see anyone here, even though it practically feels like summer. It's like something is crawling up my spine and ready to pierce my skull with some kind of poison dart or something. You don't feel that way?"

"...No?"

The blond gave him one more glance up and down, his gaze full of suspicion. Shirou turned away from his piercing eyes and instead walked further into the courtyard, his own gaze focused completely on the bubbling fountain in front of him. That was probably induced magically as well, considering how precious a resource clean water was. Magic must have been continuously cycling it around so that nothing was left to waste. He cocked his head to the side a bit and frowned as he tried to sense the prana. It was probably a very simple spell that kept the water going along, but it was still beyond him to attempt. He just couldn't understand the concept behind most spells.

"Fine, then you'll talk to me about the plan more?" Zago persisted.

"As I recall, I said no," he murmured back, making sure to stay silent. "No way am I giving anyone enough justification to kick me out, and besides, I kind of enjoy working in the kitchen now."

"So, you're completely cool with only eating once per day?"

That made Shirou hesitate a bit. He hadn't been particularly happy about that announcement either, and it was always really difficult to get through the day on just one meal. Even if Zago and he tried to ration their food portions, it never lasted them long enough. The mornings were the worst, because both of them would only eat a piece of stale bread and expect it to last them until the afternoon hours. Even when the two managed to get through the day, by the time they got back to their room to eat the rest of what they had stored, it had become long past its time and they were only inviting sickness when they ate the remains. Not even Shirou could do much with food that was technically near a couple of days old by that time, not without other resources at least.

Admittedly, he was sick of it. At least most of the upper class people had enough sense to eat away from the servants at each meal time, but Dai was starting to piss him off. Since Shirou had stopped Dai from killing — geez, he couldn't believe he had to even think of that kind of reality — Zago, the other man had seemed to launch some kind of vendetta against Shirou. Anything that could get on Shirou's nerves was the first thing Dai would do, out of sight of Telyn, at least. Lately, Dai had adopted bringing his entire meal into the kitchen each night and promptly smacking on each morsel right in front of Shirou as he cooked. Shirou didn't even care that Dai was able to eat more than him, it was simply the expressions and the things he would say while doing so. The other man more than likely thought Shirou was starting to cave with so much food around him that he couldn't eat, but since everything tasted like crap anyway, really, Shirou just wanted to punch the guy in the face. If Dai kept up his crap, then he definitely would punch him. Hard.

"I try not to think about that too much," Shirou eventually said after a bit of thought. "Things could be worse."

"Why are you so stubborn?" Zago asked, still frowning. "This would make our lives so much easier!"

"Yours, maybe."

Zago grabbed him by his tunic collar, tightly hanging on as he mustered out, "You're being really selfish, brother!"
"Get off of me," Shirou said, struggling to push Zago away without hurting him any. "If you want to do it so bad, then find someone else to con into your grand plan!"

"There's no one else who can actually cook in that damn kitchen!"

"It's a kitchen! There's no way that no one else can't cook! It's like going to a farm with no livestock!"

"Some farms don't!"

"What farm doesn't have at least a chicken on it?"

"Poultry doesn't count!"

"Then what the hell is it?"

"It's chicken!"

Shirou finally pushed the blond away, his eyes narrowed dangerously. "You're nuts! Something like this isn't worth –"

It was the clanging of armor that alerted the two of another person's presence and forced them to quickly end their argument. Both Shirou and Zago watched as the woman Shirou had seen earlier walked towards them slowly, her closed eyes narrowed slightly and hands clasped in front of her as she walked up to the two of them. The two soldiers followed behind her at a respectful distance, though both were quick to look suspiciously at Shirou, as if he were a threat. He felt his muscles begin coiling tightly and Zago was already looking as if he were going to bolt at any given moment. The second she reached them, Shirou saw her open her eyes and was stunned by the striking vividity of her violet irises.

His mouth gaped open a bit unconsciously as he stared at her eyes – they were incredibly gorgeous. They only added to her overall beauty, what with her long, luscious, hazelnut-brown hair tied up in a high bun with a few tresses falling in curls to accentuate her high cheek bones and obvious jaw line. His eyes ran her down slowly with him taking note of her full lips and very generous bosom. Shirou gulped slightly and forced himself to look away from the wonderful feminine features of the woman, and instead took notice of her flowing white and royal blue gown with its long tail trailing after her as she walked. He noticed the guards glaring at him further and quickly turned his gaze away from her when she approached.

Rin had developed very well, but her Japanese genetics were far stronger than her European ones, so he hadn't had the opportunity to appreciate such a feminine figure before. Well, Sakura had grown quite a bit, but he hadn't seen her much since he'd gotten out of high school, so he had no idea of how she looked now, or...rather, in the future? Whatever. Taiga, obviously, didn't have much for him to appreciate – not that he would anyway – and Ilya was unfortunate enough to have to live in the body of a young girl for the rest of her life. He wondered though: if Saber hadn't had Avalon and had been allowed to develop into a fully mature woman, how would she have looked? Shirou felt his cheeks heat up as he considered the possibility. He almost wished he could see the adult Saber at least once in his lifetime...

"This area is a place of tranquility and serenity, someplace meant for introspection of one's livelihood and retrospection of one's past, not the constant bickering and idiocy you two have seen fit to take part of," the woman began, her voice steady and calm. "While this courtyard is open to all of those who would seek to take refuge here away from the inconsistency of everyday life and instead turn inwards, I will not tolerate any who would attempt to destroy the peace that can be
achieved here."

Zago had begun to tremble slightly, but Shirou only cocked his head. The woman's placidity and the sheer confidence she displayed reminded him of someone. He wasn't quite sure what it was exactly, but there was something about her that just screamed, "pay attention to me", and not in a bad way either. It wasn't just her beauty, but something about the way that she demanded the attention of anyone who happened to be in the same room with her. Who was it she kept reminding him of?

The woman gave Shirou a cursory glance before frowning as she looked at Zago. After giving them both some time to contemplate her words some, she asked,

"Must I have you escorted back to wherever you belong? I would assume the kitchens?"

Zago quickly shook his head back and forth, not making a single peep. That was strange for him, Shirou noted, still trying to figure out the source of his confusion. When the woman looked at him expectantly, he met her gaze, somewhat perplexed and left unable to answer for a short time.

"Shirou," she said, addressing him to his surprise, – did every single person in the castle know his name now? – "you are aware that this is a sanctuary, yes?"

"Yeah," he answered hesitantly, before asking, "Wait, how do you know my name?"

Zago elbowed him in his ribs incredibly hard, glaring at him hard. He muttered harshly, "Dude, that's the queen you're talking to. Show some respect!"

"Oh, the queen?" he questioned and saw her features soften slightly as she confirmed his inquiry. "I was wondering who you kept reminding me of. You and King Arthur exude the same kind of pressure. Guess it's a royalty thing."

So, *this* was the fabled Guinevere. Shirou had to admit that he was impressed – it would take quite the woman to stand by King Arthur for so long, even if she did end up committing adultery and leaving the king for his, uh, *her* most loyal knight. That took some guts, too, though he supposed that according to the lore, she had been rather torn up about it the entire time. Well, after meeting her, as far as first impressions went, he could kind of believe it. She seemed nice enough, and Saber hadn't had anything bad to say about her – though, then again, Saber hadn't exactly said anything about her past at all, so he guessed that was a fairly moot point.

Queen Guinevere smiled gently at Shirou and seemed to show little to no interest in Zago whatsoever. Zago didn't appear to care any – rather, he seemed to appreciate it more so than not, but it kind of struck Shirou as somewhat odd. To him, Zago was just a normal person, but, Shirou concluded, to the queen, he was just an ordinary servant and not altogether deserving of her time. Shirou was a regular servant, too, though, if people could look past his foreignness, so he wasn't really sure why she was paying him any particular attention.

"Have you become accustomed to life in the castle, Shirou?" she asked him politely, much to his discomfort.

Zago stared at him and asked in a whisper, "Why does she know who you are, dude? Why do *all* of the upper class people talk to you?"

That's what he wanted to know.

Shirou nodded slightly to answer her question. He could be polite, too.
"It's definitely been an experience," he admitted. "I'm really grateful to the king, though. Oh, and tell him that we really appreciate the blankets. They're lifesavers."

"Wonderful," Queen Guinevere responded with a smile. "I had been curious about your circumstances since I first saw you upon your arrival to the castle, and my husband has spoken so well of you that I simply could not contain my curiosity any further."

That piqued his interest. King Arthur had been talking about him?

"What did the king say about Shirou, Your Majesty?" Zago asked before Shirou got the chance.

"Oh, nothing too detailed," she replied. "He only said that you were someone of good character, if a bit unrefined."

Zago and Shirou stared at her a bit. That didn't seem like anything extraordinary or something to really take notice of. Queen Guinevere smiled more widely when she saw their frowns.

"For someone like Arthur, you must understand that those words are practically dripping with satisfaction. He is not one to become overly emotional, nor does he truly understand how to compliment someone normally. Rest assured that he has lauded you quite a bit with what he said."

In other words, King Arthur was incapable of expressing his emotions like a normal person. Well, that Shirou could believe. That's how she'd been with him until that fateful night. Then it had been like a flip had been switched and she had suddenly had difficulty finding whatever happy place she'd had before.

"It must be hard to deal with such a serious person like him all the time," Shirou ventured, trying to probe for some information on how the king had been before he'd met her.

Queen Guinevere's eyes darkened slightly, though not from anger, but from deliberation. "When we first married, I had believed it would be somewhat difficult," she confided without reserve. "His reputation preceded him after all – someone who was strong, silent, and unyielding in his views. After some time, though, I have come to realize that the rumors were not necessarily true. Yes, he is strong, and yes, he holds his tongue unless a situation presents itself in that he must speak, but he is not as fixed in his beliefs as I had initially believed."

Shirou couldn't help but raise his eyebrows from his surprise. "You mean that he's wavering with what he does a lot?"

"According to him, he's found a happy medium, whatever that may mean. If nothing else, he is a joy to be around, so long as Sir Percival has not irritated him in some manner."

The redhead chuckled softly at her comment while Zago looked on with confusion. Percival was indeed very good at playing his part. Shirou was about to add his own opinion about Percival when a loud growl erupted from his stomach. As if to echo Shirou's, Zago's stomach let out its own complaint of emptiness. The two grimaced and looked at one another – they'd already finished off the last of their reserves. They would have to wait until the next morning to stock up again.

Zago rubbed his stomach and muttered, "See, we won't have to deal with this crap anymore if you'd just agree to follow my plan."

"Enough about the stupid, damned plan thing," Shirou muttered back, hoping that the queen wasn't actually paying any attention to their bickering.

Queen Guinevere merely tilted her head slightly, still smiling a bit. "Oh my," she began softly,
"perhaps you two should go partake in your meal for the evening."

It was like she was taunting them.

"No," Shirou denied politely, "we've already had our one meal for the day."

Zago sneered. "Yeah, no thanks to that husband of yours."

Shirou wasn't sure what Zago's deal with the king was, since he'd been carrying some sort of grudge for much longer than the new ruling had been set into effect, but he knew damn well that this wasn't the time for him to make that hatred known. Shirou didn't particularly like it when Zago griped so much about King Arthur, but didn't mind it as much when it was just the two of them alone. Saying something that stupid in front of the queen, though, was just pushing his luck. Shirou made sure to glare vehemently at the other man, trying to silently point out the folly. Zago noticed and backed off a bit and so Shirou hoped that the queen wouldn't take any offense, but one look at her made his blood run cold.

Gone was the friendly, but somewhat distanced, countenance of the woman who had spoken so respectfully of her husband barely minutes before, and in its place, the overbearing pressure of the woman who presided as queen over an entire kingdom. Her violet eyes were narrowed dangerously as she glared at Zago regally, her chin rising as she maintained an air of elegance even with her anger.

"What is this nonsense you speak of?" she asked, essentially demanding an answer. "'Thanks to my husband', you say? What, pray tell, is 'thanks to my husband'?"

Zago shrunk back a bit under her gaze, though Shirou was relatively unaffected. Saber had pinned him with that gaze more than once after all. He wouldn't say he was immune, but he took significantly less damage from it now than he used to. Maybe he'd leveled up. Since Zago seemed unable to speak further, that left Shirou with the job of answering.

"You don't know about the new ruling the king made?" he asked her, to which she only raised a fine eyebrow to display her confusion. "A couple of weeks back, when all of the shipments came in late, all the servants were told that they would only be able to eat one meal a day until further notice. Probably until another shipment comes in, but no one but the higher ups know anything about that."

Queen Guinevere seemed less than enthused with his response. "What foolery is this? The king never made such a ridiculous ruling, nor will he ever. I do not know where you came by this lie, but I would ask that you not stoop so low as to spit on his good name. He spoke so well of you, too, Shirou."

Now it was Shirou and Zago's turns to be confused, and confused they were. Shirou glanced at Zago quickly before turning back to ask, "Wait, what are you talking about? Every head person, including Baeddan, was told that this was something set down by the king to save on resources. It was a pretty big thing."

When the queen didn't respond and simply frowned, Shirou felt a knot begin to tie itself up within his stomach. Something about her reaction was completely off, and the guards behind her looked at him as if he were trying to gain something by lying to the queen. Zago scowled when he realized what was going on.

"What the fuck?" he vented, forgetting to be polite in the queen's presence. "So Baeddan was just playing us? All those people were just trying to run us down so we'd have no energy and so they'd
be able to have yet another reason to get pissed at us?"

"I can't imagine Baeddan as much of a liar, but if King Arthur didn't pass that temporary law..."

"He totally lied to us!" Zago exclaimed, growing more and more heated. "I knew something was off about all of this!"

"Silence!" Queen Guinevere commanded, her gaze elsewhere as she thought. "Baeddan is no fool, by any means. He would never consider giving Arthur any reason to kick him out of Camelot, and even if his plan were to wear out his kitchen help, he is far too smart and devious to devise something with a guaranteed chance of failure. You swear that this is something told to you by Baeddan?"

When the two men nodded, she quickly turned to look at one of the guards, snapping, "Arial, find Baeddan and inquire of this matter. I desire to know who is at fault with this foolhardiness."

Turning back to Shirou and Zago as the guard rushed to bow and run from the courtyard at full speed, her eyes were like the frozen tundra when she coolly glanced at them: "And if I find that you have been wasting my time with this foolishness, trust that I will spare no expense and effort to see that you meet a fitting end."

Shirou wasn't particularly worried. He was well aware of how willing the king was to kick out Baeddan, and she would probably do so with some glee as well. There was no way Baeddan would give her any reason to do so at all, so Shirou was rather content to stand still and look around at the vegetation from where he was. Zago, next to him, kept shifting repetitively from angry to nervous and back again. One day, he'd have to thank the king for always getting mad at him – he felt perfectly fine, despite the pressure radiating from the queen, especially since it wasn't exactly directed at him, but at a feeling of certain helplessness from not understanding the situation. He could understand that. He wanted to know what was going on, too.

It wasn't too long before the soldier came running back in, hardly out of breath, nearly twenty minutes or so later. In his hands, he held a piece of parchment paper, which he quickly turned over to the queen with a deep bow. He then returned to his position behind her, again maintaining a respectful distance. Shirou and Zago looked to the queen to see what was stored for them in the future, and Shirou frowned somewhat when he saw her tense slightly, her jaw tightening as she read the paper. He saw her hands tremble a bit.

"What," she choked out, her tone terse, "is this madness? Arthur would never... But this seal..."

Her gaze lifted to make eye contact with Shirou. "I," she started, seeming to fumble with her words, "stand corrected. There was indeed an order passed dictating that servants are only allowed a single meal per day."

"Well, we knew that," Shirou replied, not sure what she was getting at. "What's the problem?"

"This date... I was in attendance with my husband for the entirety of this day. This... This is nothing short of impossible. And yet..."

She whipped around again to look at her two guards. "Have you heard any word of this ruling?"

Both guards shook their heads slowly, unused to seeing their queen look so rattled. Queen Guinevere looked back at the paper before shakily rolling it up and gripping it as tightly as she dared.

"Whoever has done this will pay dearly for their crime."
Shirou looked at Zago before asking, "What's going on?"

Queen Guinevere turned slowly to look at him, and through clenched teeth, "Someone has seen fit to use the royal seal to submit a ruling without my husband's approval. I do not know who they are, but I will find them, and I will deal with them suitably."

For however warm it was in the courtyard, Shirou definitely felt a chill run down his spine. "What do you want us to do then?"

"You have suffered unjustly," the queen responded. "Unfortunately, it is not within my power to overturn this, law," she spat out, "but that of the king's. I do not have any way to allow you the meals you rightly deserve, nor am I certain that it would be in anyone's best interests for me to make such an attempt until more information is within my grasp."

 Damn, so she couldn't help them. She definitely seemed upset about it though. Shirou noticed Zago look at him hesitantly, a grin on his face. Before he could figure out what the blond was about to do, Zago quickly said,

"Well, Your Majesty, if you please, I have a plan that could help you rest at ease and give us the meals we need."

Shirou slapped a hand to his face. "Oh, for fuck's sake..."

"Yes, this plan," Queen Guinevere conceded, eyes still narrowed. "I assume it was the source of your bickering earlier. I will hear of this plan of yours."

"Please don't," Shirou muttered.

Zago relayed every detail that he had come up with for the plan, although Queen Guinevere's only reaction was the raising of both of her eyebrows. She was obviously not as awed by the plan as Zago had intended her to be, but she listened quietly nonetheless. When Zago finished, and Shirou was ready for someone to put himself out of his misery, the queen finally spoke:

"Never have I heard a more ridiculous idea in my life. Cooking in the dungeons, you say? To presume that you wouldn't be caught is nothing short of ludicrous. And who, I ask, would be the one to cook all of this?"

Zago pointed at Shirou, who sighed and said, "When the soldiers get back, I'll be working four shifts a day, every day. I don't have the time for this plan of his. Please ignore him."

"A wonderfully steadfast answer," she commended, nodding at him. "Were this any other situation, however, I would swiftly agree with you, Shirou. Unfortunately, something as nonsensical as his plan may be what is necessary to combat the absurdity of everything overall."

She paused, and Zago burst into a grin when she said, "I will permit this. I will allow no one to trespass into the tunnels – I will instead speak to the mages and have a specific area of the castle readied for you to cook in. Entrance will be given only to servants, and of course, the royal family, to ensure everything is going as it should. As for you, Shirou, I will speak to Baeddan about all of this and make certain you have every evening service off, and that the materials are delivered to you accordingly. I realize this will be quite the burden on you, but I am wary of assigning too many people to your cause, just in case they are somehow linked to the perpetrator of this entire event."

Zago cheered and Shirou groaned. Great, there went his peace.

"Your labor will not go unnoticed, Shirou," Queen Guinevere reassured him. "I will speak with my
husband promptly about what has occurred. I am certain he will have something to say to you upon his return."

She frowned slightly. "I want all of you to understand that this information is restricted solely to you two servants, and you alone. I do not want this to spread to anyone else, no matter what. I dare say you will both be punished if I find it has. This arrangement will also come to an immediate halt the moment the king returns and does away with this farce."

Both Shirou and the excited Zago nodded in agreement.

Seeing the giddy Zago made Shirou feel somewhat sick. *He* was the one who had to cook all of the crap, though it would be nice to eat something good for a change. In a way, he was kind of excited, but he simply wished everything hadn't been forced down his throat. Zago's pushiness kind of reminded him of Taiga in a way. He simply didn't love the blond as much as he did her, but he was growing used to the personality, bit by bit. Queen Guinevere seemed just as ready to be rid of Zago as he was, and quickly issued an order for one of her guards to take Zago away to talk to one of the mages on the upper floors. The other guard she sent to ensure a message would be delivered to King Arthur out on the battlefield, warning him of what he would be coming home to.

Shirou could only sigh when he thought of all the responsibility that had just been given to him in less than an hour. Turning to the queen, though, he adamantly said,

"Tell the king he doesn't have to worry about me, please."

Queen Guinevere's eyes widened slightly with surprise. "Whatever do you mean?"

"He doesn't have to come see and talk to me when he gets back. This is my job as a servant, right?" Shirou asked, knowing what the answer was. "Just know that it'll all be done to the best of my abilities, and that he doesn't need to mind any. It would mean more to me to know I'm being trusted to do something so important without concern."

"An admirable outlook, to be certain," she said with a smile. "I say, your confidence is quite wonderful to witness. Very well, I will tell Arthur to focus his attention on the problem at hand and leave you to do your work as is expected."

"Thanks," he said with a small grin. "You can count on me."

"Pay mind to that friend of yours, however. I do not trust him whatsoever."

Shirou chuckled hesitantly. "Roger. Will do."

Then, he remembered something and smiled sheepishly. "Um, could you allow one more person access to the area you designate for this thing?"

"Another?" Queen Guinevere asked. "Who, I wonder?"

"A woman named Eos. She's part of the Upper Echelon, but she's always helped me and Zago whenever we've had any problems."

"Hmm," she murmured. "Very well. I will allow this 'Eos' clearance. Is there anything else?"

"Nah," Shirou confirmed, grinning again. "Thanks, Your Majesty."

"You are most welcome, Shirou," she replied with her own smile before turning to gaze at the fountain as she said, "May the odds be ever in your favor."
Shirou turned around and walked away from the center of the courtyard, heading for the stairwell that would take him back towards the other parts of the castle. As soon as he reached it and starting walking up its steps, he felt the pressure of what was expected of him suddenly hit and he slid a hand across his face.

"God damn you, Zago."

He hadn't been expecting much when told that he would be operating in a place far, far away from the kitchens so as to not attract too much attention. He'd known for certain he wouldn't have the space, all of the ovens, and all of the hearths at his disposal. He'd also been well aware that he would probably be doing everything on his own, which was fine, if not a bit of a burden. There were over four hundred servants within the castle walls, after all, and he had to cook for all of them. What Shirou had not known is that this was the place he would be given to work in.

"Welcome to Master Merlin's own personal kitchen space," droned one mage who obviously felt he had better things to do. "As a favor to Her Highness, Merlin is granting you usage of his own personal hearths, ovens, tables, cutlery, seasonings, and whatever trinkets that kitchens normally come with. Once finished for the day, we ask that you clean up after yourself properly."

Shirou, Eos, and Zago stared at the immense area in front of them. Merlin had obviously manipulated another dimension to allocate so much space, considering the entrance to it was originally a door leading to a closet of sorts. He gazed up at the high ceilings and then looked around at everything. It didn't look to be much different from the main kitchens, so it didn't seem like they would have much trouble adjusting. The main things that was different were the cauldrons of tossed soup and barrels full of thrown away materials, although the meats and vegetables were, luckily, separate, and the line of ten or so mages standing in front of him in a line.

Three of them wore brown robes, indicating their novice status, four had on red robes, which meant they were very skilled, – the man who had spoke wore a red robe as well – one had on a blue robe with silver lining, one had a black robe with red lining, and one wore ordinary clothing. Shirou wasn't sure what the silver or red linings meant, but because of how attentive they seemed, he assumed they were fairly adept. The last woman, who had on regular clothing completely tossed him for a loop. In any case, the rookies weren't going anywhere near any of the food he was cooking with their magic. That was for sure.

He scratched the back of his head and looked at Zago and Eos, who merely turned to him for guidance. Sighing, he looked back at the mages. The noon shift had just ended, so they had a bit of time to spare before people starting drifting in for a meal. First and foremost, Shirou wanted to know exactly who he was working with.

"So," he began, attracting everyone's attention, "uh, who are you guys?"

The novices introduced themselves as Cynon, Gwatcyn, and Undeg. Okay, two guys and a girl – that was fine, although he seriously couldn't be bothered to give as much of a damn about the newbies. According to them, they couldn't cook worth a damn anyway, so, yeah, cleaning it was. Though, it was the two highest classed people who he was most interested in, but that was just because he was judging them by their magical abilities, not their ability to cook. That would come later. The three reds introduced themselves as Math, Nerys, and Rhianydd. The bored one who'd spoken before was named Rhein. Only Nerys and Rhianydd, the two women, were able to cook in that group, although Math did know how to cut, and Rhein was familiar with different cuts of meats and how to cook them. That was reassuring.

Then, it was the blue-cloaked man's turn. He stepped forward, bowed his head once, and said in a
"Hail, stranger. I am called Coel. I have been under Merlin's guidance for seven years and am proficient the manipulation of any and all liquid. If you have ever seen the fountain within the courtyard, please know that it is an example of my work. I am also responsible for cleansing the water within the main castle area, and am capable of duplicating the essential core of alcohol to prolong it, if it proves to be necessary. I will admit that this is one of my least used skills, as alcohol is fairly plentiful. I am here to 'purify' the soups and take out that which does not belong, or that could possibly make others sick, such as mold and other byproducts."

Shirou's eyes widened slightly. He didn't know liquid manipulation was a thing. He was wondering what he had been supposed to do with all the soup presented him. So Coel could essentially take out bad bacteria or whatever for reusing. He also took care of the sewer systems? That was a job he would never envy Coel for. Shirou turned his gaze to the woman in the black cloak, who pulled back her hood to look back at him resolutely.

"Hail. My name is Perl. I have studied under Master Merlin for the past sixty years, since I was five years of age. I am able to manipulate time fairly accurately within a ten to fifteen year span, although dimensional distortion is beyond me at this point."

"S-sixty years?" Shirou burst out. "You hardly look a day over twenty!"

Her dark eyes twinkled with amusement, although she said nothing further on that particular matter.

"I am also well versed with cooking. Please use me as you see fit."

The redhead nodded dumbly and turned to look back at Zago, who simply leered at Perl. She hardly paid him any attention other to say, "It does not do you justice for your breeches to be down at your ankles like that, young one."

Zago blinked at her before looking down and quickly rushing to pull up his pants, his face flushed a cherry red. Shirou almost felt bad for him, since underwear was a concept that didn't seem to really exist in this time. Eos merely smiled knowingly at the man, much to his apparent discomfort. Shirou ended up looking at Perl with renewed interest – he never felt anything shift and she seemed to still be standing in the same place, so she must have been very exact with her time manipulation. She also decidedly despised perverts, so Zago was going to have a horrible time with her, which suited Shirou fine. He was still angry with Zago for this whole situation anyway.

The last woman in a simple tunic stepped forward, her silver eyes peering straight at Shirou. He felt his heart jump as his body was bound under her gaze. She had Mystic Eyes? What if he stayed paralyzed? Did he have anything in his arsenal to fight something under that caliber? Shirou realized with a some dread that he definitely didn't.

"Calm yourself, stranger," a voice filtered through his mind, its tone feminine and reassuring. "I mean no harm. I am physically incapable of speaking orally, and must make do with telepathic communication. Hail, stranger. My name is Siân. I am adept at physical duplication and manipulation, and can multiply myself to up to ninety-nine copies, each one as capable as my original self. I will be your main force for carrying out tasks quickly and efficiently. Use me well, stranger."

When she blinked once, slowly, he felt himself regain control of his limbs, though it seemed that neither Eos nor Zago had noticed anything wrong. By the looks of Perl and Coel's expressions, neither one was particularly surprised by what Siân had done, so he supposed he just had to get
used to it. He rubbed his eyes a bit and then looked at Siân once again.

"Do you have any skill with cooking, Siân?"

Her smile told him she did. That was good. He basically had a hundred people working with him to complete all of the tasks needed. Shirou looked around and clapped his hands.

"Okay, my name is Shirou, and this is Zago, and she's Eos. We're here to make sure all of the servants get the food they need. I think a lot of them will be coming in fairly soon, so we don't have much time to get this ball rolling. First things first," he said, looking to Perl, "I need those fires good and hot. Siân, I need all of those leftover vegetables cut into even pieces about the size of my pinky, and Coel, I want you to get started on those soups. Recover as much as you can from them and toss out the gross stuff."

He had barely blinked before all three of the higher level mages had begun working. He wasn't sure how far back in the past Perl had gone, but the fires were already blazing in the hearths and the ovens were operating at an even temperature. Each table had about two or three Siâns cutting various vegetables and Coel was off pulling out various unnecessary pieces from the broths and throwing them into a vat meant for disposal. Shirou hadn't even said anything to the other mages, but the novices scampered off to clean areas here and there while Rhein immediately headed straight for the meat, and Math helped cut at a speed worth two or three people in the main kitchens. Nerys and Rhianydd were working to put together a decent tasting soup, and Shirou guessed that that was where he came in.

He grinned. Now, this? This was pretty damned cool.

Sparing his two coworkers a quick smile, he walked forward to start helping Nerys and Rhianydd, while Zago cleaned with the novices, and Eos concentrated on the meat with Rhein. It wasn't too long before Shirou was finally plating the meats onto a table where one of the rookies would pick it up and take it into the serving area next door. Shirou was incredibly grateful for the mages' help, as well as Eos for directing them on the finer points of each meal.

He was also incredibly relieved when all of the food finally went out to the other servants for them to eat, and when they gave out a few compliments. He had done his job well.

Two and a half weeks later, Shirou sat in the main kitchens for the night service, a permanent smirk stuck on his face as he glared at Dai who continued to glower at him. As to why he was in such a good mood, that would be because of the subtle shift in power that the Upper Echelons, aside from Eos, couldn't seem to grasp. People who had shunned him before now gave him unabashed smiles or grins, or clapped him on the back for the part he played in Zago's plan. Zago, having been entirely instrumental in helping to get everything off the ground in the first place, was absolutely ecstatic, and he kept jabbing Dai with the broom he usually used to clean the kitchens with. The best part of it all was that Dai couldn't lay a hand on them, not without suffering possible repercussions from the queen, and ultimately, the king, themselves.

Half a week earlier, the king had come back from her most recent campaign, and apparently had been utterly livid when she discovered what had taken place behind her back. Shirou was so glad he had not been anywhere near her – he couldn't even imagine how she had probably reacted when she discovered the royal seal meant to be used by her, and her alone, had been used for some other ulterior motive. Apparently, though, the king couldn't pinpoint the source behind the entire ordeal – was it a fabricated seal, or did someone sneak into her office at some point and copy the seal, or did they simply sneak in something without her knowledge and have her unwittingly stamp her approval on the paper?
There was a good chance that the seal hadn't been fabricated as there were no faults whatsoever in its markings on the paper. Also, as King Arthur was rather anal about her work, there was little chance that she had stamped something without looking at it thoroughly, which meant that someone had a copy. Nothing about the seal seemed forged or forced, it looked precisely the same, and considering how often the king was in her office, the perpetrator would have needed to forge it in a hurry. There would have been some kind of mistake along the way.

According to the queen after his last, very short, meeting with her, they had indeed confirmed it was a copy, as King Arthur had kept one just in case something happened to the original. At some point in time, it had been stolen. By whom, though, she couldn't say. They would need to run a surveillance on every single person who frequented the king's office within the past half year, maybe even further. It had to be someone who knew King Arthur's routines, and someone who effectively had overall clearance to be in the king's study. Unfortunately, there were quite a few of those people who lived in the castle. Going along and interrogating every single member of the court was risky though, and liable to rub quite a few people the wrong way.

It would take a decent amount of time before the criminal could be tracked down, but until then, the least the king could do was make an official announcement to all of the staff to belay the previous "order" of servants only being able to partake in one meal a day. Also, as previously agreed, the temporary use of Merlin's kitchen subspace was brought to a close and Shirou, Zago, and Eos were essentially given a time period of fourteen meal sessions tickets to do what they would with. The session could be used for resting during a specific service, or eating in the Great Hall with the privileged, or roaming the castle freely. They could also be used consecutively, which would equate to three-and-a-half to four-and-a-half days off straight, or as sparingly as the user desired. The times used were recorded and given to the king personally so she could keep track of their progress. All the better, the "tickets" would never expire so long as the three served within the castle.

As for why Dai couldn't lay a finger on either them, well, that was because Zago blabbed to the queen about the latest murder attempt, and so now, Dai was under close scrutiny from some of the guard. The guards wouldn't go into the kitchen, but they stood silently outside of its doors until Dai next left the room. After hearing about Dai's predicament, Shirou couldn't stop himself from grinning the entire day long. He hadn't used any of his "tickets" just yet, and had come in obediently every night service just so he could irritate the other man and smirk at him the entire time.

Another good thing that had come out of Zago's plan was the two new friends he had gained. Siân, whenever he happened to see her here and there, would always greet him with a smile, though she hadn't telepathically spoken to him since the day he'd met her. Shirou had only found out later that the ability was reserved for those of whom she held upmost trust, and she had only communicated that way with him as a courtesy. That was fine – it was kind of an invasion, and it put her at risk if anyone else was psychically adept. Coel was pretty cool, too, and was kind enough sometimes to give him a container full of clean water for him to drink or do whatever with. The mages were a busy bunch though, so unless he went to the north wing himself, he never really saw them much.

It was still snowing fairly heavily outside, despite March just beginning, but it wasn't enough to call for a complete shift change for the soldiers like in January and early February. This, of course, meant that the night service was back to being as slow as it had been prior to the blizzard, but Shirou didn't mind working so late anymore. Besides, there was the perk of seeing a very irritated Dai, and Telyn wasn't about to say anything to him because he hadn't done anything wrong. She seemed quite ready to beat Zago with his own stick though. Oh well, Shirou couldn't say that he blamed her – Zago was probably taking things a bit too far, like usual.
He sighed and stood up from his stool to go check on the meat – he was no longer stuck with just slicing veggies anymore. Yay for perks! – only to turn back and look at the main entrance as a brunet peeked his head in. After a second of staring, Shirou's face split into a large smile as the brunet waved happily and slid into the kitchen. Zago, Telyn, and Dai stared as one of the Knights of the Round Table wrapped Shirou into a tight hug, a grin upon his face. While Zago's jaw dropped open to see someone who was so highly ranked hug his friend, Dai merely sneered. Telyn, however, flushed a deep red the moment she laid eyes upon the man.

"Percival," Shirou said, unsure of what to really say. "What are you doing here?"

Percival cracked a grin, gave the other three present a quick glance before wrapping an arm around Shirou's shoulder and pulling him away a bit to a corner. His expression was serious as he leaned in closely.

"I was informed about the meal debacle," he stated in a soft tone, his mouth set in a scowl, and sapphire-blue eyes narrowed dangerously. "Whoever prompted this mess will be captured and dealt with appropriately. I promise this to you, my friend."

"I'm okay," Shirou said back. "Don't worry about me."

"Hm," Percival replied, cupping his chin. "Yes, I have little doubt that you are more than capable of taking care of yourself. I am only concerned that others' actions will somehow pull you into a battle that you may not be able to fight without outside influence."

"I'm okay," the redhead repeated. "I'm safe here, kind of. You don't have to worry."

"Truly?"

"I'll swear by it, if that'll make you feel any better."

Percival stood up to his full height, posture perfect as was befitting of a knight. Crossing his arms over his chest, he sighed, but realized there was nothing more he could say. He made a small grin and shook his head.

"Understood. But should you ever require my services, I will offer them gladly and willingly."

"Cool," Shirou agreed, walking away from the knight to check on the meat.

He grabbed a fork off of one table and prodded on the slab rotating over one of the hearths, and frowned up at the dog that was barely turning the spit. It was obviously tired, but he'd already wasted time trying to get Baeddan to stop using live animals and have people turn it themselves. That argument hadn't gotten him anywhere, so the best thing that he could do was get the dog replaced. However, replacing a dog meant that the one changed out would essentially be killed. These types of dogs were made for running in those wheels, which meant that this dog was way past its prime. Shirou grimaced. Eh, whatever – the meat could turn achingly slowly for a little while longer. He really didn't want to deal with replacing the animal.

Turning back around, Shirou raised an eyebrow when he saw Percival just sitting down at one of the tables, obviously not particularly interested in going anywhere. The knight paid no attention whatsoever to Telyn, who kept staring at him – Zago had gotten used to Shirou having all kinds of interesting friends, and Dai thought the knight was less interesting than constantly glaring at a foreigner. Shirou flipped him the bird, which confused the other man, before turning his attention back to Percival.

"What are you doing here anyway? You can't be here just to check up on me, right?"
"I have just returned from a mission for the king hardly a few hours ago," confessed Percival, his mouth opening wide to make way for a yawn. "While I would have much preferred to go straight to sleep, I need to check on the prisoner again in a little bit, so I thought I would pay you a visit."

"Prisoner?" Shirou questioned, interest piqued. "What prisoner?"

"A poor, unfortunate fool who dared to escape from his guard," Percival answered with a malicious smirk. "He led some of the king's men to their deaths on the way to a town called Puria. The man chose to conspire with a band of marauders, but he has since been captured, by yours truly, and will be properly punished. All of the iron has since been recovered, and Puria was found innocent of all charges, so long as they continue to deliver us our supplies as agreed."

"You chased the guy down? Did you have to fight against those bandits?"

Percival chuckled. "Those weaklings were hardly a warmup for me, my friend. Gawain and Lancelot were to have taken care of the matter, but I am hailed as the best at tracking down those who run. Once I set sight on my prey, I will never let it go."

Shirou nodded slowly, taking a seat across the table from Percival. "So, he's in jail? Aren't you afraid that he'll get away again?"

"Not at all. The jail cells are made of iron, and heavily enforced with the magic of our good mages. It would do him more harm to attempt an escape than it would to simply wait for his eventual execution."

The knight puffed out his chest as much as his armor would allow. "It is with great pride when I say that not a single prisoner has ever managed to break out of our dungeon cells."

Shirou laughed. "Oh, man. Here's hoping I never get stuck in one of those."

"I certainly hope you do not," Percival said, losing his smile. "You would most likely die there without anyone knowing otherwise."

"So why did you come here, anyway, besides to check up on me? To the kitchens specifically, I mean."

Percival stood up quickly, hands clasped together in front of him as he whined, "I'm hungry! Please, Lord Shirou, the one I could never forsake, the Master and Wielder of the kitchen knife, feed me your brilliant masterpieces!"

"What?" Shirou deadpanned.

"I am not long for this world, I fear," Percival continued, looking ready to faint. "But that I could try your delicacies just once in my life, I could rest and pass away all whilst knowing that I have tasted a part of Heaven without succumbing to the cold grip of death beforehand!"

Shirou looked helplessly over at Telyn, who had to tear her eyes away from the brunet. It took her a moment before she realized what he was silently asking her and then she just waved her hand, permitting him to do as he pleased. He frowned a bit when he saw absolutely how love struck she was and already knew how that was going to go down. He just hoped that Percival wouldn't turn her down too harshly.

Percival's face lit up childishly as Shirou moved to cut off a couple slices of meat and place them on a plate. They still weren't done cooking, so he was going to stir-fry them real quick with some vegetables for a nice easy meal. With the type of bread available, he could easily make some type
of croutons and stick them in together with the batch for something to soak up some of the lard. He rushed to cut up the bread into tiny pieces, and tossed some cut vegetables onto the plate as well. Shirou walked to one particular shelf and made as if he were going to take down one of the pots before secretly tossing a glance back at the other four, who were paying him no real attention. Percival's attention was currently being stolen by the fawning Telyn, though he seemed rather annoyed by it.

Shirou breathed out slowly and quickly projected a cast iron pan to use over the flames within barely a second. It had been a long while since he'd last projected anything, but this much he could certainly do. He acted like he was taking it off the shelf and then walked over towards the one hearth without a rotating spit. He grabbed some lard, threw it into the pan and along with a fistful of salt and other miscellaneous seasonings and the pieces of bread. Well, this wasn't how one truly made croutons, but hopefully they would harden up enough at the edges to resemble real croutons more so than not.

When the lard began crackling and popping and the bread starting browning, Shirou moved the pan away from the fire, walked back to put in the meat and vegetables, and then started actually stir-frying. A stove would have been so much better to work with, but his hands were tied, unless he wanted to project one himself. Which, he could definitely do, but it would be a pain in the butt. There wasn't any electricity to work with and he didn't have any gas stores either. It wasn't going to happen.

Shirou plated the meal as soon as deemed it ready and slid the plate gently in front of a happy Percival. He smiled hesitantly as Percival took off a gauntlet and handfed himself. Shirou chanced a glance at Telyn, but was none too surprised to see her looking nothing short of crushed. Percival must have told her off. Well, if she was upset, than by default, Shirou surmised as he looked over at a glowering Dai...

Ah, yes, of course. The guard dog was pissed. The guy seemed to know better than to approach Percival, however, as he suddenly switched his furious gaze over to Shirou.

Hey, this isn't my fault, Shirou wanted to say, his mouth set into a frown. As Shirou glared back, Dai suddenly adopted a thoughtful expression, which made the redhead a bit suspicious. He lost that particular train of thought, though, when Percival popped his back up when a brilliant smile.

"The Heavens! The Heavens, Shirou! They surely shine upon you! They have blessed you with a gift, my friend, a gift!"

"Yeah, yeah."

"I mean it, truly! I have never once tasted such a scrumptious meal before today! My willingness to take you as my husband has only strengthened threefold! Are you sure you will not do me the honor?"

Percival moved closer to hug Shirou and attempt to kiss him, and Shirou did his best to keep pushing the other man away as gently as possible. He wasn't particularly surprised to see Telyn pale and excuse herself from the room in order to take her break. Dai followed after her obediently, the same odd expression as before plastered on his face. Shirou found that he was concentrating so much on what that peculiar expression seemed to be that he wasn't at all prepared when Percival pressed his lips against Shirou's own. Horrified, Shirou slammed a fist into Percival's face and kicked him away before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He looked over to see Percival grinning happily that a shiver of repulsion ran down his spine.

Zago snorted, causing Shirou to pass him a harsh glare. The blond coughed a bit to hide his laugh,
and innocently went back to cleaning. The redhead glared instead at Percival, who seemed to still be cheerfully smiling back at him.

"We have kissed, Shirou. You realize this means we must wed now."

"The hell if I'm going to marry a dude! Fuck!" Shirou cursed, rubbing the back of his hand back and forth more purposefully. "God, I'm cursed for life! What's she going to say when she finds out I've kissed you?"

"She who?" Percival inquired naively.

Shirou glared as firmly as he could manage. "I swear I am going to kill you."

Only a grin met his threat. He sighed – he just couldn't stay mad at the other man. He'd just have to beat up Zago later to make up for it.

"By the way," he ended up asking the brunet, "are you sure it was okay to tell me all about that mission and stuff about the jail cells?"

Percival regained his serious manner from earlier. "Of course. What reason would I have to hide something that has already taken place and will soon be common knowledge to all of those in Camelot once he is on the chopping block? The king did not think to silence me either. Besides, what harm would come from telling you anything, Shirou? You are practically my husband, after all."

The last part was said with a cheeky grin.

Shirou ignored it. "And, just out of curiosity, what did you tell Telyn earlier? She came onto you, right?"

"Ah, that?" Percival questioned while looking bored. He frowned and turned his gaze away from Shirou. "I merely said I have no interest in ever courting such a ghastly looking woman, particularly one who was bred for brilliance and only threw it away for her own selfish goals."

Oh. Whoa. Ouch.

"Uh," Shirou started with some hesitance, "you do know what happened to her, right?"

"I merely said I have no interest in ever courting such a ghastly looking woman, particularly one who was bred for brilliance and only threw it away for her own selfish goals."

"Indeed," the knight replied, smiling softly. "And you, too, my friend. Do not allow that vixen to corrupt you. I have taken you as my own, now, after all."

Shirou scowled and made as if to throw a piece of hard bread at the knight, but Percival escaped before he could launch it. All Shirou heard afterward was the soft laughter and the sound of his own growling. Zago snorted again and this time Shirou made sure to throw the bread roll as hard as he could directly at the blond.

Thinking back to what the brunet had said, though, Shirou seriously found that he did not desire to be in the same room as the scorned woman. He was honestly entertaining the idea of skipping out, but there were only a few more hours left on this particular shift. Maybe he would take off the
morning service and sleep in? In a way, though, he was somewhat entertained by the thought of Percival slamming her right into her place. She was really nice, but, for some reason, it gave him some kind of incomprehensible joy to have seen the absolutely crushed expression on her face. Shirou smirked before a thought struck him. He his hands cupped his cheeks as he stared into nothingness, horrified.

"Isn't this something Rin would take pleasure with?" he asked himself, eyes wide as he realized his situation.

Was he turning into Rin? Why was he taking joy from other people's pain?

"You damned red demon," he muttered, catching Zago's attention. "Even 1,500 years in the past, you manage to influence me with your terrible ways. Begone demon, begone."

Zago frowned at him. "What are you over there muttering about?"

"Just trying to get rid of a curse that doesn't know when it's not wanted," he replied back, head bowed.

"Maybe you should just get your knight in shining armor to help you," Zago joked. "He could kiss you back into heavenly happiness."

Shirou lifted his head, stared at him, and then grabbed another roll off of the table. As soon as Zago saw it, he promptly ran.

"I'll show you 'heavenly happiness'!" Shirou yelled, taking aim and firing a bulls-eye.
executed a high spinning jump kick, slamming his foot right into the other man's temple. Hitting the ground hard, he grabbed the wedge and wielded it in front of him as his one, two, four, seven attackers took up a position in front of him.

Danger!

Shirou hesitated slightly which was all the time two people needed to rush him. One came in low and another swung a whip at his neck. Shirou whipped out his right foot and swiftly clipped the opponent to his right under the chin, forcing him back. The whip from the other attacker twirled around his left forearm and Shirou growled, pulling the whip down with his arm as he flipped the steel wedge up in his right hand for a better grip and slammed it right into the man's head. The guy fell down with a grown.

Danger!

The man he'd gotten in the chin was up again and was already trying to tackle him down. Shirou threw the steel wedge at him, making the man dodge first and slide back through the snow to land hard on his back. After unwinding the whip on his forearm, he launched it towards the next assailant and let it wind around the person's neck. The second he realized he had a decent grip, Shirou pulled the whip back towards him and launched a kick right into the man's face. Shirou grunted as the man fell down, though he was sure to let go of the whip. He had no desire to kill any of them, but he would fight back. Hopefully, the king would forgive him for all of this later.

Danger!

His golden-brown eyes glittered dangerously as the last four surrounded him. Projecting was a bad idea in this situation, so he'd have to take care of them the hard way. He cracked his knuckles, only subconsciously noticing that they were in a blind spot where no one would ever see them, and since soldiers were known to still train at night, no one would think anything of some grunts or cracks of weapons. His muscles tensed tightly as he glared at the man with a sack over his head.

The man tilted his head. "You're better than I thought. Looks like we've got a fighter on our hands, boys."

Shirou gritted his teeth. He could practically see the amusement oozing down from the words.

"You've got some guts, doing this out where anyone could notice."

"And yet, no one's coming, huh, genius?" the man retorted, spreading his arms wide. "Good job taking down four of us, but I guarantee you won't be coming out of this unscathed."

Danger!

A fist flew for his face from his right and he clasped it, maneuvered his body just so and flipped the man hard into the snow. He then slammed his own fist straight down into the man's face, knocking him unconscious.

Danger!

Shirou's eyes flashed back as someone came up from behind him and held his arms put him in an arm lock. Struggling to get out of his hold, Shirou's eyes flashed again with his anger. He pulled forward as much as he could manage before smashing the back of his head into the other man's. The grip loosened just enough for Shirou to spin around and launch another kick, taking the man down easily. He growled fiercely when another man caught him in another lock.
A fist flew straight into Shirou's abdomen, making him gasp for breath. He struggled to breathe before a hook raced right into his cheek. He took in as deep a breath as possible right as a kick slammed into his ribs and a fist into his nose. Soon, Shirou was taking more hits than he could feel, one punch or kick always being followed up with even more. He lifted a heavily wounded face, barely able to see the sack over the guy's face before the grip around his arms was loosened and he stumbled forward.

"Hit him again, for good measure."

Something hard bashed into the back of his head, sending him falling down into the snow below him face first. He groaned slightly, feeling his consciousness fading quickly. His left hand gripped around a clump of snow before falling limp as he fell unconscious.

"Nighty-night, Shi-ro-u."

\textit{Death.}
Decidedly, Shirou couldn't tell which part was worse when he'd finally become conscious: the rats that squeaked and glared at him with their beady eyes full of malice and hatred, the penetrating cold that seemed to seep into his very bone marrow and chill him to no uncertain degree, the fact that he was bound up in a cocoon made of rope from his ankles all the way up to his torso, or the many carcasses and skeletons of those who may have been just as, or more, unfortunate than him. The rats simply hissed and squeaked at him for invading their space, but other than crawling over the ropes that bound him and generally annoying him like gnats, he didn't mind them as much. The cold, he had unfortunately grown used to from living in the castle. He would definitely reach a state of hypothermia, though, if he didn't find some source of heat soon. The ropes kept him somewhat insulated at least. Then, there was the matter of the bodies – he didn't know who they were, but he didn't want to join them as some kind of new playmate after death either.

Welcome back to the land of living.

The ropes were probably his biggest issue at the moment. Getting out of them wouldn't be too difficult – he would simply cut his way out. The problem was that he was still groggy and was having some difficulty accessing his prana. More than likely, Shirou surmised, the people who had beaten him into a pulp had probably drugged him, and he was still suffering from the aftereffects. That was fine – if he was awake now, the effects would fade after a bit, too. Then, he was going to get the hell out of there. Shirou turned his head back and forth to look around at the surrounding area. Realizing his immediate surroundings were clear, he finally let out a low growl as he recalled the fight.

Right, the fight where you got your ass kicked like a dummy bag.

He had messed up, and badly at that. As the men hadn't been soldiers, he thought he might be able to take them down with ease, but he'd been out of the loop for a while. Shirou had still been rather concerned about using his magecraft in any sense, and he was stubbornly trying to keep his promise to the king about not making any trouble for her. Several dead people gone missing or dead would definitely have raised some eyebrows somewhere. If someone had somehow suspected him for having something to do with it, he wouldn't have had much of an alibi to work with. Besides, killing people without a real cause, other than self-preservation, didn't really sit right with him. However, if people were going to start targeting him and putting him in less than pleasant situations, like how he was currently, that was an entirely different matter.

There's more than one way to skin a cat...

Shirou shook his head hard to clear away the cobwebs within his mind. The poison, or whatever it had been, was finally starting to fade and he was starting to gain more control over his limbs. He tightened the muscles in his right arm as he tried curling his fingers into a ball and then loosening them. Closing his eyes, Shirou mentally visualized the physical compound and structure of a simple sharpened dagger, and it hardly took any time at all for its physical form to appear within his hand.

At least you're still capable of the basics.

Deftly cutting the bindings nearest to his hand, he carefully opened up a hole through the ropes before eventually working his way out of the bindings entirely. He tilted his head from side to side and stretched out his arms and legs to get his blood flowing a bit. The redhead looked back down at the various bodies surrounding him and frowned as he came to the long awaited realization that
he was going to have to kick things up a few notches. If people were intent on taking his life, then he was going to fight back. No, he would have to fight back – there was no other option. All things considered though, Shirou was still hesitant about taking their lives. He didn't want anything connecting back to him whatsoever, because that was just asking for a one-way trip either out of the castle and far away, or to the gallows or chopping block. He just wasn't willing to risk his place and the close proximity to King Arthur.

*I really don't think she's in a position to care about you at the moment, or maybe ever.*

Although, if he had no other choice, no other option, and no other path to take other than to steal away their lives from them, then so be it. He'd just explain himself as best as possible later. Hopefully, it wouldn't have to come down to that. So, for now, until he was backed into a corner, he would put them down for the count. He could do that, right?

*Doubtful. But hey, what's a few miracles here and there?*

As Shirou continued looking down at the bodies, something about each one caught his eye. Slowly bending down, he reached out and carefully touched the cloth. There was nothing remotely remarkable about it – it was just the normal, cheap cloth of a lowly servant or peasant, but there was just something that struck Shirou as odd. Grimacing slightly, he mentally apologized to the dead person as he patted down on the clothing. When he looked back at the palm of his hand, nothing but black coated his skin. He knew what it was almost immediately.

Soot.

Now, that wouldn't have been very interesting of a detail all on its own, but he knew for a fact that there were very few occupations within the castle that required working with coal. Firstly, there were the blacksmiths who tended the hearths for their fires to make weaponry, and the armorers who forged armor for the soldiers. Then, there were also the fire tenders who took care of the giant hearths in the Great Hall and other various rooms meant for members belonging to royalty and that of the court. One more group that would have come into contact with a lot of soot were the people who cleaned out the various pipes and tunnels that the sooty air traveled through. Then, of course, last but not least, were the kitchen staff.

*There you go.*

Shirou didn't know these people from Adam, so they could have come from anywhere, or they might have even been prisoners who somehow escaped and met their end in an abysmal place like this. He seriously doubted that though, especially since he recalled Baeddan saying something about sometimes finding his employees went missing while gone on certain "escapades", and Shirou also specifically remembered King Arthur telling Baeddan that her steward always had to keep finding more and more people to work in the kitchens.

*So, what now?*

Still bending down, he gingerly took one of the corpses' hands and flipped it over to look at the palm and the finger pads. Shirou looked up and around him quickly to make sure he was still alone as he inspected the hand before turning his attention back down to it. His eyes narrowed slightly when he saw the various cuts and scrapes on the hand that could have been reminiscent of someone who worked with knives a lot. Again, that could mean the person used to work with the blacksmiths or armorers, and he didn't exactly have definitive proof that the dead around him had been kitchen staff, but he had a feeling that they had been.

*You do realize how close that was to being you, don't you?*
His heart skipped a beat when he thought of how he might've met the same fate as them if not for his abilities. Shirou wiped his hands down the front of his tunic, now completely covered with dirt, dust, and soot. He had to get out of there, wherever there was, as soon as possible. Standing up, he glanced down the long tunnel leading away from his dead-end area. He turned to move down the tunnel when he heard the click-clacking of someone else walking down the enclosed corridor. Shirou hesitated for a short moment before looking around himself quickly.

*Are you just going to let them take you down again?*

There wasn’t anywhere for him to hide quickly, which meant that he had to think fast. The steps came closer and closer and Shirou finally chose to plop back down on the corpses where he'd been before, making sure to project ropes around him to make it seem as if he were still tied up. The footsteps slowly drew up towards him about a minute or two later, and he raised his gaze to meet the cold, dispassionate ones of some guy he didn't know. The man leaned down, putting his face right in Shirou's.

*You've been too complacent, too stupid. You're no longer even recognizable anymore.*

"Hey, mate," the man drawled. "Have a good night's sleep down here?"

*A guy of this level is nothing compared to you, or to who you used to be.*

Shirou immediately recognized the voice as the one belonging to that guy that had had a bag over his head. It grated on his nerves to hear it, but he was also somewhat pleased that he would have chance to deal with this douche once and for all.

*Don't think. Don't question. Don't yield.*

The man smirked and grabbed a hold of Shirou's chin as he blew onto Shirou's face. The latter felt himself become a bit nauseous just from how awful the other man's breath was.

*Don't hesitate.*

"How about you and me go for a little walkie-walk?"

*This is your chance. Take it!*

"How about not?"

Shirou released his rope projections with a burst of energy, and grabbed the man's tunic as he launched himself forward and slammed the other person onto the ground. The other man, taken by surprise, immediately tried to fight back and regain control, but Shirou simply slapped the guy's face to confuse him further. Thrusting his forearm against the man's throat and leaning all of his weight on it, he drew back his fist again and smashed it into the other's nose. Then, rising quickly, Shirou pulled his enemy up by his tunic, spun him around, grabbed the man's wrist and twisted it up behind the other man until the guy grunted in pain. Shirou's eyes were cold as he pushed the man forward against the wall, and continued pushing up on the wrist until the guy shouted for him to stop.

*Never stop. It's him or you. Choose.*

"Stop?" Shirou questioned as he methodically and carefully kept pushing further and further up.

"You're going to disconnect my shoulder, you fucking asshole!"
"That sounds like a personal problem to me," Shirou replied, letting go of the wrist only to grab a fistful of the man's hair and slam his head into the wall he was pressed against.

Shirou heard the obvious crunch as the nasal bone broke into pieces. The man, stunned, could only manage to stumble back a few steps while holding a hand to his broken nose. The redhead simply continued looking on, not feeling fazed whatsoever by his own actions. The man growled, and upon evidently considering his nose a lost cause, charged straight at the time traveler. Shirou jumped back out of reach before flying forward and sending a well-aimed open palm strike back into his enemy's face, causing further damage. He then spun on one foot and sent a simple kick crashing into the man's ribcage, hard enough to possibly break, or at least fracture, another couple of bones. The man flew back from the blow to land back where Shirou had originally been lying down.

Holding his right hand to his ribs, he took in a shuddering breath as he tried to glare back at the redhead.

"B-but, how...? We took you down easily before... You were nothing like this..."

How little you know...

Shirou crossed his arms over his shoulders. "You pissed me off. Congrats."

"I heard you were a simpleton who couldn't fight at all!"

"Hah," Shirou scoffed. "Give me a sword, and I'll swing it around and maybe hit a few cones. Give me just my fists, and I'll wreck you with every damn technique I learned from my friend. Give me a bow," he continued with a pause, "and you'll never know that you even died."

"Fuck you! This was supposed to be an easy job! I heard what happened in Tryst! You were kicked around like a scarecrow!"

Scarecrow, huh? That's a new one, although "dummy bag" is better.

Shirou let out a soft sigh.

"You know, I've been through some serious shit since I've gotten to Britain here. First, I get attacked by a dragon. Then I get involved in a war that has nothing to do with me. Then I'm brought here to a castle out in the middle of nowhere. Then, you know, I finally start making a life for myself, and then, you guys have to go and screw it all up."

They did you a favor.

He shook his head slightly as he walked forward and slammed a foot down on the man's crotch, causing the other to elicit a high-pitched scream. Shirou pressed down harder and harder, his jaw tightening as coolly looked down at his victim.

"I don't know what I was thinking for nearly, what, the last half of a year? Yeah, I got here sometime in September, I guess, and now it's March? I guess I thought that, well, being a completely different place from where I'm from, that my outlook on life and how I approached things would have to change, too. But, that was too idealistic, too simplistic, and too naïve of me. Thanks for reminding me that things are exactly the same no matter where I go."

Same evil, same malice, same stupidity, no matter where you go.

Shirou eased his weight off of the other man. Taking a few steps back, he fell down to kneel and
simply looked carefully at the beat-up person in front of him. The man whined a bit unconsciously before a fierce growl erupted from his mouth. The man pushed himself up slowly, clutching at his side the entire time.

"So, you were just deceiving everyone the entire time?" the guy grunted. "Playing the innocent clown until you could finally strike?"

"Nah," Shirou denied, loftily waving his hand in denial. "I'm no actor. I was honestly trying to live my life and set out to accomplish what I'd originally planned, but you guys screwed that up. So, now I'm here, with you. This isn't your lucky day."

"No," the man disagreed as he stood up. "It isn't yours!"

Shirou narrowed his eyes slightly when he heard that declaration, though there wasn't enough time for him to consider what it meant when he felt an arm wrap around his neck and pull him up to his full height. The muscular arm squeezed around his throat, and for a minute, he wondered if the two people who were trying to kill him really understood his current frame of mentality right then. Probably not.

*Don't falter. Take him down and do it fast.*

Shirou grasped at the arm tightly with his left hand and thrust back his right elbow the person's gut as hard as he could. His attacker let out a harsh grunt and Shirou was quick to pull away the beefy arm and spin around, grabbing hold of the person's tunic and shoving them into a wall. When it seemed that his perpetrator was about to strike back, the redhead slammed his head forward and executed a heavy headbutt. The blow took the man by surprise and Shirou steadily followed up by smashing the back of the man's head as hard as he could into the wall, and then letting the guy falter and fall forward onto the ground on his own.

*That's not enough! You need to finish this!*

As soon as the second man hit the ground, Shirou spun back to grab the tunic of the first one. Seeing that just a simple tug made the person unsteady, Shirou made a quick strike at the man's left knee, sending him spiraling back down onto the ground.

"Stay put," he ordered the bewildered man as he went to talk to the second man.

Pulling the second man up again by his tunic and slamming back against the wall, he asked,

"How many more of you are there? Do you have backup coming?"

The man refrained from answering and Shirou breathed slowly out of his nose, slightly annoyed. Clenching a fist, he launched it straight into the man's stomach, causing the guy to try to double over. Shirou kept a tight grip on the man's tunic to keep him standing straight, and shoved him back against the wall.

"One more time," he said determinedly. "Are there more of you coming?"

"...No," the man was slow to reply.

"Do you know why everyone's targeting me?"

The man painfully shook his head. "No."

"Do you know who the ringleader of all of this is?"
Another shake. "I was just hired for a job, man! I don't know what's going on! I just follow orders."

"Do you know anything that is of any use to me whatsoever?"

"No," came the reply, his hand raising up so he could point at the first man still crashed on the ground. "But, he does! He knows everything. Please don't hurt me anymore."

Shirou looked back at the other man who was now glaring vehemently at the traitor. He nodded his head slightly and turned back to the second person, who seemed somewhat hopeful.

"So, see? I told you all I know, so let me go, okay?"

"Yeah, sure," Shirou agreed with a small smile. "You're free to go."

_Deal with him._

The man cracked a smile himself until Shirou continued:

"...Is what I'd like to say, but I don't want to take the chance that you might run back and tattle to your boss. So, sorry, you've got to stay here a bit longer."

"...Y-you're going to kill me?"

"I hadn't planned on it," Shirou laughed. "I don't make a habit of killing others. I just need you out of the way for a while more. Don't think too badly of me for this, all right?"

He followed those words up by spinning in a tight circle and sending a powerful high kick crashing into the man's right temple, sending him careening into an adjacent wall and then falling to the ground, unconscious, with a sickening thud. Shirou casually shifted to his left a few steps to look down the passageway just to make sure no one else was coming for certain before he turned his attention back to the now very alert man behind him. The man tried to move back away from the redhead, but his nearly broken bones were starting to definitely impair his movements. He settled for glaring at Shirou instead, his mouth set into a deep scowl.

_Now, for the next obstacle._

"Wh-what the hell do you want from me?"

"Answers," replied Shirou, as if it was nothing short of obvious. "I'm tired of being led around like some kind of puppy. You're going to tell me what I want to know, and if you don't, this is going to be a very difficult experience for you."

"Fuck you! If you were this strong, why didn't you just beat us down before? You wouldn't even be here right now if you had!"

_And miss the look on your face? Hah._

The time traveler cocked his head slightly. "Yeah. I should have taken a few more precautions, but I was afraid of breaking some promises."

"The fuck? What fucking promises?"

Shirou smiled. "I made a promise to the guy who sent me to Britain that I wouldn't show off any more than necessary, for one. For two, I promised the king I wouldn't cause any trouble. If I had killed someone back then, that would have put me in a _really_ bad position, so I couldn't do that. Plus, you weren't soldiers, so I thought I'd be okay. Guess I underestimated you guys."
That's an understatement.

The man gritted his teeth as Shirou continued to smile. Shirou chuckled softly.

"But now, well, all bets are off. So, I've answered your questions. Now, how about answering mine? Firstly, how did you hear about Tryst, huh? Secondly, why are you people after me? Thirdly, who are you? Are you part of the castle staff? Fourthly, who's behind all of this?"

"I ain't telling you shit."

"Huh, that's too bad," Shirou lamented a bit. "I was hoping you would make this easier for yourself. Now I have to actually pry it out of you."

Shirou walked over calmly, cracking his knuckles all the while. The man simply smirked, feeling that he could take anything the redhead dished out.

"You don't think this'll land you in trouble, huh, red boy? You're going to get kicked out, or maybe even executed!"

"I doubt that," Shirou said as he leaned down in front of the man. "I mean, first things first, I didn't fight back as hard as I could because I was afraid that someone might see. But, you tell me, do you see anyone here with us, besides that guy who's sleeping over there with that corpse? Anyone at all?"

Use this opportunity wisely.

When silence answered him, Shirou shook his head. "Now, tell me, who do you think they're more likely to believe? You, someone who probably has never even met the king, or me, someone the king has traveled with personally and who could never even throw a punch at anyone because he's too 'meek'? They'd believe me every time. Now, answer the first question."

"What question?" the man delayed, much to Shirou's displeasure. "Don't know what you're talking about."

The man continued smirking until Shirou grabbed the man's left hand and, without faltering in the slightest, steadily bent the index finger back until it broke at the base knuckle, causing the man to give out a loud howl. The man tried to pull back his hand with his right one, but Shirou simply slammed a fist into the fractured bones, effectively breaking them with absolution. He then took a hold of the middle finger and bent it back much in the same way, easily breaking it as well. The man cried out again and Shirou let go of the hand as he continued kneeling beside him.

This is how you do it. This is how you overcome them.

"Stop making this difficult for yourself. Answer the question. How did you hear about Tryst?"

"F-fuck you!" the man screamed out, clutching his hand to his chest as he tried to protect his broken ribs at the same time. "I'm not telling you shit!"

Just remember:...

Shirou nodded once, stood up, and calmly placed a boot atop of the man's kneecap. The man looked up at the redhead with horror as Shirou reached down to get a good grasp of the back of the man's ankle. He tried to kick his leg around to make his interrogator stumble, but Shirou hardly faltered, his balance nothing short of perfect.
"Last chance," Shirou warned, pulling up on the ankle a bit. "And I'm warning you – if you think I don't have the physical strength to do this, you're going to be in a lot of pain within a few moments."

"Fuck you! Fuck you! Get off of me!" the man cried, still kicking.

Shirou nodded again and slowly and achingly pulled up on the ankle. His foot ground down hard over the kneecap, his golden-brown eyes never leaving the man's chocolate brown ones. The redhead pulled up further and further, starting to feel resistance as the leg angle reached its limit.

"No! No! Let me go! Stop! STOP!"

He stopped, but only long enough to ask, "How do you know about Tryst?"

"Fuck you! I don't know anything! Stop this!"

"Huh," murmured Shirou. "Then, I guess it's fortunate for me that no one's around to rescue you, because they'd definitely hear what you're about to scream next."

"NO! STOP!"

*The ends ALWAYS justify the means.*

Summoning up a large boost of strength, Shirou put both hands around the ankle and pulled upwards as hard as he could, wincing a bit himself as he heard the revolting, sickening, and overwhelmingly loud crack as the foreleg detached itself from the thigh, the kneecap shattering to pieces.

"AHHHHHHHH!" the man screamed, reaching for his broken leg with both of his hands, each one trembling as he struggled with the pain. "AHHHHHHH! You *fuck*! Fuck! God, *damn it*!"

Shirou let go of the now awkwardly placed foreleg and crossed over to the man's other side, placing a foot on top of the other kneecap.

*The ends justify the means.*

"So, shall I break the other one now?" he asked, waiting patiently as the man continued screaming.

"NO! God, no! Please! *Leave me alone!*"

"Last time," Shirou said in a clear tone. "How do you know about Tryst?"

"God," the man cried out, tears trailing down his cheeks. "My God, someone help me!"

*The ends justify the means.*

Shirou pushed down on the right kneecap with a bit more pressure to make it clear that he was growing impatient.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait! T-Tryst, right?" the man hurriedly said, looking somewhat dazed and out of it. "S-some people went and ch-checked it out! Th-they s-saw th-that it was burnt to the g-ground, a-and th-thought that you... God! P-people th-think that y-you did that!"

"Second question," Shirou said, absorbing the information and locking it away for later consideration. "Why are you guys after me?"
"I-I don't know! Honest! I j-just got the assignment a-and w-was trying t-to complete it! I-I don't have a-any personal g-grudges against you! I s-swear!"

"Hm," the redhead replied, believing the man. "Third question: who are you?"

"I-I'm with the c-cleaning staff! I swear, I-I didn't know aAnything about w-what was going to h-happen!"

"Who's the leader of this band of misfits?"

"God, I don't know! A-all I know is D-Dai hired me! Th-that's right!" the man declared, sniffing a bit as his face suddenly darkened. "It-it was all D-Dai's idea! H-he hired us! H-he s-said that he w-wanted you gone!"

"You've done this before?"

The man bowed his head before shifting his eyes to look over at the dead bodies spread out around them. He licked his lips a bit as he frowned.

"None of them fought back like you," he whispered softly and slowly, his stuttering evening out. "They never stood a chance..."

"How many of you guys are there down here? How many will I have to deal with? And where are we? Are these the castle dungeons?" Shirou asked, firing one question off after another.

The man's eyes were somewhat dull as the pain caught up with him. He swallowed, licking his lips again as he looked back up at Shirou.

"Not many," he responded after a short while. "Maybe ten of us? Probably not even that. I don't know for sure. And, we're in the dungeons, but not under the castle. Those dungeons spread out and connect to the sewers and other tunnels that lead out away from the city from underneath. We're probably a good half a league out from the city itself, and maybe a full league from the main castle..."

"Last question, and then you can rest," Shirou reassured the man as gently as he could. Standing up, he then asked, "Now. Where is Dai?"

And now, it's time to hunt.

"Damn it, how does this thing work?"

"You just talk into it," Shirou replied, his feet hitting the ground hard as he sped through one abandoned building after another. "It isn't rocket science."

He slid through one doorway, immediately bending backwards as a dagger zipped straight over him. Leaning back on his hands, he flipped backwards and quickly approached the woman with a quick strike from his fist. He stunned her momentarily, but not enough that she wasn't able to hurriedly mutter a few words and send streams of fire racing towards him. Shirou grunted and promptly materialized a wall of solid steel right in front of himself. The fire slammed into the wall and as soon as it perished, a bow was already in Shirou's hand with the sight aimed straight at the woman in front of him. The arrow in his hand flew from his fingers and landed true to his aim right into the heart of his target.

Both feeling and seeing the intense concentration of prana that left its container once it "died" was
enough to ease his mind somewhat. Shirou walked up to the pile of mud and clay and pulled out the lighter from his back pocket. A simple fire spell would have done just fine, but he simply couldn’t wrap his head around that element. The only element he could somewhat access at all was earth, and its relative, gravity. The latter certainly wasn’t something he could control well, if at all, and the former... Well, he had both on and off days with that one.

He held a couple of fingers to the bud in his ear.

"Rin, you read me?"

"You're coming in loud and clear. Emphasis on the loud part."

Shirou chose to ignore the complaint. "I think I've taken down all of the ho-"

Hearing the clack of something, Shirou spun his gaze around as he simultaneously instinctively ducked down and pushed himself forward. Executing a swift double palm strike to the enemy's chest, he followed up with fierce somersault kick, rolled forward, materialized his bow and an arrow once again, and shot straight into the victim's chest. He exhaled softly and slowly as he stood back up while a burst of prana expelled from the host.

"Correction," he told Rin. "Now they're all gone."

"Wonderful, Shirou. Now, if you're finished playing around with your clay, would you mind coming back to where the city hall must have been?"

"I wasn't just running around making vases, you know," he muttered as he started walking out of the building.

The two of them were somewhere in northern Alaska where a small village had essentially been wiped out by a mage gone rogue. He and Rin had been assigned to the task because it was supposed to be a simple mission where they eradicated the problem and all of its ties within the small town. The rogue mage also wasn't particularly strong, or smart by the looks of things, and it didn't take long after the two had arrived before earthen golems began charging them. Rin assigned him to cleanup duty while she followed the trail of prana and its many different traces to track down their mark. As for why he was on cleanup duty by himself, well, Rin declared it a good exercise in learning how to accurately trace prana in objects. Eh, he was working on it.

Shirou jogged up to the charred building and went on inside to find Rin waiting impatiently for him. Sitting beside her in a chair, tied up in ropes, was the person he assumed to be their victim. The woman’s gaze met his and he frowned as he glanced over at Rin.

"It's a woman."

"Yes. You're particularly sharp today, Shirou," Rin responded dryly. "Thank God I don't have to teach you the difference between the male and female sexes."

"Oh, shut up. I just assumed it was a guy by how the Association was talking."

"Unfortunately, women can be just as, if not more, crazy than men at times."

Rin took out her smartphone and frowned as she pressed a few buttons.

"What number are you at now?" he asked, referring to the number of phones she had already broken by that point.
She glared at him briefly before looking back at the phone. "Thirty-five."

"Jesus, Rin."

Rin paused a moment, her index finger stilling before she slowly turned to smile sweetly at him. "Shall I take that to mean you do not recall what happened the last time you mocked me for my technological skills? I'm fairly certain your eyebrows and hair do."

Shirou decided to quickly change topics, not wanting to think about how she had "accidentally" attached a spell to the stove that had increased the fire strength without him ever knowing. He wasn't sure he would ever forgive her for laughing her head off as he stared blankly at his flambéed food, his eyebrows seared straight off along with a good portion of his hair. He'd had to settle with practically being bald for a couple of weeks and with her wondering if she should buy him something to help polish his shiny, cue ball head.

"Uh, right, so, is the program working right yet? Or are you going by email right now?"

"Waver-ly Boy sent –"

"Wait, by Waver, are you talking about Lord El –"

Rin immediately cut him off. "I don't give a flying flip about what he's supposed to be called. He'll receive my respect when he figures out how to actually give some himself. Can you believe that he has a TV hooked up in his office and that he sits there playing video games every single time I'm supposed to meet and discuss anything with him? Every single time. Every. Single. Time. It's no wonder no one wants to date him. Unbelievable."

"Pretty sure I didn't need to know any of that..."

"He sent me a note via a familiar," Rin explained before gesturing to their target. "We are to convene three kilometers south of here so we can head to our next drop point."

"So," Shirou started, shrugging his muscular shoulders slightly, "what now? Is she coming with us?"

"Of course not," Rin replied with a frown. "She's to be disposed of here."

"Rin..."

"I will take care of that," she reassured him. "But I need you to extract the information from her."

"Using what?" he asked, looking around. "Am I supposed to, I don't know, stick in a USB stick into her ear, or better yet, attach a cable to the back of her neck and rig her to an HDD system and electronically access her files by using the nerves as access points? Maybe sync with her via cloud?"

Okay, he hadn't liked being bald, but one more jab at her couldn't hurt.

Rin stared at him with somewhat widened eyes, his rambling having completely gone over her head, as he'd predicted. She frowned and looked at their victim before glancing back at him with one eyebrow raised. Her right eye twitched a little as she subconsciously clenched a fist, her smile as artificial as he'd ever seen one.

"My, my, Shirou. You are on a roll today. I daresay I will enjoy the next few weeks of your training."
Shirou tried to make a cheeky smile until he felt the pressure from her anger and irritation slam into him, and for a second, he swore that the long, craggy hand of a demon had attached itself to him, ensuring a torturous and very, very painful demise. Shirou stiffened and slowly bowed his head to her in deference. She simply smiled back at him, as if nothing had ever occurred, but the feeling of certain death faded away regardless.

He sighed. "How am I supposed to extract information from her?"

"Interrogation, of course. What else is there?" she asked rhetorically, still looking annoyed as she placed one hand on her hip. When she saw his expression of obvious rejection to the idea, she added,

"Look. Either you do the interrogation, or you dispose of her. Choose."

"But, she's a woman," he protested.

"Yes, Shirou," Rin snapped. "We have established that she is indeed female. She is also a lunatic who has dissolved every person of this village into "la prana d'essence", and not even for the benefit of the Association either, but I suppose that should all be overlooked because she is a woman? We should let her go because she was fortunate enough to be born a sex that you can't see yourself hurting? How extraordinarily kind of you, Shirou."

"But..."

"Fine," she muttered, turning away. "Then go home. You're of no use to me here."

Shirou moved forward, quickly grabbing a hold of her wrist. He pulled her back to make sure she made eye contact with him.

"No. I'm not going anywhere. I'll do it. I just need to know how."

The raven-haired woman's blue eyes widened slightly before she averted her eyes. His sudden assertiveness had caught her off guard, although she was really appreciative that he was willing to take action. She really hated drawing information out from people – she always tripped at the very end, which would make the entire thing utterly pointless overall. Glancing back at Shirou, she gently pulled her wrist back out of his grip.

"First things first," she murmured back, slightly mollified. "You need to realize that who you're interrogating is no longer a person, Shirou. It is a thing. A barrier that contains all of the information you need. And as with all barriers, it must be ripped down and apart until not a single piece of it is left remaining."

"I can't do that," he said back softly, causing Rin to frown somewhat. "She's obviously human, and obviously alive. There's got to be another way to go about this."

Rin crossed her arms over her chest. "There are, but you need to learn how to get things done the quickest and most efficient way. Now, I need you to shut down whatever emotions or pathetic feelings of sympathy you may have for this psycho and take care of this for me. Here's a hint: pain works wonders."

"You want me to just beat her up? What, like she's some kind of cow or pig?"

"It," his partner corrected him, her frown deepening. "This, thing, is no longer a human being. It is something that is meant to be used for the purpose we establish for it and then taken out of its misery."
"Bullshit, Rin," he countered. "What's going on with you? How can you act like there's nothing wrong with doing this?"

She was running out of options. "You had no trouble killing Kotomine, as I recall. He was a person. What is the difference between torturing this girl for information and that?"

Shirou stood his ground and lifted his chin, obstinate. "You can't kill something that is already dead. You're the one who told me he didn't have a heart and that something was acting as one instead. That means he wasn't alive – he wasn't human. But this girl, she's alive. I can't just do something like that to her."

Her jaw clenched tightly before she suddenly turned away from him and picked up a rather strong, durable looking metal pipe. Shirou watched her turn back around and come his way before instead moving to right up in front of their victim. Her fingers tightened around the pipe before she, like many times before, lifted it up high above her head.

Shirou wasn't sure whether it was the tightening of skin around her eyes, the way her entire body seemed to lock in place as she looked down at their mark, or the slight, but noticeable trembling of her hand as she held up the pipe. Maybe it was the fact that everything about her screamed that she didn't want to do this again, that she was tired of dealing with this, but would do so anyway because she would tolerate no less of herself. She would complete this job for the sake of pleasing the perfectionist within her, only to suffer inwardly for weeks later as she recalled every single wrongful thing she did with heavy, burdening guilt. The thought of that happening caused Shirou's chest to hurt more than the idea of causing pain himself – he couldn't let his best friend go through that. Not again.

His hand reached out and caught the pipe with a sure grip before he even understood what he was doing. Rin's aqua-blue eyes slowly shifted to look at him, and he could tell that she was definitely pushing herself. Shirou gripped the pipe tighter and forcefully pulled it out of her hand.

"Give me that."

"Shirou," she said, not bothering to reach for the weapon again. "Once you do this, there is no going back. You can't approach this half-baked."

He looked down briefly at her hand. It was still trembling. He straightened his shoulders and gently pushed her away from him as he held onto the pipe tightly and looked down at the woman sitting in front of him.

"I know."

He reached down deeply inward for the cool resolution he needed to complete his task. This was the first mission where he needed to take any forcible approaches with their targets – Rin had normally completed everything herself, but he could tell the experiences were starting to weigh her down. She always looked more and more haggard and withdrawn than usual, so it was high time for him to take charge of something himself. He also had the added benefit of not having the normal thought processes of most people – he could tune out things that would have normally bothered him and become as dead and cold inside as a machine.

His resolve found, Shirou glared down at his mark, the pipe shifting in his hand smoothly as his eyes slowly shifted into ice-cold brown pearls, revealing no emotions whatsoever. He gripped the pipe tightly and just as he was about to pull his arm back, he heard Rin say,

"Just remember, Shirou," she said clearly, her own voice as cold as he inwardly felt, "the ends
always justify the means. Always."

his only response to her was to lift up the pipe clear into the air before sending it flying straight at
his target with all of the force he could muster. He concentrated so hard on the making sure the
blow hit solidly that he didn't hear her whisper the words,

"They have to. There would be no point to this nonsense otherwise..."

shirou frowned as he remembered that specific event. How could he possibly have forgotten? That
was a monumental turn in his professional life, so to speak, and he'd definitely felt a shift with how
rin had approached him after that. He couldn't say that it was fear, but rather respect with a touch
of admiration. it had been odd to experience, after going so long as her lesser. It was almost as if
she had finally seen him as an equal after he'd taken over the interrogation processes. Maybe he
had forgotten because it had become commonplace in his life, whereas now, it seemed to once
again be vastly different.

luckily for his state of mind, their first victim hadn't died by his hands, but he would never forget
the look of utter and abject fear present on her face. She may have been a psychotic mage hell-bent
on destruction – he wasn't sure exactly how many villages she'd torched before then – but she had
still been a human being. After looking down on her after gathering all the necessary information
that she screamed out with pleadings for him to stop, he'd had to leave the room and leave rin to
clean up the mess. His clothes had been splattered with blood and whatever other crap that had
flew onto him and he hadn't slept well that night, or week, or even month afterwards. however, he
soon learned to deal. It had become second nature to him at some point.

the ends justify the means.

yes, that was part of the reason why he'd had no problem leaving that one guy whose leg he'd
broken in half there in that dead end to possibly die. The other reason was because the guy had
been the one to start everything in the first place. Well, whatever the case, that person was no
longer his problem. To be honest, it had felt a bit nice to step back into his old proverbial shoes. It
had been somewhat refreshing, actually. Did that make him a sadist? Shirou wasn't sure if he had a
problem with that or not.

then, there had been the constant voice in his head as he'd felt himself reawaken to his combat
abilities. The voice had been a combination of him on a really bad day and rin on an average day.
he could understand hearing himself – his bad days were not particularly good to recall and also
made him out to be somewhat of an asshole – but rin? That had to be a sign that something,
somewhere, was very wrong in this world. Well, besides the fact that he was 1,500 years in the past
attempting to save a heroic being from a possible life of endless suffering without a clue as to how,
but that was another worry for another day.

"so, uh, can i go now?"

shirou focused his attention back on the man who he had been holding against the wall with quite
some force. He had unwittingly used so much force that the guy was wincing from the pain, but
again, that was not Shirou's problem, at all.

that's right, he'd been interrogating this man for some time, since the previous eight or so people
had been completely useless to him. This man, of course, had been no better, but Shirou knew he
was getting closer to his target. He could feel it, and when Shirou finally found that miserable man
known as dai, he was going to...
Wait, to what? What would he do? Shirou found that he had an unmistakable urge to beat the godforsaken life out of the bastard, but Dai had some prominence, and had a powerful friend in Telyn. She may have run away from home, but she still had connections. He also had no doubt that he would be the first suspect to consider, seeing as Shirou had never seen eye to eye with Dai. Hell, what was he saying? He would've been a suspect anyway, based purely on how he looked and how new he was to the castle. He'd only been there for practically three months, for crying out loud.

Shirou frowned more deeply. He had to think about this more clearly.

"Um, sir? Lord? Master?"

"Hm?" muttered Shirou as he was roused from his thoughts yet again. "Let you go?"

The man in front of him nodded his head assertively, hope dawning in his eyes.

"Nah, don't think so."

The man didn't have the time to even feel disappointed as Shirou chucked a low punch into his stomach and watched with minimal interest as he fell down to the stone ground. The redhead turned away as the man gurgled for help and seemed to adamantly ignore him instead. The man followed Shirou with his eyes, his outstretched hand wavering in the air until his vision finally failed him as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Shirou rubbed the back of his head as he walked down the extensively long tunnel, not really certain of how much time had already lapsed. He still wasn't quite sure how long a league was, but it had to be nearly five kilometers. He didn't know what time it was or if Zago or anyone he knew was even awake yet. What he did know was that he was definitely getting closer to the castle. As soon as he'd reached the city limits, the tunnels had suddenly expanded and become ridiculously complicated. Shirou could definitely understand how someone could get lost forever within its depths. Fortunately enough for him, each person he struck down silently and stealthily was kind enough to show him the correct path. Or, at least, they directed him to his next victim, and that was good enough for him.

Now, however, he was pretty sure that he was back under the main castle, as the rocky stone that seemed to be aging in several places with moss and algae hanging around – it was connected to the sewers, after all – was replaced with carved stone blocks aligning the walls. Shirou also noticed a number of sconces adorning the walls, though there weren't any torches present. The absolutely putrid smell from the city sewers was also starting to fade, though Shirou was actually sure whether he was capable of smelling anything else anyway, considering how absolutely foul everything had smelled. There was very little water cycling down through the tunnels, so all the bad stuff just...sat there.

Shirou walked on for another good ten minutes before the enclosed shaft opened up into a somewhat spacious area. This was it, he realized as he looked around himself. This was the small enclosure that secretly connected to the dungeons. It also broke off into several other passages that led to closed off areas in the castle itself. The only reason these possible breaches weren't well-known to most was because the tunnels beneath the city were so complicated that no one could normally make it out away from the castle alive. Besides, if they didn't die from starvation in thirst in the midst of the maze, then they'd surely die from lack of breathable air. The path Shirou had taken had been full of twists and turns, and the only reason he'd gotten along was because of all of the "guides" along the way.

The entire area was dark save the soft glow coming from one of the paths that veered off away from the dungeons and the underground city entrance. Shirou narrowed his eyes, suspicion
flooding his mind. Was he crazy for thinking that this had to be some kind of trick, or maybe he was simply paranoid? There was no way his target could be down that corridor, but if, by some chance, Dai was down that way, Shirou had to take the opportunity to possibly confront him, no matter what possibly awaited him.

The ends justify the means.

A dagger flashed into materialization in his hand before he even realized what he was doing, and he quickly dissipated it. Clutching a hand to his chest, Shirou took in a deep breath. He was radiating with malice and needed to tone down his killing intent. What if the guy was someone who could feel misplaced intentions towards himself? Shirou had no intention to kill Dai in the first place – he was still just running on his high from his countless interrogations.

This was why he sometimes wouldn't go on some missions with Rin; there were a number of instances where he couldn't turn off the switch between the shadow of himself and his real self. Then, there were other times, like the past number of months, when he forgot the switch existed or how to turn it on in the first place. He took in yet another deep breath. Man, he was a wreck.

"Breathe," he commanded himself, feeling himself sink back into a state of dispassionate coolness. "You aren't in danger. He can't touch you. Just get your information from him and make sure he stays alive."

Shirou looked down at his hands before clenching them.

"Make sure he serves as an example to anyone else who decides to screw with me," he whispered to himself. Then, after a brief feeling of sadness hit him, he said, "Even if this king was the one I'd known, she would never be able to recognize me. I've changed so much. In both good and bad ways."

He looked up to stare over at the lit passageway. Unlike what the queen had said about King Arthur, he thought as he carefully and silently walked across the room, Shirou had not yet found a happy place. Rin knew how to handle his switches, and Shirou knew how to compose himself well enough normally, but he was a ticking time bomb. Maybe it was for the best that he'd essentially been in a state of emotional suspension all this time. Going in time must have shocked him a lot worse than he'd originally suspected, and there was the fact that he'd met Sa-... King Arthur, so that hadn't helped any. Whatever. The past was the past, and he wasn't interested in time traveling any more than absolutely necessary.

Shirou crept down the corridor, feeling his muscles tense further as he came upon another slightly larger enclosure. The area opened up to a rather long room with one, two, no, three people, that he could see from his hiding spot. There were two grunts and...

His golden-brown eyes narrowed dangerously as he saw the last occupant in the room. The first grunt was standing guard, though he was obviously not being as vigilant as he should've been, and the second grunt was laying on the ground, snoozing a bit. Well, that was fine by Shirou. He, as quietly as a possible, sped forward and, with the first victim completely unaware of his actions, wrapped his left forearm around the man's neck and caught him in a strong chokehold. Shirou clapped a hand over the man's mouth to keep him as silent as he could, all while keeping his attention on the other two occupants. The other grunt was still dozing and the last occupant seemed to be reading something on the wall.

Shirou felt the man's strength leave him as he fell unconscious, and after lying him down somewhat gently, Shirou projected a thick cloth. He stalked across the room, keeping a close eye on Dai as he did and then leaned down near the sleeping grunt. Smoothly turning him over, he
straddled the guy and after tightly binding the man's wrists with some projected rope, Shirou forcefully pulled the man's mouth open and stuffed the cloth in as far as he could. He then placed a hand over the mouth, though by this time the man was already wide awake. He made as if to scream when Shirou pulled out from his right pocket a knife that he had "borrowed" from someone along the way and held it very close to the man's neck.

"Make a single sound," he whispered harshly, his eyes dashing up to look at Dai, "and your life is forfeit. Now, which will it be?"

The man eyed the knife nervously, his resolve crashing down around him as Shirou pinched the man's nose closed. A couple of minutes passed by, and as each second ticked by, the redhead saw his victim grow more and more desperate, though all Shirou had to do was press the knife to the man's neck hard enough to draw blood. Shirou watched the man's eyes' pupils slowly enlarge from lack of oxygen before the man slackened completely. The time traveler immediately dispersed his projections, waiting impatiently for the man's brain to force him to breathe in again. As soon as the first breath was drawn, Shirou was on his feet, looking straight at his one last obstacle.

*You have one shot. Don't blow it this time. If he gets away scot-free, then you're SOL.*

Shirou's right hand that was holding the knife trembled with anticipation and he made his way across the room. He secured it in his pocket again - killing was not currently an option. Dai continued to read along, obviously unaware of the oncoming danger behind him. Just as he turned to ask one of his grunts something, that was when Shirou sped forward, one hand reaching for the man's tunic as his other fist clenched, ready to throw a punch. Dai's eyes widened as he finally noticed the danger he was in and he tried to shift backwards away from the redhead's range. Shirou shifted at the last second to his right, using that as a chance to flank Dai from the side.

The latter fumbled back a bit to try and create some distance, but Shirou was charging forward within an instant, his clenched fist racing through the air as he slammed it into Dai's face. Dai went sprawling back onto the ground, his face distorted from both shock and rage. Shirou simply looked down his nose at the cook, eyes narrowed.

"You're out of your league, Dai."

Dai turned his head to the side to spit out some blood before glaring back at the redhead.

"You don't know who you're messing with."

Shirou rotated his wrists as he walked forward slowly, almost in a stalking manner. Cracking his knuckles a bit, he exhaled softly. Dai scrunched back somewhat, unable to believe that he was afraid of the stupid, bumbling foreigner that had invaded his kitchen some months before. His heart began to pound as fear and adrenaline screamed through his veins and he gritted his teeth.

No, he wasn't finished – the stupid foreigner would meet his end this day.

"I should have killed you when I'd had the chance," Dai growled out, slowly rising to a crouching position. "You lowly piece of dog shit."

"I wish you'd tried," Shirou responded honestly. "That would have made things move far faster for me, I'm sure."

"What do you want from me, you reject of a Scot?"

"Hmph. I want answers. What else could I possibly need from someone like you?"
"Answers?" Dai questioned with a bark of laughter. "I have none to tell to a rancid, foul being like you."

Shirou's eyes narrowed further, not at all pleased by the insult. Now, that was just rude. He wasn't a zombie or anything.

As he was about to approach Dai finally, he reached out to grab the man by the collar when Dai grabbed at the ground next to him and threw a bunch of dirt particles into Shirou's face. Shirou's eyes widened slightly before he rubbed at them, trying to clear away the dust and dirt as quickly as he could. Dai pushed off of the ground and tackled the redhead, sending him slapping against the stone. The brunet raised his own fists and started hammering them into Shirou's face as fast and hard as he could.

Shirou cried out and growled as he was finally able to open one eye and catch one of Dai's fists in his left hand. His left eye, reddened from the foreign particles, glared up at the brunet with irritation. He saw the other fist come down and caught that one as well, not needing both eyes to manage that much. Shirou gritted his teeth, trying to keep his anger in check.

"That, was a serious mistake."

He quickly shifted his hands from the fists to gripping around Dai's wrists before pulling down on them forcefully. Dai came flying down as Shirou raised up to meet him with a hard headbutt. The former saw lights as he automatically tried reeling back, but the redhead still held a firm grip on the man's wrists. Shirou let them go and pressed back on the man's chest to make room just as he pulled back his legs tightly against his chest and let them slam straight into Dai. The brunet was hurtled back and rolled across the ground before slowly coming to a stop.

Shirou grunted slightly as he cleaned out the rest of the junk from his other eye. He blinked them both a few times, still feeling some pain but knowing he was far better off than before. Standing up, Shirou looked over at the struggling Upper Echelon, not feeling a bit of concern for the man. Dai managed to push himself up from the ground, only to send a murderous glare back over to Shirou. The latter could feel Dai's killing intent all the way from where he stood.

"Make this easy on yourself. I just want answers, and then I'll let you go."

"Fuck. You."

"I could come up with a clever one-liner to that one, but nah, too easy."

Dai roared out his fury, turning and heading straight for Shirou with his arms swinging. Shirou fell into a fighting stance, grabbed one arm with his left hand and swept Dai's feet out from underneath him. The brunet face-planted onto the ground and Shirou swore that he heard a distinct crack of something. Dai slowly shifted his gaze around to look up at Shirou again before he clung onto one of Shirou's legs.

Shirou's eyebrows raised with surprise – he'd never had an enemy do that before. He simply kicked back at Dai's face again to release himself. When Dai tried again, Shirou felt himself grow somewhat annoyed. He kicked Dai away once again before grabbing the man by his tunic and lifting him up to look at him eye-to-eye.

"Last warning. Stop struggling."

Dai swiftly replied by hacking and hocking a loogie into his face.

"Ugh, what the hell? Damn it!" cursed Shirou as he fell back a few steps, again forced to wipe his
Dai lunged forward, reaching and grabbing the shiny metal he saw peeking out of the other man's pocket. Shirou wiped his sleeve across his cheeks and opened his eyes, only barely missing Dai's next attack. The knife instead caught a hold of his tunic's fabric and left a gaping hole trailing from the midway all the way down to the bottom edge. Shirou stared down with horror at the now ruined tunic Ceri had given him. He slowly lifted his gaze back up to lock eye contact with the brunet who simply smirked.

Rage flooded through Shirou's mind. How dare that idiot ruin something he cherished so much? A tear like that couldn't be mended, and even if it could, not well enough not to notice!

Belting out his own cry of outrage, the redhead flew at Dai, his only desire at that point to put down the threat that was trying to ruin his life in every way. Shirou cranked back a fist and sent it flying with no reservation whatsoever into Dai's face, definitely cracking the man's cheekbone. Dai crashed back against the ground, groaning. Shirou would have continued his attack, but then he felt some fiery pain on right arm. Taking a look down at his forearm, he saw a lengthy gash running all along it and frowned.

A burst of prana ran down Shirou as he quickly reinforced his own skin to make it tougher. He doubted it was at all necessary to bother, but Dai did know his way around a knife. Then again, it would have been stranger for him not to, considering what his job occupation was.

"I'm going to finish this now," he said loud enough for the other man to hear him. "And when I do, you will give me the answers I want."

"Hah, you haven't been able to beat me yet," bragged the cook.

"Hah, you haven't been able to beat me yet," bragged the cook.

Shirou simply frowned. "I haven't really been trying. That ends now."

Dai lost his smirk as Shirou was on him in the next second. He waved the knife around, trying to catch the redhead off guard, but Shirou slammed a precise roundhouse kick against Dai's wrist, making the latter drop the piece of metal to the ground. Shirou then spun around and smashed another kick into the cook, sending him flying up against a nearby wall. The redhead followed up quickly by grabbing the man by his tunic and pressing him against the wall as hard as he could. A hand was immediately at Dai's throat, clenching around it as Shirou looked at the man coolly.

"I'm finished playing games with you, Dai," Shirou whispered, tightening his grip around Dai's throat to make the other sputter from lack of air. "You do not call the shots anymore. You are no longer in a position of authority. You will answer what I need to know, or you will come to regret it. Have I made myself clear?"

Dai coughed a little and Shirou eased his grip somewhat.

"I pranced around with you because I really didn't want to hurt you. Not because I like you or
respect you, but for Telyn's sake. I know she's fond of you and that you're like siblings. I'd never want my older sister hurt like this, so I went easy on you. But I'm done. You'd better tell me what I need to know."

"F-fuck you," Dai spat out, making sure to spit on Shirou's face again.

Shirou let go of Dai and slowly wiped the back of his hand against his face before calmly looking back at the brunet. Dai never saw Shirou's hand as the redhead reached down and squarely grabbed Dai's testicles through his pants. His right hand was around Dai's neck again as he tightened his left and squeezed the sensitive area without any remorse. Dai squirmed and cried out as a muscle jumped in Shirou's jaw while he continued clenching his hand together into a fist.

"Why did you attack me?"

A whine was all that met Shirou's question, and he eased up some. Dai licked his lips, pain in his eyes as he murmured,

"Because I couldn't find your sister, asshole."

Shirou blinked, not sure that the he had heard the words correctly. He gaped at Dai for a few moments before anger tore through his body. His left hand gripping one of the testicle clenched until he felt it ready to practically rupture.

"Did you know," he began harshly, his voice low, "that when a man's testicle is popped, he will die within the half-hour? Not to speak of the pain I'm sure you're feeling right now."

Dai couldn't stop the tears as they started to form. His mouth was open wide in a silent scream as Shirou slowly drew back his left hand. The redhead let the man fall down to the ground, holding both of his hands to his groin as he curled into a fetal position.

"Why did you attack me?" Shirou asked again, looking down at the pathetic mess at his feet. A low whine answered him again and Shirou, losing his patience, threw a kick into the man's stomach.

"Last time I'm asking. Why did you –"

"I couldn't...lay a hand...on that knight," Dai wheezed out, breathing labored. "Telyn was upset...because he was there. You're the reason...he was there. You...were the source...of her pain."

What kind of logic was that? He couldn't hurt Percival so he decided to make Shirou's day hell instead?

"That's the reason I've dealt with all of this crap?" Shirou yelled out. "Because you have guard dog issues? That wasn't my fault at all!"

"And...because...I hate...your guts."

"Well, at least that makes sense," Shirou grumbled. "Next question: you're the master planner of all of this, aren't you? The dungeons and whatever?"

"...No. I didn't know about them...until I was told about them."

"By whom?"

"I don't know," Dai admitted grudgingly. "He just comes, gives me information, tells me what to
do, where to go, who to see, who to command, whatever."

Shirou face contorted into another frown. Who was this "he", and what was his connection to Dai? Shirou quickly voiced his question.

"I don't know, I said," the man did nothing but repeat.

Shirou realized with some consternation that the brunet was not going to offer him up any more information than that. Shirou had a couple of choices at that point: keep pressing uselessly for more clues as to what was going on around him since Dai seemed be at the center of everything, or walk away from everything here and try to do things on his own terms. There was a third option, of course, and that was to go back to being a normal cook and trying to live a normal life, but since other powers were determined to involve him in everything it seemed, it probably wouldn't be a good idea for him to act like he could get away with that.

Another matter that bothered him was things were progressing in a different manner than he had been prepared for. Saber hadn't told him anything about her seal being stolen, or about one-meal-a-day issues, or underground killing sprees. The King Arthur of this time hadn't known anything about the servants' housing problems or various other issues either. Saber had spoken a lot about the predicaments she faced with wars, the decisions she had to face in light of them and the consequences that bore down greatly on her afterwards, but not much of inner affairs. Shirou wondered if perhaps Saber had focused so much on the outer aspects that she never came to understand her undoing from the inside as well. She hadn't known her people well, and chosen to hide her true self away from everyone – perhaps if she hadn't, maybe she might have faced all of these different problems in addition as well.

Of course, the last and most obvious answer that he had was that just by being present in the past and coming into contact with all of these people, Shirou had inadvertently changed parts of her history in a way that no one would have guessed possible. Maybe Saber couldn't have known about such things because they didn't actually happen? She couldn't have been that unaware of things happening right under her nose, right? It was a big castle though, and things like this happened all the time throughout history, too, so there was some chance that his presence hadn't somehow screwed everything up, right?

Shirou rubbed the back of his head furiously as Dai continued to stare at him suspiciously. No, Shirou reaffirmed to himself, looking down at the other man. There was little point in speculating over what could be or could have been – he needed answers for certain. Since Dai was incapable of giving them to him, he needed to find someone who would. Zago was bound to know someone who could help him. He honestly would've liked to question the king directly, but she was already pissed enough as it was from what happened with the seal thing – there was little sense in him attempting to do something that might end up with him dying.

He nodded, satisfied with his plan. Now, there was just one last thing that he wanted to do. He wanted to make sure that this would never happen again.

Kneeling down, a muscle in his jaw jumped as he leaned in close to the other man.

"I've been through hell and back since coming to Camelot, and each time was pretty much thanks to you or Baeddan. I can't do anything to him – he's too important. But you? I feel no such reservation. So, listen: I'm going to walk away from this and keep living my life the way I want to, and you are not going to interfere anymore. I don't care if you think I'm invading your territory. You are stuck with me. I guarantee though, if you dare come near me and start something ever again, I can't promise that I'll hold back next time. Got it?"
Shirou rose up to his full height again and turned away slightly. After giving the cook one last glance, he fully turned and began walking away. Dai grunted, not bothering to get up from the ground as he watched Shirou walk away.

To say the least, he was angry. He had been utterly humiliated by a lower class cook, and his plan thoroughly ruined. Dai was hardly one to ever admit defeat, but there was no denying the fact that Shirou outclassed him in every fighting aspect – the redhead was stronger, faster, more skilled and able. However, the man had a soft spot for those in need, as had obviously been witnessed with helping out Eos and Zago a month prior. He also wasn't sure how, but somehow Shirou had managed to rope in the queen into battling against the meal issue as well.

Oh well, it didn't really matter. His part had been played. An evil smirk crossed his face.

"Hmph, what a fool you are," he managed to say loudly enough that the retreating Shirou could hear him.

The latter looked back, an eyebrow raised questioningly.

"How's that?" he asked, just wanting to leave and get to where he belonged.

"There was a reason I was waiting down here for so long. You can't possibly think I'm in this godforsaken place for the fun of it."

"I kind of thought you just enjoyed creepy, disgustingly rank sewers."

Dai continued smirking. "You said before that I was mistaken with what I did, but no, Shirou. You lost your life the moment you laid a single finger on me."

Shirou focused his complete attention on Dai, now fully alert. "What do you..."

He felt his ears twitch slightly when a soft sound rang out from down the long corridor. Another one, similar to a low beastly growl followed after, and the slight padding of footstep. Shirou swallowed as the growls grew deeper and never noticed Dai's smirk widen even further.

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"I told you," he simpered, looking rather triumphant. "Your fate's been sealed. You'll never get away with hurting me. I'm quite special, you see."

Shirou didn't bother answering as the creature burst out through the corridor. A shiver went straight down Shirou's spine when he saw the eyeball popping out of its eye socket, its teeth gnarly, yellow, and looking ready to fall out at any moment. Its skin sagged as if it were melting right off of the skeleton and it stank worse than any dead body he'd ever smelt. The body had obviously been dead for a long, long while, as maggots were crawling all along its insides and outsides, each white, wiggling body marking its own claim. Shirou exhaled softly as registered what was in front of him.

It was a zombie. It was a mother-loving, freaking zombie.

He felt his heart skip a beat. He hated necromancy. Not only were zombies a massive annoyance to fight against since they felt absolutely zero pain, but he could just feel the pain the hosts were feeling as well. Necromancy stripped away whatever honor was left to a person with death and made them tools to be used for someone else's general interests. It ticked him off that someone would defile a person's body after death and use it for their own begotten interests, as if dying wasn't enough of a punishment.

Shirou gritted his teeth.
"...Was this person one of your 'victims'?

"Ah, I remember that guy. I had him gotten rid of over a year ago – he kept poking his nose around in affairs that had nothing to do with him. Well, at least he's useful now."

Shirou's fists clenched so tightly that his knuckles turned white. The zombie stared absently at the redhead and Shirou could only feel pangs of horror and sympathy for the poor soul who had lost his life for little more than he could have ever predicted.

"You..." he bit out, nearly growling himself. "Did he even know what he was dying for? What was the point of killing him? Why couldn't you have cast him out of the kitchen then?"

Dai chuckled. "I don't recall saying he was from the kitchens."

"What?"

"I said he was poking around. Well, who's going to miss a poor peasant or two, eh, Shirou?"

He felt himself snap again. "You asshole!"

The very moment he spun around to just finish the deed he'd begun and take Dai's life for real, the zombie suddenly flew into motion, spiraling at him. Shirou's eyes widened slightly, having been completely taken aback by the undead beast. The zombie's mouth came snapping at him, barely missing his right bicep as he evaded the attack. His boots slid across the floor as he fell behind the zombie, his fist already raised for his next strike. The zombie twirled back around to go for its next attack, but Shirou slammed his fist into the zombie's face, putting all the weight he could behind the punch. Very much aware that Dai was paying close, gleeful attention to his fight, Shirou jumped and rolled a couple of meters away to snatch the knife that was still lying down on the ground. When the zombie next rose to its feet again and rushed him, Shirou quickly funneled what prana he could into the weapon, strengthening it as he sank it deep within the zombie's chest.

A solid blow filled with prana would normally have been enough to destabilize whatever spell was animating the undead and cause it to die off for good, and Shirou almost thought he'd made a mistake when the zombie kept pushing towards him. It wasn't that he'd made a mistake, it was that his weapon wasn't long enough of a conductor to repel the spell. He needed a sword, or better yet, his arrows.

Shirou once again felt himself grow frustrated over being unable to immediately simply access his abilities and get the job done easily and without wasting his energy. If he was being targeted though, there was no telling how much more trouble he might get in. It was just easier in the long run not to overtly display his skills, as much as it really bothered him now. He bit down on his bottom lip as he slid forward and delivered yet another solid hit to the zombie and sent it tumbling back a bit before he turned and raced out of the small area.

"Yeah, that's right!" Dai shouted after him, much to his further irritation. "Run, boy! Run! You won't make it out of this alive!"

As soon as he was in the pitched-black corridor, he muttered, "Trace on!" and a bow and arrow were immediately within his grasp. He had good reason to do so, too, considering the ten or fifteen zombies waiting hungrily for him towards the end of the path. The one zombie he'd left behind came hobbling up with a speed like Sonic the Hedgehog, though not nearly as cool-looking.

Exhaling shortly, Shirou made a full reversal, cocked his bow, pulling the drawstring back nice and taut, and let the arrow now blazing with some of his prana fly straight through the zombie's body.
The effect was immediate as blue energy swelled from within it before it burst into small pieces of dust that slowly burned away into nothingness. As much as he wanted to say a prayer in light of what he'd just done, he instead turned his attention back to the approaching assemble of undead heading straight for him.

Shirou materialized three more arrows, quickly launching them at his nearest targets before taking his bow into both his hands like a sword and smashing it into the head of another undead. Taking a few steps forward, he made sure to adjust his breathing accordingly as he struck two more beings in much of the same manner before again finally materializing another few arrows.

Three more bodies went down and he could swear that twice as many showed up out of nowhere to take him on. Switching the bow back to his left hand, Shirou materialized a light dagger in his right hand and slammed it into one zombie's head all the way to the hilt. He shielded his eyes when it burst apart, and then threw a kick into one undead that had gotten just a bit too close to him for comfort.

"Damn it!" he cursed, seeing more zombies line up.

How many had Dai ordered to be killed? Were they all from Camelot even, or were some of them unfortunate travelers who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time? There had to be twenty of them trying to kill Shirou at that point, and they were all insanely strong and persistent. Shirou jumped back to make some space, quickly concentrated and bundled some arrows together with prana, and then drew back all three bundles on his bow.

"Trace on: bombardment!" he yelled, releasing each bundle, and watching as all the arrows detached from one another and flitted straight through twelve of his targets.

He watched with a bit of unease as only three of the zombies burst apart, with the other eight collapsing to the ground as mounds of mud.

"What?" he gasped, astounded as more zombies kept coming.

Well, on the good side, not all of them were dead people. On the bad side, he was currently in the sewers. If the sorcerer or whatever was making mud hosts, they had a lot of material to work with. Even worse, Shirou couldn't tell which bodies were actually dead people and which ones were hosts fitted to look like the dead people. It was a ridiculously complicated spell, and not a kind of magecraft he was incredibly familiar with. It reminded him of the psychotic woman back in Alaska, but she hadn't been of a level that could raise the dead. It might've been a lot of worse of a situation if she had been able to.

They were all starting to crowd around him again, eager for a bite or two of his living flesh. Shirou shuddered and gave up on using his bow in such closed-quarters. It disappeared from his hands as he instead summoned Kanshou and Bakuya into existence. The yin and yang swords gleamed softly as he gripped them tightly, as if ready to strike down whatever enemy he faced against. Shirou spun the two blades in his hands before lowering his stance.

There was a very high chance the necromancer was somewhere relatively close, with how much power was being allocated to each zombie and host. Unless he found a way to stop the person, more and more hosts would just pop up and eventually be the end of him. There was little time to come up with a battle plan – he had to keep it nice and simple. Shirou readied his swords. He would just have to follow the trail and take down every single undead he could along the way. He also had to do it fast – with his inability to properly absorb prana from outside sources, all he had left to rely on was his own od, a resource that was running out quite quickly.
Prana swirled gently around his feet as he lowered his stance. This move was yet another thing he would have to thank the king for one day – he had really taken an interest in her prana burst but had incapable of mimicking on any scale, and most certainly not as easily and deftly as she had. The best he could do was push out a balanced burst of prana with each step that increased his speed just enough to get out of trouble. Each burst took at least ten prana though, if he were to put a number to it, so the most he would be able to do would be around five steps. Shirou looked closely at the route available to him.

One step forward, one sidestep right, insert a tight spin leading into another forward dash, a quick step with an acute angular diversion, with the last step followed immediately by a spinning flip over their heads and into freedom, so to speak.

The redhead exhaled softly, hoping things would go as he'd just imagined. His stance fell and he sprang into motion, his first step propelling him forward and directly at one enemy. Kanshou's blade sank deep into the decomposing body and the latter burst apart almost immediately. Turning his head as his eyes searched the next opening, he quickly noticed two zombies coming up on his right, whereas there were nearly four on his left. Without even considering otherwise, he planted his left foot down on the stone hard, a fierce gleam of blue erupting as he shifted with increased speed at the two zombies.

Kanshou came up from beneath at a low angle, slashing straight up diagonally through one zombie as Bakuya's beautiful white blade slid through the other zombie like butter. Shirou took in a short breath as he spun tightly back to his right, his next step crashing against the ground again as he swept through the middle of another few enemies. His fourth step had him sliding to the side a bit before he was able to push off the ground again and right up to yet one more enemy. Both of his blades came slamming down on the body's shoulders, as he, with his final step, launched himself up into the air, flipping around and landing on the ground nearly a meter away.

Shirou barely heard the burst as he raced through the tunnel and was back into the large opening from before. The corridor had been a lot longer than he'd remembered, but now he had bigger problems to deal with. The animated creatures he hadn't destroyed were filtering back in after him like ants – ants large enough to bite his head off – and there were nearly one hundred more in front of him. Shirou breathed in and out slowly as he looked around him at all of the enemies that had appeared out in the middle of nowhere. His golden-brown eyes passed over one body after another, already feeling weary from the battle he knew was about to take place.

"Crud," he muttered, still looking around and trying to devise some kind of strategy.

One of the figures began to move through the horde, catching his attention quickly as he focused instead on them. The person was wearing a dark hooded cloak, their face completely hidden from his sight. He could feel sweat glide down the side of his cheek as he mentally prepared himself for whatever might happen. Shirou took a couple of steps back when the person walked up to him, only a mere five paces away. When they pushed back their hood, Shirou felt himself freeze as their eyes looked at him calmly.

"You," he found himself sputtering out. "Who are you?"

"I take it you are Shirou," his newfound enemy softly responded. "I must admit, I wish we had met under better circumstances."

Shirou wasn't sure why, but just looking at the person made him feel oddly wary and concerned for his safety. He wasn't sure what it was, but there was this feeling of death that surrounded them, and it was a feeling that made him certain that whatever happened next wouldn't be good.
"I'm not a part of this," he blustered, his head rising with confidence he didn't actually possess. "Let me leave and we can forget any of this happened. I don't want to have to hurt you."

"Nor I you, yet you leave me no choice."

Shirou watched the person slowly raise their hand above their head and as all of their minions began to move as one, navigating closer and closer to Shirou as he looked around, his head turning left and right over and over. With the next words they said, he knew his fate really was sealed:

"Leave him alive."

He materialized his two blades one last time, garnering his enemy's surprise. The hell if he was going to go down without a fight, he thought, his body starting to break out in a cold sweat as he considered his probabilities of survival. They were low, but that didn't matter. Shirou drew in his elbows, slid his feet apart, and bent down low, eyes narrowed and focusing on his targets.

"If it's a fight you want," he shouted, "then *bring it!*"
The first blast of magic took Shirou by surprise and he barely evaded it by quickly jumping to his right and falling into a roll. As soon as he was on his feet, Bakuya was in his right hand, flowing straight up over his head and decapitating a zombie unfortunate enough to be near him. The second blast hit him dead center in his chest, sending him rolling back on the ground, disorientated. With a start, Shirou realized that the wind magic his enemy was using was gentle and was only used as a means of distraction while the zombies raced at him. If Rin's Gandr Shots were like bullets straight out of a sniper rifle with enough force to dismember him, then these "blasts" were like fluffy pillows that were being shot out of a giant nerf gun. They stunned him slightly, but he felt no pain whatsoever. He had no particular reason to be wary of them, which worked in his favor.

His enemy really did want him alive. Well, then, Shirou wasn't about to let her down if he could help it – and yes, his enemy was a she.

She had introduced herself as Valeria not shortly before beginning her offensive against him. Shirou had been incredibly surprised that she wasn't of Welsh, Scottish, or English descent. Her olive skin labeled her as someone from the Mediterranean area. For all he knew though, maybe she was from the Middle East. Europe seemed more likely in that it was closer, but he had no way of knowing for certain. It made him wonder what she was doing in Britain – it couldn't have been for any particularly good reason. Valeria was obviously an enemy. The question though, was whether she was just his enemy, or an enemy of the kingdom. Whose side was she on? Why was she there? What did she want with him? Rather, what did anyone want with him?

Something about her made him want to believe she was incredibly powerful. When he'd first seen her, Shirou could have sworn that he wouldn't get out of the battle without a fair share of bumps and bruises. However, maybe he'd actually been worrying for nothing. Maybe he was overestimating her a bit? A little bit of fear was seldom a bad thing, but perhaps he was taking it just a bit too far. There was no doubt that she was rather skilled in her abilities. One look around him at all of the things he had to deal with told him that well enough. These reanimations were the best he had ever witnessed – Caster's little skeleton familiars had nothing on these things. Of course, Caster hadn't really been trying, nor had she even needed to, considering how amazingly crappy of a Master he'd been. That aside though, for what they were, it was really incredible how well they had been constructed. It was almost as if they were normal, yet brainless, humans with rank, decaying skin.

Shirou frowned and turned to look at the zombies that were suddenly rushing at him. The stupid things, he lamented, also had to be the fastest undead objects he had ever come into contact with. Shirou couldn't really understand how they'd assaulted him on those deteriorating legs of theirs – was magic the reason they could move so well? Of course, he didn't really care, but he had to do some crowd control before things really got bad.

Shirou readied Bakuya, spun in a tight circle and using his momentum, he launched the white...
sword through the space in front of him. It spun gracefully as it sliced through one zombie's neck after another before making a full turn and arcing back. He caught Bakuya by its grip and wasted little time in heaving Kanshou through the air next to run down another line of zombies. The ebony blade silently cut through the air as its twin before did in a much similar arc. Just before the sword came back to his hand, his opponent attempted to distract him with yet another blast of wind magic, but Shirou stood his ground and let the puff of air flow over and around him. He chanced a glance at his opponent. The person didn't seem to mind that the magic wasn't causing him any trouble – rather, his enemy appeared somewhat satisfied.

He wasn't going to underestimate anyone again, though - that was only guaranteed to land him in an even deeper mess, as if he hadn't screwed up enough already. Just to be certain, Shirou pushed some more of his leftover prana into reinforcing his skin. His skin might as well have been as tough as a rhinoceros’, with how much he'd reinforced it. Nothing aside of an enchanted weapon or a natural disaster was going to pierce him or cause any harm. He didn't know enough about the human body to reinforce all of his bones and organs, but if he did, that would've been his next plan of action. He also didn't have enough time to do a quick analysis of himself either – with how intricate the human body was, he would need a couple of hours at the very least.

Kanshou and Bakuya glittered dangerously in the dim lighting as he readied them for his next assault. One of his eyebrows rose as a zombie grasped at his arm and tried to bite him. Shirou watched bemusedly as a couple more zombies attempted to do the same thing to his neck and left arm as well. He slowly lifted his gaze to stare at the woman ten meters or so away from him. There was a slight smile on her face, as if she was amused by his circumstances. Bakuya sliced off the zombie attached to his left arm while Kanshou went for the one on his right. Collecting both swords into his right hand, he grasped hold of the leech attached to his neck and pulled it over his shoulder. The decaying body hit the ground and Shirou slammed his foot down onto the face. He struck both swords straight into the creature's heart not even moments later and then stood up again.

The good news was that he hadn't felt any pain whatsoever from the bites. The bad news was that she kept making more familiars with each one he put down. The ten or fifteen zombies he'd taken care of were replaced with more within a very short amount of time and so he was essentially wasting energy trying to take them down. The only choice left was for Shirou to directly attack the main source behind the zombies instead of trying to whittle his enemies down one by one.

The redhead took in a deep breath to steady himself before launching himself forward and straight through the crowd of undead. His eyes focused readily on the woman directly ahead of him, watching her notice his intent to end it all with a final blow. One of her hands rose slowly, gently, and gracefully, and within seconds, five zombies were blocking his path. Frowning slightly, Shirou bent down low to the ground as he ran before leaping up high into the air. His feet landing on each zombie's head, he bounced from side to side before touching back down on the ground and continuing forth.

As he neared closer and closer, Valeria's eyes narrowed slightly. Shirou gritted his teeth when a few more zombies slid in front of her. He pulled his left arm back and then flicked it forward, sending Kanshou flying in a large arc that seemed to barely miss hitting his target and instead whizzed straight past her right shoulder. He grunted and looked somewhat annoyed while Valeria merely seemed surprised. He couldn't really blame her – mages didn't do close combat. She did manage a small smile though.

"You missed me."

Shirou struck down two more zombies with Bakuya, a soft sigh escaping his mouth right before he
smirked at her.

"I wasn't aiming for you."

Her smile slipped away almost immediately and she turned her gaze around to see Kanshou narrowing straight in on her, its aim well and true. Shirou pushed himself forward to make sure Kanshou would complete its path back to its brother without mishap. For a moment, a flicker of doubt passed over him and he just barely managed to shift the white sword over to the right side of chest before Kanshou struck. He didn't want to kill her – he needed answers after all – but perhaps it didn't matter in the end anyway.

When his precious sword shattered into pieces, Shirou wasn't quite sure what had happened. Valeria's eyes were wide, her arm extended due to her funneling prana out into a barrier strong enough to send his sword into small bits. Shirou stared as the glittering pieces of the ebony scattered through the air. Valeria's breath escaped her and she seemed to turn back from her close call with death increasingly slowly; Shirou gripped Bakuya more tightly. Taking one step forward, Bakuya was lowered close to the ground until Shirou slashed it upward towards Valeria in one last act of defiance. A thin line of red appeared across her stomach, though she had managed to escape any real bodily harm.

As Shirou finished following through with his attack, he found himself staring into her eyes that were wide with disbelief and a slight tinge of fear. Her green eyes then began to narrow, and he could swear he saw a brief flash within them before anger flooded her features and she regained control over herself. Time seemed to slow for him in that short moment of time and as he was gearing himself up to jump back, her hand shot out towards his chest.

"Oh shit," was the only thing he managed before a fierce gale of concentrated wind slammed straight into his chest and sent him rocketing straight back like a missile.

He bounced a couple of times against the stone floor before rolling to a stop as he tried to catch his breath. Shirou slowly lifted a hand up to his chest and tenderly touched his skin. His hand trembled as he realized she'd nearly canceled out his reinforcement magecraft with the ferocity of her attack. If he hadn't reinforced himself so heavily, he definitely would have either died from that blast, or had a broken sternum, at the very least. His golden-brown eyes shifted back to look at her before widening as he saw yet another attack charge straight at him, barreling right into and through the very zombies she herself had created. Shirou's heart jumped into his throat as he gritted his teeth and pushed himself off the ground into a backwards somersault, barely avoiding certain doom.

As the gale sped past him, he watched as it slammed into a stone wall and indented it. Shirou's mouth gaped open slightly. No, that wasn't good. Even if it weren't for the fact that he would've practically died if he'd got hit with that, there was also the problem of them being noticed by someone in the castle above them. Besides, what if she hit enough of the foundation and caused a cave-in or something?

"Hey!" he yelled at her. "What happened to taking me alive?"

"I doubt you will die so easily," she answered in turn, a frown on your face. "I should hope you do not, at the very least. That will make things far more interesting for me."

Another gale sped through as she finished speaking, and Shirou jumped out of its path. His chest burned where he had been hit, but he simply poured more prana into his skin, reinforcing it again. He attempted to flank her by dodging in between zombies and coming around on her right, but she basically shred that idea to pieces by turning his way and sending forth yet even more bursts of wind.
Fine. So he had to deal with long-distance attack maneuvers. He could do that – rather, that was probably better than anything else for him. Shirou materialized his bow and gripped it tightly as he ran around her in a wide circle. The zombies were fast, but they weren't agile or quick enough to give him too much of an issue. He projected three arrows, aimed them directly for his target and let each one fly simultaneously. Each arrow crashed into the barrier she constructed and shattered into tiny pieces again, much like Kanshou had.

Damn it. How much prana did she have fueling that thing? He would have to step things up a bit. Durandal appeared in his hand and he strung his new arrow.

This particular sword had taken Shirou a bit of time before he could accurately recreate the sharpness it was known for. It was one of the many swords he had seen come out of Gilgamesh's Gate of Babylon during the war, though he hadn't needed to rely on it much throughout the years. Working together with his genius friend had rendered most of his projections unnecessary, actually, but she had still forced him to continue practicing just in case he did need it at some point. Usually, though, Kanshou and Bakuya were more than good enough to complete any jobs he dealt with. However, if those two couldn't do anything...

Shirou continued running around her in a counterclockwise direction, eyes narrowed as he prepared for his next attack. Valeria frowned when she saw his new weapon of choice and calculated his speed, sending a giant gust of wind straight for where he was predicted to be. Shirou grunted slightly, jumped back and sent Durandal flying. It was so fast that it whistled as it raced through the air. Valeria threw up her barrier quickly, a few zombies falling and turning back into ordinary mud as she reserved her magic primarily for the current danger in front of her.

Durandal hit the barrier with a brutal force, and for a while, Shirou could see Valeria struggling with keeping the sword away from her. One zombie after another fell to the ground in clumps of mud, and Valeria's hands trembled as Durandal fought to pierce through. Eventually, the woman won as Durandal fell to the stone ground with a large clang before shattering. She had managed to deter his attack, but at the cost of a fourth of her army of undead. Being too depleted of prana to utilize the Noble Phantasm accurately, Shirou didn't even bother worrying about the spilt milk, having already created Dáinsleif by the time she'd started to recover. If Durandal hadn't worked, then this one was sure to.

The reddish sword glittered maliciously as he strung it. He didn't wait even a single second more before sending it flying at her. Valeria growled, but seemed to immediately recognize the danger the demonic sword posed to her. Shirou saw the rest of the mud familiars fall to the ground in lumps as she focused all of her concentration solely on blocking this one attack. He was pleased – upset? – to notice that there were only a few more actual humans that had been used against him.

"May you all rest in peace," he murmured, Kanshou and Bakuya flickering to life in his hands as he suddenly charged forward.

Realizing her barrier would do nothing against such a demonic power, she used her wind magic to push it away from her body. Valeria growled, but seemed to immediately recognize the danger the demonic sword posed to her. Shirou saw the rest of the mud familiars fall to the ground in lumps as she focused all of her concentration solely on blocking this one attack. He was pleased – upset? – to notice that there were only a few more actual humans that had been used against him.

Valeria clucked her tongue and sent a gentle breeze flowing through to clear away all of it. When Shirou's auburn hair and golden eyes pierced through the opening she'd made, her chest constricted
slightly. Shirou brought down Bakuya heavily, aiming for whatever part of her he could possibly maim, and she forced him back out of her personal space with another gale. Due to her bewilderment, the wind wasn't as strong as it had previously been, and Shirou forced himself to stand strong through the barrage. He sent both Kanshou and Bakuya flying around, both missing her on their initial sweep before they began arcing back.

"That won't work on me, remember?" Valeria growled out, as she created another barrier.

Two more yin and yang swords appeared in his hands and Shirou sent them flying. Almost immediately after doing so, yet another two swords appeared in his hands. He wasn't leaving this to chance. He sent them flying straight at her.

Valeria began to panic as she blocked against the first set, managed to block the second set as well, and barely created enough time for herself to stream another gale of wind at the very last set. Beads of sweat slid down her face as she breathed in and out heavily. The foreigner had nearly taken her down, but she'd managed to fend off each and every attack of his. Now all she had to do was defeat him for certain and finish her business in these horrible tunnels.

One could imagine her surprise then when a fire of pain radiated from her side, leaving her blinking a couple of times before looking down straight into the man's eyes.

Shirou grimaced when he pushed his dagger in even further, watching as the blood flowed freely and soaked her robes. Keeping eye contact with her as he let go of the dagger, he watched her stumble back a couple of steps. Valeria's hands shook as she touched the hilt of the dagger before it faded away into nothingness. The two looked at each other and Shirou bowed his head slightly, almost as if apologizing.

"I can't let you stop me here. I have things to do," he murmured, backing away. "I really don't want to kill you, but I will if I have to."

Well, that was an age-old story. By this point, he was more than well aware of how many times he'd given his enemies chances and how many times he'd been more or less punished for the mercy. He also knew that sometimes, all someone needed was a chance before they would think to repent for their actions. Lifting her chin and looking down her nose at Shirou, Valeria's eyes narrowed as she held a hand to her wound. It was already starting to heal, Shirou could see, with a wicked red glow gleaming from it. It hardly took much more time at all before her hand fell back to her side and the wound had completely disappeared.

He could tell she was furious as she continued looking at him. When her hand lifted up and she pointed a finger towards him, Shirou quickly put up his guard. If she sent another blast as strong as the previous ones, he wouldn't be able to dodge at so close a range. He had to make sure protect his chest – he wasn't sure if he'd be able to take yet another attack to the same area without consequences. Shirou saw the prana slowly gather before becoming a large squall of wind, directed at him. It slammed into him with an incredible force and he felt himself pushed back several meters before it began to peter out. Breathing out a soft sigh of relief, he tightened his grip around the twin swords that had once again materialized in his hands. Valeria made to send another blow at him, but he charged forward.

He no longer had any zombies to hide behind. He no longer had the luxury of time to help him aim and shoot any arrows or swords. He no longer had the patience to let the fight continue on. Shirou was going to end this fight here and now, for better or for worse.

Valeria's eyes widened slightly when she saw his charge. As her hands rose high, she began firing rapid shots of wind magic. Shirou grimaced – he was already tired enough as it was, but now he
had to do evasion and dodge practice on top of everything else? It was like being back with Rin again.

As soon as his feet hit the ground, he found himself jumping, rolling, dodging, and avoiding every bullet of air aimed at him. The ones that did manage to scrape against him left slight surface wounds and he could tell they were going to hurt something fierce if he managed to survive this. Shirou jumped to his feet again after another quick dodge and felt his chest heaving. His heart was racing and his stamina and adrenaline were definitely starting to fade away. He had enough energy in him for one last prana burst, but if he failed, that was it. He'd be going off of fumes after that.

Prana surged in a blue, blazing trail behind him as Shirou suddenly sped forward, Kanshou and Bakuya clenched in his fists. Valeria seemed taken aback by his sudden increase in speed and pulled back to get out of his range. Kanshou slashed through the air, barely missing his target by a few centimeters. Letting out a roar of frustration, Shirou raised Bakuya high into the air to make the, hopefully, final blow. He didn't register her pointing her left index finger at his chest until a finger-width line of prana left her finger and pierced straight into and through his chest.

The wind magic raced through the right side of his chest as the pupils in his eyes constricted from his surprise and disbelief. Kanshou and Bakuya disappeared in a flurry of prana as Shirou shuffled backwards, not quite sure of what had transpired. His left hand reached up to feel at the hole through his pectoral and he realized he was suddenly having some trouble breathing.

"What?" he gasped, still somewhat confused.

He had been shot, almost as if by a bullet. He couldn't breathe, couldn't really think. Shirou gritted his teeth as he fell back yet another couple of steps before finally spilling to the floor, blood starting to pool from his wound as he lay on the cold stone ground. His right hand reached upwards as if to reach for Valeria, but he was starting to have trouble focusing on her.

She gave him a small smile, her arms wrapping around her body as if for warmth. The chuckle she let out was soft and low.

"You have magnificent abilities," she began, starting to circle him as he clutched at his chest. "I have never before seen someone create something from absolutely nothing. I dearly wished to kill you, while at the same, wished to take you as a pet to nurture and grow into something quite formidable."

"Why are you doing this?" Shirou managed, his eyes shut tightly. "What is wrong with you people?"

"I'm certain you will know it due time," Valeria answered. "Before this, I had thought my master insane. What is the worth in keeping a simple human alive? But to know you are a mage... Despite how much of an absolute amateur you are, that does change things somewhat, I would suppose. My master has picked well, yet again."

"I don't exist for your enjoyment!" he yelled, feeling himself start to weaken. He wouldn't be awake for much longer. "I'm not here to be your plaything and go along with whatever stupid plans you're making!"

Valeria came around to his side and laid her hand gently atop of his wound. Shirou looked at her through his bleary vision, not quite sure of what she was going to do next. When two of her fingers sank into his wound, he found himself screaming from the pain. He didn't know any healing spells, and he didn't have Avalon to protect him anymore.
Damn it, he should have tried learning one or two spells during his tutelage.

The pain abated somewhat when Valeria pulled out her fingers, and he forced himself to look up at her. Alarm bells rang in his head when he found himself looking directly into her gleaming eyes. Bit by bit, he felt himself lose touch with his surroundings. Something about this all seemed familiar as the darkness started to claim him further.

"I cannot wait to see what the future holds for you, Shirou," he heard her say before he finally fell unconscious.

"– expecting?"

"You're... – me! That's... – mission!"

"I am not... – and don't you dare...!"

The eruption of fiery pain was the first sign that he was awake, which was a surprise in and of itself. Shirou tried to move his hand to touch where it hurt on his chest, but discovered he was completely incapable of moving. He couldn't do much else other than breathe, and it was as if something was binding him down to keep him from moving whatsoever.

Well, he'd lost the fight, but he had a good feeling that it wasn't because he'd messed up, but because his enemy was just way out of his league. At least, this time, that had to be it. He had no excuses for the all the other times he'd lost.

Shirou had seen how quickly her wound had closed up – he'd sensed the malice within that red energy. He was also pretty sure that she hadn't gone all out against him. Her last strike had been an intensely concentrated line of wind magic that had seared straight through his reinforcement, in and out through his chest. She had meant business at that moment.

This meant, though, that perhaps her getting rid of the zombies had just been a feint to make him think he was winning. Rather, it seemed more like she had been testing him, as opposed to actually fighting him to the death, like Dai had been. In addition, she apparently was insistent on keeping him alive, whereas Dai was perfectly fine with leaving him to die in a tunnel where no one was supposed to find him.

"Shall I remind you that all of this mess only occurred because you were too rash in dealing with the knight?"

"Knight? What knight? I think you meant to say "pawn". A pawn. Something meant to be used and tossed away at our earliest convenience."

"No, dear. You are a pawn, and are currently very low on my list of people to concern myself with. You are lucky that my master still has some use for you."

"Hah, how laughable! I am the reason any of you find out anything."

"Yes, this is true. But once again, I will remind you that it is you who set everything into motion years before things were supposed to take place. The queen is not situated, the knight is in a bad position and will most assuredly be taken before long. Our pawns are scattered all over, and our rook still doesn't know what is going on!"

Ah, he knew why his situation felt so familiar. Shirou had been caught in much of the same trap years before during the war, thanks to his wonderful sister. Well, it was nice to know some things
never changed. The last time he'd gotten out of his bonds had not been the most enjoyable experience, but he didn't particularly know of any better methods. He mentally prepared himself for the oncoming pain before attempting to purge his body with prana like he had done before.

Trace: on, he thought to himself as he flipped the switch for his magic circuits. He felt each one come back to life and felt somewhat like he was burning from the inside out. Blood slowly bubbled in his throat and seeped out of the corners of his mouth. Shirou groaned mentally as the pain started to wear off but found that he still couldn't move any of his limbs, nor open his eyes, nor do anything for that matter.

That was strange.

This is weird, was one thought that ran across his mind. I did exactly what I'd done last time. Why isn't this working?

All right. Maybe Valeria hadn't used Mystic Eyes. After all, it wasn't like everyone possessed them, even though it seemed like it. That, of course, meant that the magic wasn't locking him down from the inside out, but perhaps from the outside in. That meant he was pretty SOL, though. He would need someone else to release him from his bonds, and it wasn't as if he could just ask Valeria.

Shirou had thought that he'd fallen unconscious due to being bound, but it may have just been coincidental that the binding occurred at the very same time he'd fainted – no, fallen majestically – from his wound. The binding must have set after he'd blacked out and that was why he couldn't open his eyes or do much aside of breathe.

He could swear that her eyes had been glowing at the time though. Was Valeria capable of voiceless incantations? That was a dumb question, considering how many wind spells she'd thrown at him, and so readily, too. Gah, he'd really thought he could beat her, but if she had simply thrown those super attacks at him from the start without giving him time to do anything, that would've been game over for him.

Damn it, Shirou was tired of losing at this point. Mercy wasn't adding up to anything beneficial in this era and his foreignness was making everything a pain in the ass for him. Even if he had killed Dai, he still would've had to face this woman, and perhaps even more of her wrath if Dai had really been so "special".

I'm really starting to hate everyone around here. If I get out of this alive, I may actually have to break down and kiss Percival after all.

"Stop blaming me for everything, you prissy witch! I'm not the one who stole the seal so soon anyway. Shouldn't you be getting onto him about that?"

"I would, but you are inevitably the one who eventually forced the king to find out."

"No, that wasn't my fault. I just wanted the stupid Scot to pay for his crimes. I didn't care about some castle-wide ban or whatever."

"Are you saying that was Dylan's idea?"

"No, it wasn't him. It was someone else who has some kind of vendetta against the king and Baeddan."

The last name Dai – Shirou could only assume it was Dai and Valeria arguing with one another – said caught Shirou's attention. He hadn't met anyone named Dylan before, which may very well have been a good thing, but Baeddan, he definitely knew.
So, someone had an issue with the head cook. That was hardly surprising at all.

"How many people does Dylan have under his command?" asked Valeria softly, sounding a bit irritated. "I have not been updated on his actions as of late."

Shirou heard something scratch against the stone before Dai answered,

"I'm not really sure." There was another scratch or shuffle. "Are you sure we can talk so freely with that idiot laying down over there?"

Valeria appeared to pause for a moment. "No normal person alive would wake up within three hours of being shot through the chest and nearly dying from blood loss. Unless he's a new breed of human, he'll be out for a few days yet."

"I just don't think –"

"That's right. You don't. You're not paid to think. Rather, you aren't paid anything whatsoever, save for the value of your life. Provided that you keep poking your nose around and finding out details that would otherwise be lost to us, I will not render your life forfeit to you."

"God damn it, you're a real right bitch, all right."

Dylan, Dylan, Dylan… Who was Dylan? It would probably be best for him to memorize and remember that name. Also, who was this person who had an issue with Baeddan? Obviously, those kinds of people were a dime a dozen, but that didn't necessarily mean he could write this person off. He didn't particularly care that someone hated Baeddan, but he and the rest of the servants had gone through a lot of crap because of this guy laying down a castle-wide ban just because of a hatred for only one person.

Tell me who's behind all of this.

"This person who initiated that food fiasco... Is he of a high position?"

"He's pretty up there," Dai answered with a grunt. "The king doesn't have a clue."

"As well he shouldn't," Valeria responded. "Once again, the king would have never known at all if you idiots weren't dumb enough to act so rashly. However, perhaps this is for the best. At least we have Shirou within our clutches now."

That didn't tell me a single useful thing.

Dai scoffed. "What am I supposed to be doing with him anyway? Can I just leave him here to possibly freeze? Or drown? Or be eaten by rodents? Or maybe let maggots have their way with him?"

Shirou heard a resounding smack and the sound of something hitting the ground hard – he assumed it was Dai falling on his ass. At least, he hoped it was Dai receiving some kind of punishment. The fucking asshole.

"You would seek his death after I went through so much trouble to make sure he stayed alive?"

Valeria growled. "Had he been any stronger, or had I not been as able as I am, I would have lost my life. I had no intention to show him my true strength – I had to make him think I was running low on prana."

Dai groaned slightly and Shirou heard yet another loud slap. He would have winced if he'd been
able to move at all. There was another shuffle of steps.

"It is nothing short of humiliating for me to have to pretend to be a novice. I wanted to rip his head from his neck and grind his bones into a fine powder for a potion. He absolutely, positively irritated me," Valeria continued. "At the same time, however, he impressed me deeply with his instinctual way of thought and particular abilities. Think of the possibilities that may come from a man who can create something from nothing! We must take him for our own, no matter what."

Aw, shit.

"So, for you to dare assume that you would want me to have him killed... I would much rather have you be thrown into a horde of feral rats rampant with disease. Do not make my actions for naught, you filthy mongrel. He will be more useful to us than a million of you."

Leave me alone. Damn it, I hate you all.

"And when he brings down the king, a new age will dawn, for everyone."

Dai snorted. "What makes you think he'll do that?"

Yeah, why would I do that?

"What makes you think he'll have a choice?"

Oh, fuck you.

"So, what do I do with him then?" Dai asked, sounding irritated.

"Put him someplace where he won't be seen by anyone while I consult with our master to see how he should be positioned."

"Is Merlin going to find out about him?"

"I'm certain Merlin is already more than well aware, the old coot. He doesn't allow the king to involve himself in magi affairs, however, so there is no need to worry any."

There was the sound of Dai spitting. "Fine, I'll see that he's put somewhere...safe."

"See that he is."

Shirou heard footsteps softly walk away from where he was until the person walked out of his range of hearing completely. Another set of footsteps walked closer to him before stopping right at his side. After a short moment of utter silence, Shirou smelled something similar to rotting meat right where his nose was. He longed to move his head away from the foul smell, but the binding on him was too strong for him to do anything.

"I can't believe I have to keep this miscreant alive," Dai complained in a mutter.

Oh God, please get your rank breath out of my face. I wish I could punch you.

"I could just kill him now."

I can't breathe, damn you. I hope Valeria castrates you.

"I like living too much for that, though. Well, as long as he doesn't hurt Telyn anymore, I suppose I can deal with him staying alive."
When the foul odor moved away from Shirou, he wished he could jump for joy. Next plan of action, after dealing with King Arthur's enemies, his own enemies, and whatever other nonsense came about: introducing these people of the past to the wonders of a toothbrush. And salt water. And maybe some kind of breath mint.

"Hmm, but, one last blow won't kill him," his enemy said gleefully.

Warning bells went off in Shirou's head when he heard that. Oh for fuck's sake, don't you dare fucking –

He never finished the train of thought as something bludgeoned hard against his head, truly knocking him unconscious.

Shirou threw a piece of straw into the air, watching as it drifted down slowly like a feather before touching down on the filthy ground. His hand grasped around him for more straw before he started throwing that around as well. Eyes glancing up to look at the soldier standing guard at his cell, Shirou, for the umpteenth time, attempted to materialize a sword, or a knife, or just, something. Yet again, however, he simply stared at an empty hand, hardly even fazed anymore that he couldn't do anything at that point.

This jail's no joke, he thought to himself, blowing away the red bangs covering his eyes. Percival wasn't kidding when he talked about how strong it is.

It had been a solid week since the fight against Valeria. When he'd woken up, he'd found himself deep in the pit of the dungeons, in one of the cells deepest inwards. It was probably far cleaner than the cells closer to the surface, and it seemed like no one knew he was even down there. No one, aside of his guard, had even approached the depths of the dark pit he was in, and the only light visible was that of a torch right in front of his prison. Due to this, he had absolutely no way to contact anyone and with his magecraft constantly being nullified, he didn't have much hope of getting out on his own either. Dai, Shirou supposed, had chosen well in placing him there. Whatever plans the sneaky bastard and Valeria had were ones Shirou simply couldn't do anything about in his current situation.

Truth be told, it was rather unlike him to be so...pessimistic. Unfortunately, he was having a really hard time trying to find a silver lining to his predicament. Over the week, he'd scoured every stone block on the wall, trying to find a weak spot that he could exploit. True to the rumors he'd heard about the past though, dungeons were as impenetrable as they seemed. If Shirou had had half the chance, he would've created a jack hammer and gone to town on the offending barrier to get himself out – to hell with the consequences.

Resentment swelled within him as he turned around and kicked at the wall.

"Seriously, what the fuck?" he muttered, sweeping away more straw. "Dragons? Fine, I can't do anything about them, but I didn't come back all this way to get caught in some stupid political battle that has nothing to do with me. I don't even know why I'm here anymore!"

Shirou was well aware of his selfish thoughts. Continuing to kick at the wall with more and more ferocity each time, he thought of how much better he could have handled coming to the past. Instead of living in a village for a few months, he could have sought out Morgana and attempted to do something about her. Of course, fighting with her one-on-one would've resulted in his death immediately, so maybe it was good he hadn't bothered. He could have tried enlisting with the military force instead of being a wuss about everything and hunted down Mordred, but that was another can of worms all on its own. Maybe he could have looked for a group of mages or
mercenaries and worked with them to better his skills first and then try to live in Camelot. But no, oh no, what was he instead doing? He was working as a lowly cook, as if it were the most normal thing ever.

The worst part of everything, he supposed, was that he was no closer to the king than he'd ever been. In fact, she seemed to be more and more out of his reach with every passing day. She couldn't possibly understand why he would want to be near her and he doubted that she was of a mind to even care.

"Not that there'd be any reason for her to bother," he grumbled. "She doesn't know who I am, knows nothing of those two weeks I shared with Saber... Nothing. Is there a point to me even being here anymore?"

For a brief moment, the thought of leaving Camelot, her, and everything else behind crossed his mind until heavy guilt crept back up into his subconscious. Shirou couldn't let her suffer if he was in a position to stop it, and besides... His jaw tightening, Shirou's eyes narrowed as he reached over to pick up a small rock and gripped it with as much strength as he could muster.

He had a debt to repay. Not only that, Shirou had a plan that needed foiling.

First, he had to contend with Dai. The man had proven time and time again that he was nothing short of a piece of trash. Even Kotomine had proved to be more humane than the bastard Shirou was now dealing with. In addition, Dai was somehow interconnected with this grand plan to take the king down, without the know-how and general understanding of how to actually do so. That had "dangerous" written all over it. If that idiot stuck his nose in the wrong place, that could set off a series of events that might potentially seriously impair King Arthur's rule. If that happened, then there really wouldn't be a point in Shirou sticking around in the past.

Dai wasn't the only topic of interest, either – there was also the matter of that Dylan person. This "Dylan" was the one who'd stolen the royal seal. Shirou would just have to get it back through whatever means available to him. He wasn't quite certain of how to go about that, but he'd think of something.

Additionally, there was the problem with the person who'd ordered the change of rations for each servant. The person was supposedly someone highly ranked, which probably meant that Shirou wouldn't be able to get at him without assistance. The king had no reason to believe him outright, but if he could somehow score an audience with the queen... After all, he and Zago had managed to prove that there was something amiss about with the food proportions. She might agree to talk to him about it. Shirou scrunched up his nose in thought. Eh, the plan needed a bit more ironing before he even attempted doing anything about it.

Next on the list was the issue of Merlin. If that old man had any inkling of what was going on with all the disappearances or with that lady he'd fought, – and lost against – then Shirou had a bone to pick with him. If he was working behind the scenes to make King Arthur's rule any more difficult than it already seemed to be, then something would have to be done about that. That would be a tricky confrontation though, and would have to be done via a higher authority. Right, Shirou wouldn't be able to do anything about that for the moment.

After considering all of those points, the next trouble dealt with that woman, Valeria, and her master, whoever that was. She was also somehow intertwined with Merlin, and it was only obvious that the master, alongside Merlin, had to be a very, very powerful...

A flash of realization swept through Shirou's mind before he slapped a hand against his forehead.
She can't be the reason... Why would she know about me? What does she want with me?

That was a scary thought. No, if that was the case, then there was even more reason for him to remain in Camelot, behind its walls and within its safety net.

Everything and everyone seemed to be his enemy. There were so many people he, someone of so little stature, could touch that the only "in" he had would be with Dai. If he could somehow just prove that there was a backdoor scheme going on in the castle, then... But, he didn't have any proof to show anyone. What was he supposed to do, go up to the king and say, "Oh hey. I know you don't really know or trust me but there's someone close to you who's trying to kill you," or something like that?

First, she was the king, so obviously had a lot of enemies. Plus, without proof, then... A thought struck Shirou with all of the power of a bolt of lightning, sending him reeling a bit.

If the only option he had to use was Dai, then he would have to milk that particular opportunity for all it was worth. There was no love lost between the two of them anyway, and with all the headaches Dai had caused him up to date, not to mention the action of putting him in a jail cell, it was a pretty obvious choice. Shirou just needed a way to convince the fool to give him all of the information Dai was privy to.

Shirou barely had to even question the how. Dai had a very big weak point that Shirou could use against him – it was only a matter of whether Shirou was willing to go that far. One look at his surroundings though and a quick reminiscence of the previous few months and that was all it took for him to make his decision. Yes, he would do it, if only because there was no other way. Besides, he was still pissed over being used to further other people's goals as an innocent party.

But Dai's not so innocent, he thought to himself. He started this entire mess. I won't have any regrets making him eat his words, but I can't go about this half-baked. Even if she doesn't know it, the king's life may well be relying on what I can accomplish here.

He ran his hands through his hair over and over, feeling the stress starting to hit him hard.

Argh, I have so much to do, but I have to get out of here to do it. I can't leave though. Ugh, and I've got to solve all of these issues before they make things even more difficult. But to do that, I need to get out of this cell. I need to find a way out of this situation. And to do all of that, I need Fate to stop working against me!

His anger finally bubbling over, Shirou stood up in one swift motion and launched the rock through the cell bars where it crashed into the opposing wall. The sudden sound was enough to make his jailor flinch away slightly and turn back to look at him. The redhead simply scowled in his direction before sitting back down and turning away.

The jailor cocked his head questioningly at his prisoner before walking over to pick up the rock. His brown eyes shifted up to look at the wall, a frown working its way across his face as he saw the mark from where the rock had hit. Biting his bottom lip, he exhaled softly before turning back and walking up to the cell. He tossed the rock back in, causing the other man to look at him quickly, bewildered.

"I believe you lost this," said the jailor in an attempt to joke.

Shirou just glared and turned away. The jailor sighed slightly before glancing down at the food tray that had been prepared for his charge. It, like several other meals over the past few days, hadn't been touched. In fact, the prisoner hadn't even bothered approaching it, although the jailor knew he
was hungry, despite that.

"Sir, I realize the conditions are less than hospitable, but if I may, you really should eat."

Shirou grunted. "No thanks."

"But if you would just –"

"No."

"I'm sure the meal is –"

"No."

The jailor looked back down at the tray. "Hm, but it would be such a waste for no one to partake this food. I dread to think of how offended the cooking staff must be to know you do not enjoy their prepared meals."

Shirou had a pretty good idea that not a single person in the kitchen probably cared about the food a prisoner had to eat. Rather, he doubted the food was even remotely fresh. It was probably the remains of more remains from the servants' meals, which meant that it was way beyond its expiration date. Plus, Shirou was fairly certain that each meal was poisoned with something. When he'd muddled his way through his first few meals, he'd felt like crap and had been unable to function correctly. He couldn't open his circuits or even manage to manipulate any of his prana. It also took extreme effort for him to move any – he'd felt like the world around him was full of molasses that he was stuck wading through. In other words, he'd been rendered completely helpless.

No, he wasn't touching that food with a ten-foot pole.

His jailor bent down to pull the tray back into the corridor and lifted a spoon to taste the soup. A smile was on his face as he turned to Shirou.

"See here! They have even prepared a layer of fresh garnish for your soup! How kind the cooking staff is!"

Shirou rolled his eyes. "That would be mold."

"Pardon?" the man asked before inspecting the green stuff more closely.

The spoon fell back into the soup after only a few seconds had passed. Shirou felt like smirking when he saw the jailor begin to understand why Shirou wouldn't go near the "food", but lost his smugness when his jailor simply tightened his jaw, stood up, and turned away. Then, without any sort of warning, the man picked up the tray and walked down the corridor away from Shirou's cell.

The Japanese man's eyebrows raised slightly as he watched the other man walk away before they furrowed again as he thought about the past week.

His jailor, decidedly, was one-of-a-kind, most certainly. This hadn't been the first time the man had attempted to start a conversation with Shirou, and it was almost as if he was trying to be friendly. The very idea struck Shirou as a bit wrong and made him incredibly wary.

His general impression of a sixth-century jailor was someone who was a bit rough around the edges, never spoke, never made any move to interact with a prisoner, and people who essentially had no desire to be in their position. Other images included roughshod people who preferred to
bully their charges at whatever chance they had and to basically make life a living hell for everyone involved.

Shirou's jailor, however, was neither of these examples. Rather, he seemed obsessed with trying to find out things about Shirou, although the redhead was always quick to shut the former down with a few acidic words. The jailor was also a bit clumsy and seemed incapable of reading the mood. Had Shirou ever met the man outside of his current unfortunate circumstances, he never would have bothered starting a conversation at all, if possible.

Sighing, he turned to peer into the darkness, his shoulders slumping as he tried thinking of other ways of getting out. He wasn't skinny enough to fit through the spaces in between the bars, and even when he stretched his arm out of the cage to try to get at the lock, he could never reach it. His jailor didn't carry around any keys either, so he couldn't memorize their design anyway.

Shirou stood up and shuffled back over to the front of the cell again. Sticking his arm out as far as he could until his shoulder brushed against the iron bars, he once again attempted to trace something that might help him. He only encountered the same issue as before though, despite a part of him being outside of the prison. As he sat back on his haunches, Shirou shook his head.

There was some kind of magical veil lining the perimeter of his cell that seemed to entrap any and all prana. It was like a thin sheet of plastic that encapsulated whatever extremity that tried to push through it. Shirou had also attempted to create a weapon, and even something as small as a nail by focusing outside of the barrier, but only met with the same fruitless result. Unless someone noticed he was gone, – how could anyone not notice that a foreign-looking redhead had suddenly disappeared? – it seemed like he was stuck there for the long haul, or until Dai decided to bail him out.

Shirou plopped back on his butt the moment he realized he was completely powerless within that environment. The walls to both his right, left, and back were made up of stone blocks and everything in front of him were iron bars reinforced with some kind of magic that he'd never seen. His magecraft was canceled out at every turn and he had no materials otherwise to use to better his situation. Not only that, but his food and water were poisoned – well, the water was just unclean, but it may as well have been poisoned for how much it made him want to release his bowels. No one appeared to know that he was gone, or even if they did, that he was down in the dredges of the castle.

Feeling a wave of helplessness sweep over him, Shirou crawled across the cell to slump down in a corner and drew his knees in close to his chest. There he stayed, unmoving, for the next hour or so, just throwing himself his own personal little pity party. One thought that crossed his mind was that both Saber and Rin would've killed him. He might've been a little okay with that, too.

It was the sound of soft clinking that snapped him out of his dreariness and instead instantly rang a couple of warning bells for him. When his jailor appeared again, jaw set and eyes determined, Shirou curled his hands into fists. Had he judged wrongly initially? Was this jailor going to try to exert his power over Shirou and try to make him cry out for mercy?

_Not if I have anything to say about it_, he thought, immediately jumping to his feet.

He felt himself lurch forward a bit as his strength failed him from not eating for a number of days, but forced himself to stand strong when the feeling passed. Forcing himself to make eye contact with his jailor, he gritted his teeth. Shirou was ready to take on anything – if he could somehow overpower his opponent, then that would be his ticket out of that prison. He'd take whatever he could get.
Shirou watched carefully as the man bent down and slid something through the thin space allotted for meal trays. Shirou looked at his jailor warily before looking down at the thing sitting at his feet. It was wrapped with a heavy cloth – there was no telling what it was without taking the covering off. Was it a bomb, or maybe a –

Whoa, now. Had he really just considered that someone in the century had somehow created a bomb? That was a bit too paranoid, even for him.

The jailor offered him no words of support or reproach, so Shirou decided to just take a look for himself. There was little else he could do, after all, aside of ignoring it. The jailor's gaze was so full of intent, though, that Shirou eventually just ruled that out.

Reaching down, he tentatively pulled off the cloth and took a look at the contents. Wrapped inside was a simple piece of bread and a metal cup of soup alongside a couple of wilted pieces of lettuce. Shirou's gaze immediately snapped up to stare at his guard.

"Just what are you playing at?" he demanded, his voice raising as he glared fiercely. He'd almost reverted back to speaking Japanese for a moment before controlling himself and speaking in clear Brythonic.

The guard seemed slightly dismayed, though he recovered quickly. Gesturing towards the food, he said,

"No one should have to make a choice between starvation and poison."

"You expect me to believe you're giving me this out of the goodness of your heart?"

Shirou honestly did want to believe as much, but previous experience in this time period had shown him over and over again that naively trusting people around here was practically guaranteed to land him into some kind of trouble. He was finally beginning to understand that a nice dose of wariness coupled with some distrust might actually be more beneficial to him overall.

"I do not expect you to believe anything you are not apt to," the jailor answered. "I am simply giving you a chance to continue surviving. I want to help you."

"You want to help me? Then let me out of this cell!" Shirou pleaded, walking up to the cell bars. The man flinched back somewhat. "By no means must you partake in the meal I have given you, but it is there for you, regardless. With that, I bid you a good night."

"Wait!" Shirou exclaimed, reaching an arm out as the guard walked away quickly. "Why are you...?"

He slid down against the bars, eyes downcast as he sighed out. Wiping his face with one hand, he took one glance at the tray of food. His stomach grumbled. He was obviously very hungry, but was worried that the jailor might be participating in yet another conspiracy, or worse yet, what if he was working for Dai? It wouldn't be in Shirou's best interests to fall for that kind of ploy. Then again, there was also a slight chance that the guard had truly meant well.

Shirou's hand neared the food with a smidgen of hesitation. As soon as he was almost touching the bread, a flash of his past fight out in the snow caused him to suddenly rear back. He eyed the food,
left wanting, but grudgingly forced his gaze away. This time, the poison might just affect more than simply his circuits. He wasn't sure if he wanted to take that chance. His stomach grumbled again when he stood up and walked over to sit in a corner.

Shirou looked back at the food again as he tried to get comfortable before he finally closed his eyes and tried to go to sleep.

The next day when he awoke, he saw the guard come back for duty, take a look at the food still sitting there, shake his head, and merely replace it with yet another meal while taking the first away. The same thing happened that evening, with Shirou maintaining a fixed gaze on the man's every moment. It happened yet again the next day, and the next evening after that. Shirou hadn't touched a single morsel brought to him – whether that was out of obstinance or fear, he wasn't sure. Either which way, he was starting to feel the effects of not eating for so long. He was becoming woozy, unable to think clearly, and continuously grew increasingly irritable with every passing hour. If things kept up like this, he wouldn't have to worry about any kind of future because he wouldn't be able to manage his way out of his prison.

When the guard again replaced the food again on the third day, Shirou realized he needed to make a choice: possible poisoning or possible starvation? He was already dehydrated enough as it was – he hadn't gone to the bathroom for over a day. He wasn't particularly happy that he had to rely on such contingencies. Shirou ran a hand over his face – his "choice" wasn't much of a choice at all. He had to eat if he planned to survive, and he had to survive if he wanted to save the king.

No, there had never really been a choice from the start for him, had there?

The second the guard left for a bathroom break some few hours later was the moment Shirou set into action. He crawled over – he didn't have enough energy to walk by that point – to the wrapped food sitting there for him. Glancing around, he licked his dry lips as he debated once again whether to eat the food or not. His eyes closed briefly before he shook his head and sighed. There was no point in deliberating further.

Shirou untied the cloth and looked inside to yet again find a piece of bread, a cup of soup, some wilted cabbage, and a cup of...water. At least, he thought it was water. It was hard to tell sometimes.

As soon as he picked up the piece of bread and bit into it, he suddenly felt extremely ravenous and ended up scarfing down the entire thing. The soup disappeared next, and the cabbage along with it. When he tossed back the water, he had to slam a fist against his chest to keep from choking on all of it. Shirou burped, set the waterless cup down and sat back to wait. With the previously poisoned meals, he'd felt almost lethargic within a few minutes of eating. If this was the same kind of poison, or worse, the side effects were bound to show up sooner or later. He leaned back and lay flat against the dirty ground, his stomach full for the first time in a week. Shirou looked up at the stones, eyelids growing heavy as he continued staring.

The sound of clanking woke him back up some time later, though he hadn't realized he'd fallen asleep at all in the first place. His golden-brown eyes met up with the jailor's brown ones, and he pushed himself up to a sitting position with some effort. The jailor was smiling. Shirou wasn't sure what to make of that.

"You ate everything this time."

Shirou grunted, turning his gaze away. Gruffly, he muttered, "Yeah. Thanks."

"I was concerned about you," his guard continued. "It is unhealthy to go without sustenance for
prolonged periods of time."

Shirou didn't say anything in return. What could he have said, besides the fact that he was worried he would get wrapped up in one more conspiracy that shouldn't have had anything to do with him? No, staying quiet was the better decision.

The guard shifted from one foot to another before he finally settled. He seemed conflicted but resolute.

"Was the meal to your liking?" he eventually asked.

Raising an eyebrow, Shirou was unsure of how to react.

"It was fine. Didn't seem poisoned at least." A pause. "No offense, but you don't seem like much of a jailor to me."

There was little mirth in the jailor's smile. "It was through extenuating circumstances that I received this post. It was most certainly not by choice."

"Extenuating circumstances?" inquired Shirou, curiosity piquing and overriding his wariness. "Like what?"

"Conversely," argued the guard, "what brought you to rot away in this cell, so far away from any other prisoner? You do not seem the type."

Shirou scowled. "I'm not. I got stuck in the middle of something that should've never involved me in the first place."

The guard nodded solemnly. "An unfortunate situation, to be sure. I... Admittedly, I may have dug my own grave, and so I am not quite certain whether I have the right to complain or not."

"It seems like we've both gotten ourselves into some hot water," muttered Shirou. "Anyway, thanks for the food."

He stood up and began walking back to his corner. His guard looked down for a short while before looking back up.

"I have other duties to attend to. If you so wish it, I will supply you with more provisions later this evening."

Shirou looked back, a frown on his face. "Please. And thanks."

There was another awkward pause before the guard once again spoke:

"Um, my name is Meilyr, if it so pleases you."

"...I'm Shirou," Shirou replied, manners kicking in before he could stop himself.

"Well then, I will be on my way," Meilyr said with a happy smile. "May we nurture a wonderful relationship."

Shirou didn't say anything back, but just watched as the Meilyr bowed his head politely and then walked away, his armor continuing to clank even in the far distance. He rubbed his bare arms, before eventually moving over to rub over the wound in his chest. His eyes then switched back to look at where his jailor normally put the food and then he finally looked down at the place where he normally slept.
"Yeah. Here's hoping."

Chapter End Notes

Comments, questions, critiques? Let me know.
Both Shirou and Meilyr sat up against the bars on their respective sides, each nibbling on their breakfasts. It was fairly early in the morning, and neither of the two were particularly interested in carrying on a conversation. Meilyr nibbled on bread while Shirou bit into a chicken wing – where’d Meilyr manage to get his hands on actual meat, and how? As he chewed, he thought again of his seemingly hopeless situation.

He was going to die in this cell. He just knew it.

Three weeks. Three solid weeks Shirou had been stuck in his newfound home under lock and key. Once he'd grown to know Meilyr better, he'd attempted asking the jailor to look up some people for him, to see if someone could bail him out. If he were somehow able to get in contact with Percival, or even Eos or Zago, he'd be that much closer to getting out. Percival definitely had the clout to plead to the king for his release, Eos could possibly ask her husband, and Zago was loud and annoying enough to put up such a stink that everyone present would be forced to pay some attention.

However, Meilyr's actions were considerably limited, despite the fact that he was a soldier. Even for a rank-and-file soldier, he should've been able to get someone to listen to him, but he, too, was under constant watch wherever he went, apparently. Shirou wasn't sure what was going on the man, but he was almost as much of a target as the redhead.

Meilyr had zero backing behind him, and wasn't actually assigned by chain-of-command to be in the dungeons. By Shirou's guesstimate, he bet that no one actually knew he was down there guarding Shirou's cell either, which meant that he wasn't a very important person after all. If he was so forgettable, then something incredibly terrible must've taken place for Meilyr, or some other unfortunate circumstance. Meilyr didn't have control of the keys, which was part of the main reason Shirou wasn't allowed to leave. That, and whatever was forcing Meilyr to guard him scared the man into inaction. So, Shirou was stuck.

His jailor did guarantee him two meals each day though, sans the poison. Shirou still wasn't quite sure where the man procured the food, but it was always there and starting a few days ago, Meilyr had started eating together with him. At first, neither had said much, but soon enough, Shirou began taking part in small, short conversations about life in general: how did he like Camelot, what did he dislike – he'd had a whole list lined up for that particular question – what was his favorite food, and things along that line of thinking. Shirou wasn't particularly interested in trying to make any friends, but it was far more interesting to make small talk than it was to count all of the 50,236 tiny holes within the stone ceiling. That was just for his particular cell. Not that he'd been bored or anything.

Physical activity, or rather, varied physical activity also ran a bit on the mundane side at times. There were only so many pushups, sit-ups, and wall flips he could do before running out of things to do, again. He had taken to trying to dig a tunnel with the rocks he had on hand so he had someplace to bury his fecal matter, but it just sat there in the corner, mounting up like an anthill. It was disgusting. He was disgusted. He would have given anything for a bidet, but he'd just have to wait for the French to think up that invention in a few hundred or so years, or wait until he got out to trace his own.

Shirou rolled his eyes. He'd never expected to play the damsel in distress again, but this time there wouldn't be a dashing Saber running to his rescue.
No Rin either, he mused. Hell, I'd even take Zago at this point.

He glanced back at the other man. Meilyr was incredibly silent for once, to the point where it seemed out of character. That was slightly worrying. The man may not have been Shirou's friend, but it was slightly disconcerting for the other to be so...quiet. Rather, Shirou couldn't recall a time where the man had been quiet for more than ten minutes straight, and here they were going on over half an hour. He shrugged his shoulders and attempted to start a conversation for once.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Meilyr seemed loathe to explain his train of thought, instead appearing to let it run through his mind for a few minutes before even attempting to speak. Shirou waited patiently – after all, there wasn't much else he really could do. Being in a jail cell had a tendency to limit one's options.

Meilyr turned around, his armor scraping across the stone a bit. His expression was rather contemplative, and Shirou wasn't sure he'd ever witnessed this particular side of the jailor.

"How old are you, if I may ask, Shirou?"

What?

Shirou frowned somewhat. That was an odd question to run into.

"Uh," he stumbled. "I'm...twenty-four? No, wait..."

He had been born sometime in September or so, and it was still only late March... Yeah, he was still twenty-four. That was heartening to know – nothing could contradict that information otherwise. Or could it? How did the time travel thing work anyway? Did he still age like normal, just in the past? But, if he was in the past, didn't that more or less mean his existence hadn't yet come to be, and so he couldn't age because he hadn't been born yet? If he hadn't been born yet, though, he couldn't be in his current situation though, so it made little sense to...

No, Shirou wasn't a scientist. He was not going to try to figure out the point of his existence within the time stream. He was a living paradox.

He turned to Meilyr and shrugged his shoulders, his answer more or less given. The latter looked back at him, still frowning.

"You're still quite young, though older than myself by some years. And, you said you were a cook, yes? You work in the kitchens."

"Yeah...?" Shirou replied hesitantly, not sure where this line of questioning was going.

Meilyr looked at Shirou determinedly. "Then, I suppose that is the part where I fail to understand. You are young, fairly kind, hardly judgemental, lacking ill will," – Shirou scoffed at this point – "and a generally good fellow. How did you earn someone's ire? Why are you here?"

Shirou shrugged again. "I was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Understatement of the year.

"Your luck must be poor, indeed."

Try Rank E.

"Story of my life," Shirou muttered, settling back against the bars.
"Is there nothing more to your story?" Meilyr pressed, sounding concerned. "One does not simply get put into jail."

The redhead scratched the back of his head, sighing. What was the harm in telling anyone? It wasn't as if it would land him in deeper shit... Probably. "I pissed off the wrong people."

"Pissed off?"

"I made them mad – in particular, some guy named Dai. Not sure what his deal is, but he had me ambushed, captured, sent into a fight that practically guaranteed my death, and then stuck me in this jail cell to keep me out of the way while he does...whatever. The crappy thing about it all is that it's totally working. I can't do anything in here. I have no resources, no one to fall back on. No one knows I'm here."

"I beg your pardon, Shirou," Meilyr began, looking confused, "but perhaps my ears have deceived me. Do you mean to tell me the king did not sanction for your imprisonment?"

Shirou yawned slightly. "That's right."

"You are an innocent party?"

"Those aren't the words I'd use," Shirou answered carefully, tilting his head, "but that's the gist of it."

Meilyr suddenly fell silent, his armor clinking as he stood up to his full height, eyes darkened. Shirou didn't pay him much attention until several minutes passed by with only the sound of scuffling as Meilyr paced back and forth in front of his cell. Meilyr would pause every so often before quickening his pace and then coming to complete stops. It happened so many times that Shirou had begun to lose count. He simply yawned again, bemoaning the fact that he was already ready for his mid-morning nap. At the very least, he'd gotten a good deal of sleep over the past few weeks.

He flinched slightly when Meilyr slammed his gauntleted hand against the far wall. Shirou swiveled around to stare at his companion, who looked nothing short of furious.

"That despicable monster," Meilyr bit out, teeth grit together. "Has he no shame? I've half a mind to approach the king myself and have him officially executed for such audacious crimes..."

"I'm not about to disagree since I think the prick deserves it," Shirou conceded, "but what's stopping you?"

"I am not without a spoiled record myself, Shirou," Meilyr responded, his eyes glaring at the ground. "Just as he's using your anonymity, or lack of power, against you, he is using something I value more than life itself against me. I am, to my complete humiliation, entirely powerless against the man. I can no more fight against him than can you – not without serious repercussions."

Shirou narrowed his eyes slightly. "What, is he holding your family for ransom or something?"

Meilyr paused for half a second before turning back around slowly. His brown eyes gleamed with something Shirou couldn't really place.

"That, Shirou," he said haltingly, "is actually closer to the truth than you might think."

"He has your family?" Shirou exclaimed, wondering how the hell the cook had managed that.
"Not precisely," Meilyr said deliberately, eyes not leaving Shirou's. "He, fortunately, does not have that much influence. However, allow me to tell you that he and I are not strangers. Rather, we are from the very same hometown."

Whoa. "Was he a little shit back then, too?"

Shirou was rewarded with a wry smile.

"One of the worst."

The blunt answer made Shirou chuckle somewhat, and the sound felt foreign to him. He hadn't had reason to laugh for quite some time. It was pretty sad, actually. He was starting to forget how to enjoy life, something Rin had drilled into him for so long. What would she say if she were here with him now? He could almost hear her now:

"So, you went back in time — without telling me, for that matter — to save someone who used to be your Servant for a reason entirely unknown to you, and proceeded to become a complete weakling and a liability to everyone you are near? Wow, Shirou. You. Are. An. Idiot."

He grunted, sitting up straighter. That had sounded entirely too much like her and it kind of scared him a bit that he would know exactly what she would say. He couldn't fault Thought Rin's views, but they made him feel like crap, which was probably the point.

Meilyr cleared his throat, regaining Shirou's attention.

"Before, I believe I once told you that I was here through extenuating circumstances. I was being truthful back then. Dai has threatened to ensure I am relieved of my position should I make any...unfavorable movements."

"What are you talking about?" asked Shirou, feeling slightly confused. "Does he have people back in your hometown that are holding them prisoner or something?"

His jailor shifted nervously, rolling his shoulders back with agitation. "Shirou, you are of course aware that it is an honor to be a part of the king's army and guard?"

Shirou shrugged. "I don't doubt that it is."

"It is, very much so. When a part of the guard, each soldier receives compensation in the form of food or other necessities that are sent to the families of each soldier. My family earns its way by fishing, but that kind of job will not pay for the levies exacted, nor will it put clothes on my siblings' backs. For my payment, my family is given raw materials once a month, such as wool and other hard goods."

Shirou felt the information slowly start to click together, and he narrowed his eyes a bit.

"I think I get it. Dai must have a way of getting you off the payroll, and in exchange for you keeping your job, you have to guard me down here and essentially do whatever the asshole says. That's why you don't have any clearance or access to the guard keys like normal jailors would. I'll even bet the king has no idea you're down here, or your superiors for that matter."

Meilyr's eyes widened comically. "You're unusually perceptive, sir."

The redhead scowled slightly. "It's not hard to add two and two together. If you lose your job, you lose your monthly stipend, which means your family will suffer. Dai would definitely get a kick out of that."
"Were I a normal soldier, I wouldn't be as concerned," confessed Meilyr, "but I don't rank high in quality as a soldier, to be entirely honest. I've always been known as the sickly sort, so I have only ever been assigned the lesser known jobs, or should I say, the duties no one would ever particularly want."

"Like cleaning the bathroom?"

"Bathroom?" Meilyr asked, looking confused.

Shirou frowned somewhat. "Uh, the latrine? The water closet? The toilet?"

When he was met with a quizzical expression, he sighed. "The place you where you urinate and-or defecate?"

"Ah." Meilyr looked happy to finally reach the same page as Shirou. "No, I don't clean the chambers, thank the Lord. More along the lines of cleaning the weapons used for training, or evening the training field, or cleaning horse excrement... Practically anything that can technically be done by one of the lesser guard. In a manner of speaking, guarding you is something of a promotion, though it is not without its bad points."

"Well, excuse me," Shirou countered with a grin. "I don't want to be stuck down here, either."

Meilyr's eyes fell to the floor. "I do not mind guarding you, so to speak. I gave up a life with my family to work for the king, and I have no regrets whatsoever about that decision. I do not regret that my constitution is so lacking that I am unable to assist in any other ways but to clean up after my fellow guardsmen. Nor do I regret that I cannot march on the different campaigns His Majesty undertakes."

The jailor paused slightly, seeming to have difficulty in uttering his next words:

"Were I to regret anything, it would be that I have become a liability to my family, instead of an additional foundation. Were I to regret, I would feel remorse over being foolish enough to be caught in a plan that, in the end, has little to nothing to do with me. Were I to regret, I would be angry that I have allowed myself to become less than that of a man. And, had I not been stuck down here with you, those regrets might have once upon a time come to fruition."

Shirou stayed silent throughout the entire monologue, feeling a bit wary of interrupting and causing the man to lose his nerve. When Meilyr raised his eyes up to meet Shirou's though, the former couldn't help but raise his eyebrows in surprise.

Meilyr smiled softly, an action that completely contradicted his spoken words.

"True, you are not the ideal that I sought towards," Meilyr conceded with a small grin – the first Shirou had ever witnessed, "but you have given me worth. I cannot stand Dai, and I believe the cur should pay for his crimes. However, I will always feel grateful to him for pushing me into this situation, for without it, we two would have never acquainted. That is worthy of any regret I may have once harbored."

Shirou felt his face pale when he heard those words. "I'm just a prisoner. I haven't done anything for you. I spent all the energy trying to ignore the fact that you even existed. I never acknowledged you for any of the food you brought me. Quite frankly, I've been a pain in the ass for you."

"I will never deny that," Shirou's guard quipped without hesitation. "You were a right headache much of the time, but, I would not have it any other way. I will always value and cherish the chance His Majesty has blessed upon me, but..."
Meilyr rubbed a hand over his breastplate with a grimace. "Despite that, though, there are times when I felt like less than a person, and more like a part of the background with little worth. It is...difficult to remind yourself that you have meaning when you are cleaning the feces from a horse's rear end."

"...I can imagine," Shirou agreed wryly.

"So, thank you," Meilyr continued, as if fearing he would lose his nerve. "I also appreciate your understanding of the current situation."

Shirou snorted. "You're just lucky I didn't find a way to bail on you."

"Dear me," the other man remarked with a smirk, "and here I was almost certain that you well on your way to digging a tunnel with that hay of yours."

"Shut up."

So he'd gone a little crazy and attempted to attack the stone floor with some hay. What the hell else was he supposed to do?

Meilyr shook his head out of amusement. "Forgive me, but I must take my leave for now."

"Oh, don't worry about me," Shirou muttered, waving his hand loftily. "I'll just be here, glaring my stone prison to death."

The jailor tapped the prison bars a couple of times as a greeting before turning and walking down the corridor towards the exit. He paused and looked back at the redhead leaning back on the bar, a frown on his face as he saw how increasingly despondent Shirou was becoming. He was a victim to his situation, as was Meilyr, but unlike the jailor, had lost nearly everything and looked as if there was no hope for him. Meilyr turned and faced forward, his jaw tightening as he considered how unfair it was that a wicked person like Dai could control the lives of others for his other glee.

A couple of steps forward and Meilyr paused again. He shook his head back and forth. There was little he could do – if he even dared step out of line, Dai would see that he was incapacitated and his family starved in a heartbeat. He couldn't risk that – not for Shirou, even if the Scot was one of the first friends he had ever made... No. He couldn't. His family was far too important. His family meant the world to him.

Meilyr made it down the corridor, around a corner, down past yet even more prison cells before finding the steps to the first underground level. It was on this level that he finally ran into other prison guards, although they hadn't a clue of who he was. Many of them guarded criminals who had turned on their family, or had been caught with vital information, or had simply spoken ill of the king. There were also common thieves and fools who had been reported to the city guard, and were just waiting for their eventual execution days, weeks, or maybe months in the future. Then, there was the other one...

He gripped his helmet tightly in his hand as he peered into the cell of the newest inhabitant. Rumor said that this man had been foolish enough to attempt to pull wool over the king's eyes. Sir Percival had brought him in personally, and his crimes against the kingdom were both exceedingly high and treasonous. The fact that he was still in a cell and not dead yet was simply due to the king wanting to imbue within the prisoner a sense of worthlessness, as if the king couldn't even be bothered with such a nuisance. The prisoner would simply watch as other prisoners were taken away to be sentenced or freed without nary a glance his way. It was a means to humiliate him and cause despair.
Meilyr narrowed his eyes sharply.

This man, unlike Shirou, deserved every feeling of pain inflicted upon him. He deserved to suffer. Unlike Shirou, he had caused a wealth of troubles, enough to possibly hurt the kingdom as a whole. Unlike Shirou, this prisoner truly was an eyesore. Yes, unlike Shirou...

His brown eyes fell to the ground as he slowly walked past the cell's inhabitant and jailor. Shirou may have made Meilyr feel better and may have heightened his self-worth, but the truth of the matter was, Shirou didn't belong in that cell. He didn't at all, and Meilyr knew it. He knew it, and yet he did nothing.

"Nothing's changed," Meilyr muttered as he walked the long flight of steps leading from the dungeons to the main castle. "I am as cowardly as I always have been. What am I, a guard, doing hiding within the shadow of an innocent?"

The need to do what was right and just weighed down heavily on his shoulders, but he hadn't the courage to correct the obvious mistake.

"Will I forever be haunted by that poor excuse for a human being?"

His last step out of the dungeon proved the heaviest and most burdening of them all.

Papers straightened into place as she aligned them on the tabletop, her shoulders seeming to slump slightly before straightening as she took a moment to look at every single attendant of the meeting. King Arthur glanced from one man to another: Bedivere, Gawain, Percival, Kay, Gareth, Tristan, and Lancelot. She found herself pausing to look at the last night for a bit longer than the others before gradually finishing her sweep of the room. It was unfortunate that her other knights could not be present, but they'd not returned from their various duties just yet.

To be truthful, however, she really had little desire to still be conducting this meeting. As for the why, well, she and the men had already been sitting down talking about important business matters for the past few hours, and every single one of them was starting to become a bit antsy. Luckily, there was only one more thing to discuss before she could call the meeting to a close.

The king breathed out a soft sigh through her nose before erecting herself in a more regal manner.

"I believe that brings us to our final matter of topic: the traitor involved with the Puria incident."

Arturia's eyes focused on Kay as he snorted without mirth.

"Ah, yes," her foster brother started, his forest-green eyes looking down at his own collection of papers, "the fool who attempted to cause complete and utter madness, and nearly succeeded, if I may be so bold to add. Whatever shall we do with him? Would it not be a simple matter to, say, simply kill him?"

Bedivere frowned deeply. "After we spent so many resources to catch him? Are you daft, sir?"

"Kill him with fire and be done with it!" argued Kay, a frown now on his face as well. "I grow weary of this game to try to gain information from pawns who obviously have none to give."

Arturia merely continued to watch Kay carefully. "That is always an option, Kay. Are you certain it is so simple?"

To her right, Tristan slammed a fist down on the table, eyes narrowed as he leaned forward.
"Enough of this tool we speak of! We should be focusing our attention on the man behind it all: Conan! He slides in and out of grasp like a slimy leech, always certain to suck out a bit of blood with every encounter. Until we contend with him, mark my words my fellow knights, this 'game' we play will be never-ending!"

"Calm down sir, before you have a heart attack," murmured Gawain. "There is little doubt of Conan being a priority, but the man simply will not be found unless he desires such. You would risk much attempting to follow him into the deep with so little information."

Gareth nodded, though no one was at all surprised to see him agree so readily with his brother. There was a slight moment of silence as each knight considered what had been said. Arturia looked from one man to another before asking,

"What of you, Lancelot, Percival? What would you propose?"

Percival, who had been less than attentive throughout the entirety of the meeting, ducked his head down as he righted his posture.

"As the one who sought him down and captured him myself, I say there is little worth in simply killing him. There must be a way to utilize him to get to the bottom of this."

He fell silent as soon as he said these words, much to Arturia's befuddlement.

Percival, while many things, was not one to fall into depression or become as listless as he currently was. Rather, the fact that he showed no signs of interest in the very prisoner he had sought to hunt down himself cause the king some concern. She peered at him closely, trying to analyze what little she could before turning her attention to the last knight, who stared across the table pensively.

Lancelot met her gaze steadily, his dark brown, near black, eyes searching her expression for possible clues of what she might desire. Arturia was quick to close off her expression even further – what she desired was meaningless, what was necessary for the kingdom was the sole purpose for why they were meeting with one another. If the man was intent on trying to supersede this specific ideal of hers, he was in for a rocky ride that would only meet with a dead end.

Lancelot apparently caught the hint, though he seemed somewhat disgruntled by her obstinance.

"I, personally," he began with a soft, gentle voice, "am of the opinion that everyone here has raised a decent point. As Tristan was quick to vocalize, Conan is the reason for our recent misfortunes. The sooner we seek him out and eliminate him, the sooner we can concentrate on solidifying the kingdom."

Tristan nodded steadfastly, his hands clasped in front of him on the tabletop. "Exactly right, my brother! Conan is simply baiting us, waiting for other chances to strike at our weak points. The longer we allow the scoundrel freedom to network further and turn even more against our cause, the more we are setting ourselves up for a quick and easy downfall. His Majesty's kingdom has not progressed this far only to fall short due to senseless actions."

"Mighty we may be," Kay interrupted as he leaned forward, "but I believe Gawain just said that we lack enough viable information to take that route. Tristan, I praise your willingness, but I do not think you are considering this in full. Perhaps you should go cool off that head of yours in a vat of ale? Perhaps that will help you think better, though it is rather a shame that a drunk would do better than that of a sober man."
"Save your jests!" Tristan argued back, his voice rising. "Have you nothing better to do than make witty comments and act holier-than-thou? If you've so much to say, then let it be said, my good man! However, I'll ask that you not waste anyone's time and patience just because that head of yours only has room for women and foolhardiness!"

"It is this wit of mine that keeps things afloat, dear Tristan."

"The ship you float upon causes me nothing but headaches, so please forgive me if I'm not ready to take a ride."

"Kay, Tristan, enough!" Arturia snapped, not wanting this to escalate into an all-out fight. She glared at the two of them until they sat back in their seats and gained better control over their emotions.

Taking a deep breath, she waved a hand airily towards Lancelot. "As you were saying?"

Lancelot nodded, swiftly continuing: "As Kay was quick to reassert, Gawain spoke of the danger we would undertake by searching for that menace without knowing what traps might lie ahead. I believe the obvious way to curtail the possible danger would be to, of course, interrogate our prisoner and extract as much information as possible. As soon as we have procured anything of value, we could then draw up a plan on tracking down our elusive foe."

Arturia voiced her agreement softly, her index finger tapping against the table intermittently.

"I will perform the interrogation myself," she announced after some deliberation. "I will admit I still have some irritation over the fact that the prisoner made bold-faced lies in my very presence."

She noticed her knights cringe slightly at her declaration. Confusion swept through her mind as she frowned.

"Is there a problem with my participation?"

Bedivere was the only one who felt bold enough to clear the air: "Not...exactly, Sire. We are simply concerned..."

"The last time, you killed the damn bloke," muttered Kay, head in his hands.

Arturia's eyes widened slightly before she glared at all of them. "My techniques are humane. I have not killed anyone."

"Yet," Kay was quick to correct, though quietly.

Gawain leaned forward slowly. "If I may, Your Highness," he began, gaining her attention, "the last man you interrogated was left so mentally scarred that he might as well have been dead. We do mean to say that you did kill him –"

"Except he kind of did," someone who sounded suspiciously like Kay rebuked.

"– but that you are so skilled that there was nothing left to salvage once you were finished," Gawain concluded while narrowing his eyes at Kay. "If I may, I would suggest Tristan and Lancelot handle the task."

Tristan grinned evilly. "What a fine suggestion, Gawain, my good fellow. I would gladly take part in this endeavor. I will not disappoint."
Lancelot merely closed his eyes. "I will do what is necessary for His Majesty and the kingdom."

The king's eyebrows rose slightly. She had been overruled – politely and respectfully, but ultimately, overruled. She wasn't even sure what to say about it, or if there even was anything to say, so she would just not say anything at all.

"How kind of you to undertake this matter for me," she eventually answered dryly, not missing the slight grins and smiles her men made.

Arturia simply shook her head, knowing better than to push the matter when she had been so easily outvoted. Until the prisoner was thoroughly interrogated, they didn't have much choice other than to play the waiting game. Lancelot had been right, of course. Attempting to pursue an enemy that was as elusive and particularly annoying as Conan would only be wasting valuable resources, time, and energy. Better to adopt a suitable plan once helpful information was gathered than to attempt anything further. She was an aggressive leader, to be sure, but even she knew that her actions were not always necessarily infallible.

She bowed her head once in silent consent of her thoughts before turning her attention back to her men.

"Then, I take it we are in agreement of waiting until after interrogation has taken place? All those in agreement, say aye."

There were a number of replies across the table. She believed that everyone had agreed, but just to be sure:

"All those opposed...?"

When silence met her question, she stood up from her seat, head high.

"Then I hereby call this meeting to a close. We will then reconvene once the interrogation has been finished to further plan for our future operations. If there are no other questions, then I will see all of you when you hand in your individual reports for missions undertaken."

Kay rose quickly, raising his hands high over his head as he stretched. "Lord above, finally. I don't recall the manual for joining the king's special knighthood illustrating any need for such long, incredibly boring meetings."

"I don't recall there being a manual at all, Kay," Gawain said with a slight grin. "I would have thought it would have been nothing short of obvious."

The two walked towards the door, after giving a respectful nod to their king, with Gareth in tow. Kay shrugged, his face screwed up into an expression of distaste.

"Yes, of course. For such a thing to exist would make life far too easy, wouldn't it? Can't have that now, can we?"

Gareth chuckled. "What use is life if nothing proves a challenge?"

Gawain agreed readily and Kay rolled his eyes. "You two are complete eyesores, sometimes."

Arturia sighed as the three men walked out of the room, bickering on and on. Bedivere only sneered at them, but was quick to leave the room himself, after bowing slightly to Arturia. Lancelot nodded his head respectfully and Tristan pumped his fist with a characteristic grin on his face.
"Until we next meet, Your Majesty!" Tristan said energetically. "I will not fail and will glean as much information from the prisoner as possible! Your humble servant will prevail!"

Arturia chose not to say anything in return, though she wasn't quite sure Tristan knew what the word "humble" meant. She was ready to leave the room herself, but had noticed that Percival had made no indication of getting up from his own chair. His sapphire-blue eyes were dark with an emotion she couldn't depict, and it wasn't until she drifted to his side that he even showed signs of recognizing his surroundings.

Percival stood up tall almost immediately, looking somewhat ashamed as to having kept the king back for so long and for losing sight of himself.

"Your Majesty," he murmured demurely, which caused her more alarm than anything else.

"Percival," she replied, voice giving away nothing. "You were not very attentive to this meeting. Was there something else you deemed of having more importance?"

"No!" he denied vehemently, causing her to reel inwardly before looking chagrined again. "No, of course not, Your Majesty. Nothing takes more precedence than the safety and good fortune of the kingdom."

Her hand rested against her hip as she frowned slightly. "But...?"

The brunet winced. "No, there's... It's not..."

He seemed to come to a decision before righting himself proudly and turning to face her completely.

"It's about Shirou."

Now, that was a name she hadn't heard in quite a while.

"Shirou," she deadpanned, uncertain of how else to continue the conversation. "The kitchen boy, am I correct?"

"Yes, my king. The foreigner you personally brought to the kingdom to serve as a cook. I have...sufficed to say, become rather close to him."

"Close, you say?" Something about this conversation was putting her at odds.

Percival shrugged, seeming to naturally fall back on his real personality. "As close as a servant and knight can be, I suppose. We talk every now and then, when I make the time."

Arturia turned her gaze away from her knight, wondering if she should sit down for this. It seemed to be something weighing heavily on Percival's mind, though how it involved her, she hadn't the slightest. Once again, it appeared, Shirou had landed himself in some kind of bad predicament.

_The boy attracts trouble like a magnet._

"What of him, Percival?" she sighed, not wanting to deal with this.

"That's just it," the knight continued, forcing Arturia to turn her sharp gaze back upon him. "He's just disappeared as if he never existed. It's unnatural."

"Perhaps he was simply let go?" Arturia argued, though she wasn't sure why. "It hardly seems unnatural that Baeddan would get rid of yet another of his servants."
Percival frowned deeply. "That is true, but my liege, you know as well as I do that Shirou is quite famous, or infamous, within the walls of this castle. If someone like him were to be kicked out, I think such information would have definitely made its way to your ears eventually."

That...was true, Arturia was slow to acknowledge. Considering that it was she who brought the man to the castle, for him to be kicked out with her none the wiser was highly improbable, likely impossible. She was certain many would cheer were the "Scot" to be thrown out on his rear end, never to return to the inside of the castle. The information would make its way around to all of the servants, then the knights, and eventually, even her.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. "How long has it been since Shirou has gone missing?"

"It has been about a month, my liege."

A month. How could someone as well-rumored as Shirou go missing for nearly a month without a word otherwise? He didn't have the permissions needed to leave the castle under any circumstances, and his death would likely travel through the grapevine just as quickly. If anything out of the ordinary had happened to the man, Baeddan probably would have stormed Arturia's office almost immediately. Now, there was an additional problem. If Baeddan wasn't beating down her door about yet another issue, that meant that he might be unaware that anything was amiss at all. That, of course, meant that someone else was pulling the strings in this sudden disappearance.

"Have you spoken to Baeddan any?" she asked, rubbing her chin thoughtfully.

"Not just yet, Your Majesty."

Arturia frowned at him. "What did you hope to gain by coming to me with this problem?"

"Nothing even remotely," Percival answered honestly. "However, I was hoping that you would allow me to look into this issue further without any interference."

"What interference might you mean?"

His eyes darkened angrily. "If I find that someone has less-than-noble intentions with my friend's life, I would like to take measures against that person, should that come to pass. I do not know how far I will need to push to get to the bottom of this. For all I know, Shirou could very well be in good health with little trouble to his name at all, but he has never struck me as someone who would not inform someone else of his motives or intentions. I feel that if he were to set out on a trip to hunt for resources, that Baeddan would be one of the first to know, as his boss."

"I see," Arturia murmured softly. "And for Baeddan not to know seems to contradict Shirou's general personality as a whole, and unintentionally gave you pause."

"Baeddan is a great many things, Your Majesty, but a liar and a criminal mastermind do not fit into his scheme for life, I do not think."

"No," she agreed slowly. "No, I suppose they do not. Please understand though, Percival, that there is little I can do about this situation. Shirou is a low-ranked servant, far beneath what I 'should' consider to be important, as according to my chancellors. I cannot, in good faith, allow you to run rampant to pursue this personal goal that in no way obviously benefits the kingdom."

Her knight nodded solemnly. "I understand, of course. I realize this isn't considerably important to anyone other than myself, but --"

"Let me finish," she interrupted gently, making Percival look back at her with interest. "You know
as well as I that I cannot be everywhere at once. You are also aware that I have complete and utter faith in my knights. In which case, if one of my men deems to undertake some unknown mission without my prior knowledge of the event and it, in turn, causes no irreparable harm to my people, castle, and kingdom overall, how could I ever be the wiser?"

A slow grin crept across Percival's face as the king turned her gaze away.

"So, unless I was to cause trouble directly with this mission of mine, then far be it for you to personally attend to the matter, yes?"

"What matter?" Arturia shot back, though not unkindly. "I know not of what you speak. Now, is that all, or may I attend to other matters that actually require my attention?"

Percival smiled boyishly, making Arturia huff in annoyance.

"Not at all, Your Majesty. Might you be so kind as to honor me with a kiss before I take my leave?"

She stared at him with half-closed eyes, unsure of how to deal with the sudden change in emotion.

Percival leaned in close to her and she held up a hand in front of his face.

"Do that, and I will personally see that you know how it feels to be castrated."

Percival backpedalled so quickly that Arturia thought he might trip and fall on his butt. He muttered a quick "thank you for your time" before speedily retreating from her sight and out of the room. Arturia reached over to pick up her papers as a quick grin lit up her face.

Ah, but her men were so entertaining to tease at times.

When Baeddan was called out of the kitchen and down the corridor away from where people normally walked, he vaguely knew that there was something wrong, but not the reason behind it. It was rare for Percival to ever speak to him voluntarily, and without even an insult or slight given in between. In a manner of speaking, it was almost awkward, and Baeddan very much hoped this wouldn't be some kind of "moment" for the two of them, or that Percival was not finally planning to ask for his sister's hand in marriage. Perish the thought.

Baeddan wouldn't have even considering giving permission anyway, no matter how much the man might have begged.

The very last thing he expected the moment Percival paused at the end of the corridor near the east wing's service doors was to be grabbed by the collar of his tunic and thrown against the wall. Percival's gauntleted hands ground into Baeddan's collarbone as he tightened his grip on the material, his blue eyes narrowing dangerously. Baeddan reached up to clutch at one of the knight's hands, but was completely overwhelmed by the other man's power.

"To what do I owe this pleasant greeting?" Baeddan grunted out, his own expression bordering on furious for his treatment.

"Enough of these games you play, Baeddan. I have bid my time, waiting for the day you would realize your error in judgment and release my friend from his poor situation, and yet you insist on playing these ridiculous dramas of yours."

Baeddan snorted. "What are you prattling on about? The only game I seem to insist on playing is
staying in this godforsaken wreck of a castle. I must have lost my mind somewhere over the years."

Percival ground his teeth, his anger growing in intensity.

"It is to Shirou I refer, you daft man," Percival informed the other, muscles tightening further. "What kind of cook attends to gathering resources for the castle? A job of that caliber should be delegated to a merchant, or a team of farmers, or perhaps even hunters. A cook's place is in the kitchen, not out there where he could presumably be killed."

"Shi-ro-u?" inquired Baeddan with a slight frown. "Who are you... Ah, you mean Ro, do you? What is this nonsense?"

When Percival had chosen to press Baeddan for details in such a manner, he had been absolutely certain that the man, without a doubt, was somehow implicated with whatever crime had been committed, if any. After all, if there were any troubles within the kitchens, then Baeddan was more than certain to be mixed up in it somehow – more like, the man chose to create trouble wherever he walked, and it just so happened that each situation stemmed into even bigger messes and headaches for everyone else. However, in this case, Baeddan seemed almost, dare he say, innocent. Rather, he appeared innocent of any wrongs by Shirou, at the very least.

"Nonsense?" Percival questioned, a bad feeling making its way up his spine. "You dare tell me you weren't involved whatsoever with Shirou's disappearance?"

The Head Cook shifted his head slightly, his eyes clouding over with some confusion. "Have you not heard, oh honored knight? Your pathetic disgrace of a friend is out gathering herbs or some such ridiculousness. That was hardly anything I would ever consider suitable to the boy. Regardless, we need the resources, and I am not interested in concerning myself with our fool king yet again so soon."

Percival pulled away from Baeddan, blinking a few times as if to clear his head.

"What do you mean? Are you saying you did not send him on such an errand?"

"Idiotic as the boy may be," Baeddan snorted with some derision, "he is a blessing within the kitchen. It would hardly make any sense for me to turn the child away when I dearly have use for him."

"How is it that you had no part in his going out of the castle?"

Baeddan laughed, much to Percival's annoyance. "So much time spent in the king's presence, yet he distrusts you so much that he would not tell you of a ruling he made?"

The knight stiffened, his face draining of emotion. The event caused Baeddan to grow silent, unsure of exactly what was happening.

"...I take it he made no such order," Baeddan said flatly, the possible truth dawning on him.

"He did not," Percival conceded softly, his own tone lacking emotion as well.

Baeddan cleared his throat importantly and adjusted his tunic, smoothing out the small wrinkles and ruffles that Percival had made. Percival eyed him with some distaste, his hands on his hips as he glared at the other man.

With Baeddan being somewhat of a dead end, Percival didn't really have anyone else lined up to question. Certainly, there was the riffraff that Shirou had chosen to make company with, but
Percival couldn't remember what the other man looked like, and wasn't sure he wanted to even bother to take that route. He supposed he could check the recent logging of any and all servants who had left the castle for different tasks, but he had a gnawing feeling that he wouldn't see Shirou's name on that ledger. There was always the chance that Baeddan was hiding something, but lying simply wasn't his style so much as being a magnificent pain for every individual forced to contend with him.

Baeddan sniffed. "That boy attracts trouble like the plague."

"When I want your opinion of someone I look to with high esteem, I will plainly ask for it," Percival snapped. "If you know nothing of the man, you are no longer of any use to me."

"Wait," Baeddan called as Percival readied to walk away, shoulders tight. "I understand that Ro...means something to you. Or something along those lines. I do not care in the slightest. However, I am concerned that one of my best servants, much as I loathe to say that, has gone missing, without my prior notice. I may have an idea of who might be the root of all of this mayhem."

Percival turned around, eyes raised as he looked back at Baeddan with new appreciation.

"You mean to say that you, too, are worried for Shirou, Baeddan?"

When a snort of laughter met his question, Percival's expression closed off entirely.

"Worried? For that lout?" Baeddan said with a chuckle. "Please, do not jest. I am simply annoyed that if he should disappear, I would need an extra three to four hands to make up for his absence. Our king would barely grant me one servant per request. What do you think would happen were I to ask for three more?"

"Get to the point."

The Head Cook frowned softly, all humor vanishing. "I meant what I said when I believed this was the king's directive. Arthur—"

"King Arthur, you mean," Percival spat out, his fists tightening.

"Yes, yes, of course." Baeddan waved away Percival's anger as if didn't matter to him whatsoever. "King Arthur has made terrible decisions before, in that he hardly pays attention to the lesser people at all. While I did find it somewhat odd that he would specifically target Ro for this trip, I only thought it was because of his strange partiality to the man. You must have sensed that there was something strange about their relationship, surely."

"Get, to, the, point."

Baeddan shrugged. "Such impatience. That mother of yours should have taught you more manners."

A muscle in Percival's jaw jumped before he suddenly slammed a fist into Baeddan's face. The force behind it sent Baeddan crumbling to the ground, nursing his jaw with both satisfaction and pain gleaming in his eyes. With just the barest of sneers, Percival bared his teeth at Baeddan before curtly turning around and starting to walk away.

"Dai."

At the one word, Percival paused, slowly looking back at the still fallen man.
Baeddan sat up, a hand to his jaw as he stared back with no expression present on his face. He cracked his neck by shifting his head from side to side before slowly rising up.

"You want the possible perpetrator behind this insanity? I would suggest you go to Dai, of the supposed Upper Echelons in the kitchens. I will bet two horses that he is part of the reason for Ro's absence, if not the main one."

"Where is he?"

Percival's words were laced with a subtle venom, though his body posture betrayed none of that viciousness.

"Where else?" Baeddan replied, tilting his head back as he focused directly on the knight.

"Bring him to me."

"Am I your servant?" Baeddan questioned with his eyes narrowed.

Percival crossed his arms over his chest. "You will soon be so much less if you do not do as I have commanded."

Baeddan grudgingly walked away with his head held high, Percival's gaze trained on him the entire way. Percival continued watching even as Baeddan disappeared into the kitchen far down the corridor, his fingers tightening over his armor as angry thoughts swirled through his mind like leaves caught up in a breeze. He knew of this Dai – the queen had taken to assigning a couple of soldiers to guard him and make sure he didn't stir up any trouble. He had also been there the last night that Percival had spoken to Shirou. His eyes, that day, had been filled with hatred and malice, though Percival hadn't thought to pay the fact any real attention. People were free to hate those whom they wished – it was only natural as a human. The knight couldn't be certain of anything just because of that.

What if it didn't end at Dai? What if Dai was only wrapped up in some convoluted stratagem that connected loosely with more and more difficult characters? What if Shirou was in far more trouble than Percival had originally thought?

No. That couldn't be it. Percival was merely thinking too deeply about a simple matter, which was probably a side-effect from being in the king's presence so often. Considering problems from every possible angle was more along the lines of something King Arthur or Lancelot would do, and it didn't suit Percival to such a degree. No, this was a simple cut-and-chase situation.

At the sound of clanking from someone's armor, Percival slowly lifted his gaze to look at two soldiers following directly behind a sandy-brown-haired man who looked as if he had never seen the sun in his life. The man annoyed Percival at a somewhat primal level, the frown on his face showing cordiality, but still seeming as if to taunt the knight.

"You called?" the scruffy man spoke up.

"Ah, you must be Dai," Percival proceeded politely and calmly before giving the two soldiers a look. "Leave us. I will take him back to the kitchens myself."

The soldiers bowed respectfully and walked away. As soon as they were out of hearing range, Dai flicked a glance at Percival's hip before noticeably relaxing.

"You did not bring your sword, Sir."
"I do not make it a habit to carry it with me when among friends," Percival responded with a short smile. "Do you deign to label yourself my enemy?"

"Of course not," came the polite response. "Who would dare be so foolish?"

"Ah, I have the luxury of being in the presence of a civil gentleman. 'Tis good fortune indeed."

Dai was starting to become restless, though he tried not to show it. "May I ask the reason for why you have requested my presence?"

Percival's smile grew, though it never once reached his eyes. "Indeed, we waste time with only standing here. I am looking into an issue that has come to my attention. I wonder, do you know of my friend? His name is Shirou."

Dai's expression didn't change whatsoever upon hearing that name. "Yes, sir. We have worked together a number of times."

"Yes, yes, I see," Percival replied amicably. "Then, you must have surely noticed that Shirou has suddenly disappeared without any notice. Of course, this has caused me some concern, as he does not seem the type to leave without saying something first. I have since discovered he was recently sent on a trip as a representative of the kitchens to search for herbs. If that is the case, it is quite an honor."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Dai murmured, a sinking feeling started to take place in his stomach. "If only we were all so fortunate."

"Indeed. But, this is where I must admit to being confused. You see, to go on a trip outside of the castle, a servant requires permission from the king. Yet, after speaking with His Majesty, I've come to realize that no such permission was given. Rather, my lord was hardly even aware of the event. And, with how interesting of a figure Shirou has proved to be, I find it rather odd that this particular news has not reached his ears. Would you not say this is strange?"

The feeling began to grow stronger. "Yes, Sir Percival. That seems quite strange. I wonder what all this has to do with me, I must say."

Percival crossed his arms over his chest as he continued smiling politely. "A wonderful question, Dai. I heard from a little birdie recently that you were the one to deliver news from the 'king' to Baeddan about this outing, so to speak. That makes me curious – how did you come by this information? Where are you hiding Shirou?"

Dai's change in reaction was immediate. "You have no proof that I've done anything. All you have is the word of a cook that talks shit about the king on a normal basis."

Dai's fingers curled up to make fists, the muscles in his arms tightening as a shadow loomed over Percival's face. The knight sighed softly.

"I was hoping we could converse about this like gentleman, but it would seem you will not give me a choice in the matter."

"You don't scare me. I don't care if you're some knight or not. You can't touch me without suitable cause."

"Big words," murmured Percival, his eyes darkening perceptibly. "But can you back them up, I wonder?"
"You're going to attack a civilian?" Dai grunted out with a slow smirk. "You can't. The king would...

His words ceased as Percival grabbed a hold of Dai's tunic, and swirled around to throw the servant into the wall with no hesitation whatsoever. Dai gasped out as his head cracked against the wall like a whip before he glared up at the knight, who suddenly seemed like an entirely different person.

"Listen, I am going to say this once, and that is all," Percival warned in low tones, his grip never wavering. "My friend has gone missing, and no one knows where he is. I have heard your name a number too many times for your rudeness and ruthlessness. You have guards posted to your person no matter where you go, or what you do. You are not an innocent. Let's make that clear.

"You are quite free to act like you have had no hand in this deception. I am going to search high and low for Shirou. I will search the dungeons, I will search your room, I will talk to every single person you have ever spoken to, I will wander the sewers or send people to do so if necessary. I will scour the entire castle if I must, but I tell you this: if ever I find that you have had even the slightest implication in Shirou's disappearance, your head will be on the chopping block before you can count to three. Do you understand?"

Dai sneered. "You have no right. When the king finds out, your knighthood will be stripped and you'll be as meaningless as the rest of us."

"Keep thinking as much, you little piece of filth," the knight spat out. "Though maybe you should ask yourself who the king will be more than likely to believe – his faithful knight, who has fought beside him without recourse, or you, the little troublemaker that even the queen is slightly wary of? It isn't terribly difficult to figure out the answer to that question."

Then, as if nothing had ever happened, Percival pulled away with a kind smile on his face, leaving Dai spinning. Percival gestured down the hallway, softly saying,

"Now, I must ensure that you are taken back to the kitchens as promised. Shall we go?"

Dai was reasonably shaken as he duly and silently followed after Percival towards the kitchens and into the proverbial protection of his two guards. Percival gave him one last slow smile before he walked off to his next destination. Dai was hardly worried that Percival would somehow connect him to the crime – he'd covered the evidence leading back to him well enough, in his opinion. However, if the man was intending to search the entire castle, in particular, the dungeons... That wouldn't do.

Valeria could fuck herself. Dai wasn't interested in playing this little game anymore. Shirou needed to be eliminated, and soon. Dai smirked as he walked back into the kitchens with his head high.

And he had the perfect tool to make it happen.

"Kill him?"

Meilyr was stunned. He hadn't spoken to Dai for weeks since he'd first been ordered to guard over the prisoner or face the consequences, but this is not how he had expected the next meeting to turn out.

Dai spared the two guards posted a few meters away a quick glance before glaring at Meilyr again.

"Look, you," Dai growled, slamming finger against Meilyr's armor. "You remember who you're
working for, don't you? It's me, you imbecile, not the goddamned king. Either you do as I say, or I take your life, you miserable coward. Now, which will it be?"

"B-but, I don't understand," Meilyr stammered out, his expression full of confusion. I thought I was just supposed to watch over him. Why the sudden need to –"

"That's my business, not yours! Either you do this, or else!"

Meilyr took a step back. "B-but, this isn't right. Dai, I'm not sure what it is you have against the fellow, but Shirou has done nothing wrong. I'm sure of it. This is all a mistake. It would be in our best interests to free him, not kill him. We can make this all right again, without a doubt."

Dai took a good, long look at Meilyr, a frown of puzzlement crossing his face before anger quickly replaced it.

"You pitiful, little fool. You've taken a liking to the bastard, haven't you?" he sneered, rounding in on Meilyr with barely concealed hate. "Let me guess: he gave you some ridiculous sob story, and now you want to make things all better again, do you?"

"There was no sob story," Meilyr affirmed with a slightly steadier voice. "I know it in my heart and soul that he is not meant to be in that dungeon. He should have never been placed there. He's been framed of something."

"Your goody-two-shoes act does nothing but make me angry," Dai said, spitting in Meilyr's face. "Fine, take that bleeding heart and get the hell away from me. I'll send someone else to do the job for you."

The soldier looked taken aback, but didn't try to argue the point. There was just one last thing on his mind.

"What of my family?" Meilyr asked quietly. "I've done all you've told me to do up until now. Will you keep your promise to keep me on the list? Without those necessary resources, my family won't make it..."

The scruffy cook looked at Meilyr, completely surprised, as if the thought had never crossed his mind.

"Your family?" he asked, tilting his head. "The list?"

"Yes, the list that we soldiers are applied to so that shipments to our families are calculated out," Meilyr said slowly, panic starting to well up in him. "You promised that you would no longer take any interest in hurting my family so long as I did what you asked."

Dai blinked a couple of times, not saying a word in return. "Did I? The list?"

He tilted his head the other way before a bark of laughter suddenly left his mouth. "Oh, the list! You little fool! You were never part of any list. Your family has been dead for over a year! Both of ours have, thanks to a sea trek gone wrong."

Meilyr froze, his mind refusing to accept the new information. "I do not understand. Dai, you promised that..."

"Not that I take pleasure in reminiscing, but I wonder if you recall back when we were both children, and your family denied mine a kill that would have fed us for an entire week. Or maybe when your little brother decided to leave me in that hole to my death. Or when your mother slapped
me for no reason whatsoever? Karma is quite a pain, isn't it?"

Meilyr's face paled before abruptly turning a dark shade of red from anger. "Your part of the family stole all of our fishing supplies and our fishing spot, and yet you somehow thought that you would take the kill when we were able to catch something regardless? My little brother was two! How could he have possibly helped you? And my mother slapped you because you hit me!"

"I didn't deserve that trouble your family caused me, Meileeer."

Meilyr gritted his teeth. "Do not call me that. Those actions were no one's fault but your own!"

Dai smirked. "And so here we are."

"Why was I ever cursed with a cousin like you? How could I have been so foolish as to believe you would help one of your own?"

Dai dangled a key in front of Meilyr's face, with a grin that could match the Cheshire Cat's. Meilyr eyed the keys with an empty expression, his shoulders slumping as he stood there with nothing else to support him.

"There is nothing left for you, Meilyr," Dai consoled. "I would hate to leave you to simply fading away, and I really would prefer to simply rely on you instead of getting some other peon to do your work for you. Just think of it as one last thing for our family."

"Why would I?" Meilyr asked, his voice dull.

"My aunt always said you were a boy who would do anything for his family. I'm all you have left now. Your main family may be gone, but we leftovers have got to stick together. What do you say, cousin?"

Meilyr looked at the key for a few more seconds before slowly reaching out and grabbing them.

"What else have I to lose?"

Dai continued smirking. "That's the spirit."

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Shirou bit into the wilted cabbage, and sighed. What he wouldn't do for a bowl of white rice, some tempura, a nice filet of grilled mackerel, some gyouza, miso soup, and piping hot glass of green tea on the side. It's been ages since he's had the opportunity to eat "real" food with "real" seasoning in a situation that was nice and calming. Just half year before, he had been relaxing in his and Rin's house, and now... Well, at least no one came around to bother him in the jail. It gave him a lot of time for introspection.

Another thing that now bothered him, though, had to be his jailor. Meilyr had been solemnly quiet for the past few days, never sparing Shirou a single word whenever he brought food. It was actually somewhat unnerving for the redhead as it was just so unlike Meilyr to be unfriendly in any sense. It seemed like he had a lot on his mind, and though Shirou wanted to ask, he was hardly a stranger to dark, unbidden thoughts, so he chose to give Meilyr his peace and leave it at that. When the man was ready, he would broach a conversation on his own.

"Have you ever killed, Shirou?"

Huh, like now.
Shirou frowned. "I have, yes."

"How did you deal with everything that happened after?"

"Oh, you know," Shirou started, shrugging his shoulders, "lost sight of myself, regretted taking someone's life, forgot how to fight, forgot how to be me. Nothing out of the ordinary."

Meilyr turned his gaze downward towards the ground he sat on, looking nothing short of depressed.

"That sounds like a terrible experience. I would hate to forget who I am."

"It's not the most pleasant thing to go through. I wouldn't recommend it."

Meilyr turned to look at Shirou. "I spoke with Dai the other day."

Ah, that was reason enough for anyone to become upset, even in the slightest. Meilyr turned back around to stare at the opposite wall, his face shadowed.

"For the past year, I have been living a lie," Meilyr confessed softly. "I told you that I became a soldier for the sake of my family, did I not, Shirou? I became a soldier because I firmly believed that I could help them by leaving them and taking care of them from afar. I left with the intention to do my best in hopes that this way was the best path to take. I came here because in my mind, there was no alternate route available to me."

Shirou stayed silent, wondering where Meilyr was going with this. The latter gripped his helmet in his hands tightly.

"I just found out that for the past year, I have been doing all of this for no one's sake, not even my own. My family has long since been dead from a fishing incident. My mother, father, brothers, sisters... All of them are gone, and without me ever once knowing of their deaths. It leads me to wonder what I was ever thinking, leaving them and coming to Camelot. I cannot fight, I cannot assist the king in any manner – I am nothing short of worthless. I realize this now."

Meilyr stood up on his side of the bars, and Shirou watched him out of the corners of his eyes, waiting for the other shoe to drop. He wasn't sure if Meilyr simply needed to rant, or if there was really a reason behind telling Shirou all of this. Shirou was hardly a stranger to losing others – after all, he'd essentially lost every person he'd ever loved or been friendly with by going through time. They may as well have been dead to him – he probably wouldn't be able to ever return to his time.

In a way, he could understand how Meilyr felt, and yet, there was no denying that he would never truly understand what it meant to lose one's entire family. Yes, he had lost Kiritsugu, but it wasn't quite the same. It wasn't, and Shirou would be unfair for acting as if it were.

Meilyr turned to stare down at Shirou. "I never did tell you that Dai and I are related. We're cousins."

Shirou's head swiveled around, his neck popping with the quick action. He stared back at Meilyr, completely gobsmacked. They were cousins? Well, it wasn't like Shirou was a stranger to crazy relationships either. His own adopted sister had attempted to kill him with a berserk Greek hero with twelve freaking lives. There was also the fact that his sister wasn't exactly human either, but it wasn't necessarily important to dwell on the details.

"Oh," Shirou offered lamely, unsure of what to say.
Would it have been rude to say, "Sorry, your cousin's a dick and I'm going to kill him"?

Meilyr continued looking at him, his face empty of all expression.

"I was ordered to kill you, as a favor to my last remaining relative."

Shirou rose to his feet slowly, shoulders tightening as he considered Meilyr's words. "Oh? And do you plan to?"

That he would fight back against his new friend went unsaid – they both knew what would happen, and they both knew that Shirou would more than likely win. He would just hate himself for a good, long time afterwards.

Meilyr dropped his gaze for a moment before his eyes rose up again, hardened from making his decision.

"No," he said determinedly, a click in the door echoing through the cell as the iron door slowly swung open, much to Shirou's surprise.

"I plan to free you."

Shirou stared at Meilyr, shock racing through his body. He looked first at Meilyr, then to the door, then back at his jailor, almost unable to comprehend what had just occurred. Meilyr took the confusion in stride, and simply walked into the cell himself and set his helmet down on the ground.

"What?" Shirou asked weakly, thinking this must have been some kind of trick. "What about Dai? What if he finds out?"

Meilyr grasped at one of his gauntlets and unclasped parts of it before sliding it off easily. It was as he was doing the same action to the other that he said,

"Dai is a manipulative, pathetic soul who would stop at nothing to hurt others so long as it somehow benefits him in the end."

The other gauntlet came off. "I have spent far too long hiding in that man's shadow, strung by his fingers' threads, doing whatever he would bid me to do.

Next, Shirou watched as Meilyr unhooked his pauldron from his breastplate. Then, he slowly shimmied out of his breastplate as well, setting it gently on the ground next to everything else. Shirou eyed him carefully – Meilyr, for all of his confided weakness, was still fairly muscular and had a decent build under all of his armor. Shirou couldn't tell for sure, as the man was still wearing a loose tunic, but he definitely wasn't all skin and bones.

Meilyr looked at him without any hesitation. "I will die before enacting any plan of his, especially when it concerns someone who should have never been punished in the first place. If his desire is that you should die, that is precisely what I must fight against, with all that I am. I am no one's slave."

He took off his sabatons and greaves next, and lined them up next to the other parts. Shirou frowned at him.

"I see," was all he said as he looked down at all of the armor parts. "I can understand that. What I don't get though, is why you're stripping everything off. What are you doing?"

Meilyr cocked a slight grin at Shirou before next slipping off his cuisses. As soon as the cuisses
were off, he stood back up and slipped off his tunic, his pale skin smooth and unblemished. He turned to Shirou and held out the tunic to the redhead, still smiling.

"You will be wearing these in my stead, of course."

Shirou stared back blankly. "I'm sorry, what?"

Meilyr chuckled. "Wear this armor in my place, Shirou."

"Can't we just, I don't know, walk out together?"

Meilyr immediately lost his smile. "One soldier came down here, and it is only one soldier who may leave without raising any suspicion. In addition, my cousin seeks your life. You would not make it past the upper level before someone attempted to stab you or put you in a terrible position. My armor will shield you. The helmet will hide your identity. I know of no other way than this for you to get out. I beg that you understand."

Shirou gritted his teeth and looked down at the tunic bitterly. "So you have to stay here while I go off to my freedom? What's fair about this?"

His jailor shook his head, and thrust the tunic into Shirou's arms. "You act as if there is nothing but fault with this plan. Please remember that I chose this path. Not you, not Dai, not even the king, but me. I, for once, am acting out my own desires without anyone forcing me into one position or another. I am freely choosing to take this route, to liberate you. It has been a long time since I sought to do something for the sake of myself and none other."

"This isn't right," Shirou muttered, clenching the tunic in his grasp.

"Such is life, eh, my friend?" Meilyr quipped with another smile. "If you are so opposed, then see that my choice is not made in vain. Show my cousin that he has taken the wrong and unjust path. If you can do that, then I have no regrets whatsoever."

Shirou looked down at the tunic, never once attempting to make eye contact with Meilyr. After a few seconds of deliberation, he slowly nodded his head in concession. If that was what Meilyr wanted, then Shirou could do that, or attempt to.

"Wonderful, my friend," Meilyr said with some joyfulness in his voice. "Now, let us fit this armor on you. I dare say that I doubt you have ever worn any yourself."

Shirou chuckled to himself as the tunic went over his head. Meilyr was smaller than him by a bit, but it still fit more or less. Shirou next took off his breeches – Meilyr was admittedly taken aback by his boxers, and upon saying that he'd like to inspect them, Shirou firmly told him no. He switched Meilyr's breeches, which were the same color as the rest of the soldiers', and then one by one, began putting on one piece of armor after another.

It was somewhat awkward for Shirou to be clasped in armor, and the metal was heavy. It was heavy! He wouldn't be doing much running and jumping with all of that on, and found himself suddenly seeing Saber in a new light. She'd run up a building with this crap on, plus she'd been carrying a huge sword like Excalibur, too. Certainly, she had been a Servant at the time, but, in this day and age, she hopped up on horses and fled off into the distance like a medieval Batman, so that was still something. Shirou lifted up one arm and frowned at the amount of energy necessary to keep it raised.

Meilyr grinned at him, having already shifted into Shirou's boots and breeches.
"Armor is rather cumbersome, isn't it?"

Shirou just looked at him as if he were crazy. "Cumbersome" was not the first word to come to Shirou's mind. Try annoying, heavy, bulky, and pain-in-the-ass.

Meilyr continued smiling before giving the open cell door one last glance.

"Shirou," he said, sobering as he thought up his next words, "I do not know what comes next for you. I do not know what you will face. I only hope that by doing this, you will reach some sort of closure. Dai was wrong to put you here, and he was wrong to try to force you into such a terrible situation. I hope that you can find it in your heart to somehow see past that."

Shirou sighed. "I don't know if I can. I'm surprised you would ask me to."

"He is a manipulative demon," Meilyr said, "but he is still my cousin, my family. I hate him with all my soul, and still love him with all my heart. He is all I have left. I understand that this does not hold true for you, but I know that I would never be able to hurt him. This is all I can do to fight against him."

Meilyr shrugged one shoulder. "I have no regrets."

"Meilyr," Shirou started before being pushed out of the cell and into the corridor.

The brunet smiled again and closed the door himself. "You must leave now. I normally go back at this time, and if you are to maintain anonymity, you must leave quickly. Do not concern yourself with me, I will be fine."

Shirou glared back at Meilyr before nodding curtly. "I'll make sure to come back."

"See that you take care of what all must be done first. I am a secondary matter. Now, go."

The redhead gave Meilyr one last cursory look before walking down the corridor.

One step after another took Shirou past one cell after another, up to the next floor, and then down the long line of cells with guards posted at each one. He walked past each jailor with nervousness swirling in his stomach, wondering if they would be able to tell who he was. It wasn't until he had left the dungeon entirely that he felt all of his anxiousness just float away, like nothing had ever happened. He stood at the top of the steps outside of the door leading back down to the dungeon. For the first time in a month or so, he was out of a cell and in relative freedom.

Shirou felt his muscles tighten as he walked away from the dungeon door and away from the watchful gazes of the men posted to watch the dungeons. Blue sparks of prana leapt over the armor as anger boiled deep within him. No matter what happened, he was going to find Dai and make him pay. Shirou wouldn't kill him right away, no. That would be too convenient, and if he did that, there was no telling what Dai's little network might do, much less Valeria, for that matter. No, Shirou would make Dai see the error of his ways, not only for Shirou's sake, but for Meilyr's as well. What Dai had done was unforgivable – no human being should be able to treat anyone else like that, no matter what.

War was one thing – mindlessly hurting people because you found enjoyment in it? That was something else entirely, and Shirou was not going to stand for it for even one more second.

He walked down the hall, not really knowing where he was going, when he heard voices of people walking his way.
"I would at least like to watch how you attend to the prisoner. You would deny me even that?"

"Your Majesty, I mean no offense, but I feel that you would not be able to stand idle while we have all the fun."

"I would hardly consider this as fun, Tristan."

"Beating the ever loving lights out of a terrible person? If that is not entertainment, Sire, then I fail to understand what is!"

Shirou stopped in his tracks, eyes wide.

_She_ was here? That wouldn't do. King Arthur needed to be told about what had just occurred within her castle over the past month, but Shirou didn't yet have any proof to give her. Without that, she wouldn't pay him any mind and that might cause trouble for him later.

He needed to talk to Dai, and take care of the situation. If Dai could not be dealt with in a fatal manner, then Shirou would simply need to extract every last bit of information the idiot held within that head of his so Shirou could find a way to contend with the situation better. Even if Dai could point him to his superiors, or tell Shirou where Valeria was hiding, or who she really worked for, then he would quickly have a leg up and be able to produce some results in a satisfactory time period.

There were so many things he needed to do...

Shirou shook himself to get rid of the thoughts that suddenly plagued him. At the moment, his task was to act like a normal soldier and get past his newest obstacle: the king. That's right, he would hold his head high and march forward like he belonged there. She couldn't know who he was or he wouldn't be able to do anything.

He walked forward with new vigor, trying to look like a normal soldier as he walked past. He saw her as soon as she rounded a corner with a few of her men. He noticed Percival almost immediately, and nearly smiled before remembering his current mission: getting away without catching anyone's attention. As King Arthur neared his position – were they going to the dungeons? – he happily thought that he was doing okay.

Time seemed to slow down for him as she passed him by, though he never caught the quick glance she gave him and the subtle narrowing of eyes. As Shirou walked away, King Arthur faced forward again, her mouth in a tight line as she once again rejoined the conversation with her knights.

_Why was he...?_

Shirou was simply happy that he'd been able to fool everyone, even the king. Now, with that problem behind him, he needed to deal with the even direr one: Dai. Now, how would he find out where Dai's quarters were?

It was time to pay a visit to Zago for a little reunion.
The door slammed shut behind him as Shirou clanked into his and Zago's room, eyes narrowed as he found his target. Zago had jolted awake from the loud noise and only stared at the man he hadn't seen for practically a month. Shirou took off the helmet that had kept his identity more or less a secret and stared at Zago, his eyes far colder than Zago had ever recalled them being.

"Zago," Shirou called out as he walked into the room and sat on his now dusty cot. "I need some information from you."

Zago just continued to stare at him, not even bothering to tame the mess of platinum-blond hair on his head. A frown slowly appeared on the redhead's face as Zago chose to stay quiet for once in his life. He gritted his teeth.

"Zago. I don't have the patience to wait for you to get over whatever your deal is right now. We've got to talk."

The blond finally snapped out of his state of shock and frowned back at Shirou, his hand held out as if waiting for something to be given to him. Shirou focused on the hand for a moment before his angry gaze slowly floated back up to look at his roommate, tension practically radiating off of his body. He grabbed Zago's wrist, pulling the lazy man off of his bunk and up close so that Zago got the point.

"I don't have time for games, Zago," Shirou warned, his need for information overriding his desire to be kind to his friend. "You know everyone who's anyone, practically. Tell me what you know about Dai."

Zago frowned at Shirou. "What's happened to you, mate?"

The lack of the word "dude" made Shirou take a step back mentally, and he let go of the blond's wrist. Hesitantly taking a step back to create some room between the two of them, Shirou closed his eyes and counted backwards from ten. Just because he'd been through hell for the past month didn't mean that he could just treat his friend like this – a friend who had no idea of what kind of hell he'd just experienced.

"Sorry," he finally muttered, falling back to sit on his cot. "I'm just in a rush."

The blond tilted his head slightly, but slowly backed away to sit back on his own cot.

"Guess the trip didn't pan out as well as hoped?" Zago questioned, tone serious for a rare moment. "Did you not get enough supplies? What's got you so upset?"

Shirou narrowed his eyes in confusion. "What trip?"

"You know, the one you've been on for the past month to get supplies for the kitchen? That's why I was holding out my hand. No friend of mine would ever leave the castle and not come back with some kind of souvenir."

Trip? What trip? Was this the cover story Dai had come up with to explain away his absence? Ah, that actually made some sort of sense. Providing something happened when Shirou was outside of Camelot, his death could be explained away because of a wild animal of something gone awry, inevitably cutting off any possibility of his having been involved with the foreigner's death. Shirou closed his eyes as he felt himself grow even angrier. Dai had been resolute on erasing Shirou's
existence from the plate without a hint as to what had truly transpired, and it was pissing Shirou off.

"No," he eventually said, voice deepened from his inner turmoil. "Sorry to burst your bubble, but I was never a part of any kind of supply run. You've been misinformed."

Frowning, Zago leaned forward. "What do you mean there wasn't a trip? Then where the hell have you been for the past month? I had to fucking do your share of the work, you know. That wasn't exactly a walk in the park."

Shirou shook his head. "Oh, I've been gone for good reason. More like, kidnapped, beaten down, and then stuffed into a jail cell to rot away without anyone the wiser."

"You what?" Zago exclaimed, automatically looking towards the door as if fearing someone would come charging in because of the volume of his voice. "What the fuck do you mean you were in jail? How the fuck were you in jail? Why the fuck did the king put you in jail?"

"The king had nothing to do with me being in jail."

"What?" Zago asked, bewildered. "But he's the only one with authorization to make that call. How the hell were you put in there otherwise? What, did you take a wrong turn and, oh no, find yourself in a cell that just happened to lock behind you? Were you drunk?"

The redhead leaned forward, expression calm but completely serious. "Listen, Zago. I need you to tell me every damn thing you know about Dai. His shifts. His tendencies. His haunts. Where he sleeps. Who he talks to usually. Any information you've got on him, any at all, is something I need to know. Right now."

Zago was obviously thrown by all the new information that had been stuffed down his throat. "Why are you so fixated on that asshole? I get that he's a serious pain in the ass, but it's like you've got tunnel vision as far as he goes. What's he got to do with..."

Shirou could tell the exact moment that Zago realized the correlation. The man's grey eyes widened before narrowing into slits as his hands curled into fists on his knees. Zago breathed in and out slowly as anger swirled within him.

"That cock-sucking, motherfucking, shit-eating..." he growled out.

"Yeah," was all Shirou could reply with.

Zago looked back at him. "So that asshole kidnapped you and sent you to rot in a cell without the king knowing a damn thing? You're going to tell King Arthur, right? Get that dumbass on the chopping block and out of our fucking lives forever?"

With a shake of his head, Shirou argued, "No. Telling King Arthur wouldn't do anything. Sh... He needs evidence, and I don't have any – not the irrefutable kind, anyway. Dai has his grimy fingers wrapped around so many people in this stupid place, that he would probably just be let out soon enough, and after that, we'd probably never see him again. That's not to say he wouldn't still be running the show around here. There are just too many layers to dissect before I can really get rid of him. If I could, I'd just go to his room, kill him, and be done with it. That's not going to work though."

"I never thought I'd hear you talk about killing someone so easily," Zago pointed out, a strange expression on his face. "This month has changed you, my friend."
"No," Shirou denied, "it's just reminded me of something I'd thought I'd lost long ago."

The blond tilted his head and paused from speaking for a few minutes. Eventually, he leaned forward, his expression more determined than Shirou had ever seen it before. All evidence of his normal lackadaisical, lazy self were gone, replaced with a man with a mission.

"All right," Zago said, strength underlying his voice. "you said you wanted to know about Dai? His, what, shifts? Places he goes, people he sees, all that important stuff?"

"Yeah," Shirou said. "What can you tell me?"

"Not much, honestly," Zago answered. "Dai's pretty much your run-of-the-mill detestable individual, despite his tendency to want to kill everything and anything that pisses him off or offends Telyn in the slightest. I'm pretty sure that if he hadn't targeted you, even with you seeing him every day, you'd never have noticed him. He's just that kind of guy."

Shirou made a small noise of agreement. "You're right. He's capable of getting in and out of places without alerting anyone. He's kind of like a snake – you don't realize you're in trouble until he latches onto you and poisons you."

"Right. As for his shifts – well, he's still on night duty. That hasn't changed, but lately, he's also been doing the morning and evening shifts, too. He's always randomly absent during the afternoons, but that suits me just fine. As for who he sees and meets, or what he does." Zago continued with a shrug, "sorry, my brother. You're out of luck with that one. I've never really considered him worthy of paying much attention to before all of this, so I couldn't tell you a damned thing."

"What about where he sleeps? Where are his quarters?"

Zago raised his gaze to look at the ceiling before letting out a soft sigh. "All I know is that he lives on the second floor of the main wing, like Baeddan. It's a perk of being a part of the Upper Echelons."

There was a small moment of silence before Zago snapped his fingers. "Oh, wait, that's right. Fourth door from the right side of the hall."

Shirou couldn't help but blink with surprise. "That's pretty exact."

"The fucker made some kind of big hullabaloo about how Telyn being on the very end of the corridor might put her in danger, and he forced the poor soul in the room next to him to move the hell out so Telyn would be right next to him. She currently lives in between him and Baeddan, actually."

Well, that was an interesting piece of information.

"So, which room is Telyn's?" Shirou asked, a plan forming in his head. "Third or fifth door?"

"Third," replied Zago before frowning. "Wait, what are you going to do anyway?"

Shirou stood up slowly. While he was somewhat loathe to rid himself of the perfect disguise he currently had on, the clanking of the armor wouldn't allow him to move around with the silent quickness he required to sneak into Dai's room. As he started relieving himself of one piece of armor after another, he told Zago, "Not something I'm going to bore you with. Let's just say I've got a bone to pick with that asshole."
Zago stood up as well, watching as Shirou reached into a foot locker for a spare set of clothing. As soon as Shirou was dressed again in an unassuming pair of breeches, boots, and tunic, he asked, "Are you going to kill him?"

Shirou paused before slowly turning to look back at the blond. "Were you planning to turn me in if I were?"

"No," Zago said, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'd just need to make preparations for where to bury the body without getting in trouble. Oh, and I'd have to steal a couple of shovels from the gardening crew, somehow."

With some hesitation, Shirou looked back at Zago, eyes wide. "Seriously? No chiding or words of retribution?"

"Who the fuck has time for that shit?" asked Zago, one eyebrow lifted. "We're brothers until the end. You need someone out of the way? Just let me get the cleanup crew organized. Need that one specific ingredient for a hellacious itching powder? Got you covered, man. Need that one asshole who threw you in jail to be six feet under instead? Give me a few hours, and we'll have that taken care of, no problem."

Shirou made a slow, slightly unsteady grin. "Thanks, Zago. I'll keep that in mind when some other crazy idiot wants to off me."

"Go fuck off if you plan to start crying," Zago retorted with his own grin. "I ain't got time for that sissy stuff. Just let me know what happens, yeah? You're not allowed to be the only one laughing his ass off."

Shirou clapped Zago on the shoulder once before walking away and heading for the door. As soon as he opened it, he heard his friend say,

"I'll let Eos know about what's happened with you. She's got enough clout that Baeddan will believe her without setting off Dai in any way."

He nodded shortly before opening the door fully and walking out into the hallway. He let out a deep sigh as soon as the door was closed behind him before straightening up and heading down the corridor for the main building. He saw a number of curious expressions on people's faces as he passed by, though he could hardly care less as to what they thought of a foreigner walking down the hallways of the servants' quarters. His mind was focused on one thing and one thing only, and that was dealing with the man who had made his life hell for far too long now.

Shirou walked up the stairwell of the main wing up to the second floor, his golden-brown eyes sweeping down the hallway to check for stragglers or officials coming and going. Seeing no one in plain sight, he inwardly counted the number of doors as he passed them. As soon as he reached the fourth one, he set his hand on the door handle before hesitating and looking back to his right at the third door. He hardly thought of his options for barely a minute before his boots were scuffing against the floor softly and he was at the third door instead.

He gingerly attempted to open the door, but wasn't surprised any to find it locked tight. A few more glances down the corridor both ways and without a second thought, his hand was on the lock itself as he cast a Structural Analysis. With the lock being so simple, it was child's play to swiftly understand its overall design and quickly reproduce a key that would unlock the door. Shirou once again looked around him before tracing the key, unlocking and opening the door and slipping into the room silently.
The first thing he noticed as he came into the room was that no one was actually there. Telyn was absent, which meant that Dai was too, for the moment. That didn't mean he had much time to dawdle around though. Shirou walked into the room, noticing that while it wasn't all that big, it had an actual bed, with a mattress and covers and a pillow and... Shirou grunted and turned away, letting his eyes take in the desk, mirror and... For fuck's sake, she had a fucking miniature fireplace?

A spark of irritation hit him as he realized how different it really was when you held rank in this type of society and realized just how far off he was from making a difference of any kind as a lowly cook. Even being a soldier should offer him more advantages than he currently had. What he wouldn't have given for an actual fireplace over the winter, though.

Shirou looked around the room some more for anything that might strike his curiosity before his eyes landed on the drawers of the desk. He tilted his head and attempted to open one, but it had nothing of value inside. Rocking back on his heels, he then tried the next one, but found it wouldn't budge. Eyes narrowing, Shirou once more quickly ran a scan over its locking mechanism, produced another key, and heard it click open. As soon as he heard the noise, Shirou slid the drawer open to see a bunch of different items laying inside, askew. He ruffled though a few parchments, not really seeing anything of importance before a glimmer of blue caught his eye.

Curiosity piquing, Shirou picked up the blue gem, looking at the golden necklace attached to it. He looked it up and down before finally nodding and pocketing it. Shirou slid the drawer shut again and immediately locked it again afterwards. He didn't want her to figure out he'd taken anything so easily. He stood up swiftly afterwards and headed to the door. As soon as he opened it slowly, he listened calmly for any sound of someone coming before judging the coast to be clear. Shirou, after giving a quick glance down both sides of the hallway, slipped out of the room and locked it with the necessary key before dashing over to the next room, and running through the same process for Dai's door.

As he opened it gingerly, he was relieved to find that, as initially assumed, Dai was absent. Where his target actually was, he couldn't be certain, but there was a definite guarantee that the man would be back, no matter what. It might take hours upon hours for that to happen, but it would happen. Hopefully, the man would come back before trying to pay a visit to his cousin to see if the job had been finished as necessitated.

Shirou locked the door from the inside and walked in to sit on the mattress. From what he could tell, it was filled with down feathers, which pissed him off more. He was normally sleeping on a shitty, thin cot, and for the past month, he'd be sleeping on a cold, hard ground with only hay for comfort. All of this while Dai, a murderer, for no other word could describe him so succinctly, was essentially living in a sort of paradise.

Shirou cracked his knuckles, eagerly biding his time for when Dai returned for their wonderful reunion.

Luckily for him, however, it was only a little over an hour later that Shirou finally heard some voices echo down the hallway. He calmly leapt to his feet, sliding into the space behind the door just as he heard Dai stop in front of it.

"You go in first, Telyn. I want to make sure everything's all right with you first."

"Dai," Shirou heard Telyn say with some exasperation. "I'm hardly a skip and jump away from you. Must you do this every day?"

"Baeddan lives right next to you," Shirou's target explained. "Who knows what he'd do to you if
given the chance."

"Nothing," came the eventual reply, with flat tones. "He wouldn't do anything because he has little interest in anything that doesn't concern the kitchen. You are paranoid, my friend."

"Better paranoid than dead," Dai retorted before Shirou heard Telyn scoff.

Shirou heard a door open and then shut before tensing as the door to Dai's room opened, just barely leaving him enough room to breathe. Dai grumbled a bit as he walked in before turning around to close the door and lock it. It was with a slow realization that the scruffy man slowly turned to his right to see Shirou standing right next to him, eyes gleaming with a blazing fury. Shirou, looking as relaxed as could be for a would-be assassin, simply smirked slightly and whispered,

"Hey."

Before Dai could even let out a shout of fright or surprise, Shirou had clapped a hand over his mouth and pushed him further into the room. Pushing him away slightly, the redhead chucked a fist straight into Dai's stomach before clocking him again with a hook. When Dai hit the floor with dull sound, Shirou immediately traced a regular sword and held its point at his target's neck, his eyes colder than Dai had ever before witnessed.

"Now," Shirou began, his voice soft, "get up and sit on the bed."

Dai hesitated. "You can't do this. You're insane. One shout from me and you're done! Finished!"

From his pocket, Shirou withdrew the necklace he'd stolen from Telyn's room over an hour before. Dai's eyes narrowed in on it automatically before the man frowned, not recognizing its significance.

"Ooo, a pretty bauble for the Scottish idiot," Dai snipped, feeling bolder. "What, do you plan to hypnotize me or something?"

Shirou regained his smirk. "I take it you don't recognize this. What a shame. I'm sure she'd have a few words to say about your supposed friendship then."

"She who?" Dai shot back.

Shirou made certain the sword just barely touched the other man's Adam's apple as he explained: "Your beloved friend, Telyn, of course. Don't you recognize the beautiful necklace that she cherishes so much that she keeps it under lock and key so that no one else can get to it?"

Seeing Dai pale slightly, Shirou tilted his head. "So, you and I are going to have a little talk, and unlike last time, you're going to be telling me every single thing I want to know, if you want Telyn to stay alive. Or," he continued with a shrug, "you can ignore me and I'll just kill her the first chance I get. I could do it now, even. I'll bet she's asleep right now. She'd never even feel it – it'd be a merciful death."

"Don't touch her!" Dai exclaimed before shutting up as Shirou pressed the point deeper against his neck.

Waving the necklace back and forth once more before pocketing it, Shirou gestured at the bed with a quick nudge of his head. "Get over there."

The brunet scrambled for his bed, jumping onto it before freezing as the blade once again found his neck. Dai held up his hands in a semblance of surrender, though Shirou didn't bother moving away or letting the pressure in the room die off any. Shirou slid his left hand in his pocket as he stared at
Dai as coolly and calmly as he was capable, eyes narrowing slightly.

"Now," Shirou said, his voice laden with authority, "first things first: tell me what you know about Valeria."

Dai grunted, his eyes glaring with hatred at Shirou. "Not that much. She's currently receiving training from the great Merlin himself, but from what I can tell, she's pretty up there in ability. Whatever skills you saw from her when you two battled was only the tip of the iceberg. I don't know what all she's capable of, but she's a real threat, to anyone who finds themselves as her enemy."

"What's your connection to her?"

"Tch," spit out Dai. "I've been running circles around the high-and-mighty people since I first got here. I talked to people, made contacts, all of that shit. She came looking for me one night with an offer of more power if I completed some more tasks for her. Kill some people, keep watch on others, make sure things run the way she wants them to."

Shirou frowned. "Why? You didn't even question it?"

Dai laughed abruptly. "Question what? She gave me advantages. Any time someone screws with me and I can't deal with them, she does. I'm necessary for her, see? I blend in well enough that I can accomplish things that she's too high-profile to even bother with. I do what she wants, and get what I want. What more do I need?"

"You didn't think for one moment that she'd kill you anyway?"

"Even if she did, so what? I've got no one waiting for me – no one gives a shit if I live or not. There's Telyn, but she's kind enough to get a new friend or guardian within a second."

At that, Shirou couldn't deny the truth of the statement. He knew he wouldn't cry if the guy bit the dust. Nodding slightly, but keeping his grip on the sword steady, Shirou asked a different question:

"How often do you meet? Is there any way for you to call her to you?"

The scruffy man's hackles rose as he got tired of being interrogated. "Fuck you. I'm tired of –"

Shirou simply pulled out the necklace again and pressed the tip of the sword in further, watching emotionlessly as a trickle of blood made its way down Dai's neck. The latter winced but bit his lip and argued no further.

"She calls me. I don't know how to get in touch with her," Dai finally admitted, his face screwed up into a scowl."

"Anything you do know about her?" Shirou continued to press.

"She's a fucking psychopathic bitch."

Well, that they could both agree on, Shirou realized as his eyebrows rose. Dai bent back a bit to clear his throat, although Shirou only moved in closer with the blade afterwards.

Dai glared at him again. "If you want to find out more about her, you'd best ask Merlin, or for fuck's sake, some other mage. They'll probably know her, unless the damn bitch lied to me about that, too."
"Last question about her," Shirou said. "What's her deal with the king? Why's she trying to cause disorder?"

"Hmph," Dai harrumphed. "You tell me one person who is actually reasonably okay with a mere boy taking the reins of control over an entire kingdom at the age of fifteen. King Arthur was hardly a squire and yet suddenly, bam, he's king? Because he pulled out a magic sword that is fated to the next king? He has zero capability, zero experience in running any type of force, and the only reason he isn't dead yet is because of that stupid sheath."

Shirou glared back at Dai. "King Arthur had royal lineage – he would have taken control over the kingdom regardless."

"If you believe the rumors, sure," Dai scoffed again. "I've also heard he was a bastard child and not actually related whatsoever to King Uther. There are so many different stories floating around out there that you'd be hard-pressed to find one that pictures that kid as anything particularly amazing. Any damn mage can make a stupid enchanted sword. Look at you! You fucking whipped that thing out of nowhere. Are you going to tell me that it's saying you're going to beat back the Saxons with a single blow now, too?"

No. Shirou couldn't do that with this pathetic sword. A nice Gate of Babylon might pull that off for a good amount of time, if he didn't run out of the prana necessary to channel it before kicking the bucket himself.

Dai's explanation of the problems concerning the king also bothered him a bit, but he couldn't refute them whatsoever. At least the person he had met in the future had been the ripe age of twenty-five, which was a more than suitable age to begin running a kingdom, but it was true that the one right now was only seventeen, soon to be eighteen. Hell, she could be eighteen already. Whatever. He couldn't do anything about that right now. One problem at a time.

"Fine," Shirou conceded. "Let's switch topics. I heard you talking to Valeria when she thought I was unconscious –"

"Fucking hell," cursed Dai. "I damn well knew you weren't out. That stupid woman."

"Back to my questioning," Shirou cut in smoothly. "Who's Dylan? What's his role in all of this?"

Dai rolled his eyes. "He's some stupid right-hand guy who's always at the king's side. Always. Stupid squirrelly weakling of a man."

"What do you mean?" asked Shirou with some anxiousness. "And what's he got to do with anything?"

The other man sighed. "He meets with me every so often, getting me to do his dirty work for him. I don't really care, but the guy's a whole new kind of asshole. He's got to have balls of steel to pull all the shit he does under the king's nose and never get caught. It must be because he looks so fucking pathetic that it'd be hard to think him capable of anything like that."

"Is it possible to get close to him?"

"Not in your dreams, even, no," Dai denied, shaking his head slightly. "The guy is untouchable. He sees everything the king does, practically. Is a source of information for the king to use at all times. The guy's so out of reach that the only time I ever see him is when he's in the damn Great Hall being served. And even then, he only passes me pieces of paper. I had to learn to fucking read because of that idiot."
"Fine," Shirou finally said. "Enough about him, then."

So, Dylan was out of his reach, huh? But if he was always next to the king's side and willing to cause irreparable damage to the woman and her keep, then that was a serious problem. Unless he, again, somehow found a way to get closer to the king and in her confidence, he'd never be able to get Dylan out of the way. Shirou either had to become a right-hand man to someone extremely important, or prove himself in battle. While he wouldn't mind joining the military at this point, that might only create even more distance between himself and the king. He'd have to rise through the ranks extremely quickly, but he wasn't a master of swordplay. Without the memories of the swords he traced, he was pretty much a newbie to the art. Now, he could become an archer, but Shirou couldn't recall any real archers in the Knights of the Round Table, and it would take years to prove he was worthy anyway.

But wait – what about Mordred? He was another problem altogether. He had been planted by Morgana into King Arthur's service, and had somehow become a knight in her elite service. Damn it, when had he even come to the castle in the first place? Was he already here? Was he already one of the elite knights? Great, now Shirou had to worry about that, too.

"Next," Shirou stated with a shake of his head. "I want you to tell me how many people you're in contact with."

Dai smirked. "Good question."

As soon as Shirou threatened him again with the sword, Dai chuckled. "The answer is that I don't know. I know everyone, and at the same time, no one. Sorry, but anyone in this castle could be my contact at this point. I work fast, and hard."

*That's what she said,* thought Shirou irritably. "Fine. Then I want a list of every single person you've killed so far."

"What, like their names or something?" Dai asked, looking confused.

"Or something," Shirou repeated, feeling a bit cross.

"Why would you want to know something like that?"

Shirou just glared at the other man. "Their families deserve to know what happened. You just kidnapped these people and killed them. There's no way their families could possibly have any sort of closure."

Dai stared at him for a moment before bursting out with laughter. "Hoh, lookie here! Seems like we've got ourselves a saint!"

Shirou gritted his teeth as Dai's laughter finally died down and the man looked at him while saying, "Sorry, man. I haven't a clue of who those people were, or whose family they were. They were just in my way. I guess it wasn't their lucky day."

The sword in Shirou's hands dissipated slowly and Dai felt the leash around his neck loosen as Shirou looked away from him. Feeling like some of the danger had been uplifted, Dai leaned forward, as if ready to kill his intruder for treating him with so much disrespect. He watched Shirou breathe in slowly and let out a sigh. As he readied himself to pounce, Shirou suddenly spun, lifted a leg, and smashed his boot right into Dai's face, sending the man's head banging back against the wall behind him before ricocheting onto the bed. His hands reached for his now broken nose as he whimpered pathetically and curled up to save himself from more abuse.
Shirou scowled deeply at him, eyes wide and teeth still gritted as his hands clenched tightly into fists. Turning slowly, Shirou reached out and grabbed at Dai’s tunic, pulling the other man up until he was face to face with Shirou. The latter's golden-brown eyes bore into Dai’s hazel-yellow ones, his anger easily readable.

"Let me make this clear to you since you still don't get it," Shirou growled. "I want nothing more to do with you. If I see you outside of my shifts, I will give you reason to fear me. If I hear that you've been a part of some stupid scheme to make things even tougher around here, you can bet I'll be right back here, ready to give you another beat down. You get in my way, and I will make things very, very painful for you. Stay away from me, stay away from my friends, and if you ever, ever try to have me hurt again in any manner of speaking, then you'd better be prepared for the oncoming backlash, because I guarantee you that it will come."

Throwing Dai back onto the man's bed, he threw out another bit of information: "And, just to make sure you understand this, you now report to me. If you get contacted by Dylan, Valeria, or whomever, you talk to me. You get any interesting information, you talk to me. If I want something from you, you do it. If I need something procured, you get it for me. Got it?"

Dai groaned before whining, "You just told me to stay away from you..."

"Don't be a pest," Shirou snapped. "I'll be seeing you during our shifts. You can tell me what I need to know then."

"I fucking hate you," Dai complained, his glare sharper than before.

"I don't care," Shirou retorted, turning away and walking towards the door. He pulled out the necklace, turned back around and held it up plainly for Dai to see. "And, just so you don't get any bright ideas, my threat still stands. Her life is in your hands."

With that, he turned around, opened the door, and walked out without another word. The last thing Shirou heard as he walked down the empty hallway was a scream of frustration, which only made him start walking just a bit faster than before.

"Shirou! I was so worried about you!" Eos was quick to say when Shirou appeared in the kitchen for his shift after talking to Baeddan the day before.

Shirou grinned hesitantly before letting out a cough when Eos slammed into him for a powerful hug. Zago simply watched the two of them with a smirk on his face. When Eos finally backed away, her cheeks a rosy hue as she realized she'd let her emotions get the best of her, Shirou finally let out a small chuckle.

"It's good to see you again, too, Eos," he said sincerely.

As Eos and Shirou gathered at the table to begin preparing for the evening meal, with Zago lazily keeping them company and ignoring his own chores, the woman suddenly frowned, her countenance growing serious. After flicking a tendril of raven tresses out of her midnight-blue eyes, she focused them on Shirou.

"Is it true that you were not on an expedition for resources?" she asked softly, disguising their conversation under the premise of separating materials for cutting. "Please tell me you were not, in fact, trapped in the dungeons for an extended period of time."

Shirou passed Zago a glance, but the latter only shrugged his shoulders.
"She kept asking me questions I couldn't figure out how to answer," Zago explained in the end. "It made more sense to just tell her what happened rather than hope that any lies would stick."

The redhead sighed and turned to look back at Eos who merely narrowed her eyes further. When he hesitated, she turned her gaze away, looking somewhat disappointed. Shirou reached for a carrot and a knife himself, keeping track of all the other people in the kitchen to make sure there weren't any people lurking around listening to the conversation.

"It's true," he muttered, and Eos's lips firmed slightly. "There was nothing I could do about it."

"Had I but known," Eos whispered back, a tinge of regret present in her voice. "I might've been able to convince my husband to relieve you of your situation, or at the very least—"

Shirou put down the knife and rested a hand on Eos's shoulder, much to her surprise. "Hey, it isn't your fault. It happened. It's done."

Eos touched his hand gently, before pulling it from her shoulder and concentrating again on her task. Her eyes were narrowed as she grew quiet, much to the concern of both Shirou and Zago. Shirou looked back at Zago who shrugged his shoulders and grabbed his broom. Pushing away from the table, the blond moseyed away to do the job required of him, leaving Shirou relatively alone with Eos, who seemed different from her normal kind, gentle self. He didn't bother to try getting her to explain what was wrong and turned his attention instead to the vegetables he was supposed to be working on.

The two of them worked side-by-side in relative silence for the next ten, almost twenty minutes before the doors to the kitchen burst open and in walked a tall man who, again, looked as if he just stepped out of a Pantene commercial. Baeddan's brown eyes swept across the room before coming back to stare straight at Shirou, who looked back unabashed.

"Ro!" Baeddan called in a loud, clear voice. "You bless us with your presence! How fared your wonderful trip to the abyss beyond Camelot?"

Shirou quirked an eyebrow, unsure of how to take such a greeting. "Uh. It was, uh, pretty crappy?"

"Of course it was, of course it was," Baeddan agreed, motioning with a hand for Shirou to follow him. "The rest of you, continue with your duties. As interesting as I may prove myself to be, if you do not deliver an excellent batch of meal provisions this day, I will force down the slop we feed the pigs into your mouths and expect you to accept my loving gift with a wonderful smile. Chop chop!"

Shirou noticed several glares sent Baeddan's way as the two men walked out of the kitchen and into the hallway. They both walked down to a far corner, away from those who might try to listen in. Once Baeddan felt they were safe to talk, he turned to Shirou, his arms crossed over his muscular chest. Shirou had a hand on his hip, ready to deal with any trouble that Baeddan might dish him. He hadn't escaped one hell just to have someone bring him down now. Baeddan, however, was hardly interested in doing anything of the sort.

"So, Ro," the older man began, eyes narrowed as he lost all trace of his earlier sarcasm. "I received a visit from your friend the other day during your absence."

"Yeah, so?" asked Shirou, muscles tensed.

Baeddan merely gave him a knowing glance. "He informed me of something interesting. So, tell me here and now. Were you, or were you not, a part of a group that traveled to search for
ingredients, or something of that sort?"

Shirou shrugged and looked away. "No. I wasn't. Happy?"

"Hardly," came the serious reply. "Rather, I am quite irritated that I was misled in such a manner. I lost one of my best people for an entire month to suit the needs of a fool who has proved himself time and again to be completely dispensable. Be honest now – it was Dai, was it not?"

"Who knows?" Shirou questioned, not bothering to actually answer.

Baeddan regarded the other man with a small frown. "If it was Dai, I am going to refer him to higher authorities."

"Don't."

The demand caught Baeddan slightly off guard, and so did Shirou's eyes, filled with a coldness he had never seen, aside from his dealings with the king. Shirou turned to look at Baeddan with his complete attention, his shoulders pushed back as he readied himself for a possible fight.

"I'm the one who will deal with him," Shirou informed the Head Cook. "Let him be."

"He is causing a mockery in my kitchen."

"The prick is causing a mockery over the entire castle," retorted Shirou. "He has done nothing lately but cause me one stress after another, and I've had enough. Dai won't be able to do a thing anymore without telling me anyway. Leave him to me."

"Hmph," grunted Baeddan, unwilling to give even an inch on the subject. "And if I refuse?"

Shirou eyed the other man. "Then I promise you'll find out what it really means for your kitchen to be full of chaos."

"Hah! You could never manage it! You cherish the kitchen almost as much as I."

"You're right," Shirou admitted. "I do. Which is why I would really prefer it if you'd leave all of this to me. It's me who's been his target, so it should be me who is left to handle him. Please."

"Cease your groveling," sighed Baeddan. "I am not of a mind to listen to it. Fine, deal with the dog if you must. Do away with the cretin, even. It makes little difference to me. I will simply demand that the king retrieve me yet another servant, loathe as he may be to do so. I am of no mind to care for his excuses, no matter the case."

Shirou put his hands on his hips as he watched Baeddan stride away, the argument settled. Baeddan spun back around once more just to warn Shirou that there was to be no blood lost in the kitchen, before he turned back around and threw open the doors for another grand entrance. Crossing his arms over his chest, Shirou tilted his head as he closed his eyes tightly.

Damn it, I think he's starting to grow on me, the fucking asshole.

He shook his head at himself as he began walking back to the kitchens. He chose to make his entrance as unpretentious as possible to counter Baeddan's grandiose one. Shirou gave the kitchen a quick sweep with his eyes before he came across a pair of hazel-yellow irises. Dai froze when he saw the redhead, but Shirou forced himself to stay calm. He glanced quickly over Telyn who was stirring a soup before looking back at Dai. Then, he let a smirk slowly cross his face and turned away from Dai to head over to where Eos was still chopping veggies.
Sidling next to her, her retook up the mantle and starting putting his experience to good use as he went through one vegetable after another. He didn't really notice Eos look at him and beyond until her hands stilled for a few seconds. Shirou looked up from his work to see an expression that could freeze the hottest depths of hell. He felt himself flinch involuntarily, having never seen her look so unbelievably ticked off before. Following her line of vision, he noticed Dai reaching into a barrel for various resources and considered himself lucky that he was not on the receiving end of the woman's glare.

"Eos, relax," he suggested as kindly as he could. He didn't want her getting pissed off at him too, like every other woman in his life.

Eos slid her glare over to him and he swore that he could feel a touch of fear run down his spine. She finally turned away.

"Nothing is 'done', Shirou," she whispered, sounding far calmer than she looked. "Do not treat this as some kind of isolated incident, or as if he did something as mundane as stealing a bread roll from your plate. He kidnapped you. Put you in a cell in the dungeon. He, by all rights, left you for dead. You are my friend, Shirou. I cannot accept this while lying around like a miserable dog."

"It's okay," Shirou consoled her, a small smile on his face. "I've got everything under control."

Eos looked at him again before going back to cutting. "You had best hope you do," she warned, no pretense of jesting in her voice, "or I will take things into my own hands. Gladly."

"Isn't killing a sin?"

A secretive smile met his question. "Why, of course, Shirou. 'Thou shalt not kill' is one of our important ten commandments to follow under the Lord's word. There are worse ways to cause one's suffering, however. Sometimes, death is far too kind."

Shirou shuddered. "I know some pretty scary people around here. Anyway, you don't have to worry. I've got it all covered."

"Good," Eos answered. "Let us pray you do not need a woman's touch to seal the deal."

Shirou sent one last glare over at Dai himself, causing the other man to flinch slightly when he made eye contact.

"Yeah," he finally responded. "Let's hope."

Zago came back around with the broom under the guise of actually doing work, and while Eos gave him a soft glare, already knowing that he'd been doing nothing overall, Zago ignored her. Coming close to Shirou, Zago whispered,

"Eos is fucking scary as hell when she's pissed off. Best to stay on her good side, brother."

Shirou chuckled and gave Eos one last glance. "Understood."

Yeah, he had everything under control.

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Strike that, nothing was really under control for him anymore.

For the first three weeks straight, Dai had reported to him about any oddities and instances like a good, little puppy, and Shirou realized that Dai's tree of contacts was quite widespread. Honestly,
the man was like the modern day internet all wrapped up in a person, maybe like Google. If Zago could tell him all of the juicy gossip that was happening, then Dai was the one with all of the headline news reports – he knew who was who, what areas of the castle were under the most duress, what soldiers supported the king and what ones were on the fence, the movements of high-profile people like the chancellor, and other important people. The only news Dai couldn't obtain was within the main core of the knights, and anything that was directly the king's business. The man even had contacts within the village and knew of different methods to receive various supplies should the need arise for such.

Actually, as far as Dai went, that hadn't changed at all. He still reported in with only the slightest of hesitation, but it felt like something was off. Threatening him with Telyn's life still worked, of course, but... Well, Shirou wasn't quite sure what the actual issue was. Little things seemed to keep popping up, and Shirou knew it had nothing to do with Dai or his little minions – he knew who every single one of them were in the kitchen by now. He had a few reservations, but didn't think Telyn was the source for any of the problems either, which meant Dai hadn't cracked yet, although it was only a matter of time until he finally did. Shirou would deal with that problem when it finally happened.

No, all the little things could only be explained as the tiniest of accidents. Spilt salt into the soup, making it less tolerable than usual but still edible, a few pieces of meat that hadn't been cooked thoroughly and had caused some minor food poisoning, vegetables that weren't evenly cut or cooked resulting in less than acceptable dishes, older water being used as a base instead of fresher water, causing a few more health concerns – they were all incredibly tiny things and could easily be explained away with not having paid enough attention while cooking. It's just, they were also extremely basic foundations that any cook would pay attention to and immediately amend. Shirou would have never made such basal mistakes, ever. Yet, they always happened to happen to whatever he was working on.

The smaller things kept adding up and adding up, and now Baeddan was getting on his case about slipping at work. He hadn't done any such thing. He didn't know who was doing it, or how they were managing it, but whatever bad thing happened always did on his watch, and no one else's. He'd conferred with Eos and Zago about the matter when he'd had the chance, but they never saw anything actually take place either. Shirou had zero proof to put on the table, and people were starting to get suspicious of him.

Because he had only been back for three weeks, people were starting to think he was intentionally causing mayhem to possibly run them into the ground. Some continued to believe that he was being used as a scapegoat, while several others were under the opinion that he was trying to be a nuisance. The main cover story for him was the he'd gone on some big expedition for resources, which for many people, symbolized his greater status. Well, Shirou wasn't any higher in rank than anyone else, and the rumors that he was trying to be a menace were starting to piss him off.

Grunting softly, Shirou lifted a barrel of old, rotten apple cores, intent on taking them to the courtyard gardens to be used as fertilizer. He sighed as he made sure he had a firm grip on the object before walking down the corridor, bypassing several other servants as he went. At this point, Shirou was ready to just trace a stupid cart and roll the dumb thing all the way there, but then he'd have to explain where he'd gotten a cart and why it was made of metal. That wouldn't be a fun conversation.

Shirou had made it to the bottom of the stairwell that would open to the gardens themselves when he heard something creak just slightly. A feeling of trepidation hit him as he tried to walk into the gardens, only for the entire bottom of the barrel to fall out as soon as he reached the magical barrier. Shirou closed his eyes, counted up to ten to calm himself, and then looked down at his
Shirou let out a long sigh as he looked around before angrily picking up the bottom that had fallen from the barrel.

Feeling a touch of magical residue, he rotated the piece of circular wood within his hands.

"What kind of spell is this?" he muttered, growing more irritated. "It looks like it was set to fall apart the second it came into contact with any kind of other magic."

His thoughts raced through his head as he considered the implications of someone in the kitchen working together with a mage to cause problems for him. This wasn't a Dai thing – Dai wasn't a fan of magic overall, especially after Shirou had shown his type of magecraft. Dai wouldn't have gone anywhere near a mage if he could help it, excepting Valeria. Was it Telyn? Who else had a bone to pick with him? Why couldn't they just confront him in person instead of making his life miserable?

"Damn it to hell," he finally burst out, throwing the piece of wood onto the stone ground.

Shirou didn't even know what he was fighting anymore. It'd be so much easier to just leave the Camelot altogether with everything that had happened to him lately. He could save Saber some other way, like by becoming some kind of rogue outside of Camelot and attacking from the outside in. He could go into intelligence gathering and get some important information for the king that way. Hell, there were a million other ways to make his mark other than getting ostracized and turned on like an elementary schooler.

Now he had to pick up all the damn things and take them over to the station for fertilizer by hand. At least it hadn't happened somewhere else.

"I am really starting to hate everything about this time period," he muttered under his breath as he started picking up one core after another.

"What's all this?"

Shirou frowned as he looked up to see two people coming across the garden who had probably heard his explosion of anger. He found himself scowling slightly – they were the last two people he really wanted to see right now.

Guinevere looked at the mess with slightly widened eyes, a frown on her face. Next to her, King Arthur stood with her arms crossed across her chest, an unreadable expression on her face. She had obviously been the one to ask the question, and was waiting for him to reply.

"Nothing, Your Majesty," Shirou bit out, his teeth gritted. "The barrel just fell apart suddenly."

"Why must trouble follow wherever you go?" asked the king, looking somewhat irritated herself.

Guinevere sent a quick glare to her husband, who only turned her gaze away shamelessly. Shirou ignored the both of them, inwardly cursing himself for getting caught in stupid situations. Plus, he couldn't deny that he was a little aggravated that the king had never helped him out with his problem, even though, logically, he knew there was no way for her to have known.

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"Why aren't the jails monitored more often? How many people get stuck down there by idiots like Dai? And how is it she never even knew something like that was happening at all?"

Shirou, unable to help himself, passed the king a glare, as if to blame him for all of his problems. If it wasn't for her, he wouldn't be here. If it wasn't for her, he wouldn't have to deal with all of this crap. If it wasn't for her, he'd still be more or less safe in the confines of his own home in London,
1,500 years in the future.

He immediately squashed those thoughts and swept them out of his head. If it hadn't been for Saber, he never would have known love, not really anyway. Had it not been for her, he wouldn't have come to understand himself as much as he had. Had it not been for her, he would have still been trying to figure out why everything he traced was always some kind of failure. Had it not been for her, he wouldn't have led much of an existence and he certainly wouldn't have become such good friends with Rin at all.

Sighing softly, Shirou felt his anger slowly trickle away and continued to pick up one core after another.

"What a distasteful mess," Guinevere said, her voice soft and yet authoritative. "I am hardly of a mind to leave you to clean this up on your own. Guards!" she said, regally lifting a hand to get someone's attention.

"I've got it under control, Your Majesties," Shirou said as clearly as he could while trying to hide his irritation. "I made the mess – I should be the one to pick it up."

King Arthur nodded. "A wise ideology to follow, Shirou."

"Arthur!" the queen scolded, causing the blonde to look over at her with an eyebrow lifted, as if to say, "What?"

"If we are in a position to help, we should," Guinevere continued. "In any case, the mess is absolutely ghastly. I do not desire to look at it any longer than I absolutely must, and the boy only has two hands to work with. Must you antagonize him so?"

"I am not –" King Arthur attempted to protest before the queen quelled her with a single glare.

The king masked her grimace smoothly before calling over a guard herself, thereby swiftly putting a smile back on her wife's face.

"I said, I've got it, Your Majesties," Shirou stated again, finding himself unable to handle his irritation.

Yes, it would take him some time, but he could carry everything over on his own. He didn't need any help, and it wouldn't take more than a few minutes. The two of them could simply ignore him and once he finished, he'd just leave without another word. The fact that the queen felt the need to call over guards to assist him with such a simple task only reminded him of how useless he currently was. Damn it, he could do this much. Why was everything trying to give him such a hard time lately?

King Arthur chose not to reply and only looked back at the redhead with a frown, although Guinevere was much less subtle about her disapproval. She glanced at Arthur who only looked back at her unwaveringly.

"Shirou," began Guinevere. "You should not refuse help so freely given."

"I've got it, I said," he repeated for the last time, his muscles tensing. "Your Majesties, I will have this taken care of and will be out of your way as soon as possible."

Guinevere looked ready to argue again, but King Arthur held up a hand, her green eyes dead set on Shirou.
"Leave us," she said, not disguising her command.

The queen cast one last glance at the tense redhead before walking away, and ordering for the guards to retake their posts. King Arthur never took her eyes off of Shirou as the man rose up to take an armful of cores to the dumping spot before walking back to grab at more. He tried to ignore that she was still standing there as he went about his business. She never opened her mouth once as he made several trips back and forth until he finally finished and made as if to leave.

"Hold, Shirou," the king ordered, freezing Shirou in his tracks.

"Your recent words leave much to be desired," she continued when Shirou turned around to look at her. "That attitude is reprehensible. I demand an apology for both your attitude and mannerisms."

Shirou clenched his fists tightly before forcibly bowing his head. "Many pardons, Your Majesty. I should not have conducted myself in such a fashion."

"Accepted. Now, explain yourself."

"I don't know what you mean," Shirou tried to say, and only received a cool stare back from the blonde.

Grimacing, Shirou's shoulders slumped slightly as he tried to come up with an explanation that would satisfy her. He couldn't think of a single thing that didn't have to do with blaming her for her absence or blaming a crazy mage who had tried to kill him and then had stuck him into a jail cell for a month. He could point out that someone was making trouble for him in the kitchen, but that wouldn't have done much either. Eventually, he just said,

"Life's been stressful lately, sir."

She was obviously less than impressed with the answer. "As it has been for everyone, most assuredly. I must say that I am concerned by how different you are now than from before when we last spoke. When was that... Ah, yes. After the storm, some months prior. Dare I say that you are far less, hmm, what's the word? Optimistic, perhaps, than you were before."

There was no comparison. The only thing he'd had to worry about before was getting along well in the kitchens, but now he had to worry about everyone trying to kill him. Maybe it would be better to just leave Camelot.

"Let's just say it's been a wild few months," Shirou murmured.

King Arthur narrowed her eyes. "How fared your trip?"

"What trip?" Shirou automatically replied before realizing what he'd said.

The king's eyes narrowed further as she saw him take a couple of steps back and try to correct his wording.

"I mean," Shirou started. "It was...uh, great. Saw lots of new things, plenty of new sights. Was kind of stressful."

"Shirou," she warned, her hands falling to her sides.

"It was fine," he reinforced, bowing quickly. "You can expect much higher quality food for your meals, Your Majesty. Now, if you'll allow me to take my leave..."
"If you must," she said, her eyes never leaving his form as he bowed again, scooped up the broken pieces of the barrel and quickly left the gardens.

Percival's intuition was indeed correct, it would seem, she thought to herself. There is a rank smell of foul play here.

Percival had come back to her regardless of her desire to stay out of the situation, informing her of her supposed ruling concerning Shirou. It incensed her to no small degree that someone was making claims in her name, but she was also concerned that whatever was happening was causing further estrangement between her and her servants. She didn't know what had occurred, or how to see to it without physically entering the lion's den for herself. She was also irritated that every problem seemed to be centering around the one person she'd sought to save.

As she once again reached Guinevere's side and sat down next to her for a small moment of respite, she frowned inwardly when she realized that something needed to be done about Shirou, and soon. What was it she could possibly do without seeming too forward or unlike herself, though?

This will require much consideration, she thought, nodding as Guinevere spoke about a specific flower that had taken her interest. What will I find if I disturb this considerably large hornet's nest, and who will survive the line of destruction left in its wake should I do so?

It was a heavy knock at her office door that brought her out of her musings one day. Arturia lightly set her quill back into its ink pot before beckoning in her visitor. As she dragged a piece of parchment off of the large stack of papers assigned to her for the day, she skimmed over the contents. She pointedly ignored the loud thump of someone sitting in one of the chairs across from her desk, and further ignored the loud yawn that ensued seconds later.

"Late night, I take it?" she murmured, her hand reaching for the seal that she now kept under close lock and key, with the key going wherever she did, no matter what.

"What's wrong with assigning a day off or two here or there, sibling?" replied an annoyed voice.

She didn't bother to react, only shifting her current paper to the 'accepted' stack and moving on to her next piece of paper. "If you found any value in retiring early for once instead of constantly frolicking with the servant women, Kay, I'm certain you wouldn't have much of an issue to speak of."

Kay leaned forward, his eyes focused on her. "You simply do not understand the meaning of freedom, dear brother. Why, if you could only understand the appeal of all the women to behold! What a life you would live!"

"Yes," she answered dryly. "If only I understood how wonderful women were."

The two shared a look before Kay cleared his throat. "Guinevere is indeed a woman to stare at with awe, but think of all of the other fish to be found in the sea!"

Arturia wrote out a quick note on the bottom of the paper before placing it in the 'declined' stack. "Fish are for eating, Kay, and I am not particularly interested."

"Do not rain on my parade, brother," Kay muttered. "Someday, you too will realize the magnificence of the opposite sex. And you will present me with billions of babies to love, care for, and promptly give back to you once I am finished."
"They aren't toys to be thrown away at your every whim," she retorted, no longer able to concentrate on her work. "And you know as well as I do that such an event will not ever take place."

Kay gasped and leaned forward. "Are you sterile, brother?"

The look she pinned him with had him leaning back laughing. "Oh, you are a piece of work, Arthur!"

"There are times when I can honestly say I hate you," Arturia said, her glare shifting to the paper in front of her. "It is too early for such commentary, Kay. I have no desire to plan your demise on an empty stomach."

"You wound me, my brother!" Kay groaned, a hand raising to his chest over where his heart was. "Do you mean to say you would be more apt to plan for my death once your stomach is full and sated?"

"If I say yes, will you leave me to my work?" she asked with a frown.

Kay snorted. "Of course not. Were it not for me popping in every now and then, you would never find the time to eat. For all that you're puttering around trying to keep order, you do not eat enough for all of that energy you are always expelling."

Arturia marked off a few words on another parchment before sticking it in the 'declined' stack as well. "Avalon allows that I—"

"– Survive whether you eat or not," finished Kay. "Yes, I'm aware. That is the same thing you say every morning I come to retrieve you."

"Ah, yes," she continued in just as dry a tone as ever. "You never were capable of taking a hint. The leading reason as to why you can never settle down, I'd imagine."

Kay smirked before all trace of humor left his expression. "Seriously, though. It's time for breakfast. I'll allow you one more parchment to check, but after that, we are heading to the Great Hall."

Arturia looked up from her current parchment and frowned at him again. As soon as her hand stamped the seal down on the parchment and she placed it back into its confines, Kay caught hold of her wrist, pulling her up from her seat. She glared at him, a gesture he returned easily.

"Kay, if you'll just allow me another minute, then—"

"You're a workaholic, that's what you are," he chastised her, and she grunted in return. "The paperwork will still be here when you come back."

"Yes, along with five hundred more to sift through," she retorted quietly, but obediently took the key from around her neck, locked the seal within its case attached to her desk, and put the key back around her neck.

Kay dragged her up to the door, and eyed her until she left the room under her own volition. She nodded her head slightly at the two guards right outside of her room before passing her brother another glare, which he happily ignored.

"Honestly, Kay, why do you insist on such force every single time?" she asked, quickly smoothing down her formal blue robes.
She hadn't any plans to leave the castle or venture to the training field today, so only wore her high-quality material, collared blue tunic alongside of her blue breeches and thick, black leather boots. The sash she wore for a belt sparkled with small gems along its trim. It was a simple outfit, but the crown upon her head made it seem rather impressive and overwhelming to the average rank-and-file servant.

"Had you any common sense, I wouldn't need to bother," Kay argued.

"What rudeness you show to your king," Arturia grumbled.

Kay smirked at her again. "I guarantee that if you'd had to change your own diapers, that you wouldn't feel as high and mighty as you seem to right about now."

Color ran across her cheeks as she stared at Kay with horror. "You said we would never speak of this again!"

"No, brother. You said we would never speak of it again. I rather remember those times fondly."

Her mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out as the two of them came out of the stairwell together. She probably might have said something in an effort to relieve her of her embarrassment had her steward not decided to make his presence known as soon as they'd taken a few steps down the corridor.

The humor drained from both Arturia's and Kay's faces, the moment they shared vanishing as they adopted their more serious countenances. Arturia looked at Dylan with a quick sweep of her eyes.

Dylan bowed deeply. "Your Majesty and Sir Kay. Allow me to guide the both of you to the Great Hall."

Arturia barely nodded her head, which the steward took to mean for him to lead on. He scampered on a few steps ahead to give the two space, and Arturia kept her gaze on him all the while, readily settling back into her kingly mannerisms. Kay walked right next to her, slowing his own pace to keep in step with the smaller king.

"I heard the report about our little prisoner," Kay said, opening up a new line of conversation, something Arturia very much appreciated. "Tristan was frustrated by how little information was obtained, though we do know for a fact that he was operating under Conan's orders."

"Was that ever considered for debate in the first place?" she rhetorically asked back. "Of course it was Conan. The last thing anyone needs is for another fool to attempt to rise up for his so-called ideals and what he thinks would most benefit the kingdom."

Kay cracked his neck as he tilted it from side to side. "Let's address the elephant in the room and point out how you defined the exact same thing you are attempting to do. The only difference is that you hold the crown."

Arturia stifled a growl. She was very tired of this conversation.

"I would never seek to pillage villages, light them afire, and take every single woman for myself while conforming the children to follow my ideology."

"Perhaps not," argued Kay. "But you do raze villages to the ground in so simple a manner as taking every single resource they have, draining them dry. You are essentially leaving them to their deaths. The men are forced to take up arms for your name or die, which inevitably leads children to believing they must do so as well. You are correct about one thing though: we do not rape the
women. They simply become courtesans for the castle, and they would be a part of your harem, were you interested in such."

"Which, I am not," Arturia ground out. "This conversation is finished."

"I am just saying -"

"Yes," she managed to say while withholding her anger, "and now you are finished, the exact same as the current conversation."

Kay looked down at her, noticing her clenched fists. "Every action has its repercussions, Arthur."

Don’t I know it, she thought to herself as they finally reached the Great Hall. If you only truly knew how far I’ve come, Kay.

The first person she noticed at the long table was Guinevere, who she regarded kindly. Guinevere smiled warmly back from her side at the other end, her violet eyes looking over every part of her husband as the latter sat in her seat. Both women looked at Tristan as the man let out a loud yawn before flopping his head back onto the table.

"Good morning, Tristan," Guinevere said, watching the man turn to eye her before flopping back down.

"G’mornin', Queen Guinevere," he responded with little enthusiasm. "Though whether the morning truly is a good one is something I couldn't confidently say, as I've seen very few of those lately."

Arturia piqued an eyebrow. "I take it that you are referring to the prisoner?"

She heard him let out a groan. "No, Sire. Lancelot has long since finished picking that infidel's puny mind. He is worthless. I have simply been busy filling out all of the paperwork required of me since."

"Ah," she replied, cupping her mouth to hide a smile. "A knight's work is never finished, yes?"

He suddenly slammed his hands against the tabletop as he pointed insinuatingly at the king. "You! Your Majesty, you planned this, didn't you? I was wondering why you did not argue the matter of interrogation. You knew very well how much would need to be done after said fact, didn't you? Was that your plan the entire time?"

Arturia tilted her head in reply, making Tristan visibly grow more ticked off. Lancelot noticed that she hadn't answered and made a small smile himself.

"You see now, Tristan," he said, "this is absolutely why I chose not to say anything in regards to this matter."

Tristan turned his glare to Lancelot. "You're part of the problem, damn it! What kind of man abandons another to a mountain of paperwork? What happened to camaraderie and friendship?"

Lancelot tilted his head similarly to how their king had, intentionally causing Tristan to nearly burst a fuse. "I am not fond of paperwork."

"AH! I hate the whole lot of you!"

Lancelot and Arturia shared a glance of amusement before looking back at Tristan, and tilting their heads just slightly. Tristan banged a fist against the table this time.
"Stop that! Stop making it seem as if you're both so much better than I am!"

At that, Arturia lifted her chin slightly, just enough that Tristan realized what he said before plopping back down in his chair and sighing. All five of them, excepting Arturia who simply closed her eyes, looked back towards the door when Gawain, Gareth, Bedivere, and Percival made their grand entrance. Bedivere and Percival, like usual, were bickering about one thing or another while Gawain and Gareth simply looked on with amusement. As the four took their seats, Arturia leaned forward slowly, greeting each and every single one of them.

"Let us see," started Arturia, inwardly counting heads, "as Geraint, Galahad, Bors, and Lamorak are still out fulfilling missions assigned them, I believe we are all in attendance. Are there any announcements any would like to declare before we break our fast?"

After only hearing the small grumbles of Tristan as he continued muttering to himself, she nodded her head.

"Then let our morning feast commence."

She caught the eyes of the servants waiting awkwardly to the side and nodded her head slightly. Almost as if a switch had been flipped, she saw them jump into action, many heading back into the kitchen before coming out a short while later, their hands holding bowls of fruits and bread to tide the knights, king, and queen over until the real dishes were ready to be delivered. And, as with every morning where she had the time to dine with her knights, Baeddan walked out to give her his greeting, his pace slow and steady.

She acknowledged him by making eye contact, and nothing further than that.

"Your Majesty," he greeted with a bow. "As always, it is a pleasure to feed you the efforts of our work."

"You grace me with your well-prepared menu. I look forward to what you have planned for all of us this day."

Guinevere didn't bother saying a word when she saw the two trade niceties, knowing full well that the one could die off right then and there with the other not caring a single bit. She saw Arturia glance back at her briefly and turned her attention instead to Gawain who sat nearest her. The man smiled at her, genuinely happy to participate in a conversation with her. Percival jumped in immediately, his ever-amusing antics delighting the other two quickly.

Gareth and Lancelot began conversing with one another while Bedivere, Tristan, and Kay traded insults with one another as if it was just a normal, everyday thing to behold. Every so often, one could hear Tristan bang on the table out of irritation and Kay laugh just to mess with the younger man even more, but this was hardly anything out of the ordinary.

"– servants that you have?"

"I am always looking for more outstanding workers to attend to the kitchens."

Her good mood gone, Arturia just stared at the taller man. "I cannot even have a moment to eat without you beginning such a conversation? How many people must I find for you to be appeased, Baeddan?"

Baeddan cocked a smirk at her. "For every single man, there should be at least three cooks to prepare for him. You do the math, Your Majesty. I'm certain you are capable of that much?"
"I am not hunting down that many people just so your ego can inflate even further."

"Hmph. How typically rude of you to say. My ego is substantial enough as is. It need not grow further – you would not be able to handle how incredible I might become."

*Truer words,* Arturia thought to herself. "Regardless, you have enough servants to last you for the time being. How fares the kitchen otherwise, Head Cook?"

She saw him hesitate before confidently saying, "The kitchen, Your Majesty? But, of course, it is incomparable with how uniformed and orthodox it is. Rather, you could say we haven't a single problem to boast of – no other kingdom could ever –"

Baeddan cut off abruptly when he, all of the knights and royalty, and all of those serving them, heard a loud crash erupt in the kitchen. Her eyes darted over to look at the doors leading to where the incident had occurred before looking back at Baeddan with a frown. He had closed his eyes, the muscle in his jaw jumping as he reined in his temper.

"What was that?" she asked flatly.

Baeddan sighed irritably, gaining everyone's attention immediately. "I may have embellished our current status somewhat, Your Majesty..."

"Explain."

"We have had some, or rather, a number of mishaps occur over the past couple of months, Sire."

She felt both her eyebrows rise from surprise. Baeddan, if nothing else, was quite adept at keeping accidents to a minimum, so it was most certainly surprising to hear that something wayward was taking place under his very command. That, more than anything, had sparked her curiosity.

"What's the problem?" she asked, unable to help herself. "Is it something that needs to be addressed immediately?"

Baeddan hesitated yet again, causing her to wonder what in the world was going on.


A bad feeling crept through Arturia's heart when she heard that, and she wearily asked what individual was causing so many problems.

"Ro, Your Majesty. I mean, Shirou."

Of course it was. Well, as she had thought before, something about the foreigner needed to be done, and it seemed the time to do it was here and now.

"I see," she clipped out, her voice growing colder.

Baeddan, however, didn't seem ready to let the matter drop. "However, Your Majesty," he started, regaining her attention, "there is much about the recent incidents that does not seem to add up. If I may, I do not think Shirou is at the heart of any of them."

Kay snorted. "What does it matter? Every problem leads up to him, doesn't it? Get rid of him."

Percival chose to interject at this point. "Shirou is a decent cook! He makes food that would satisfy God himself! Getting rid of him would only sign our losses!"
"Yeah, but if he's only causing trouble," Kay trailed off, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Gawain stayed silent on the issue, but Bedivere had no problems saying, "The man can cook. Even I recognize that. He is worth little else – we would have little use of him, otherwise."

Arturia cleared her throat, forcing everyone in attendance to fall silent.

"Bring him to me."

Baeddan frowned. "Your Majesty..."

"Bring, him, to, me," she repeated, her words still clipped.

The cook nodded and left to disappear within the kitchen. Moments later, a Shirou with ash covering the lower half of his breeches and a deep frown marking his face walked out, tired eyes immediately seeking out the king's as she looked at him. She took in his appearance before looking at him with hardened eyes.

"We meet again, Shirou."

Shirou looked away from her momentarily before he nodded in agreement. "Your Majesty," he murmured.

Her fingers laced together as she looked at him. "I hear that there have been incidents in the kitchen, with you at the heart of the matter."

When he stiffened and a shadow fell over his eyes as he glared at the ground, she tilted her head. "I believe that you promised me months ago that you would not cause me anymore undue trouble, Shirou."

His fists clenched tightly. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"And yet, here we are."

Shirou slowly raised his gaze to look at her, a gaze she met unflinchingly. He gritted his teeth before confiding, "None of those accidents were my fault. I've done nothing wrong."

Arturia continued to stare at him before looking away. "I am concerned. Do you hold worth within the kitchen, or did I make a mistake placing you there?"

She could almost feel the anger emanate off of him. Shirou made a slight sound of irritation as he answered,

"No. I am a good cook. I am the best cook you will have ever met."

She noticed Bedivere start at that, and turned her attention to him instead. Bedivere locked gazes with her.

"That's the same thing he said when we had the unfortunate circumstance of meeting the first time, Sire."

"Of course," she replied before turning back to Shirou. He eyed her warily.

"You have one last chance," Arturia eventually said. "Prove to me your worth."

Shirou very nearly forgot his anger as he looked back at her with some confusion. "What do you
Arturia pushed away every item of food near her and gestured to the space in front of her. Shirou frowned again as he looked back from the table to her again, still not understanding what she wanted from him. She waved slightly for a sinewy, little man to come forward and attend to her.

"When is my next meeting?" she asked, ignoring Shirou for the moment.

The squirrely man looked down at the parchment in his hands. "Not for another three hours, my liege."

She turned back to look at Shirou. "That leaves you with the time limit of one. You have one hour to prove your worth to me by making a suitable dish to my liking. Should you fail, I will then decide your punishment right then and there, even should that mean I must kill you for wasting my time and patience. Should you succeed, there will be other options available for you, I am certain."

Shirou seemed taken aback. "O-one hour? But, that's..."

"Fifty-nine minutes, fifty-four seconds remaining, Shirou," she said calmly, closing her eyes and effectively ending the discussion.

Shirou stared at her for another few seconds before backing away, bowing, and quickly heading to the kitchen, with Baeddan right behind him. As Shirou dodged around people to randomly pull ingredients out of barrels and off of the shelf, Baeddan glared at everyone in the kitchen, announcing,

"Ro will be making a dish for His Majesty himself! For one hour, no one is to interfere with this man's work. Ro, you may have three people work alongside you. Who do you request?"

"I only want Eos and you cooking with me," Shirou stated hurriedly, already pulling a couple of full, skinned, raw chickens out of a vat and slapping them on a table. "Zago, make sure the tables are clear for prep, and I need you to get me some ham, flour, butter, wine, some cream. Eos, I need you to start on a decent-sized Caesar salad – make sure to fry up the bread pieces for some croutons to throw on top. For the vegetables, lettuce, carrots, onions, a few olives, and maybe some radish should be enough. While the chicken is cooking, I can help you create decent dressing to go with it."

Zago sputtered. "Wine? What are you going to use wine for? What is all that mess going to do?"

Eos glared at him, already walking past several other servants to reach the area where the vegetables were aligned. "Do not complain, Dagobert. Retrieve what he has requested."

The blond merely frowned, but left the kitchen to go to the stockroom for the supplies. Baeddan watched him go before looking at Shirou. "What would you have me do?"

The redhead spared him a glance as he finished cutting off the breasts of each chicken, leaving the rest on the table to be used for something else. As he began to pound on each piece to thin them out, he said harshly,

"Start the process for creating some cabbage wraps – wash the cabbage and start mincing some of the beef cuts while adding a liberal portion of salt, some vinegar, black pepper, a bit of ginger, some garlic, and a dash of rosemary for extra flavoring."

Baeddan was with him up until he listed out some seasonings. "Ginger? Garlic? Rosemary? I do not know these words, Ro."
Shirou stared at him for a second. "What the hell do you mean you don't... Fine, whatever. Salt. Vinegar. Black pepper. Use those. Dice up some pickles, too."

"...Pickles?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Shirou yelled out, glaring at Baeddan. "Are you kidding me right now? Salt! Vinegar! Black pepper! That's it! Get those!"

Zago came back into the kitchen and dumped some ingredients onto the table next to Shirou. He barely managed a nod before Zago disappeared again to hunt down the rest of the items. Shirou picked up one edge of the piece he'd beaten down before quickly turning to see the large chunk of cheese next to him.

Damn it, of course they wouldn't have Swiss cheese here, he thought with some irritation as he moved away to rinse his hands in water before coming back.

Shirou grabbed a knife and sliced straight through the cheese as evenly as he could manage. He then cut each slice in half and laid them over each piece of chicken breast. Turning his attention next to the large slab of ham on the table, he grimaced and worked at cutting that as thinly as he possibly could. It didn't work as well as he might've liked, but that was neither here nor there. As soon as he was finished, he moved on to work with the flour and shook his head when he realized he had very little to season it with.

"Zago," he called when the other man came back with some cream – he'd apparently run all the way to where they kept the cows because he was breathing in and out hard, "get me some lard."

"Lard, too?" Zago asked breathlessly before rolling his eyes and running back out the door, barely avoiding crashing into another servant as he did.

Eos looked at him from where she stood, asking, "Shirou, the salad is prepared. You spoke of some kind of dressing of some kind?"

"Hang on," he replied, thinking quickly. No olive oil. No easy bases to use. No buttermilk, so ranch dressing's out. I hate to use so much wine, but that might be easiest, and it will barely take any time at all. Ah, but shit, red wine vinaigrette needs olive oil, too, damn it.

He eyed the lard that Zago just brought in. Can I boil that down to use as a base? No. Fuck it – it's not conventional, but I'll just do a lemon pepper and butter spread and call it a day.

"Use some of this butter, melt it down and mix it with some squeezed lemon juice and black pepper. That'll have to do."

She nodded and Baeddan turned to Shirou. "The ingredients are ready. How would you like them cooked?"

"Brown them," Shirou replied immediately. "Mix the minced beef together with the salt, vinegar, and pepper until it's browned. Just browned, not burnt crisp."

Baeddan made a small scoffing sound before moving to the stoves. Shirou ignored him and took the floured chicken over to the stove himself and first threw in a small chunk of butter, letting it crackle before he neatly placed in each chicken piece. As soon as the chicken was browned, Shirou added some wine and little pieces of lard. He then closed the slats underneath the pan so only a little heat could slip through before throwing on another pan over the first as a lid to cover it.

Sighing and wishing he had the nice, modern kitchen he and Rin had shared in the future, Shirou
turned back around to see Eos smiling at him, her part of the meal completely prepared. Baeddan just sniffed as he began wrapping the meat within the cabbage leaves. One servant popped into the kitchen, murmuring,

"The king has announced that you have just twenty minutes left."

Shirou crossed his arms over his chest, casting a quick glance back at the chicken, hoping it would finish cooking in time. He'd made each piece as thin as he could but there was no telling if he would make it in time. In the meantime, he had to use that cream. He walked back to the table and grabbed the cream and a bit more flour, stirring them together until they thickened. After that, he just looked at both Baeddan and Eos, who both just stared back steadily at him. Zago stared at the concoction Shirou had mixed together, his curiosity so great that he reached a finger out to grab a dab of it. Shirou slapped his hand away, glaring at the blond until the man backed away, hands raised.

"Five minutes remaining, the king has announced."

Shirou jumped into action, pulling the pan off of the stove and calling out for Zago to get him a plate. As soon as Zago put down a serving dish, Shirou grabbed a fork and wrestled each piece of chicken off of the pan and onto the plate before giving the pan to Zago and pulling his cream mixture towards him. Shirou slowly spread the mix across the chicken after mixing it together a bit more before setting the cup down. With a deep sigh, Shirou nodded at Baeddan and Eos.

"This is your dish, Ro," Baeddan informed him. "We cannot help you serve it."

"I figured," Shirou replied, carefully placing the plate of chicken on his right upper arm, putting the bowl of salad in his right hand, and taking the other dish full of cabbage wraps in his left hand.

The servants watched with surprise and some skepticism as Shirou walked away, everything balanced precariously on his person. Shirou nearly made it to the door when he caught the gazes of Telyn and Dai looking at him. He paused, gave them his fiercest glare, and then continued to walk out of the kitchen. He noticed many of the knights glance up with curiosity over what he was carrying, but the king didn't even raise her head. She merely continued to wait, her eyes closed.

Shirou walked up to her and bowed his head. "Your Majesty."

King Arthur slowly opened her eyes. "Twelve seconds remaining. You certainly know how to run it close."

He cleared his throat and first put down the cabbage wraps, and then the salad, and then the main dish.

"Your Majesty, may I present to you my dish?"

"Get on with it then," she commanded, frowning.

"Uh, first," he said with some hesitance at seeing her in a bad mood, "the salad with lettuce, carrots, onions, and olives, complete with a dressing of lemon-butter-and-pepper. Next, there are the cabbage wraps filled with seasoned beef to accompany your main dish of cordon-bleu chicken, light brown and simmered for extra flavor."

He paused when he saw her narrow her eyes at him. Unsure of what he'd done wrong, Shirou looked around for help, and noticed Baeddan motion him back. Shirou turned back to look at her, saw she hadn't begun eating yet, quickly bowed, and then moved back to where Baeddan was standing. Only then did the king pick up her utensils and cut into the chicken first.
Shirou saw the knights stand up and crowd around her, with the queen simply looking on in interest from her end. With the knights around her, Shirou couldn't see her reaction, and so just resigned himself to waiting until she was finished. About ten minutes later, he saw the knights disperse from around her.

"Shirou," she called out softly, and he quickly rushed to her side.

When he arrived at the table, he found each plate immaculately clean, save for one piece of chicken breast. Had it not been so like what Saber had always done, his jaw probably would've dropped from disbelief. Then again, seeing how his sister had always eaten, he wondered why he was even surprised anymore. He just hoped the king didn't want seconds.

King Arthur glanced at him, her gaze not nearly so cold anymore.

"I am pleased to see that I did not make a mistake with assigning you to the kitchen, Shirou," she finally said. "But, now I wonder what shall be done with you. Baeddan."

When Baeddan appeared next to Shirou, she asked, "Be honest with me, Baeddan. Is it possible to keep Shirou within the kitchen, despite these mysterious incidents that continue to occur?"

As much as Baeddan wanted to say yes, she had asked him to be honest. "I would much like for him to stay, but unfortunately, unless I can pin down the fools causing all of the problems, we will only continue to have issues."

"As I thought," King Arthur eventually agreed. "Which leaves me with quite the conundrum of what is to be done with you, Shirou."

Shirou's hands clenched into fists. "Am...I to be punished, Your Majesty?"

She looked at him momentarily before shaking her head slightly. "No, you have proven your worth. I have a few options available to you, and you must make your decision immediately. First: I give you the right to instead switch to a different vocation and work quietly there. Second: you may instead leave the castle and live an existence in the village instead. I will see to it that you are given housing and that someone initially guides you through life outside of the castle. Third: I will give you permission to leave Camelot altogether and find dwelling elsewhere. These are your options – to which are you most partial?"

Shirou's expression darkened. No matter what, he was being chucked out of the kitchen thanks to something that had never been his fault. What had he done to deserve any of this?

He started when Percival appeared next to him, eyeing the last piece of chicken. Percival looked at the king pleadingly before she sighed and waved him to do as he wished.

"Share," she ordered, much to Percival's displeasure.

Percival looked at the other knights, who seemed as intrigued in the dish as him. In the end, with the queen garnering for a taste as well, he only managed to snag a bite, sighing with joy as his taste buds danced within his mouth. Shirou spared him a smile when the brunet slapped him on the back.

"I say, Shirou!" exclaimed Percival happily. "You have a gift from the Heavens above. What say you about becoming a personal chef of mine instead of leaving Camelot? I will make sure you are comfortable and do not have to worry about any of the little things any further."

King Arthur peered at Percival with wonder before a thought clicked in her head.
"Denied," she deadpanned, causing Percival to flinch back. She turned to look at Shirou. "I, however, will extend the same invitation for you to become my personal cook instead. What will your choice be, out of those four?"

"What?" cried Percival. "That was my idea, Your Majesty! How can you be so cruel?"

She spared him a frown. "He would be a cook, nothing more. Not your maid, not someone to test out your wily ways upon, just a chef. I doubt it need be said that you wouldn't hesitate to use him for other things as well. I am simply saving him that effort."

"That's not fair!" Percival continued to complain.

"Life seldom is," she replied flatly.

Kay nodded from where he sat. "Actually, that's a good idea. Having someone attend to the king's stomach instead of me having to go retrieve him all the time to make sure he eats sounds like a very good cause. Would certainly free up my time."

Bedivere shrugged. "I have no complaints. The king would simply kill him if he ever got out of hand."

Gawain again stayed silent, though he did share a small smile with Shirou, but Gareth slapped the table. "No! Who is this person? How can we be certain he will not simply try to poison the king?"

"Hush, puppy," Kay retorted. "What on earth could poison the king that Avalon could not somehow do away with given time? Besides, our king could still simply kill him – it wouldn't take much."

"I am against this solution!" Gareth continued to shout. "How can we allow some foreigner to assist to the needs of our fair king?"

Tristan snorted. "Who the hell cares. The guy can cook. The king needs to eat. The king can't die. I don't see a problem with it."

Gareth reeled back. "But what of the dire consequences of being seen as weak for letting a Scot take the reins on our great king's meals?"

"Now, now, Gareth," Guinevere calmly interjected. "I am certain Arthur knows what he is doing. If something terrible happens, we will act then. For now, it is simply a solution to save this poor man. What say you, Lancelot?"

The aforementioned man merely looked at Shirou, who looked right back. "I am not of a mind to care. Let His Majesty do what he must."

"But that's –!" continued Gareth before Kay shushed him again.

"Down, puppy."

"I am not a puppy, Sir Kay!"

"Bad puppy, stop barking. Good boy."

Gareth continued to glower at Kay who was content to ignore him. Percival was still put out from having his idea stolen.

"You're such a fiend, Your Majesty," he mumbled with a pout. "I wanted Shirou..."
"So, your reply, Shirou?" King Arthur said, taking a page out of Kay's book and ignoring the pouting Percival.

Shirou looked down at the ground as he thought about his decision. He had a chance to get close to the king and possibly change some things around if he took this chance, but he was still wondering whether he should just join the military and start making a name for himself that way. Or, better yet, if he left the castle, or even Camelot altogether, he might have a chance to get at the people who were causing so many problems around Britain. And, if he was away from the castle, he'd probably have the opportunity to use his magecraft and take care of a lot of people in one fell swoop. He could also take up arms against the Saxons and delay their march in on the British isles, and maybe help out the king in that manner. There was so much more he could do away from the castle, so much more he could accomplish.

With a slow exhale of breath, Shirou lifted his head, his gaze determined.

"Yes, Your Majesty. I've made my decision."
King Arthur tilted her head slightly, her eyes completely focused on the redhead standing near her side. He only continued looking determinedly at her, his eyes glowing with a kind of passion she hadn't seen for a long while. It comforted her slightly that giving him a real choice in how his life would take a turn, though she was rather curious on what it was he planned to do next.

"Well," she began, hardly in the mood for waiting him out, "spit it out then. I do not have all day."

Shirou nodded before hesitating slightly. "But first, may I ask you a question or two about my choices?"

The king raised an eyebrow as curiosity overtook her. "If you must. But be quick about it."

"Of course," he quickly agreed, not wanting to annoy her. "I'm just wondering, if I joined your military, what would that entail for me? Could I train to become a knight? Or, could I choose my field of practice?"

Percival cut in quickly, grabbing a hold onto Shirou's arm. "No. Cook for me. I'll protect you! You won't even have to lift a finger – I will do away with all those who would cause you harm! Just imagine: your own comfortable bed, nice clothing, a wonderful fireplace, you attending to me as I eat your wonderful, heavenly food..."

"Percival," the king warned, causing the brunet to look at her. Percival let out a small whine as he looked back at his commander. "But I want –"

"Percival."

Percival finally frowned, his whining ceasing. He gave Shirou one last forlorn glance before backing away, his eyes downcast. King Arthur turned her gaze away from the sullen, pathetic looking knight, trying to ignore the small stabs of guilt to her heart after having cut her own knight down. She gave him one more glance before wishing she could roll her eyes. He really did look like a kicked puppy.

She instead turned back to Shirou.

"In any case," the blonde started, "I must say that I think you to be a bit too old to start training to become a knight – not to mention the fact that you are not from a well-bred and influential family, and may very well have little skills to speak highly of. I question your intelligence, and the matter of you being capable enough to withstand the conditioning and training required for becoming a squire, even should you manage your page duties adequately.

"Let us not forget that no one is aware of our true ancestry. I suppose it would not matter of whence you came, so long as you were solely loyal to me and no other, but I really must say the odds are quite stacked against you in that regard, Shirou. Providing that you did manage to become a page, and then a squire afterwards, and then even a knight by some fortunate circumstances, the second you showed yourself to any one of my men who were not initially aware of your odd background, your life might become endangered, and therefore, forfeit."

Shirou frowned as the king explained the obvious impossibility of becoming someone higher ranked because of who he was and where he had come from. He knew good and well that training
for knighthood began back when children were around six years of age and for him, a twenty-four-
year-old, to suddenly want to try working his way through the ranks and becoming someone of
importance in such a fashion made little sense for Shirou. It didn't make sense, but he'd wanted to
know if the possibility had even been remotely there. The redhead needed as much of an advantage
as he could get, and becoming a knight would give him certain privileges the other options might
not.

"However," continued King Arthur, regaining Shirou's attention, "if that is the change of vocation
you truly desire, then as promised, I will make the necessary preparations to see that it is done. I
must say though, that I highly recommend you do not attempt that path."

At that, he fell silent before slowly asking, "...Why is that, Your Majesty?"

"Because you are not a fighter," she answered, making him freeze. "The battlefield is not your
place, nor is it your calling. So I would suggest against that choice, but regardless, that is
ultimately for you to decide."

Shirou stared at the blonde, unable to fully comprehend her words. What would she know about
whether he was a fighter or not? How much shit had he crawled through to survive this far? That
wasn't even including the Holy Grail War, where he'd got his ass handed to him again and again,
and yet he stood up each time because he had a goal to fulfill. He'd wanted to be a hero.
He still wanted to be one. He had gone through so damn much to get this far. All that, and she
dared to say he probably wouldn't last through the training? And even if he did, he'd just be killed
by his own side?

She knew absolutely nothing about him. Nothing. Not a damn thing.

Shirou took in a deep breath before letting it out as he tried to rearrange his thoughts. She didn't
know anything, but of course she couldn't possibly. When they'd first met here in the past, he'd lost
himself to grief and to a trauma he'd never officially acknowledged and gotten past. Shirou had
bowed his head, wanting only to curl up into a ball and toss away his dreams and aspirations. He
had only been a shell of his former self, and that was all the king had seen at the time. He hadn't
shown her anything to amend that opinion, either.

He damn well was a fighter, but this wasn't the time for arguing or pissing her off. Regardless of
how indignant he felt, Shirou was still in her domain, a domain where her word was law. It was
best not to rock the boat too, too much – after all, she was doing him a favor. Kind of.

"All right," Shirou finally said, reining in his temper. "What about the next option, the part about
living in the village?"

King Arthur narrowed her eyes at him. "Did you not say your decision was made? What became of
that?"

"I know what I want to do," he calmly responded, "but I'm just making sure that I'm not making a
mistake here, sir. This is the last chance I'll ever have, after all."

"So it is," she conceded. "As you will then, but make it quick. You inquired about the village, I
believe?"

Shirou nodded. "I think you, uh, Your Majesty said something about finding me a place to live and
making sure I'm taking care of initially? So, I mean, I could just live a normal life in the village
and all of my connections to the castle would be cut? I could open a bakery or something and no
one would try to kick me out?"
She turned away from him and closed her eyes. "Yes, any contact with the castle would henceforth be eliminated – you would no longer have any real connection here, after all. As far as 'kicking you out' is concerned, providing you do nothing unlawful, I see no reason for there to be any problems."

He nodded again, acknowledging her words. If he decided to take that route, he wouldn't be able to stay in contact with Zago anymore, although he might be able to talk to Eos every now and then after her shifts were over. Opening up his own bakery or restaurant didn't sound too appealing, but he would have the freedom to do anything he really needed to. The seeds of discontent towards the king would also run far more rampant within the throngs of common folk in the village, and there would be so much different information he could track down and sell back to the king in some way. The idea was tempting, at least.

"All right," he said again. "What about if I left the castle? Anything I did at that point wouldn't matter to anyone here anymore, right?"

"That's right," she replied with a steady tone. "You would no longer exist in my mind as anyone else other than one of my many people in the kingdom. Whatever happened to you would hold the same importance as anyone else out there."

"And, if I did something that wasn't necessarily in your, or Camelot's, best interests, theoretically speaking?" he ventured to ask.

There was a small pause before she slowly opened her eyes and turned to look at him, her emerald-green orbs as frosty as her words as she gestured towards her men and said, "Then you can be certain you will be seeing one of these men again, and that may be the last thing you ever will see."

Shirou looked to his right at all of the knights that were not peering seriously at him, not a single smile or expression of happiness on their faces. Even Percival continued to frown, though he didn't look as cold and intimidating at the moment.

"I see," was all he ended up saying.

King Arthur paused once more before standing up to her full height and locking onto him.

"And let me say this, Shirou;" she continued, a menacing and slightly malicious air floating about her, "if ever I must chase after you personally, I promise that whatever hell you may visit after death will be nothing in comparison to the pain I will strike down upon you."

For a short moment, Shirou completely forgot whatever memories he'd had of him and Saber together and could only focus on this small statured, young blonde who held more power in her blade than any other person in the entire land, with no other but Lancelot coming remotely close. He took an involuntary step backwards, his thoughts coming to an abrupt halt as a sliver of fear ran down his spine. No matter how he looked at her right then and there, Shirou simply couldn't rid himself of thinking that this was the devil walking under the full light of the sun.

This, he realized, his heart beating hard as her power stole over him, THIS is the king of all Britain, King Arthur. Fuck.

"Yes...sir," he murmured, needing to say something and hoping she'd stop glaring at him.

Her eyes narrowed, but after seeing he'd gotten her point, she closed her eyes again and sat back down. Almost immediately, the thick atmosphere died down, and Shirou could hear the barest of a sigh of relief coming from Percival. Shirou curled his fingers into fists to calm himself down.
"Okay," he shakily managed out, "one last question, if I may, sir."

"Speak," was all she said.

"What happens if I become a personal cook for you?"

"Ah, yes," she sighed out. "While I cannot be too specific as this is a new experience for me as well, your main role will be comprised of keeping to my schedule and feeding me at times most suitable. Of course, you would no longer be considered part of the kitchen staff, and so your duties there will come to an end. On occasion, you may be asked to cook for my knights as well, or whatever I may ask of you. You may very well simply be my personal servant, with a focus on cooking."

Shirou cast his gaze downward as he considered his options. Becoming a knight or leaving Camelot entirely seemed to be the best options for him, but becoming a knight would probably take too much time, and he did have a lot hindering him if he took that option. Then again, if he decided to leave Camelot, then he would be in a position to do whatever it was he needed to do, and then some. But, there was always the chance that he might make a wrong step and draw the wrath of her ire. That would surely end with his demise, unless he wanted to try and survive sixth century England with her as his enemy. No, that wouldn't be a good idea. It would only make sense to not be the source of her fury, then. Could he actually do that, though?

With a sigh, Shirou straightened his shoulders and looked at her as determinedly as before.

"Before I say my decision," he began, earning another sigh of irritation from her, "what would you personally think is in my best interests?"

"This again?" she asked, not withholding her annoyance any further. "Have we not already discussed this in the past? Asking another to decide a path that will become your future is nothing short of lazy and ignorant! If you intend to waste my time with this, then I will simply –"

"I'm sorry," Shirou quickly interrupted. "That's not what I meant. I have a plan. I've made up my mind. I just wanted to see if what you thought I should do was the same as what I intend to do."

She shook her head with frustration, making Kay smirk a bit. "And what, pray tell, is the difference? You are still asking me to decide something for you."

"No," Shirou quickly disagreed. "I am asking for your opinion, one that will in no way impact what I plan to say."

King Arthur turned to look at him thoughtfully, her eyes narrowing as she tried to piece together the underlying meaning to his words. "Will it not?"

"No. I am my own person."

With this, the king finally felt herself relax somewhat. "Then. In my own opinion, the best option for you would be to leave this place and to never return. Leave Camelot, leave Britain. Venture to another part of the endless world where no one within this vicinity will ever once again hear your name or your accomplishments or failures. That, Shirou, is what I believe would be best for you."

He found himself feeling somewhat frustrated himself from that. Would Saber have said that to him? He realized more and more that the two probably were hardly the same at all. This person in front of him was arrogant and far colder than the Saber he'd been together with — she treated him as if he were nothing but an insignificant insect. Like he'd declared earlier though, what she said wouldn't weigh on his previous decision at all.
"I understand, Your Majesty," he finally said, bowing his head slightly. "I have decided I would like to become your personal cook, if you will have me."

King Arthur's eyebrows rose, showing her surprise as Kay let out a noise of disbelief. The king and Shirou both turned to look at him as he stared at the latter.

"His Majesty said he thinks you should vanish and you decide you want to be his cook? What the hell is wrong with you?"

Shirou frowned. "I think I said that whatever he said wouldn't affect my decision whatsoever. I'd planned that from the moment I heard the offer, but I wanted to make sure I was making the right choice."

The king looked at him sharply. "If you'd known from the very beginning, why would you seek the answers to all of those questions?"

The redhead turned to look at her, slowly replying, "Because, knowledge is power, Your Majesty."

King Arthur was unable to say anything further after hearing that and so chose to say nothing at all. Instead, she motioned for Dylan to come forward. When the squirrely man reached her side, she stood up and motioned to Shirou.

"This is my new personal servant," she explained to Dylan, with the latter looking at the redhead blankly. "His name is Shirou. He will be preparing all of my meals henceforth and will therefore be allowed access to the fourth floor corridor. See that the guards are aware of this."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Dylan agreed.

"As my new, and only, personal servant, I expect him to be clothed suitably and informed of what is expected of him. See that he is moved from the servant's quarters in the east wing to the third floor of the main wing. I want his room in an acceptable order, befitting someone of his new rank. He is to move in today, effective immediately."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

"In addition, see that he is well aware of my schedule," King Arthur continued. "While I do not foresee any changes or amendments, be aware and notify him immediately if one of my meetings is to run longer than expected. I also want his attire drawn together by the day's end. I demand that the tailors finish it by tomorrow's morn. I do not care what it takes – I will accept no less."

She then cupped her chin in thought, trying to see if she'd missed anything. No, she would inform Shirou of the specifics later on, when she had more time to speak to him. At the moment, she needed to prepare herself for her meeting – a meeting that would take up several hours. Ah.

The king turned to look at Shirou. "I will be in my study promptly at noon. Ready a meal for that time. Should I prove to be late, then wait for me outside of the door, and I will be there as soon as I am able, unless my steward tells you otherwise. I expect your future meals to be as high in quality as my breakfast today."

Shirou never had the chance to respond to that comment as Dylan shifted in front of him and offered the king a deep bow. King Arthur didn't bother acknowledging the man and slowly turned her gaze to look steadily at Shirou, not a single word coming from her mouth. She continued looking at him even as Dylan finally righted himself before finally turning away and silently dismissing the both of them.
Dylan chose not to comment on the fact and glanced at Shirou, motioning for him to follow. Shirou hesitated, looking back first at Baeddan, then at the kitchen, and then back at the king who was sitting once more in her seat at the table. He frowned as he stood there, wondering why she'd stared at him for so long – it was almost as if she'd been trying to tell him something, or as if she'd wanted to. He hadn't any idea what, though.

The steward cleared his throat to show his impatience and Shirou turned back around to follow along after the former. As the two left the Great Hall and walked down the corridor towards one of the stairwells, Dylan never once attempted to converse with the redhead, and Shirou was hardly in any mood to bother with chitchat himself, so that didn't bother him any. It was only once they were in the walkway leading to the north wing that Shirou found his curiosity overwhelming. He'd never been any further north than the castle gardens, and he only knew of the basics of this other wing.

"Where are we going?" he found himself asking eventually.

"The north wing," came the dry answer.

Shirou bit his tongue to hold off from replying scathingly. "Obviously. Why?"

Dylan stopped and looked at him with his empty dark-brown eyes. "Do you plan to walk around naked? Are you daft? Where else do you intend to be fitted for clothes?"

Okay. He and this guy were definitely going to have a problem. "I get that. But I thought it was all mages here. I thought we'd have to go to the village for tailors."

"Spoken like a true plebian," Dylan replied, making Shirou's eye twitch from irritation. "Go to the village? What nonsense do you think you're speaking? This is the king, you ruffian. Why on earth would he go to the village with that riff-raff when he could take on all the tailors and seamstresses necessary in his own place of reign? I suppose everyone needs a good source of stupidity at times – even the king."

Shirou gritted his teeth, his hands clenching into fists. Dylan noticed this quickly.

"Only a few minutes into your new position and already seeking violence. My, but you are worthless. Come, let us be finished with this ordeal before your idiocy decides to taint me with itself as well."

With that, Dylan turned back around and continued forward as if nothing strange had transpired between the two at all. Shirou just forced out his breath slowly to calm himself down before he, too, began walking forward again as well. He noticed one of the open arches lead to the garden and frowned.

"We could've cut through the gardens instead of going the long way."

"Fool. You don't cut through a tranquil, sacred place like that. One of your kind shouldn't even be allowed to trespass lest you spoil it with your poison."

...That was it. Shirou definitely hated this guy. The guy reminded him of a certain blond asshole who'd taken joy in belittling everything "beneath" himself. Shirou grimaced slightly as the memories of that particular blond came flowing back into the forefront of his mind.

They approached a large double door and Dylan didn't even bother to knock before marching straight inside, obviously expecting Shirou to follow along after him. Shirou popped his head through to look around before coming in fully, his eyes taking in all of the different fabrics laying...
everywhere, alongside of the multitude of people who seemed to be busy sewing one thing or another together. It was pretty damn amazing.

One man jumped up and came forward quickly, his head bowing as he acknowledged Dylan.

"His Majesty's Steward, we once again have the pleasure of speaking to you again," the man began, his words humbled. "What is it His Majesty would like made for him this day?"

Dylan nodded his head over in Shirou's direction before standing aside to let the tailor have a look at him.

"You are to see that this man is outfitted with a wardrobe befitting a personal servant to the king."

"A personal servant...?" the man asked incredulously, and Dylan nodded in reply. "I've never heard of... I see. What is required for him?"

The squirrely looked at Shirou with emotionless eyes before looking down at his clothing. "Yes. Seven days in a week... Prepare three different sorts of cooking outfits per my color specifications and Shirou's outfitting decisions. In addition, I demand three different pairs of outdoor clothing, should the man ever need to venture outside of the castle. Also, see that a shoemaker is aware of this man's need for two new sets of boots."

The tailor wasted no time in accepting the order. "Of course, Steward."

He turned to Shirou next. "Personal Servant, would you please allow me to measure you for a proper fitting?"

Shirou frowned from some discomfort. "You don't have to call me that. Call me Shirou."

Just as the tailor was about to respond, Dylan snapped, "No, they will not call you by that name. You do not represent only yourself anymore, boy. You are in the king's personal service now, and there is little respect for calling you by your given name."

The redhead looked at Dylan irritably. "I'll respect them more if they use my actual name."

"I care little for whether you feel respect for them or not," Dylan argued in a no-nonsense tone. "It only matters whether the king does or not. Do you not get it, boy? You are no longer your own person. You are an extension of the king now – I ask that you act like it."

That began to grate on Shirou's nerves more than anything. He was not a gopher for the king, and he wasn't just a some pretty bauble to show off. His name was Shirou, not "Personal Servant", and no matter what his job, that would never detract from who he truly was. He was his own man, on his own path.

"Please hold still," the tailor said unobtrusively as he and a few other women began measuring parts of his body.

Shirou's body was so taut with anger at this point that it was all he could to hold himself back from attacking Dylan right then and there. He forced his gaze away from Dylan's as he stared blankly at an opposite wall. He should've just chosen exile and left it at that.

The tailor and seamstresses fiddled around him for a few minutes before backing up and bowing deeply to him, an action with very much bothered and unnerved him. The tailor turned to look back at Dylan.
"Now, allow me to repeat for you your allocated order: you have demanded twenty-one sets of cooking outfits for His Majesty's personal servant, along with another three pairs of personal clothing, alongside two new pairs of functioning footwear, yes?"

"Correct," Dylan clipped.

"What dyes would you prefer, Steward?"

"Royal blue with a yellow seam like His Majesty's battle wear. The second outfit should be royal blue with a black seam, and the third outfit should be a pure black outfit with a silver seam."

"I take it that would be for the outdoor wear?" the tailor asked, taking down notes to ensure the order would be correct.

Dylan nodded. "Indeed. As for the cooking outfits, seven white, seven black, and seven blue. That should be sufficient. Make certain the pairs of boots are black."

"Understood," the tailor replied in turn. He switched his attention to Shirou. "How would you like the cooking outfits to be designed, Personal Servant?"

Shirou bit his tongue again to keep from demanding the man say his name normally. It just wasn't worth fighting over at the moment. He took in a deep breath as he thought of the uniforms that chefs would normally wear in the future. Those certainly weren't tunics and breeches though, and Shirou wasn't sure if they'd be able to manage that kind of design. Eh, but in for a penny, in for a pound, as they say.

"An outfit where one side of the uniform top comes over like this, and then the other flap closes over it with buttons like this. Then the pants are all the way down like this, and there's the permanent seams on the sides here, and then the collar's like this, and..."

He faded out the second he realized the tailor was looking at him strangely. "...Right. Hey, can I borrow that parchment and, what is that? Yeah, the quill, too, please."

As the tailor moved aside for Shirou to begin drawing, Shirou took the quill into his hand and frowned at it. He'd never written with one before, and he wasn't sure how much pressure to use. He'd seen the things used in movies and on television, but never had had the opportunity of attempting such himself. Shirou dipped the quill into the ink, like he'd seen on TV, but the second he tried to write anything, the ink splattered all over the parchment, making him gawk down at it with disbelief. He let out a small growl when he heard Dylan sigh with annoyance, but tried to ignore the steward as he tried once again. Just like before, though, the ink splattered against the sheet.

Shirou just ignored it this time and tried to draw something out as best he could. It was hard to tell the difference between what'd he drawn and all of the splotches of ink everywhere, but the tailor simply looked down at the drawing pensively, his eyebrows knitted together as he tried to make sense of it.

"I've never seen clothing designed like this before. And this, ah, 'collar', you said? Why does it come around like that? Why do you have the flaps of the shirt folded over like so with the sets of buttons? I don't see a functional use for this."

"It looks crisp and clean," didn't sound like the best thing to say in this era, so Shirou stuck with, "That's how cook's clothing is designed in my country. Call it nostalgia if you like. Whatever makes you feel better."
The tailor honestly desired to say the stranger's country was very strange to not wear something as convenient as a tunic and breeches, but that was not his place to do so. He continued studying the strange drawing before simply shaking his head. It could be done, of course, and far be it from him to debate on the clothing's uselessness, but he was but a simple tailor in the king's keep. If this was what the king's personal servant desired, then it was what would be delivered.

"I...understand," he said eventually, turning his eyes away from the splotched parchment. "We will have your order fulfilled. Please allow us a couple of weeks to a month to complete everything."

Dylan shook his head. "My apologies, Tailor, but I can give you only until the morrow's morn."

The tailor quickly rose from his bow, his eyes as wide as all of his coworkers'. "Surely, you cannot be serious, Steward. That is over twenty pieces of clothing. We could never complete such an order within that given time."

"Feel free to recruit the mages to assist you again," Dylan suggested, his expression unforgiving. "The king has demanded thus, and so you will meet his expectations."

"But, twenty plus articles of clothing is..."

"Indeed, that is a tall order to fill," Dylan agreed. "At least complete two sets of everything, and his current boots will need to suffice. I will inform the king of these conditions."

The tailor still hesitated, but realized there was nothing he could do. Two sets of everything was far better than completing all of the clothing all at once, after all. "I understand, Steward."

Dylan nodded and turned around to look Shirou up and down. "I suppose those rags will have to do for the first day. It is a shame, but there is little we can do about it."

"You aren't touching my hair," Shirou said immediately. "Ever."

The steward only sniffed in reply and spun on his heel to walk out of the room. Shirou gave the tailor one last glance, but the man was already elbow deep in work, preparing the material for Shirou's clothing. The time traveler tilted his head but decided to just leave and allow the people peace to work – they only had a day to finish everything after all. He walked out into the corridor to see Dylan waiting for him.

"What now?" he grunted, not in the mood for scurrying across the entire damn castle. It was fucking huge.

Dylan looked at him briefly before walking on. "You are to move to different quarters. A room on the third floor, as His Majesty has demanded. Though I quite doubt you to have anything of real purpose lying in wait for you in your current quarters, I ascertained you would wish to visit there regardless."

Shirou frowned but didn't bother replying. He followed after Dylan again up until the two ran into a pair of servants. Dylan quickly relayed to them the king's orders about Shirou's new room and they ensured that it would be ready within the next half hour. As soon as the two women bowed, Dylan continued walking, with Shirou tagging along right behind up until the moment they both reached the door to Shirou and Zago's room. Shirou strode in quickly, zeroing in on his cot and reaching behind it to get the backpack he hadn't used for months on end. Slipping it on, he then looked down at the red blanket folded neatly at the end of his cot. He tilted his head slightly before
grabbing it and carrying it awkwardly in his arms.

When he left his room to meet back up with Dylan, the latter looked less than impressed with the bulk. However, the man said nothing about the topic and walked away with Shirou following around right behind him again.

"Allow me to inform you of the king's schedule," Dylan said, looking down at the notes he'd been holding in one hand the entire time. "Within the next hour or so, the king is to be in a meeting with a court official from another kingdom – you need not be aware of the details concerning what or who. Providing the meeting does not tally for too long, the king should be available thereafter in his office. Around two in the afternoon, the king is expected to be in the throne room to receive villagers until early evening. I would believe it appropriate to have a meal prepared for before that particular conference. As for tomorrow's scheduling, I assume the king will inform you either at lunch, or at the time for dinner."

Shirou grunted in reply. "Anything else I should know?"

"I suggest you don't screw up," Dylan said in return.

At Shirou's annoyed expression, Dylan stopped walking and turned to face the other man fully. "I wasn't being facetious. I truly mean that you should not mess anything up, if you value your life. Whenever I hear your name pop up, it is not with redeeming factors, I can tell you. You are teetering on a very fine line, and if you so choose to not put your best forth, you may as well have chosen exile instead of this route, like the king had thought you to do."

"I get it," the redhead said. "I'm in a precarious position. I didn't choose that choice just so I could mess up and get kicked back down to my previous rank. I'm here for the long haul."

"Such strange idioms and words you use," Dylan responded, his head tilting to the side. "But, I understand your meaning well enough. May you succeed in all of your endeavors."

At this, Shirou couldn't help his skepticism and surprise. "Wait, I thought you were waiting for me to fail."

"I expect you to fail," Dylan agreed somewhat, much to Shirou's ire. "That does not necessarily indicate that I desire for the event to happen. I expect it because you know nothing. You are nothing. You have come from nothing. What is nothing multiplied by three? Of course, it is still nothing, and so what can I expect but failure? You are most certainly welcome to prove me wrong, however."

Shirou sneered. "You know nothing about me to say I'm nothing. Your lack of information just shows how lost you are – you have no right to act as if I'm all that low on the totem pole. I could be a prince or king from my own land, here just to live a normal life."

At this, Dylan paused. "There is truth in those words. You could be playing a dangerous game with no one necessarily understanding your exact position upon the board. In which case, might it be you who is orchestrating all that has gone wrong so far?"

That put Shirou on edge so quickly he couldn't help show his displeasure. "Don't put recent troubles on my back. I haven't done anything wrong."

"Either you are more than you are, or you are nothing at all," Dylan countered easily. "However, you must be one of the two, for there is hardly an in-between whatsoever."

"Life isn't all about the black and white of a situation," Shirou argued.
"Even grey has its limits," Dylan said, finishing the conversation. "So, for now, shall I just assume you are nothing if you are not something?"

He turned away from the shaking redhead again, taking the lead as he continued walking towards Shirou's new room. Shirou fumed in silence as he continued following behind the sinewy man, his eyes attempting to burn a hole in the back of the man's skull. By the time the two reached the third floor, Shirou was ready to be done with the man. Dylan stopped in front of one room, looked at Shirou, and told him to wait outside as he kept walking down the hall. Shirou stared after him before looking at the door next to him. Was this his new place?

Shifting the pack on his back to a more comfortable position, he looked at the general door itself. It was much better crafted than the servants' doors were – that much was for certain. It had a very beautifully carved door handle, and looked of even better quality than the ones on the second floor. He jiggled the handle a bit, but it was obviously locked shut. While being led to stand directly in front of this particular room led him to believe it had to be the one he'd been allocated, with his retarded luck, he'd probably just be attempting to break into some woman's quarters or something.

Dylan came shuffling back some time later with a key in hand. The man placed the piece of metal into Shirou's hand, gesturing to the room in front of them with some flourish.

"Please, have a look at your new place for rest. Inform me if it is lacking in any way, shape, or form. I believe it should have whatever basics you would ever need."

Shirou pushed past the other man and easily slid the key into the keyhole. When he heard the gentle click of the lock's clasps, he pushed open the large wooden door, slowly walking in to take in the entirety of his new lodgings. Shirou looked from the desk in the corner, to a window overlooking the castle gardens, to the sheeted bed on the other side of the room. His boots treader over a beautiful rug placed on the stone floor, and he also took note of his own personal fireplace in next to the window. He couldn't help his jaw falling somewhat as his pack fell from his shoulders and onto the floor with a soft thump, the blanket right along with it, while he automatically steered himself toward the window. The sun had already began its ascent into the sky and its gorgeous rays shone in on him as he stared through the barred window.

He turned back to look at his room at a new angle, now noticing the wooden closet tucked in near the wall beside his door. Shirou looked blankly back at Dylan, seeing that the man hadn't once attempted to cross into the threshold. The redhead simply couldn't believe it. His new room and his old quarters were like night and day – he never would have expected to have a window with solid shutters, or a fireplace, or a wonderful, actual bed, or... Why did rank seem to matter so much to get a modicum of a half-decent life in this time period? In his time, everything had been based on money. What kind of person you were didn't matter so much as you had the money to support your ideals most of the time, and here, it was blood and advantage. If you somehow found an in, you were blessed. If you were related to those with advantage, you were blessed. If you had neither, then, good luck.

The point was, though, that anyone could earn money when given half the chance. You couldn't change who you were born to, which meant you might not be able to change who you knew all that much either. It wasn't very fair, in all truth.

"Are you satisfied with what you've seen?" Dylan asked Shirou quietly, not wishing to disrupt the personal servant's thoughts.

"Yeah," Shirou replied, his voice sounding dull and empty, even to his ears. "This is enough for me."
Dylan nodded. "Good. I must show you to where the king's study is on the fourth floor, as well as notify the monitoring guards of your new position and your right to access it. Then, you will begin preparations for the king's afternoon meal so that you may present it to him there in person."

"Right," Shirou consented, unable to manage many words. He was still too shaken from his realization.

He trudged out of his room, a frown on his face as he shut the door and locked it with his key. Looking down at the key in his hand and then back at the door, Shirou thought of how much he'd bled, sweated, and cried to get to where he was now. Was his new position even worth everything he'd gone through? He wouldn't know until he let himself experience life a little bit more as he was now.

Shirou peered into the oven of the personal kitchen given to him by the mage population. It was similar to the incredible kitchen allowed to him, Eos, and Zago when they were feeding all of the servants, but it was far smaller and the main difference was that he was the only one with permission to use it. Essentially, the kitchen had been made for his use, all in all. The ingredients were still all in the main storage, but as long as he provided a list for Baeddan on what he specifically needed, the servants would have each item prepared and brought to the entrance for him to take. It was easier, but, now, he really was alone.

The redhead had expected to be working with the rest of the kitchen staff, but without the same pressure and without Baeddan yelling at him to get his shit together. When he found out he would be by himself with no other company, at first, he had been surprised. As he'd started preparing the king's lunch, however, Shirou began to feel a bit better about his situation. When he needed tools, he could simply trace them without anyone knowing. If he messed up and starting cursing in Japanese, no one was around to care. If a mess was made, he knew it was his own damn fault, and had no trouble picking up after himself. The best of all, though, was that it practically guaranteed that there would be no one to ruin anything for him or make his life miserable.

Sure, through the first hours of his new position, Shirou kind of missed having Dago and Eos around to chat with, and, for some seconds here and there, Baeddan even, but the fact that the only person depending on him was the king and that he was in charge of solely himself, trumped over any thoughts of loneliness he may have ever coincidentally considered. If he screwed up, it was all on him. If he did well, that was all due to his skill as well. There were not external factors to concern himself with, and that made everything a bit easier. If nothing else, he definitely had the king to thank for that.

Shirou pulled out the rendition of butter parmesan chicken that he'd come up with. While it was unfortunate that parmesan wasn't in cultivation yet, normal cheese would do well enough since the king wouldn't know the difference at all. It definitely irritated Shirou to cook a meal that wasn't up to his normal standards, but a lot of the bread-like dishes would've needed time for the dough to rise, and chicken didn't take that long to cook. He'd baked the vegetables around the chicken, letting the natural taste of the seasonings on the chicken flow over towards the vegetables as well. Honestly, Shirou really wished aluminum foil had been invented – he'd tried to trace it, but the his version was far too dense and it would've been like putting the chicken in an oven within an oven.

He looked up at the empty kitchen briefly before tracing a metal dish to plate the chicken. Shirou cut the large piece into smaller slices for appeal and aesthetic beauty before arranging the vegetables in a more graceful manner next to the chicken. He next went to the wall where there were a few bottles of wine and a keg of ale. Looking back at the chicken and then looking at his two options of alcohol, – because water just wasn't going to cut it – he decided on the red wine for
taste value. Ale would cover up the richness of the chicken too much instead of complementing the meal. A nice, smooth lager would've done well with the chicken, but Shirou hadn't yet had the opportunity to work with growing the hops, – he'd have to find some to work with first – getting the necessary yeast, and he didn't even know if there was any barley to work with around here. That would probably be his first big project: dealing with alcoholic beverages. He would've never originally thought of Saber, no, King Arthur, as a drinker, but, it only made sense.

Shirou set the cup full of wine, together with the plate of food, onto a tray. He mentally calculated the entire meal to see if he was missing anything of importance, but just shrugged and traced some silverware to eat with.

"Drink. Food. Silverware. I don't have any napkins. I'll have to appeal to someone to make that a thing here," he murmured to himself. "Is there anything else? Mm. Guess I'll find out later if she doesn't like something."

After tracing a lid to cover the steaming plate of food, Shirou carefully picked up the tray and headed towards the door leading out into the castle gardens. He allowed himself a small smile when he saw the view, and thought himself lucky to be able to see it every time he went back and forth from the kitchen. Walking through the grass, he breathed in the wonderful aroma of all of the flowers. He'd heard that Queen Guinevere had had a hand in picking whatever plants would be planted and in what manner. Shirou thought that she'd done a great job. Everything seemed so warm and inviting that it was a shame no other people really visited. He still couldn't understand why Zago had acted the way he had when they'd first visited.

The Japanese slowly ascended the steps, making sure to keep the tray even so as to not jostle the cup full of liquid. When he reached the fourth floor, he came face to face with the two soldiers guarding the staircase on the side he'd taken. They both offered him a bow of their head before stepping back and opening a path for him. Shirou offered the two of them cordial nods as he walked past them and down the corridor. The sounds of his boots scuffing against the stone as he walked bounced against the walls and high ceiling above him. It was odd being on the fourth floor – it was so quiet and...strangely lonely.

The moment he approached the door to the king's office, he let out a breath to relieve him of his apprehension. It all started here. If he did well here, then he would have survived the first step of the journey. And fuck it if he didn't want her to appreciate what he'd made. Shirou balanced the tray on his left arm with his hand securing it from falling. His right hand rapped gently on the thick wooden door before he let it drop and waited.

"Who is it?" came the query.

A bout of nervousness suddenly hit him before he quenched the feeling. "Uh, Shirou, Your Majesty. I have your food?"

Well, wasn't that wonderfully well-spoken of him? Note to self: learn how to speak better.

There was a pause and he heard some mutterings come from inside before the door suddenly swept open and the tall figure of Kay came into his vision. Shirou hesitated when he saw the other man, but Kay only nudged his head, indicated that Shirou walk in. Shirou glanced at the man as he passed him before turning his attention to the blond patiently waiting for him to acknowledge her.

"Your Majesty," he said quietly, not sure of what he was supposed to do. "I have brought your afternoon meal."

"So, I see," was her short reply.
She gestured at the cleared desk in front of her and he walked in further, adjusting the tray so that the plate would be right in front of her. Setting it down on her desk, he barely noticed Kay shut the study door and flop down into a chair behind him. Shirou pulled off lid and a small cloud of steam rose up from the food, showing how hot it still was. King Arthur looked down at the meal before looking back up at him.

"What is it I am looking at, Shirou?"

Shirou nearly palmed his face when he realized there was no way for her to know what it was. When Kay popped up next to him to look at the meal, he slid to the side somewhat before answering her question.

"At the center is the breast of a chicken baked to perfection in a number of seasonings" – the ones he could find anyway – "as well as butter and what was meant to be parmesan. To the side are the vegetables I baked alongside it. I did not season them too much, so I would advise that you eat them together with the meat instead of separately. Then, I also brought you a glass of wine to complement your meal."

King Arthur nodded as she listened to his explanation. "Yes, I see. But, what do you mean by 'what was meant to be parmesan'?"

Shirou shrugged helplessly. "The type of cheese I'd normally use doesn't exist here, Your Majesty."

"You appear somewhat irritated by that fact," she pointed out, making no move to eat her meal.

"It just makes things a bit harder to make when I don't have the ingredients I'm used to using," Shirou responded. "Or when they don't exist at all, even remotely."

She tilted her head. "I believe I understand your frustration. Perhaps if you –"

"Could you just eat the damn meal already, brother?" interrupted Kay with an expression of irritation. "Play king later. Eat now."

The blonde frowned deeply at him for interrupting her conversation. "You act as if my eating somehow relates to you in any way."

Kay harrumphed. "Well, I can't sneak away any food until you at least take your first bite. By all means, talk your life away with the man, but only after trying that first nibble."

Shirou backed away slowly as the king only stared at Kay. "This meal is mine. You will not receive any."

"You would deny your own brother this gratification?"

"Within a heartbeat," she deadpanned. "If I even so much as see you gesture at my food, I will stab you. And then I will kick you out."

Kay's jaw dropped somewhat. "Where did this viciousness come from, brother? I simply wish to test it!"

"You are just like Percival," King Arthur continued. "If I gave you even the slightest morsel, you would only fight for more. Go sit down."

"My brother is so cruel to me."
"Sit in that chair like a good, little puppy."

Kay stared back at the blonde as she just blinked somewhat innocently. "I cannot believe you used my own line against me. What a terrible person. Fine. Have your wonderful food."

He sulkily sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. King Arthur chose to then ignore him, the danger to her meal no longer existent. She looked back at Shirou who was off in the corner, trying to stay as far away from the fight as he could manage.

"Now, Shirou, back to what we were discussing previously..."

"Saber Lion came back," he muttered to himself. "Damn, Taiga was bad enough, and now this?"

King Arthur and Kay both looked at him at this point. "...I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing!" Shirou exclaimed. "Nothing! Hah. Yes, you were saying? Something about if I do something?"

She looked at him oddly before replying, "Give me a list of the list of ingredients you might need procured to better operate in the kitchen, and I will see if it is possible to gather them at some point. I make no promises, however."

"Ah, yes sir," Shirou answered. *That would require me knowing how to write though. Maybe I could have the steward guy write it out for me?*

With the discussion finished, the king finally turned to her meal and picked up her knife and fork with almost practiced fluidity, surprising Shirou incredibly. She'd done that with the first meal, too, but Shirou could swear that utensils weren't a normal thing back here in the past – at least, not yet. Weren't table manners originally a French thing passed over? The king used the combination of tools as if she'd been doing it for years, though, and Shirou definitely thought that to be strange. But, since Kay wasn't saying anything about it, then it definitely wasn't Shirou's place to, either.

The first five minutes passed quietly, with only the odd scrape of metal against metal here and there interrupting the silence. Kay watched her eat before letting out a loud sigh. Her green eyes drifted up to look at him as Shirou did much the same.

"Well," Kay began, his head hitting the wall behind him, "this is about as exciting as watching the grass grow."

Shirou didn't say anything, only watching as the king set down her fork and sighed herself. "Forgive me if my eating is inconveniently boring for you, Kay. Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me why you're here then?"

Kay scoffed. "And leave you here by yourself with this guy? He might try to seduce you into doing something awful. I must stay here to protect you."

Just as Shirou interjected, "I wouldn't do anything to His Majesty," King Arthur simultaneously sputtered out,

"S-seduce? Seduce?"

At this point, both men looked at her and the king realized she was acting very much out of character. "Kay, that is nothing short of nonsense. I am married, if you would recall."

Kay blinked at her reaction before a smirk drew across his face, thereby filling her with a sense of
dread. "Oh, hoh, have you realized the appeal of men now, just like Percival, Arthur?"

She opened her mouth before shutting it quickly, knowing all too well that this was punishment for her eliminating his chances of trying her meal. Her eyes darted over to a bewildered Shirou before she pointedly stared back at her brother.

"Kay..."

Her brother only decided to stand up and throw an arm around Shirou's shoulders, making him stiffen with confusion and a tinge of fear. Kay chuckled.

"Hey, what's your name again?"

"Shirou..." the redhead replied uncertainly.

The king quickly stood up. "Kay."

Kay turned both himself and Shirou around so that their backs were facing the blonde. "So, Shirou, was it? It seems my brother has not only a wonderful taste for women, for what is the queen if not a beauty in every way, but also for the other sex as well. While I do not see him ever attempting to marry you like Percival claims on a normal basis, I believe I should warn you of his tenacity, regardless."

He snuck a quick look back at the king to see her face aflame with red, though whether that was from embarrassment or anger, he couldn't be entirely certain. It was time to find out, though. Ah, the role of a big brother was a tedious, but amusing, one.

"Allow me to regale you with his less-than-finer moments of life..."

Within a flash, his little "brother" was standing in front of him, her face entirely devoid of emotion. Oh, oops. It seemed he'd jested with her a bit too, too much. Well, the day was never done if he didn't.

She glanced at the wide-eyed Shirou, nodding her head back at the chair behind him. "You. Sit."

Kay winced. She hadn't even used the man's name. He felt a shiver run down his spine the second her cold gaze landed on him.

"Arthur, it was just a bit of..."

"You. Out."

"What is life if you don't..."

"Out."

Kay held up his hands to try and placate her fierce fury, but she only opened the door and stared at him, unmoving. He finally shrugged his shoulders, making sure to lean in and whisper to her as he left,

"If you like the man, you should at least be honest with your feelings."

He grinned at him as she froze and continued staring back. She sent a glance back at the still confused Shirou before pushing Kay out and closing the door after her as she left as well. Shirou wondered when his life had gotten to be so strange that he was seeing the king's brother brazenly tease the king as if she were just a normal person. Of course, Kay had known her long before she'd
ever become king for real, and was basically treating her as if nothing had changed over the years. Shirou felt himself grin when he thought of all the crazy stuff Taiga had done to him once upon a time as his older sibling. It was always nice to have someone who would treat you like the real you, without paying any attention to how much you might have grown up over the years, or what you might've become.

His grin vanished when he heard a loud yelp of pain and the sound of something hitting the ground. Shirou gaped as the door then opened as King Arthur gracefully walked back in, shaking out her right hand somewhat. She glanced at Shirou once before sliding into her chair with a sigh.

"Please forgive that interruption, Shirou."

He just smiled softly, much to her confusion. He chuckled a bit. "It must be nice to be on such good terms with your brother."

An unreadable expression overtook her face before she blankly looked back at him. "I would rather not discuss such a topic with you, if you do not mind. And, if you could forget such an event ever occurred, it would be much appreciated."

Shirou's smile disappeared from his face entirely. He cleared his throat before sitting up straight. "Right. I'm sorry."

"There is little need for apology," she stated, situating herself to finally finish her meal. "Sir Kay simply is not the type to differentiate between times when such foolery is allowed and when it is not. Which brings me to another point."

Shirou gave her his full attention and she nodded. "You are my servant. Never again do I wish for you to act as if you are a part of anything like the matter with Sir Kay. You are to serve my meals and whatever else I ask of you, and nothing else. If there is something you need, I will of course attend to your needs if I am able. It is only reasonable that I do so. Should I not be available, it would be in your best interests to consult with my steward. However, even if you should be brought into a discussion by any other person within my study at any time, never will you participate in the discussion at any point in time. Ever. Have I made myself clear?"

At this point, Shirou felt his fists clench tightly. "Yes, sir."

"Good," she replied. "Let us now discuss your role."

She ate a piece of chicken, swallowed, and then looked at him. "When you come to my door and ask for entrance, you will say the following words: 'Your Majesty, may I be granted entrance?' Now, repeat those words."

"Your Majesty, may I be granted entrance?" he repeated dully, his emotions closing off.

"Good. When I allow you entrance, you will then walk two steps forward, bow, and say, 'Your Majesty, I have come to serve you your breakfast, lunch, dinner,' or what have you. Repeat those words, as if you were here to serve me my midday meal."

Shirou closed his eyes, feeling irritation flow through him. "Your Majesty, I have come to serve you your lunch."

She narrowed her eyes. "Your tone leaves much to be desired, but we will work on that. In any case, once you have set down the tray, you will immediately explain to me my meal and any issues you may have had concerning ingredients. Thereafter, I expect you to retreat back towards the wall over there, and stand there at attention, and as still as a statue. Do you understand?"
"Yes, sir," came the forced response.

"Very well, then. Even should my brother or any other attempt to include you into any conversation, you are to simply say, 'Forgive me, but I am only here to serve.' Nothing else. They will understand given enough time. Now, say those words."

Shirou breathed out slowly. "Forgive me, but I am only here to serve."

"Good enough, I suppose," she murmured, setting down her utensils and downing the cup of wine. "Your meal was delectable, Shirou. I expect more of the same quality. Now, let us see how you leave."

He stood up slowly, his eyes downcast as he bowed courteously and took the tray from her desk. He rose to his full height.

"By your leave, Your Majesty."

King Arthur rubbed her chin before nodding. "That will do. You may leave now."

"Thank you," he bit out before bowing again and walking away.

He opened the door to the study, walked out, and then closed the door behind him. As soon as he left, King Arthur let out a small sigh and fell back against the cushioning of her chair. She stared at the wall across from her as the silence permeated throughout the room. She gave the door long glance before leaning forward and setting her elbows on her desktop. Her face fell into her hands as she thought over what all she had told Shirou and how she had acted towards him.

"Am I really doing the right thing? However am I to truly know?"

There was something that had been plaguing the back of her mind over a number of days that she had nearly forgotten, what with her busy schedule and the generally low importance of this particular task. King Arthur gracefully set down her spoon – the soup had been very rich and creamy, and definitely to her tastes. It intrigued her how well he cooked despite the odd circumstances thrust upon him. She wondered if there was anything lacking or impeding his ability to...

Ah. And there it was.

As Shirou pulled away the tray away from her desk, King Arthur smoothed out her brow with a couple of her fingers as she tapped her fingers against the wooden surface. Shirou backed away, respectfully announcing,

"By your leave, Your Majesty."

"Hold, Shirou," she said, stopping in his tracks as he looked up with an expression full of emptiness. "It has since left my mind, but I can almost certainly recall that I asked for you to provide me with a list of ingredients that are currently lacking in the kitchen. It has been over a week since then. Where is that list?"

She felt a wave of annoyance and irritation pass through her when he automatically stiffened at hearing her words. By the Lord above, she had not asked the man to fight a one-man battle against the whole of the Saxons – she just wanted a piece of parchment with a list of ingredients on it. How difficult was it to supply something so simple?
"You do not have it," she deduced, not even bothering to ask it as an official question.

Shirou made a small noise of irritation himself, which only annoyed her further. He hid a glare – he was getting better at that, she would have to admit – and looked at her fully.

"I know what all I need, and I do have a list, Your Majesty," he explained slowly. "It's just..."

"Just?" she repeated after him, eyes narrowing. "Just what, exactly?"

He turned his gaze away, muttering, "You just wouldn't be able to read it..."

For a moment, the king thought that her servant was trying to insult her. "...I beg your pardon?"

Shirou cleared his throat and glanced at her as he asked, "May I set this tray down, Your Majesty?"

She waved her hand, silently permitting him to do so. As soon as Shirou balanced the tray on a chair, he slid his hand into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of parchment. As soon as he unfolded it and passed it to her, the king immediately realized what the issue was. King Arthur stared down at the mess of kanji, hiragana, and katakana written down rather neatly. Her eyes scanned over each character before she blinked a couple of times as it if to clear her vision. The blonde turned her attention back to her servant.

"What is this?"

He grunted slightly. "It's the list, in my native language. I can only speak Brythonic, but I can't write or read it."

King Arthur sighed a bit as she laid the parchment on her desk. "I see. You are illiterate of the country's language. That will not do."

"Your Majesty?" Shirou inquired, noticing her stand up from her chair and gaze out of her large window.

He watched her tilt her head almost indecisively before looking out once more. King Arthur smoothed her brow once again, a habit he was beginning to recognize as something to calm her down when she was harried. Saber had never done that, but then again, when Saber hadn't been fighting, or arguing with him, or eating, she'd been sleeping. She'd actually lived a pretty low-maintenance lifestyle for those two weeks. Would she have adopted these mannerisms, given enough stress? Then again, who's to say she hadn't when she'd been king? Ruling a country as opposed to just dealing with an idiotic teenager who didn't know how to jump into dangerous situations had to have been like comparing apples to dogs. Sleeping most of the time had to be the easier of the two.

"I have some time left still," the king muttered to herself before walking back to her seat and gesturing towards one of the chairs.

"Have a seat, Shirou," she directed as she made a bit more space available on her desk. "Pull it forward and pay attention. I do not intend for any personal servant of mine to have the educational level of an average peasant."

The redhead hesitated, but after noting her no-nonsense tone, quickly reached for the chair without the tray laying on it and set it down on the rug right in front of her desk. As soon as the man sat down, King Arthur took out her quill and began writing down what looked to his like a bunch of scritch-scratch. She wrote out, in large script, twenty different symbols, with more writing next to each one. Five letters each were separated out into four different groups, that he could tell, but it all
looked the same to him. English hadn't seemed this difficult, although the "d" and "b" looked ridiculously similar, like the "p" and "q". And, that was just the letters themselves – don't even get him started on the sounds everything made.

King Arthur set her quill back into its inkpot before gesturing to the entire sheet, turning it around so he could see it the right way. "There are currently twenty letters in the Ogham alphabet –"

"'Ogham'?" he accidentally interrupted, sounding confused.

"The term 'Brythonic' is too encompassing," the king explained patiently. "Brythonic refers to a myriad of languages, nothing particularly specific. When I say 'Ogham', however, this solely means the alphabet used in all of the Celtic region. As I said, there are twenty letters in the alphabet at the moment."

Twenty wasn't bad. If only they didn't all look the exact same...

She pointed at each letter as she went down the list. "First, you must know that the letters, also known as 'feda', are separated into four different groups, otherwise known as 'aicme'. The first aicme, named 'Beithe' after the first feda, has the letters 'beith', 'luis', 'fern', 'sail', and 'nion'. Write down those words, if you must."

Shirou stared at the parchment with wide eyes before they snapped up to look at her. She gestured towards her quill and was surprised to see him glare at the utensil as if it were his enemy. He grudgingly took the quill out of its pot and started trying to write the sounds he'd heard in katakana for easy reference. Katakana couldn't really do the language justice, and he'd be sounding like a hick for a while when he'd try pronouncing everything, but it was better than nothing. He made a small sound of frustration when a blot of ink fell onto the paper when he tried using the quill. Shirou heard a small snort and looked up to see the king eye's dancing with some mirth.

"Must I teach you to write correctly as well, Shirou?"

He felt embarrassment race through him as he stiffened. "This is only my second time using one of these stupid things, Your Majesty."

"Well," she began, shaking her head, "as these 'stupid things' are the only utensils around for you to use at the moment, might I suggest you learn to get used to them?"

Shirou grumbled under his breath before she finally admonished him. "Shirou. Remember where you are."

He finally fell silent, only letting out another sound of frustration when another blot landed on the page. Before he decided to try and break her quill, she grabbed his hand to still him. Shirou frowned as he looked back up at her again and she sighed. Standing up and moving to stand behind him, she placed a hand over his right one and forced him to take up the quill again.

"You're pushing down too hard, and at times, too lightly," the king informed him as she moved his hand in careful motions. "The quill is a tool meant to be cooperated with, not conquered. Should you attempt to force it in any way it does not like, it will reciprocate as you've already seen – with blots all along the page. Do not fight the tool – only guide it as an external embodiment."

Shirou had only heard the gist of her words, his body immediately freezing the moment she came up behind him and touched his hand. It didn't matter that he was currently pissed at her for everything wrong in his life lately – the second he felt her breath against his ear and the electric feeling of her hand upon his, his brain started to shut down. Suddenly, he remembered that night
and his brain then pulled a one-eighty on him and kicked into overdrive.

She noticed him still and frowned as she moved away. "Is there something wrong, Shirou?"

"Nothing but my imagination," he muttered to himself before telling her, "No, Your Majesty."

"I see," she said as she made some space in between the two of them. "Now, if you'll look at the next aicme, named 'hÚatha', the feda go as followed: 'uath', 'dair', 'tinne', 'coll', and 'ceirt'. The third aicme is 'Muine', and has 'muin', 'gort', 'ngéadal', 'straif', and 'ruis'. The last aicme is 'Ailme', with 'ailm', 'onn', 'úr', 'eadhadh', and 'iodhadh'. Understand?"

"No," he wanted to say, desperately writing down all of the sounds in his own language. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Good, then we're finished," she was quick to reply, moving back behind her desk again. "While I do not expect for you to have everything memorized all that quickly, I do want you to continually practice in your own free time. You cannot say you are not given enough of that."

Shirou stared blankly at her before looking back down at the paper. "Uh, if I need more help...?"

"Yes, yes," she sighed. "I will arrange for someone to work with you. Expect a notice within the day or so. A scribe from the library should come to retrieve you in your downtime."

He couldn't help but continue staring as blankly as before. "There's a library?"

This time, it was she who stared at him so blankly. "Not one you've ever apparently seen, it would seem..."

In his defense, the castle was incredibly enormous, and he'd never had the time. And what would he have done even if he had discovered it? Look at all of the scritch-scratch and wish he could actually read it? The king merely looked at him with some amusement before waving him away.

"Be off with you, now," she ordered. "I have important tasks to take care of."

He rose from the chair steadily, quickly putting it back where it'd originally been before looking back at the parchment on her desk and reaching for it. Shirou started to fold it when he noticed her shake her head just a smidgen.

"Roll it," she directed. "The creasing from folding the parchment may interfere with the writing itself."

He frowned but did as she'd told him. Holding the parchment in one hand and the tray in another, he bowed and once again said, "By your leave, Your Majesty."

"Go," she commanded. "And be certain to study."

Yes, Commander, he wanted to gripe. He stayed quiet though, simply bowing as he tried to open the door without knocking over anything. As he was about to leave, Shirou turned around once more. King Arthur raised an eyebrow at his hesitance.

"Yes, Shirou?"

"I was just wondering," he started slowly, "is there any way I might be able to visit the village?"

She frowned at this. "For what reason would you need to go there?"
"All the recipes I know are from my country, but since I don't have all of the ingredients right now, I was thinking I could see what normal people cook for their families."

King Arthur sat back in her chair. "...And, for whatever reason, you believe a normal peasant's meal is in what I should be partaking?"

There was an edge to her voice that had him rolling to a full stop before he tried to change tracks. Shirou shook his head emphatically. "No, Your Majesty. The kitchen has a plentiful supply of things to use, but I wanted to see how people without much to work with create meals for themselves. For the sake of conservation."

"You wish to feed me peasant food."

She almost sounded irritated again. He wanted to stamp down his foot.

"No. I want more options!"

"What's wrong with asking Baeddan?"

You act as if I'm taking away your favorite toy, he thought to himself. "Baeddan is too high-class to know anything about conservation, and most people brought into the kitchen didn't have any kind of reputation with cooking beforehand. It's a new thing to them. I just want more ideas, that's all."

King Arthur eventually sighed. "I'll consider it only when you can write on par with a five-year-old."

Oh, ouch. That was mean.

"Fine," he muttered. "By your leave, Your Majesty."

She waved him away and he closed the door behind him. He huffed to himself. How was it that one moment she made him feel as if he was on fire, and then the next, she could piss him off like nothing else? It was as if she had a gift.

Shirou looked down at the paper in his hands and puffed up his cheeks.

"Great. Now I've got homework to deal with all over again."

Omake:

Shirou stared hard at the king from his spot at the wall near the door, his eyes narrowing as he monitored how the woman went through her paperwork. He had to hand it to her – she had a solid defense, with hardly any holes or weaknesses to exploit. But, that didn't matter in the end. Where there was a will, there was a way, after all. Nothing shy of her kicking him out of her study would keep him from succeeding that day.

Not even a moment after he thought that, Shirou saw her pause to cover her mouth, probably to hide a yawn from him. That didn't matter. This was his chance.

He saw her hand lower from her mouth and his golden-brown eyes glinted dangerously.

There!

Shirou dashed forward with every ounce of speed in his body, the dish of cakes he'd managed to bake sliding softly across her desk as her hand fell down to meet it perfectly. Then, without a word,
Shirou silently leapt back, mentally fist pumping when he noticed King Arthur automatically pick up one of the cakes and start nibbling on it. He chuckled to himself – she hadn't even noticed his movements. Ah, he was good. No, he was the best.

Shirou, the quickest draw in the West, armed to the hilt with every delicacy known to the sixth century! Yes, he was brilliant.

There was also far more where those cakes had come from. Baking small batches was a pain in this time period, so he'd made the equivalent of two pans worth, and had only given her barely a quarter of one pan. The other dishes rested to the side, and he eagerly awaited her asking him for more, because, she obviously would. He was amazing.

His grin grew when he saw the king eat up the last piece of morsel on her plate, but she never turned her gaze away from her paperwork. Her right hand flipped up one page before lowering it back down while her left hand picked up the plate and held it out towards him.

"Okawari, Shirou," she demanded of him in crisp, clear, proficient Japanese, and Shirou was quick to respond.

"Sure thing," he said, automatically reverting back to his native tongue, his facial expression joyous.

Shirou put the empty plate on the ground, humming to himself as he reached for the top plate on the stack of sweets. This made recall the number of times Saber had held up her rice bowl to him, always asking readily for more. She and Taiga had always made his slaving in the kitchen worthwhile whenever they requested for more and more food. It was always nice to be appreciated for his deeds and hard work, even if the food bill was always beyond exorbitant.

"Good, old Saber," Shirou sighed out happily. Ah, those were the days.

He quickly set out another plate of cakes for the king to eat. "Here you go, Saber!"

"Thank you," came her quick reply.

As Shirou went back to his spot against the wall, it wasn't until the king was halfway through her next plate that he suddenly froze, his face blanking as he stared at the blonde. Had... Maybe he was just over thinking things, or maybe he'd heard something and interpreted it wrongly, but, had the woman in front of him spoken to him in Japanese? She said "okawari", right? That meant "seconds" in Japanese. That meant she wanted more, in Japanese. That meant she knew Japanese. But, wouldn't that mean that she was...

"Uh, uh," he stammered, catching the king's attention. "Excuse me, but could you say that word again?"

"...That word', you say?" she asked him warily. "Which one? I've said a great many."

"You... Uh, didn't you say 'okawari' to me for more food? Does that mean you speak Japanese?" he asked, half afraid of the answer and half excited.

The king stared at him blankly. "I have no earthly idea of what you are talking about, Shirou."

"But, you said..."

"You're imagining things, Shirou."
Shirou stared blankly. "But... You... You answered to 'Saber' and everything... So, you..."

"You're imagining things," she repeated and turned back to her paperwork.

Shirou never realized a person could become as absolutely confused by a situation as he currently was then.

Wha-a-a-a-a-a-t? Why me?
When her eyes opened to see the pitch-black darkness of her room, she longed nothing more than to turn over, pull up the covers further, and go right back to sleep. Withholding her groan, Arturia ran a hand down her face and tugged off the duvet from her body as she sat up fully. She cupped her mouth as a yawn escaped her lips, but she shook her head and rose determinedly. While running a hand through her slightly tangled bed hair, a list of the activities that needed tending to ran through her head.

First order of business, she thought inwardly, splashing some water onto her face from her room's personal basin, overseeing the training schedule and highlighting points of negligence versus portions that are progressing satisfactorily. Next: a meeting with my knights in concern to their missions as well as discussing matters involving both our enemies and citizens alike. After: lunch, and then a long overdue conference with a Viking whose name I am quite apt to forget. Thereafter, attending to my citizen's needs if able, outlining plans for village construction, plotting harvest time schedules, talking to Merlin, private training, dining with Guinevere, hours of paperwork, further investigation into the issue of my stolen official seal, and...

Arturia's head hung slightly when she realized there was simply not enough time in the day to complete everything required of her, which meant another late finish and early start for her, as usual. Lately, she had been feeling a strong desire to rest, but she could never allow herself to give anything less than her best.

She didn't escape the vortex of her thoughts until she heard the soft sound of the shutters opening. Turning around slowly, Arturia saw her wife, Guinevere, making the bed, as if it were nothing short of ordinary for a queen to do. Starting when the other women caught her staring, Arturia averted her gaze to look at the soft pastel colors of the sky as the sun reared itself. Well, at least something was content with being up so early.

"You will catch your death one of these days, husband," Guinevere quipped softly as she finished tucking in the edges of the comforter. "Each night, you retire so late, and yet, two hours later, up you are again."

The edge of Arturia's mouth tugged into a half-smile. "There are worse ways to die in this world, wife."

"Now, now, I won't be hearing any of that," Guinevere replied, waving away the king's words flippantly. She picked up a brush from the vanity case and motioned for Arturia to sit down. "All right, then. You've quite the day ahead of you, so have a seat, and let me work on your hair."

Arturia quirked an eyebrow in blatant amusement. "I am more than capable of doing my hair on my own, as I have so often before. Rather, why don't you rest a little more?"

Guinevere gave her a look that made her feel like something of child and then scoffed. "Some of us, dear, retire in a timely manner. Have a seat."

"I can do it on my –" started the king before stopping abruptly.

The brunette had frowned somewhat before a slow grin crossed her face. "Oh my. Whatever will Sir Kay think when I tell him the words you murmur in your sleep. Something about a man who –"

Within a second, Arturia had crossed the room, her hand whipping out to cup Guinevere's mouth as
she smiled shakily. Guinevere's eyebrows rose slowly and the blonde merely chuckled hesitantly.

"Why, I would love for you to help me with readying myself for the morning. Such a kind and loving wife you are, dear Guinevere."

Guinevere smiled in return. "So long as you are aware."

As soon as the king had turned around and sat down in the chair, her smile fell and she watched via the vanity mirror as Guinevere began working on her hair, brushing it softly and gently. She closed her eyes as Guinevere's fingers deftly wrapped her hair up into its usual formal bun, calming even as the touching finishes of her braid was tied around and sealed with the blue ribbon she always wore. Truth be told, it would have taken Arturia a bit more time to finish everything properly, so she should have been grateful. She really never wanted to force Guinevere to do something for her when she could do it herself, though. Guinevere was a busy woman as well, something most would have never known simply from looking at her. Arturia opened her eyes and straightened her shoulders as she looked at her reflection.

Her tired eyes looked back at her, and if it weren't for Avalon, she was certain that beneath them, she would have bags deeper than a canyon. Rising swiftly, the blonde smiled her gratitude, and the two of them together readied themselves for the long day ahead. Nearly half an hour later, Arturia pulled on her left gauntlet, flexing her fingers as she turned around and headed for the door so she could catch a quick breakfast before making her way towards the training grounds. Guinevere walked out with her, her hand at the king's elbow, as the two nodded curtly at the guard stationed outside of their living quarters. The two walked down the corridor until Arturia spotted Dylan heading their way and groaned internally.

Guinevere spared her a knowing smile as she separated. "Do not forget, we dine together tonight."

"I wouldn't dare miss it," Arturia responded in kind.

"If you do not show, I will send Percival and Tristan both to retrieve you."

The frown of consternation on Arturia's face was enough evidence to show she wasn't particularly thrilled with the idea. The beautiful brunette ignored this and turned to walk away, though not without acknowledging the scraggly Dylan as she walked past. Arturia watched her go before steeling herself and nodding at Dylan as she opened the door to her study. The man followed her in, shuffling his feet against the floor slightly. His meekness irritated her at times, but he did his job well, and left hardly any room for her to complain, so she just dealt with it.

Her desk, having been halfway cleared by the time she'd finally called it a night, now had one-fourth of its space taken up by new paperwork and materials. She scowled to herself as she glared at it all, but forced the expression off of her face as she made her way around the desk and sat down. Dylan bowed to her as he approached the front of it, his hands holding the book of notes he always kept around with him.

"Good morning, Dylan," Arturia greeted, picking up a parchment that caught her immediate attention. "Please report."

"Good morning, Your Majesty," he returned. "Your schedule today is quite busy. In regards to the Viking, Sire, we have yet to receive any correspondence regarding his arrival. Each messenger sent has been rebuffed, and they have not volunteered any information otherwise."

"And of course, now it is too late to send forth another," the king said irritably. "Keep me updated on the matter. I do not want any surprises popping up."
Dylan nodded. "The next problem concerns the wolf attacks in outlying villages. A total of thirteen people have died, but hunters are having some difficulty tracking down the wolves' dens. What would you have be done in regards to this, Sire?"

Arturia frowned somewhat. "Which villages, precisely?"

"Losteanc and Yustaeia, Your Majesty."

"Yustaeia," she repeated slowly, rubbing her chin. "Have they paid their share of the harvests yet?"

"Not just yet," answered Dylan. "They claim to be more concerned that people are dying then paying their dues to the kingdom."

A sigh left her lips. "Send an archer and a couple of swordsman to Losteanc. Send a few men to Yustaeia as well, but on the condition that should the problem be remedied, they will pay what they have promised me. If they do not distinctly say as much, I give our soldiers the right to ignore their plight."

Dylan frowned a bit. "Of course, Your Majesty. In continuance, a villager named Einion has reported the loss of another horse."

Arturia stared at him blankly. "Einion?"

"He showed himself before you some time last year, blubbering about the death of his horse due to some vixen's loving ways."

"Ah," she murmured, recalling the memory. Then, Dylan's words finally hit her and she, unable to fully vocalize her disbelief, asked, "Again?"

"He seemed quite distraught."

"I do not care!" she muttered, unable to believe how her morning was turning. "It was a fantastical tale the first time, to say nothing of a second. See that his horse permit is taken from him – I do not want another repeat of this yet again."

"By your command, Your Majesty," Dylan said faithfully.

"Is there anything else?"

"Nothing of immediate urgency, Sire."

"Then leave me," she told him, her dismissal plain and obvious. "I wish for some peace before heading to the grounds."

Dylan nodded and bowed deeply before wishing her well as he headed for the door. The moment it shut behind him, she took off her gauntlets and rubbed her face tiredly. Only an hour into the day and she was already regretting getting up. Her eyes passed over the multitudes of papers, hands quickly reaching for each one as she filed them into stacks of priority and basic relation to needs. About twenty minutes later, she'd managed to create a small space in the center of her desk for her breakfast tray, but other than that, she was still heavily encumbered by stacks of paper everywhere. There were so many that she had to use the floor space as well because her desk couldn't accommodate everything.

Sighing deeply, she rested her chin against the back of her left hand and tapped her right index finger against the desktop.
I feel I am getting too old for all of this...

A knock at the door brought her back to reality. "Your Majesty, may I be granted entrance?"

Shaking her head, Arturia clearly stated, "Enter."

"Good MORNING, Your Majesty!" Shirou cried out, drawing out the word "morning" as he bounced happily into her study. "I have come to serve you your breakfast!"

She stared at him as if he were an alien come from outer space. ".What? Oh, yes... Thank you...?"

Shirou set down the tray, smiling bubbly as he looked out her window. "The sun is so bright, and it's a really beautiful day. Have you seen the garden, Your Majesty? All of the flowers look so energized and happy. It's very calming, so I thought I would make you a breakfast to match that. An easy breakfast of toast with melted butter, sunny-side up eggs over easy, cured strips of bacon, small pieces of beef steak, a lentil soup, and a glass of ale to accompany everything. Please enjoy."

Arturia looked down at her meal, unsure of how to take his current disposition. She ended up grumbling, "You're awfully chipper this morning, Shirou."

"I read a children's book yesterday, and finished my basic lessons on the alphabet. The scribe in charge of my studies says I'm performing well."

"But what of your writing skill right now?"

Shirou face fell and he looked downwards. "Not...yet."

The boy, by nature, seemed to be a naturally cheerful person, particularly when he was in the position to be of use to others. While there was nothing at all wrong with wanting to be valuable, Shirou tried a bit...too hard to reach that goal, and that concerned her, greatly. When the two had first met, she had had other problems to deal with, and paying attention to a low-ranking servant boy had been the least of her worries, but from Baeddan's reports, Shirou had been happiest when times were toughest on him. He rose and conquered despite adversity, and that was good, but, she worried that he would one day push himself too far, and there would be no saving him at that point. Yes, Shirou bothered her -- though, that was probably putting it lightly. She appreciated his passion and dedication, and that never failing enthusiasm that she found lacking within herself as of late; so, when his cheerful expression had cracked somewhat due to her sharp, needless words, she'd felt a surge of satisfaction -- misery loved company, after all. If she was forced to suffer, then why should he be allowed to smile so brightly? But, upon recognizing the feeling, it turned to chagrin that she would be happy to see him look as miserable as she currently felt. There was nothing honorable about that, and the self-satisfaction would do no one any good in the long run, nor even in the short.

"In due time," she eventually told him, watching him brighten almost immediately from her words. The fact that he had bounced back so quickly also bothered her. Why should her words hold that much emphasis or meaning for him?

Shirou gave her a half-smile before bowing and retreating to his designated spot in the corner. The room was completely silent save for the soft clinging of her silverware against the plate. The breakfast, as were all of Shirou's meals, was delectably scrumptious and she found she had no room for complaining, not that she would've wanted to, regardless. Were she to compare Shirou and Baeddan's style of cooking, the former won hands down -- not that she was in state to be picky. She couldn't cook to save her life, though hopefully it would never come to that.
When she set down the silverware, Shirou walked over to collect the tray, his eyes flashing up to meet hers.

"Your Majesty, when did you want me to ready your lunch?"

Masking her feelings of annoyance at the thought of setting an exact time within her busy schedule, Arturia laced her fingers together, hiding a frown behind them. Providing everything went according to schedule, she could plan for an early lunch before noon and hopefully finish with enough time to prepare for her meeting with the illustrious Viking person. If anything changed, she could simply have Dylan inform Shirou of the alteration in her schedule.

"Plan for shortly before noon," the king eventually said. "Should anything go awry, someone will be certain to inform you."

He nodded. "Yes, sir. I hope you have a wonderful morning."

After the man had left, the door closing softly behind him, Arturia snorted in an unfeminine manner.

"Wonderful"? What a laughable notion, although she did hope for much of the same.

A raven-haired man lunged forward with his spear, a smile alit on his face as he parried another blow. With a flick of his hands, his spear spun in around to block a downward slash before the two men relaxed and then took up another fighting stance. A different pair not too far away from them had one man slam down his hammer, for it to be evaded swiftly as his swordsman 'opponent' jumped to the side and followed up with a quick one-two motion. The former evaded the attack and then repeated his initial assault. Neither one seemed particularly winded, but their amusement was rather obvious.

On the far end of the field, an archer readied his bow, a few arrows zipping through the air at a man complete with a set of heavy armor. The latter shifted steadily, his eyes following the path of each arrow as he pushed himself out of the way. He ran forward, broadsword in hand at the archer, slashing around a few times only for the archer to jump out of harm's way and notch yet another few arrows. Jumping back, the man with the broadsword took on a defensive stance and the training exercise repeated itself once again. The two shared jibing words with one another, all done in good fun.

One pair in particular caught her attention, as one man tripped and fell, only for his partner to burst out laughing merrily. The one who'd fallen rose up slowly, rubbing his rear as he snickered alongside the other. The two laughed aloud before yelling out the names of a few men training beside them. The others stopped what they were doing to laugh as well, each picking some fun at the one clumsy enough to fall.

"And what you goin' to do out there on the battlefield, eh? You goin' to just fall down and hope that the Saxons don't kill you? Picking up after your sorry arse ain't goin' to be a picnic."

"Hah, the Saxons will be too taken by my strikin' good looks to worry none 'bout my graceful nature and what have you!"

"I think that fall hurt his head, too, the stupid lout!"

Arturia frowned as she focused directly on those people.

Today was focused on evasive measures and using time efficiently to regain the upper hand after
an attack. It was a very useful exercise and would undoubtedly do well against whatever enemies Camelot might face. Her men were not even altogether bad, all things considered. No, on the contrary, they were operating rather well considering the time constraints and how much all of their levels differentiated. Additionally, they adopted the exercises with a tenacity that made her proud, but...

It just wasn't enough.

The blonde found herself grinding her teeth unconsciously as she watched the soldiers run through their training. She had zero qualms about how Tristan chose to run his courses, and she most certainly could not deny that the man achieved good results. Tristan knew how to read the men and respond to their actions in a positive, lucrative manner, in a way that the men would readily reciprocate. He, and Percival, for that matter, knew how to match himself with others' wavelengths – far better than she could, actually. While Arturia may have been a leader, she knew quite well herself that she simply didn't understand the needs of those around her, and couldn't be bothered to meet them in a proactive manner. Yes, her knights were far better at training others than she would ever prove to be. It was annoying to admit that fault, but it was what it was. She was more adept at reading a person's potential and pushing them to reach that point, but that conceivably forsook a healthy relationship between pupil and mentor in the meantime.

No, that wasn't the main issue. What really irritated her was the matter of how the men seemed to approach the training. Had she missed something? Was training so one would not fall on the battlefield somehow amusing, entertaining, enchanting? How did they, if they were taking the exercises seriously, have enough energy to even spare a smile or jest? When did the possibility of death evoke such a pleasant response from any individual?

Had the whole lot of them lost their minds?

"Your Majesty?" murmured Tristan from next to her, more than likely having seen her right fist clench even more tightly than usual.

She felt her jaw tighten. "They appear to be enjoying themselves."

If Tristan saw red flags from her words, he didn't show it. He frowned, looking at her more seriously than before.

"You are not pleased."

"Don't say that," she replied softly. "Learning the art of killing another is obviously an entertaining profession. Carry on."

At that, she saw her knight freeze before bowing his head. "Many pardons, Sire. I believed that allowing the men some room for expression would energize them further and have them work off one another's energy for better results. Let me assure you that each soldier takes his duties to you and the kingdom seriously and that they are merely –"

"Tristan."

The man flinched back at her tone, his hazel-green eyes flicking upwards to glance at her expression. Her emerald-green eyes stared coldly at him, all usual warmth irrevocably absent. He could feel himself begin to break out into a sweat, his heart starting to pound harder, even after she finally turned to gaze back at the soldiers training. She didn't move, didn't speak, and her right hand was nowhere near her sword, but for whatever reason, he felt as if she were holding Excalibur at his neck, expressionless as she spelled out his doom for him. Tristan struggled to still his hands
after realizing they had been shaking. He even tried to respond back, but found he had lost track of his words.

Arturia tilted her head slightly as she oversaw the training. "Tell me, Tristan. Do you enjoy the path of the warrior?"

"Enjoy, Your Majesty?" he nearly stuttered. "I do not take pleasure in killing, Sire. If anything, I take pride in the fact that I have helped the common person, saved him or her from harm. Upon the anointment to knighthood, I vowed to fight for the welfare of all, and to serve you, my lord, in valor and faith."

"Oh?" was all she said at first, slowly turning to make eye contact with him again. "I suppose you did, as I recall making the exact same vows. I also recall, however, vowing to eschew unfairness, meanness, and deceit."

Tristan grew ever more uncomfortable with each passing second. "Your Majesty, they do not mean any harm. I do not see how allowing a little fun and enjoyment in their training means to –"

"Do you not?" Arturia asked icily. "Because, when I see such lackadaisical training, rampant with jests and amusing displays, I can only feel they are belittling those we sought to save and could not. When I see these men dancing around instead of dodging with everything they are worth, it makes me wonder if those people were not saved as a result of ineptitude, or casual negligence. Ineptitude, Sir Tristan, can be cured with time and patience. Negligence, on the other hand..."

She turned to completely face him this time. "Sir Tristan, what will you feel if, because of their lackluster performance here, they are ill-equipped to protect the lesser when push comes to shove? Will you give them excuses then? Will you tell the mourning families that the men meant well, but some things just do not work out the way you plan? Will you allow them to believe we are incapable of protecting those powerless to save themselves?"

The king took a step closer to Tristan casually, so that any onlooker would not think to take notice. The light-hearted mannerism, however, belied the true coldness and ferocity emanating from the woman, and Tristan forced himself not to back away or back down, because he knew the moment he did, that would set the king off completely.

"To answer your question, Sir Tristan," she continued, ignoring the way the man winced when she continually attached his title to his name, "there is absolutely nothing wrong with 'a little fun and enjoyment' every now and then. However, I want to know, honestly, if this is truly in the best interests of those we are fighting for. If you want them to enjoy themselves, fine. So be it. I will not disallow it. But I hope you are ready to apologize to each and every single person wronged because you wanted to let the men have a little...relaxation."

Arturia fell silent for a short while, and turned away when she noticed Dylan heading her way. He seemed to be moving towards her with purpose, his gait somewhat rushed and his expression concerned, but steady. She narrowed her eyes.

"Personally, though," she continued finally, regaining Tristan's attention, "were I of that wronged person's family, I am not certain I could ever find it in my heart to forgive you. But, that is with knowing what I do. Ignorance is bliss, after all."

Tristan felt his mouth go drier than a desert, and his teeth would've chattered if he hadn't grit them together so tightly. Never had he caused the king to look so unfavorably upon him, and it frightened him to see that this is what the person he admired so much could be like should something go so wrong. Tristan watched Dylan walk closer, but could only pay any real attention
to the harsh beating of his heart within his chest. He had never thought having a fun word here and there to be showing any kind of disrespect to the dead or somehow denouncing the intentions of those who fought for the sake of others, but if Tristan were to really consider the king's words, he could understand and agree with them.

Turning away from the king, he hailed the different group leaders. While he didn't want to disparage the men's morale, the king was correct in his assessment. Their duties needed to be taken more seriously – they would have time to play around when the serious matter of training had reached its completion each day. For now, though, they would have to work to earn their keep. After all, Tristan wasn't about to let down the king he served a second time.

Arturia noticed Tristan meet up with his assigned leaders, and felt herself relax just a smidgen. She had at first wondered if perhaps she had overdone it, but she had a good knight under her command – he did not take overt offense and instead used her advice as a means of becoming better. It was an admirable trait, and she couldn't be prouder of him for it. That was the mark of a true knight.

She focused fully on Dylan once he reached her.

"Your Majesty," he began, a little breathlessly. "Scouts have reported sightings of the Vikings nearing the castle. At their current pace, they should be at the castle gates within the hour."

"What?" she asked, her tone dangerous even to her own ears. "Without a letter, message, or notice whatsoever?"

"What would you have done, Sire?"

Arturia was not particularly happy with this turn of events, nor was she altogether surprised. It most certainly put her into a steadily fouler mood than previously, which was saying something. First the news from the morn, an irritable filtering of the mess of papers in her study, more asinine jokes from her brother that would one day get him killed by her very hand, then the terrible mess of "training" she had witnessed, and it was only a little after eight in the morning. Arturia had yet gone over, in complete detail, her opinions of the men's training session – she hardly wanted to leave on such a dreadful note – and there was the meeting with her knights that had been canceled twice already. She couldn't afford to cancel it again, but with the way things were coming about, she wouldn't have much of a choice in that matter either. Surely, Arturia could simply switch around the designate time constraints for that meeting and the one with the Viking leader, and... But, no, she couldn't. Gawain and Bedivere both were due to leave with a round of men to check the border to the southwest as Camelot had been rather lackluster and fortifying that area.

Another thought was to turn away the Viking leader until he formally sent forth a message declaring a time and date that he would be available to speak with her, thereby allowing her and hers to reorganize the schedule in a fitting manner. Arturia shook her head slightly when she realized that wouldn't do, either. This convention with that leader was vital, as they were causing another headache of troubles that she didn't want to bother with. Sending the group of misfits away might gain her yet another enemy, and she had enough of those to last her a lifetime or two.

She closed her eyes. "Sir Tristan."

The king hadn't called his name loudly, but even still, he approached her quickly, his head bowing down in a form of respect. "Your Majesty."

"Inform the knights that much to my regret, I must once again cancel our meeting until the next time everyone is gathered together."
The man seemed a bit taken aback, but nodded resolutely. "Of course, Your Majesty. If I may be so bold as to inquire of the circumstances resulting in this declaration?"

Arturia scowled. "The Viking leader has decided to make a presence, without sending word ahead. I need to meet with him, and thus will not have enough time to get in a meeting with my knights before Gawain and Bedivere are to leave for their mission."

"Her, Your Majesty."

Both the king and Tristan turned to look at Dylan. Arturia tilted her head slightly. "What was that?"

Dylan looked between the two of them, concerned over how focused they were on him. "The leader, Sire, is female. She, uh, the woman, was leading the group."

"A woman?" scoffed Tristan. "You cannot be serious. No man worth half his salt would be caught dead following behind a woman."

Arturia slid her gaze over to her knight. "Watch your tongue, Sir Tristan."

"I mean no disrespect, my king, but this is blatant rudeness on their part," the knight proclaimed. "They send a woman to take care of a man's duty? To confer with a man who reigns over a kingdom? Over a country? No, Sire, this is unacceptable."

"Be that as it may," Arturia said, "perhaps this is their way. How are we to know the types of governments other people may have? Britain utilizes a monarchy system, but we are only one country. There are lands we are yet unaware of. Basing what little we know and using that to compartmentalize other societies does not indicate any sort of superiority in our favor – rather, we are merely discriminating against what we do not know or understand."

She turned away when Tristan fell silent. "So long as this issue is absolved, I do not care if they send a baby to dictate with me. Though it would be preferable that whoever I deal with be informative and know what it is that must be done."

Tristan shook his head slowly, his short raven tresses flicking back and forth with the movement. "You have wisdom beyond your years, my king, and though I understand what you say, I am not certain I can agree. Women are meant to support men, not reign over them."

"Enough of this talk!" she snapped, finally growing impatient. "Inform the others of what I told you. And have Gawain and Lancelot come to my side for the meeting. I will have no others."

Her knight closed his mouth tightly and bowed before taking his leave. She narrowed her eyes at his back and finally switched her attention again towards Dylan.

"Take this woman and two of her followers – only two, mind you – to the conference room. Have her wait there until I have finished my preparations."

Dylan nodded before hesitantly asking, "What should be done should she complain over the wait?"

"Ignore her," Arturia stated with irritation. "She thinks she can simply waltz into my kingdom without even so much as a notification beforehand and carry my attention as if it is some prize to be won? Am I not busy? Do I not have a kingdom to run? The woman can wait until I make time for her. Never will it be the other way around."

He nodded again and bowed deeply. "As you have requested, Your Majesty."
Arturia crossed her arms over her chest as she grit her teeth together and forced herself to focus on the soldiers training in front of her. Now, her major concern was how to go about dealing with her new menace, and not only that, but Tristan's words concerned her greatly. If ever there was a moment when she was the surest that revealing her true gender was a terrible idea, now was most certainly one of those moments. She knew that women were not valued in positions of exceeding power. She knew this, and yet, her knight's words, hurtful that they were, had wounded her some. They had wounded not only her pride as a woman, but her faith in their steady friendship. Would he look down upon her? Would all of her knights, save for Kay, think lesser of her?

Certainly, they would be upset that she lied about her true identity, but did her gender matter so much if she ruled her kingdom and people well? Arturia let her gaze fall to the ground as she realized that it of course would. Even if she ruled the world, people's conceptions of the truth and reality would not fall away so easily, so quickly. More than ever, she knew that she could not afford to make any mistakes, to take any missteps in how she proceeded henceforth. She needed to be on guard at all times.

She looked up again at the men, her men. If they knew their king was a woman... Well, it was best not to dwell on such thoughts.

The latch acquiesced to her touch, and Arturia pushed open the thick, wooden door. Her feet carried her in resolutely as her gaze locked onto each one of her guests. Though she had held her doubts, the fact that the Viking leader was a woman – for Arturia knew of no other creature with irritatingly enviable curves – gave her a moment of pause, if not the slightest hint of jealousy. What kind of life would she have led without the insufferable need to continually hide her true self to those who she ideally trusted the most? It was a point of contention that bogged her down with more annoyance, more reason to irrationally dislike this person based solely on first appearances.

It was unfair, and unjust, but yet, the king had difficulty ridding herself of the debilitating stray thoughts and emotions. Not until Lancelot approached her side softly did Arturia snap out of the trap of her own mind and truly focus once again on the people in front of her.

"I trust your stay has been relatively comfortable thus far," the blonde, sweeping her cape up gracefully behind her as she leaned back into the chair reserved for her.

One of the men to the woman's right grumbled something Arturia was unable to understand, but considering that the woman paid him no mind, nor was the king keen to.

The Viking woman tilted her chin up just the slightest, subtly demonstrating her unwillingness to bow to another authority. "You have been most...gracious, King Arthur of Britain."

The woman's distinct accent was notable, but she was fairly well-spoken, if nothing else. It would do.

"I am afraid you have me at a disadvantage," Arturia said slowly. "Might I have your name?"

"Fiona, if it suits you," the Viking answered, her icy, pale-blue eyes focusing directly on Arturia. "Fiona of the Grey, though I don't expect you've heard of us."

"I haven't, no," Arturia confirmed with little hesitation. Fiona merely smiled somewhat coldly.

At the king's side, Lancelot clenched his fists behind his back a bit more tightly. When she switched her attention over to him briefly, he murmured,

"Her hair, Your Majesty. It is like his."
The blonde's green eyes navigated back to her guest, where she took in the rich, ruby-red waves of hair cascading down the woman's shoulders. The visitor was cleaner and better kept than Arturia would have assumed of someone who lived their life aboard a ship, and, were she not accustomed to not caring whatsoever about most people's feelings, she might be a little intimidated by Fiona's frigid, pointed gaze.

Nodding, Arturia responded, "It is, indeed."

Her guests' presence certainly wasn't helping the man's claim of not being affiliated with one of her enemies in the slightest. The fact gave her even more reason to resolve this issue and send the trespassers of her kingdom away, be it that they walked under their own power or were carried off in pieces. Either which option was a definite possibility, though she would much prefer to avoid bloodshed as much as was conceivable.

Arturia idly wondered how the redheaded man would react to such a confrontation, and mentally grimaced.

"Who is this 'he' you speak of?" Fiona asked cordially. "Your people do not tend to be the sort to willingly take in someone different from you."

Arturia ignored the jab. "Let us dispense with the formalities, shall we?"

Fiona's unblinking icy eyes stared at the king before she let out the smallest of chuckles. "Finally."

Then, to the incredible shock of Arturia and Lancelot both, enough to force the latter to nearly unsheathe his sword, the redhead slammed a hand down on the low table in between the two parties. Her two bodyguards crossed their arms over their impressive chests, and Lancelot tightened his fingers around the grip of his sword. Even Arturia could not keep her muscles from tightening from a blast of adrenaline.

The female Viking glared harshly. "What is your game, king?"

"Game?" Arturia questioned, tilting her head back a smidgen. "I was unaware we were playing any."

"Why, am, I, here?" Fiona ground out. "I have people to see to, feed, clothe. Who are you to threaten me to visit you, as if this were a field trip for children?"

Arturia frowned a bit. "I believe you should know. Ah, but considering how you have turned away each and every messenger I have sent for correspondence with you..."

Irritably, Fiona narrowed her eyes. "You threatened my people with decisive action."

"I have been attempting to contact you for over two months now," the blonde explained matter-of-factly. "Know that my patience is not infinite, and my graciousness not as extensive as you might believe. You have had your time and fun. Now I would have you leave my lands."

"Your lands?" came the disbeliefing response. "You own nothing, and my people have done you no disservice. We only partook in food and shelter."

"You raided one of my coastal towns," the king continued, unfazed. "Pillaged their food and drink. Brutally harmed the men and defiled the women, of which a small minority have taken their lives as a result of an inability to live with such disgrace. Rather, you should be thankful I did not have my men cut you down where you stood."
Not that she hadn't genuinely considered it. When the news had reached her weeks after the event, Arturia had been livid – beyond so. She had desired to immediately rain down on the intruders with waves of steel and arrow, but the fact that her enemy had unknown numbers, and that a majority of them were aboard sea vessels was enough to quell her fury some. Arturia's company could not remain with those villages forever – the Vikings, with their newly acquired rations – could hold out in their ships for days on end, and quickly take up their previous activities as soon as the company was forced to fall back.

Fiona's mouth firmed. "Is that a threat?"

"Not necessarily," Arturia denied, leaning forward and lacing her fingers together. "I invited you to come because I did not desire to take up arms against you, if I could so help it. That would not end well in your favor, and I do not need the extra headache. I wanted to see if there was a peaceful way to curtail these activities of yours."

"So be it," Fiona murmured. "I wasn't there with the team that went to the village, and I don't know the full story myself. I believe my men stumbled upon unguarded food supplies and took to pillaging the contents. There was an outcry from the your villagers who believed we were stealing and turned to violence."

"How convenient that you all are made the victims here," the blonde woman argued with a raised eyebrow. "You just happened upon a food supply, but the recourse was harsh and unforgiving. I beg your pardon, but I am not convinced."

She glanced at Lancelot before refocusing on Fiona. "As I heard it, you demanded supplies from our village, and when they denied it to you, your people turned to violence instead. Violence, and after which, you then resorted to stealing after brutally punishing every single villager in attendance. How many of those children did you take?"

Fiona met Arturia's gaze evenly. "You accuse me of much."

"I am awaiting your answer."

There was a short period of silence with tension lacing the air thickly as both parties' bodyguards glared at one another, their animosity towards one another obvious. Arturia tilted her head to the side slowly, her gaze never leaving Fiona's as the two stared at each other, waiting for one to back down.

"I don't think the number matters," the redhead finally said.

"No," Arturia agreed, her voice deepening. "The fact that you kidnapped children of my faithful subjects does. Where are you hiding them?"

A slow smirk full of cruelty etched its way across the woman's beautiful face, belying her darker emotions. "Now, wouldn't you love to know, King of Britain?"

Arturia felt the tethers reining in her patience snap with unbidden force, her lips contorting into a fierce scowl as her hands shifted to resting atop of her knees. Every muscle in her body tensed greatly as she tried to curb her temper as one would attempt to stop a full speed freight train with their bare hands. She knew that underneath her gauntlets, her knuckles were probably pure white from how much her fingers were digging into her knees.

"You –!" the young king managed before falling silent. Her darkened emerald eyes glared with a ferocity that would have her men running from her presence. "What have you done with them? To
"They're in a better place, I assure you," Fiona replied with little hesitation, almost seeming to enjoy how wound up the blonde was growing. The two men at her side seemed to almost relax, convinced that their leader would put them into an even more favorable position.

The king never even realized when she made the transition from sitting to standing, Lancelot loyally coming to her side with Arondight partially unsheathed, the purplish blade gleaming as flickers of light bounced across it. Arturia’s pulse sped up with her increasing anger, but she ground her teeth to give herself some semblance of control. She took in a semi-deep breath before letting it out slowly. It would not do for her to give this woman any kind of leg up, and yet, Arturia had already done just that, hadn't she?

The idea that these Vikings would stoop so low as to take children, and not even children remotely related to anyone of importance in the grand scheme was utterly reprehensible. Violating women, battering down on men, brutalizing children and thereafter, killing them... Unforgivable. Regardless of the sins Arturia had committed, regardless of the misguided steps she often took, regardless of the depravity and mercilessness she might display and exhibit, never could she allow herself to lay a hand in such a manner on innocence yet unmarred by reality. That was a step even she, a person's whose hands were bloodier than even the worst people in the world, would never dare take.

The children never deserved such a fate.

King Arthur settled her cautious gaze on the Viking leader's own. "What have you done?"

The words were absent of emotion, voiced plainly into existence, and for a moment, Fiona didn't quite know how to respond. They were hardly threatening, and yet, she sensed the oddest tinge of danger. Her eyes searched the now blank expression of the king's, bewildered as the hairs on the back of her neck began to stand on end. The king made no movements, nothing that would indicate outright animosity, but even still, Fiona felt her guard rise up further.

The king made as if to say something when the soft sound of the door opening turned everyone's attention to the person coming in. Fiona concentrated on the man's softly swaying dirty-blond hair, his chestnut-brown eyes flashing towards her before looking away, as if he were dismissing her existence with ease. He walked briskly to the king's side, falling into a snapped bow.

"Your Majesty."

King Arthur didn't say a word, her blank expression telling as she turned towards him. Leaning a little closer, Gawain whispered a few words into her ear and the tightness at the corners of her eyes smoothed some. She looked downwards for a moment before sighing and sitting back down again. Gawain took his place at her left side, while Lancelot sheathed his sword fully and fell back to her right.

If nothing else, the immediate calming of her opponent rang warning bells in Fiona's mind. Anger no longer fueled the king's actions, no longer made him as malleable and so easy to exploit to her whims. What did he know that she didn't?

"Fine," the king eventually said, voice soft, but with a sharp edge to it. "Let us move on to the matter of why you chose to pillage instead of hunting in the wild. Was killing and tormenting innocents really necessary?"

Fiona attempted to smile. "The issue of the children no longer concerns you?"
"I am beyond furious," King Arthur murmured, "but I can do nothing about their fates now. I would prefer to find a way to get you off of my soil for all intents and purposes."

"We have every right to be here," Fiona argued. "Even if you evict me from your land this once, who's to say we won't come back with a vengeance at a different spot, or --"

"Twelve."

Fiona's words cut out at that, her mouth closing and turning into a frown. "What?"

King Arthur closed her eyes. "Twelve within Camelot's borders. Two at the tavern. Four within the area of the nobility. Three more in the poorer section. One near the main gate and two others brooding along the walls. This, of course, does not include the five resting just far enough away from the outer wall to not be considered a threat, nor does it include the two in here alongside you."

She looked pointedly at the two men at Fiona's sides, and the redhead grew deadly silent. Clasping her hands together once more, King Arthur leaned forward, eyes glittering dangerously.

"Now, I am threatening you."

The redhead was not at all amused. "You play a very risky game, king. Providing my men and I do not return in a set number of days, the entirety of my fleet will rain down on your pitiful dwelling, turning it into nothing more than a sea of blood."

"Poetic," King Arthur commented, "but unlikely. My men are at the ready. What will your decision be?"

"You had no intention whatsoever for a peaceful convention," accused Fiona. "You had him out there spotting my men so you could blackmail me. You are a despicable king."

The king shook her head. "On the contrary, I had every intention up until the point where you essentially admitted to kidnapping and murdering children. My people. My desire to convene with you previously shriveled away into nothingness."

Fiona scoffed. "I see that you took up the title of king to forcibly impose your opinion on that of your subjects, or possible future enemies."

King Arthur was somewhat perplexed. Was this woman really sulking and whining about a bad situation she had created for herself, by herself, by blaming the indirectly related victim party? The blonde could only sigh at the ridiculousness.

"I took up the mantle because I wanted a better future for my kingdom, and because I wanted my people to live freely, without the constraint and stress that war would place upon them."

"So, you wage more war to end the war?" Fiona asked, incredulous at this point. "Now, I see how your mind works. I'd like to think there were far better options out there than you."

It was a slight made from desperation, a last hurrah towards the plainly thought victor of the matter at hand, and one the king had trained herself to ignore. With the problems from the morning practice still weighing heavily on her mind, however, and the fact that Arturia still couldn't quite convince herself that her place on the throne as king was the better option, the quipped slight shot through her with surprising ease. She thought she might have been able to hide her reaction for the most part, but the way her two men stiffened, she was fairly sure she had failed. And when the smirk returned to the redhead's lips, the fuse of her temper was relit.
Arturia ground her teeth together. "What will it be? Will you surrender," she asked, realigning the topic back on track, "or will you fall?"

"For this? I will surrender," Fiona answered smoothly, causing Arturia's eyebrows to rise. "But consider this, king: you are not in a position to make an enemy out of us."

"Do tell," Arturia returned without hesitation, although she could feel the icy cold grip of dread clench around her heart.

Fiona chuckled a bit. "These enemies you face – one to the north, and one to the south. They have you in a bit of a pincer maneuver, yes? How wonderfully difficult it would become for you if they were given access to parts of your land that you normally left unwatched? Why, had it been them who had appeared on your shores, you would have been in a bit of a bind, I would think."

The dread spread. "You would help my enemies rise against me? You are so bitter that someone would seek to put you in your place that you would raise hell on my kingdom? How would you even profit from this?"

"Were you unaware? We are a nomad people," explained Fiona. "We travel and trade, and so long as we can make deals, maintain our quota, and be graced with new, exotic things, I would say we profit quite much, wouldn't you agree?"

Arturia closed her eyes. She could feel the stress of the situation start to take hold, the iciness running through her body. At her side, both Gawain and Lancelot were tense, ready to strike down a blow on her very word.

"...What do you want?"

"You would have us leave, and that is understandable," Fiona told the king. "But, I'm afraid we simply cannot do that. We have run low on food and drink, and your country is quite flush with resources. It truly would make a wonderful place to settle down, for a short while. Of course, I cannot guarantee what would happen to those who might oppose us, be they soldier or the common man..."

It was a threat as obvious as day, but Arturia did not have the means to counter it – not really. Not yet.

"You mentioned trade," began she. "Would you not –"

"What could you possibly trade with us?" Fiona asked, genuinely intrigued. "What would you have that we have never seen before, never used before?"

Arturia remained silent and Fiona hummed slightly. "Nothing, apparently."

The blonde shook her head. "I ask that you would give me some time."

"Asking!" Fiona exclaimed. "How ridiculous that a king would bow down like a beggar. My interest is piqued, but I wonder what giving you time would do. Time for what?"

"In exchange for you leaving my people alone, not even going near them, I will find something of interest that you have never yet witnessed before."

"Hmm. How much time would that take? We are an impatient sort, you see."

As much time as it takes me to extinguish the lot of you from existence. "A year."
Fiona outright laughed at this. "You wish us to wait around for a year? I will give you a month."

Frowning, Arturia countered, "No one would be capable of that much within a month. Ten months."

"Two," corrected Fiona. "I do love a good bartering."

"Half a year."

"Three, and that is the last offer you will receive from me, king."

Arturia met the other woman's eyes before making a curt nod. "Three."

The resulting, "It's been a pleasure doing business with you, King Arthur," grated on Arturia's nerves to the point that the blonde had simply wished to throw all caution to the wind and rid herself of the source of her fury. As it was, she could hardly hide the steel in her voice when she stood up and directed that Lancelot and Gawain see the guests out safely and with due respect. Gawain had taken one glance at her before escaping from her war path as she opened the door to the conference room and let it shut behind her with a soft clack.

Her fingers trembled within her gauntlets and she found herself pausing every so often to rest a fist against the wall. A servant happened on her once during a period of respite and while Arturia was certain she had attempted to neutralize her expression, by the way the servant paled severely, bowed, and ran off, she knew she had not even remotely succeeded in the endeavor. Arturia's breath escaped her lips a bit more harshly than before and she covered her face with a hand.

She was ready to break down, and it was not do for anyone to see her in such a position. As if her luck were not already bad enough, if the wrong sort were to witness the king acting like a...well, human...

Arturia sucked in a deep breath through her teeth, gritted them tightly, and made the long journey up to the fourth floor, up to her office, up to her place of sanctuary. The doors were not thick enough to hide any screams, and so she could not go that far. Her discipline wouldn't allow it either way, but a closed door would keep her away from any curious onlookers. That was something she needed – something that she currently demanded, more than anything else at the moment. And when she saw the two guards posted outside of her office, it took every ounce of restraint for her to tell them to politely take a break and inform Shirou that she wanted her lunch.

She didn't. Not really. She had utterly no desire to take in any sustenance whatsoever, but it sounded kinder than telling them to go away because she didn't want to see their faces right then and there. It was also a normal request, and based on a routine built up thus far. It would have seemed odd for her to not mention as much.

When they were gone, and the door was shut tightly behind her, Arturia walked up to her desk and stared down at it blankly. Once again, it was overflowing with a different assortment of papers and documents, things that she really needed to start working on.

"For this? I will surrender."

Arturia hadn't made the connection immediately, but there was little denying that she had been played like a fiddle from the very beginning. Fiona had known exactly what she was after from the start, and had probably tried to wind up Arturia with the extended period of not answering. Had Arturia sent down her soldiers as she had originally wanted to, she would have been in a very difficult situation as a result. Only her instincts had kept from falling into that ditch, but even still,
never could she have foreseen that the Viking would manipulate her through such extreme methods. It was galling that Arturia didn't even have a means of denying the woman – she was in no position to whatsoever. She didn't have the resources, the people, the time. One problem after another continually cropped up and she was running out of space to move. Things were starting to box her in, but she could only take things one step at a time.

Arturia peeled off her gauntlets and placed them on a shelf, and looked down at her trembling fingers.

*I...am angry.*

That was obvious. Of course she was.

She was the king and regardless of that, Arturia lacked control in most of what she did. Her opinions went uncontested, but there was always unrest just around the corner. Things people couldn't say to her face were whispered behind her back, by the "loyal" servants she kept. Problems developed that she was normally never privy to because they were a few grades down from her own rank. Even asking about them would just have Merlin, her knights, or even Dylan smile at her and tell her she need not have something extra to worry about in her storm of current business.

It wasn't only the fact that she somehow felt distrusted despite supposedly being the most trustworthy figure around, but that even if she *did* know about the situation, she had little means of directly affecting it. Arturia *could* order people around and patch up the issue, but that would only escalate into something worse, something she couldn't control, something highly unpredictable. It was something out of her range of knowledge, of understanding, something she could have never foreseen.

So, she stayed out of these issues. She pretended they didn't exist, because when she did that, she wouldn't feel frustrated that despite her actions, things still went amiss, that despite everything she did, nothing was ever solved. When she first became king, Arturia believed firmly, and completely, that she would make a difference using not only her title as king, but the skills she had fine-tuned along the way. But, despite all she tried, the whispers continued, the discontent rose, and her frustration that she tried to forget mounted even further.

It was partly due to that reason that Fiona had taken her by surprise so well, so easily. To be countered, wrapped around the woman's fingers with bold words, foreseeable advances, and tactics fit to be seen from the mind of a squire... What did that mean for her, as a king? Wasn't that kind of frontal assault *exactly* what Arturia had desired, and yet, *even then*, she still couldn't put up anything of a defense other than to gawk with confusion? Was she *that* ill-equipped, that ill-favored? How could she not have known?

Her hands shook further at her sides.

The blonde looked up and around her for something, anything to use to unleash her anger, but there was nothing that didn't hold some kind of importance. She couldn't throw her documents. She couldn't wreck havoc on her bookshelves. She couldn't uplift her desk. She couldn't shout. She couldn't even train outside because she was supposed to be working.

She couldn't take her frustration out on anything, at all. There was nothing she could do.

So, Arturia simply stood there, a hand lying on her chair as she breathed in and out deeply.

*Why did I choose this path?*
In her mind, she knew. In her heart, she knew. At times like these, though, when people used her for their own ambitions, used her as some kind of stepping stone, undermined her authority and capability, she sometimes allowed her doubts to resurface.

"So, you wage more war to end the war? Now, I see how your mind works. I'd like to think there were far better options out there than you."

Arturia bowed her head and let it lay against the back of her hand, her teeth biting her bottom lip as she struggled inwardly. There were times when she wondered if she was strong enough to deal with all of it, knowing what she did. Her teeth ground together as she forced herself to get a grip – she was better than this.

But, she was human, too, wasn't she? Wasn't she?

 Aren't I?

With an exercise in self-control and a somewhat shaky exhale of breath, Arturia rose up tall, her shoulders straightening. She pulled her chair out and sat down with a soft sigh. Perhaps she wasn't human, but she still had work to do, regardless, and that was something she would allow no one but herself to ever have to do.

Disgust mounted within her at the minute mistake in her normally impeccable handwriting. It wasn't entirely obvious unless a person looked specifically for it, but it annoyed her enough that she briefly considered starting over from scratch. What vexed Arturia the most, however, was the fact that under normal circumstances, the blunder would have never occurred had she not been preoccupied with other thoughts. Even nearly an hour later, she tended to grip the quill a bit too tightly, and write a tad too uncontrollably. Her efficiency had dropped down to less than half of what it should be, and she had nothing left to show for it other than wasted time and added stress.

A sigh escaping, the quill was returned to its proper place and her head fell into her hands as she took in a couple of deep breaths. Her anger had cooled, true, but Arturia was still unable to completely calm the storm raging within, and truth be told, she still wanted to throw something and feel the satisfaction of its destruction.

"It has been quite long since I have heard such sighs from you, lad."

Even worse, her mentor had chosen to make her a visit, probably after hearing of her reputed failing in her meeting with the Viking leader. Or, at least if not that, Arturia had no inkling as to why the man had chosen this particular time to see her. She certainly hadn't beckoned him. Arturia didn't have any desire to speak to anyone at the moment.

She glanced up at him silently. "Merlin. Your presence is...unexpected."

The comment caused the older man to pause and look at the blonde with some concern.

"I take it that events did not go as you would have liked," Merlin murmured, brow furrowed.

Arturia laughed hollowly, mirthlessly. "I was seen through, worked as a tool, and forced to dance to her tune. To say nothing of that fact that I didn't even realize the trap before I'd tripped it."

"Pride doth cometh before the fall, Arthur."

The mage shifted somewhat, his frown deeper than before. "I take it that events did not go as you would have liked," Merlin murmured, brow furrowed.

"Yet, your mentor chose to make a visit, probably after hearing of your reputed failing in your meeting with the Viking leader. Or, at least if not that, Arturia had no inkling as to why the man had chosen this particular time to see her. She certainly hadn't beckoned him. Arturia didn't have any desire to speak to anyone at the moment."

She glanced up at him silently. "Merlin. Your presence is...unexpected."

The comment caused the older man to pause and look at the blonde with some concern.

"I take it that events did not go as you would have liked," Merlin murmured, brow furrowed.

Arturia laughed hollowly, mirthlessly. "I was seen through, worked as a tool, and forced to dance to her tune. To say nothing of that fact that I didn't even realize the trap before I'd tripped it."

The mage shifted somewhat, his frown deeper than before. "Pride doth cometh before the fall, Arthur."

At first, Arturia could only stare at him blankly, as if incapable of understanding his words. Then,
with incredibly speed, like a whip of lightning, her hand slammed down on the desk with enough force to make it tremor slightly.

"Pride?" she whispered. "This isn't about pride, Merlin! And even if it were, that doesn't change the fact that I should've been able to account for such a mistake! Not because I am a king, not because I outrank that woman, but because I should have foreseen it! It should have been a matter of course for her people to be able to contact my enemies, put me into a ridiculous pinch, and yet, I had no back-up plan, no means of cutting off their path of retreat should I be defied. I had nothing!"

Arturia paused for half a beat as she looked down at the papers beneath her hand. "I have two forces beating down my doors from both the north and south. A group of marauders, or however I should call them, are causing mayhem all across my country. There is something akin to a conspiracy bubbling up within in my very walls. My men," she pointed out towards the training field, "are frolicking during their training as if they were simply taking a walk in the park, and to top it all off, I was outwitted in full by an ingrate of a woman despite the fact that I should, have, known!

Merlin raised an eyebrow. "Should have known, you say, boy?"

"I am the king, Merlin," she spit out bitterly. "What use am I when I can neither defend my citizens nor realize when doom is approaching my doorstep? I knew my security was lax, but I was woefully unprepared. I knew that my men lacked a focus, a drive to push them, yet I was still ridiculously surprised when facing it. I knew trouble was brewing on the coast due to my lack of people, and yet I did nothing. I knew there was something wrong with that woman and yet I was still beaten down, like a child! I care nothing for pride! All I care about is that I should, have, known, but despite it all, I didn't! What does that make me? What good am I?"

"No one is infallible, lad. Nor are they perfect," Merlin murmured. "Not even a king."

"No," Arturia agreed after a bit of time. "But, that can't stop me from hoping."

Her mentor cleared his throat slightly as he shifted and finally settled his old bones into a chair. Her eyes followed his every movement silently before she eventually turned away. Arturia curled her fingers in and clenched her fists tightly.

"Merlin," she began, her voice soft, "I do not know what to do. I find myself aimless, wandering around miserably, reaching for clues and finding nothing to support me. I'm just so...

Angry. Frustrated. Tired. All of the above.

If she didn't find some kind of outlet, some way to help fix her situation, something was going to have to give in her life. Something would be destroyed if she didn't get herself onto the right track, and if ever Camelot fell as a result of her inappropriate conduct, because of her lack of foresight, because of her lack of ability...

No, that was something she could never bear. Would never bear.

Her hands trembled again as she relived her humiliation in her mind, her inability to see, and how could she have not?

I should have known.

"You must take caution in what you do," Merlin warned, ever the caring teacher. "Continue like this and you will only burn more bridges."
"I know that!" Arturia snapped, her temper showing through even more. "I am trying!"

Merlin looked a bit grim. "You must endeavor harder."

She gritted her teeth. "Merlin..."

Had it not been for the sudden pair of knocks at the door, Arturia might have said something she would regret in the future. Her attention shifted away from her mentor over towards the entrance, and she took a moment to calm herself.

"Who is it?" she managed to ask, irritation still quite present.

"Your Majesty, may I be granted entrance?"

Arturia took in a deep breath, prayed for strength, and then let out a sigh. "Enter."

The door opened to reveal a toothily smiling Shirou, his eyes alight and his gait merry. As happy as she wished to be for him, his current state of happiness just annoyed the hell out of her. Arturia pushed down the feelings of negativity as she worked to make space on her desktop. Behind the redhead, Merlin gave the slightest of harrumphs and clucked his tongue.

"I hope you mean to share, boy."

She couldn't quite stop the acidic glare back at him.

Arturia turned towards Shirou as he set down the food tray. "Explain."

Shirou was taken aback by the curtness of her words but forced a smile to his lips. "Absolutely, Your Majesty! For the main course, a medium-well grilled cut of sirloin, accompanied by a rendition of a magnificent Greek salad, a side of a set of pork-filled gyouza, and last, but most certainly not least: a slice of lemon meringue pie."

Her eyes fell down on the beautifully made lunch, but she felt none of her usual enthusiasm. "I see."

The lack of reaction made his smile slip away, and he cleared his throat. "Uh, so...yeah."

He backed away from her desk a bit and waited somewhat nervously as she continued to stare at the food. When she didn't begin to eat immediately, his brow furrowed slightly and he took a step back to really get a good look at her. After a quick glance at Merlin, Shirou narrowed his eyes at the king, looking up and down to get a read on her current mood.

As far he could tell, she, was, pissed. And, for once, it wasn't actually at him. The only time he'd ever seen the slightest bit of hidden fury on her face like this was when she had mentioned her time as a Servant for his old man, and the second time had been when she dealt with Gilgamesh. They were two men she had hated with every fiber of her being, and two instances where he hadn't been able to get a word in both out of respect for her feelings, and out of pure fear for the prana that seemed to emanate from her at the time. Food normally got her out of her funks, so this had to be a hell of a hatred she was holding onto for her not to even bother trying to eat. Maybe he could help?

He knew he shouldn't get involved – after all, he didn't know this Arturia, technically. She was different – she hadn't yet lost her kingdom, lost her people, been forced to serve under a human, been forced to go against her very core values. She was young, far more innocent, and obviously hurting. It hurt him to see it, really.

"It'll be okay," Shirou said softly, his voice almost loud in the silent room.
King Arthur looked somewhat startled at his words, and her green eyes swept towards him. "What?"

Shirou smiled gently. "Everyone has those days where nothing goes right, and it seems like every passing minute is some kind of struggle. But, it all evens out in the end."

She looked too surprised to say anything, but she didn't stop him, so he forged on ahead.

"You're strong, Your Majesty," he said, and he could swear he saw her face pale slightly. "You're the best king I've ever met. I don't know what's happened to you today, but you're better than...whatever it is. I'm sure that the problem is no match for you."

Arturia stared at him disbelievingly for a moment before turning away. "You're wrong."

The memory of how easily she was bamboozled by Fiona struck back through her mind again, showing her that had she been a little more aware, a little more prepared, that mistake would never have happened. How could Shirou, someone she had just met, have such undying faith in her despite knowing absolutely nothing? He knew nothing about her, and yet he believed in her? The idea touched her as much as it angered her.

It seemed so foolish to her – what did he know that she somehow didn't? Why was it he could have unwavering faith when every truth she'd maintained continually proved itself false on a consistent basis? Arturia was irritated for the simple reason that Shirou truly had no idea of what he was talking about. He didn't know the mistakes she had made, he didn't know how she lamented, he didn't realize his king was not what she normally presented herself as.

The thought angered her, not because it was any fault of his whatsoever, but because she couldn't yet prove that she was that king he spoke of. The best? What had she done to earn such respect? She was floundering, living from one day to the next despite knowing she should be better than she was. She knew that, so why, why did he sound so assured of his words?

"You know nothing of me," Arturia finally said, causing Shirou to frown slightly. "Nothing."

He made a small smile, one that showed a hint of sadness that pierced at her deeply. "I feel like I know more than you think. Your Majesty, you're better than this. Things might seem bad now, but they'll get better with –"

"You're wrong," she interrupted, involuntarily rising to her feet. "You don't understand. Stop acting as if you do."

"Your Majesty –"

"You're wrong!" she repeated, involuntarily rising to her feet. "What would you know of the hand I've been dealt? Of my failures or successes? You call me great, but you do not even understand the reason why! You praise me for all the wrong reasons, because you are blinded by faith and guided by a sense of luxury. You do not know me! Do not presume to understand!"

Shirou opened his mouth before sighing a bit. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I don't know you, but, I know you're not as bad as you might think. I trust you as my king, and maybe I don't know you as a person, but, I trust you that way, too. And, if you ever need an ear..."

The words were spoken so strongly, without hesitation, that she dearly wanted to believe him. She wanted to believe that what she was doing was right, was just, and that she was not veering from the path she'd set for herself. Arturia wanted to believe that perhaps she was pushing herself too hard, that it was okay for even her to make mistakes...
But, she was king. She was the king, and mistakes caused casualties, pain, and suffering. There was no room for her to be a normal person, someone who could lean on others and allow them to help her along her way. She had to be strong, had to learn from what she'd done wrong.

Yet, time and time again, this man named Shirou often made her forget that important point. He made her forget exactly what needed to be done. There was this warmth where she would lose herself, and if she relaxed, if she didn't forge forward –

She was no longer hungry. Had she ever been? "Get out."

Shirou looked completely taken aback by the sudden order, and Merlin was hardly any different.

"Your Majesty?" inquired Shirou, his voice low and filled with confusion.

Arturia looked up and made eye contact with him. He made her feel as if she wasn't as alone as she chose to believe she was. He tolerated her, appreciated her despite his hardships. He endeavored despite his situation. She admired him.

And, not for the first time, Arturia was scared of Shirou. She was scared of what his presence implied, what it meant for her mentality. She had no defense for this. When he was there, she lost sight of herself, and it infuriated, angered her as much as it scared her.

"Get out."

"B-but, what about your lunch?"

She didn't want to rely on his support. But, she was king. There was no room to allow fear within her heart, but anger? Anger, she had in spades.

"You think you know me," Arturia continued. "You know nothing. You insult me as a person, and you ridicule me as a king. Turn to you? Why would I do that? Even if you, for whatever reason, did hold promise as an advisor, you expect me to bow my head and pay you attention in such a manner? You are my cook! Nothing more, nothing less!"

In return, Shirou gave her this...smile. It was an expression of acceptance, despite her words. It terrified her. Why did he just stand and take her abuse? Why hadn't he left yet?

"Are you deaf as well as dumb?" she tried again. "Did you not hear me distinctly tell you to leave?"

"Okay," he replied gently. "I will. I'm sorry."

Why was he apologizing? Why?

It made her angry at him. It made her angry at herself. It made her angry at the circumstances. This was wrong, but her damnable...pride...wouldn't allow her respite. For all that she said she didn't care about it, it certainly seemed to pop up at the most inappropriate times, forcing her down a path she had no desire to take.

She couldn't take his gentleness, nor his understanding. It was more than she...

Shirou picked up the tray, and bowed down to her. "I'm sorry, but it will get better. I promise."

Arturia merely stared at him and gritted her teeth.

"Just get out." The words sounded empty even to her ears.
When he just smiled at her again, she finally couldn't take anymore. Her hands slammed down on her desk.

"Get, out!"

"I hope you have a wonderful afternoon," Shirou whispered before finally taking his leave and closing the door behind him.

The second the infernal man was gone, Arturia slammed both of her hands onto her desk again, taking in deep breaths to try and calm herself. She couldn't recall a time in years when she had felt so flustered, so out of her element – and by a low-ranked servant, nonetheless! He had the nerve – the nerve – to treat her like an equal, offer aid with inspiring conviction, and make it seem as if her cutting words meant absolutely nothing. The thought left her shaken, and she briefly regretted ever making him her personal servant. Had she realized precisely what that would mean for her and her emotions, she never would have taken that leap. But, like everything else lately, she lacked control for her environment and decisions.

Arturia closed her eyes as she could feel the rampant onset of further frustration. The part that rankled her most, though, was probably that she had, for a fleeting moment, desired to just let it all, to rage at him with all of her troubles. But, what sense would that make? She had known him for less than a year – far less, but even still...

She shook her head. No. It made absolutely zero sense for her to feel anything towards him but indignation, irritation, and infuriation. If she wanted people to talk to, there was always her brother, Lancelot, any of her other knights of the Round Table, or even Merlin. Yes, those options suited her far better, and speaking of the old mage...

Her gaze lifted slowly to peer over at the man who had not deigned to say anything thus far. His attention, however, was focused solely on the door where Shirou had just exited. She stayed silent, however – the man would speak when he was well, good, and ready.

"I see," Merlin murmured, almost wonderingly. "So, this is the path you have chosen."

Arturia frowned at that, unable to reply.

"Yes," the old man continued, "I do suppose that a lack of control is most frightening. It is that weakness that allows for darkness to surface, for a need for greater space – a separation. Yes, yes, I see, I see. Yet, I do not. Why would you desire this? Ah, but perfection demands it, I should suppose."

Now, she was plainly confused. "I'm afraid I don't follow, Merlin. Please explain."

Merlin turned to her, looking far more serious than she had seen him in years. "Tell me: were it Dylan who had appealed to you in such a manner, would you have flung him away so quickly with barbed words and a voiced edge sharp enough to cut? I wonder if you might."

"Dylan?" The young king tilted her head – she was still very much bewildered. "I highly doubt he would be so bold. Wait – what exactly are we discussing? I believe I have an inkling, but..."  

"What of Gawain, or your brother?"

Her eyes finally narrowed. "What are you inferring, Merlin?"

"You play with the boy," her mentor explained, and her mouth opened to deny his words. Merlin merely shook his head. "You bring him into the fold without direction, and toss him aside when it
proves inconvenient. You speak with him, seek to understand, and when the tides turn, he is then considered a liability, a reason for your chink, for your exposure. I wonder why he isn't as confused about the circumstances as another ordinary person might be. You play at cruelty."

"What?" Arturia couldn't stop herself from yelping. "Cruelty? I have not done anything of the sort! I provided help at the cost of my own personal time and patience. He should be so thankful that I deigned to do anything of the sort for a man of his particular background. I know nothing of him, and yet have done much. You would still accuse me of wrongdoing?"

"Why is it my fault?" was the real question begging to be asked, though she dared not bother voicing it. The man was a servant. A *servant*. Why should she have to bother that much for such an insignificant person?

Then, she inwardly winced at the direction of her thoughts. No. She couldn't think that way. Regardless of his rank, regardless of his actions, his words, his inability to follow *common sense*, he was still a citizen of her kingdom. He was one of her people. She was king, or so she kept telling herself. She had no right to... But yet...

"I wonder," Merlin pressed on, "is this learned behavior or natural? Am I to blame for this way of thinking?"

Arturia stiffened. "Of course not, Merlin. I would never accuse you of anything."

"Then why do you treat others so? It is not just him, I believe, that you attempt to bring in close but then throw aside when you realize your level of intimacy. You cause suffering, not only for yourself, but others as well."

She blinked a few times as her eyes narrowed, the observation whirling around in her head. There was a short moment of silence before Merlin spoke again.

"Arturia."

It wasn't so much his tone of complete seriousness nor how harshly he said the word that made her head snap up, her body immediately tensing as it so often did years before during her youth, whenever Merlin sought to scold her for something. No. It was the fact that he called her by her real name at all, something that was nothing short of taboo out of the right environment. Anyone could hear, and anyone could begin to doubt, and the fact that he dared use it meant that what he was about to say was something she would need to consider with great certainty.

Merlin beckoned her closer, and she did go to him, albeit somewhat nervously. When he clapped a hand onto her shoulder, she looked up at him, feeling every bit as young as she had before taking on the title of king.

"If you want someone to learn, you must teach and guide them, not command and force them to bend to your will. You must not bid confusion, but be honest and clear, and pure in your intentions. This is the way of a mentor to a student. You are king, the greatest mentor of all, and your people, your students.

"This is the kind of king you have become?"

She could feel as the blood drained from her face and she stared searchingly up at Merlin, but he simply clapped her on the shoulder once more before making his retreat.

"Ah, and Arthur, my lad," the man said, regaining her attention. "Remember that sharing is caring."
Then, with a small smile, he left her office, the door closing quietly in his wake.

Arturia let go of the breath she hadn't even realized she'd been holding, and with a bout of shakiness, fell back into one of the guest chairs as she stared at the stone floor. She ran a hand down her face as she thought back on the mage's advice, and closed her eyes tightly.

Was this the kind of king she had become, indeed?

Four hours. Four hours of mindless paperwork and constant, continuous reflective thinking. It had taken less than an hour for her to come to terms with the fact that she had a few real, solid options available to her, but another three hours of hiding in her office, arguing with herself over whether she really wanted to take the chance. And even then, she wasn't sure if she truly wanted to – not really. This would open up a new can of worms in her life, but she was nothing if not a risk-taker, calculated as those risks might prove to be.

So, now, she stood there at the precipice of her rope, at the very edge of the garden borders, feeling completely out-of-place despite it being her home. She fidgeted nervously until a group of servants noticed her and began to gawk as they tended to. While she could not blame them, – after all, it wasn't exactly normal to see her in the flesh – she certainly never wanted to be seen looking as she did. Arturia had given them a cool glance that was enough to send them skittering away. It was then that she finally sighed, her hands resting on her hips.

In those four hours, she had come up with three options: take on the persona of a cold, distant king that kept everyone and everything at a sword's length, never to show any warmth, to open herself entirely and allow everyone to see the smile that she locked away for fear of being seen as even weaker than some already thought her to be, or to...

Arturia took in a deep breath, focused her gaze on her target, and marched forward with purpose and determination. Her steps slowed once she reached a bench, and she felt her shoulders straighten even further.

"Might I join you?"

The golden-brown eyes of her personal cook looked up at her with alarm and a slight tinge of wariness. He sat there on a bench in the center of the gardens by himself, as no other individual ever seemed to visit the place. The redhead was in a set of casual clothing, and looked to be no more affiliated to her without her embroidered initials on his breast pocket than any other soul in the castle. He looked plain and ordinary.

She had never felt so nervous as of late.

Shirou frowned at the king who waited politely a couple of paces away from him, her face as blank as her stare as she waited for his answer. He grunted slightly before gesturing.

"It's your castle," he muttered, looking away.

There was a pause and then she was sitting on the bench next to him, her back straight and her gaze cast onto the beautiful cascading waves of water in the fountain. He stole a glance over at her but she neither spoke nor moved, but just sat there, as still a statue. It was...strange to be so close to her, but never had he felt further away. Enough time passed that Shirou wondered if maybe this was a cue for him to, uh, leave. Just when he was about to get up and let her be, she murmured,

"I owe you an apology."
It was enough to stop him in his tracks and stare at her disbelievingly. She was determinedly *not* looking at him during this confession, though he could see her knuckles whiten a bit. He relaxed against the bench again.

"Uh, for what?" he asked, taken aback. Hastily, he added, "Your Majesty."

She glanced at him for half a second before looking away. "I shouldn't have... I had no right to be so cruel to you. You neither deserved it nor did anything wrong to receive such treatment."

He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "Eh, it's fine. You're stressed, I get it."

"You're taking this rather well," Arturia finally said, a frown on her face. "I imagined a bit more anger on your end."

"Uh, not sure getting mad at the king is going to help me much."

"Maybe I deserve it," she muttered, much to Shirou's surprise.

Shrugging his shoulders, he leaned against the back of the bench and let his gaze rove over the blue sky above. "You have the biggest job of us all. It only makes sense that you'd want to blow some steam every now and then. Can't say I really saw it coming at me, with all the force of a sledgehammer, but I can't really blame you. I think I'd have burnt down the castle by now if I were in your place."

A snort escaped her before she could hide it away. Shirou let himself smile at that, but it fell when he saw her grow far more serious, her brow furrowing as her eyes narrowed. This was one of those moments that usually caused him an onrush of apprehension, but at the moment, she did not appear angry with him, rare as that seemed.

"I," she began, somewhat hesitantly, "believe I owe you something of an explanation. It's the reason I was so..."

"...Filled with righteous indignation?" Shirou finished, shifting away just in case her good mood decided to turn on itself.

She met his eyes, as if unsure of how to react, but she only turned away and let out a sigh. "Yes."

A pause, and then, she turned back towards him, facial expression solemn and contemplative. "Shirou. How aware are you of Britain's current circumstances?"

He frowned again. "I know for a fact that Britain's having trouble with the Scottish up north – border problems and land issues. Then there's the Saxons to the south, as they try to expand their empire. Camelot's holding for now, but unless the army's numbers increase dramatically, there's going to be a lot of trouble over the years. Then again, that also depends on your efforts towards reunification of Britain, because right now, everyone's too separated, too spread out. When problems occur, the military's usually too far away to act promptly. It takes too much time, and by the time it arrives, people are either dead, or too far gone."

Shirou looked down at the ground. "...Like Tryst."

"Indeed," Arturia agreed, hands clasping together. "Believe me when I say that it is an issue at the forefront of my mind, and I am taking great steps to remedy the problem. Particularly after today's visit."

"Today?" asked Shirou, his curiosity piquing. "Did something happen? Your Majesty?"
"A coastal town fell under attack from a new enemy," she explained. She closed her eyes briefly before shaking her head. "I don't quite know why I am telling you this. Perhaps it is an attempt to rebuild that bridge I set aflame. Or, perhaps I simply needed someone to hear it, someone who had no part in the complication."

Shirou held up his fist in the Japanese "fighting" pose, and she raised an eyebrow. "Hit me."

She tilted her head slightly before nodding, albeit slowly. "The men were beaten, the women violated, and the children captured and...dealt with," she spat out, her temper rising just from recalling the events. "And the leader simply laughed it away. Ridiculous."

"Who was it?" Shirou demanded to know, his tone passionate as he switched his gaze over to her. "What was the point?"

"I don't know, truthfully," she answered. "They call themselves Vikings, but as for why they terrorized a village instead of simply tracking down wildlife on their own...I don't know. I truly don't understand the benefit. Regardless, my meeting with this...leader, did not go as planned."

"You beat them down with your quick wit and intelligence, right?" he asked, a grin on his face.

Arturia made eye contact with him, her face blank. "I was outwitted at every turn of the conversation. Pathetically so. And now, I've three months to come up with a way to get them out of my country."

Shirou looked as if he couldn't believe her, and she didn't blame him. She still hadn't come to terms with it herself.

"What do they want from you in three months' time?"

"Something of interest that they have never seen before," she replied softly. "The Vikings are apparently a nomadic people. They travel the world – what could I possibly show them that they may not have already seen?"

He watched her beautiful eyes cloud with worry and found himself desperately wishing he could help. Vikings weren't exactly his forte in history – he knew a bit about them, but beyond that, he was probably just as much in the dark as she was. If one could travel the world and see all of its beauties, what little was there that hadn't yet been experienced? Shirou wasn't entirely sure. It was annoying, but he didn't know how he could help in this instance.

Arturia appeared to understand his dilemma because she only gave him a pained smile before turning away and standing up. "Again, I am not sure why I told you this. Perhaps it was to have a friendly ear, or because some things should be shared. Regardless, I thank you for listening. You have been kind."

Had she been expecting him to just refuse her presence? That wasn't going to happen, not on his watch. Even if she did piss him the hell off sometimes. She hadn't even ate his food – she hadn't even touched it. He'd worked hard on that meringue pie, damn it.

"Sure," Shirou managed eventually.

The king hesitated and then looked back at him again. "My wife, Guinevere... She has been asking after you, and would like to speak to you, for whatever reason. I was hoping you might grace us with dinner?"

His answer was immediate. "What time?"
"In an hour?" she asked before shaking her head. "No, it would be rude to give you so little time. You'll have two."

"Done," he affirmed, and stood up himself. His mind was already buzzing with possibilities. Should he try serving the meringue pie again? Right now, it was in a chest of ice, and would go bad, otherwise...

"Thank you," Arturia said, her gratitude seeping through. She bowed her head slightly and made as if to go when suddenly she stopped, and turned back with the slightest of jerks. "Actually..."

Shirou stumbled a bit and swirled around again to stare back at her, almost automatically standing at attention. He received a knowing glance in return, but she didn't comment on the clumsiness.

"About the village... While it isn't official yet, as of tomorrow morning, you will have the authorization to travel to and from the castle into the village as often as you like. All I ask for in return is that you do not make a mockery of yourself there, and that you are not lax in your schedule with me. And that you keep up with your studies."

He couldn't help it – so great was his surprise, that his jaw dropped with all the elegance of a child. "Oh, uh, I mean, thank...you? That's... Thank you!"

She granted him a warm smile. "You're more than welcome, Shirou. I apologize that it took this long. Thank you for listening to my troubles."

"Anytime!" he exclaimed, and she gave one last bow of her head before walking away, her shoulders and back straight and showing how truly brilliant she was just from watching afar.

Aaaaand, now he had to think of a meal befitting both a queen and a king, and only two hours to do it.

"I wish I had some rice..."

Candles were all that lit the area as dusk fell, the twilight colors of the sky slowly diluting into a starry black as Shirou gathered the remaining dishes together, piling them into stacks. He kept a close eye on the large lion cub that sat right at the king's feet, but so long as he never went all that close, the lion was content to ignore him. It had been a fairly calm, relaxing evening – far more than he'd imagined it would be. While neither the king nor the queen paid him much attention throughout the dinner, they didn't outright ignore him either.

Guinevere asked him the standard questions of how he was, if he enjoyed serving directly under King Arthur, and so forth, but other than that, she spent most of the time talking to her husband. The king, for her part, only passed him a somewhat guilty expression when he dished the meringue pie for their dessert. He waved her concern away – he was just happy that she was bothering to eat now. Perhaps she really did feel better, and in which case, he was more than fine with that.

Shirou smiled when the queen let out a soft round of laughter at something King Arthur said before turning to stack another plate.

"Then, Shirou," Queen Guinevere called to him, her eyes kind and welcoming. "It has come to my attention that my husband sought your forgiveness, and pardon my curiosity, but you did, indeed, give it?"

He rubbed the back of his head, ruffling his auburn hairs as he frowned a bit. "There really wasn't anything to forgive. His Majesty is stressed – things happen."
"Such a kind, young gentleman," Guinevere praised before giving the king a bit of a dark look. "My husband tends to act before he thinks. Particularly when he is off the battlefield. How one can be a genius tactician and strategist and get himself into so many scrapes, I cannot even come to fathom."

The scowl on the blonde's face was telling and she looked at Shirou. "Pay her no mind. She knows not what she speaks."

Queen Guinevere gasped dramatically. "Now, you listen here, Arthur. Do you not think you've caused enough trouble?"

"Me?" deadpanned the king. "I never cause trouble, I am simply unlucky enough to find it."

"Trouble follows you like a swarm of locusts."

"They are simply jealous of my ability."

Shirou ducked his head to hide a grin as the two continued to bicker back and forth. This was the kind of moment he'd never really had the opportunity to share with Saber. Certainly, he and Rin had argued over and over about the simplest things, but Saber had normally sat a little ways away, watching, listening, but never really participating. She would smile sadly, as if happy to minimally be a part of the situation, and he never quite understood what was wrong. Shirou certainly thought he had an idea, what with the dreams of her past swirling around in his head, but it wasn't until he came to the past and saw her truly interact with those she was closest to that he really got a good idea of her feelings from before.

The redhead watched the bantering with mixed feelings. On one hand, Shirou was glad to see the king in her element, shining brightly enough for everyone to see, but on the other, he wished that he could have shared that kind of moment with her. Well, this was nice in and of itself, too.

King Arthur looked pained after one comment from her wife, and Shirou wished he'd paid attention enough to hear it. With how smug Guinevere looked though, maybe it was better that he hadn't, for his own sake. When King Arthur glanced over at him with the slightest of grimaces, Shirou laughed inwardly. It was good to see that some things were everlasting, like the bond between a husband and his (her) wife.

He had absolutely no sympathy for King Arthur right then.

Shirou muffled another snort when the king blatantly turned away from Guinevere and instead focused her attention on her lion. Guinevere sniffed and rose from her seat.

"Shirou," she said with a smile, "let us speak over there."

The king frowned and looked up from the cub. "You cannot speak here?"

"Shush, Arthur," Guinevere warned. "The adults are conversing."

The look, the look, on King Arthur's face – an expression that showed uncertainty as to whether to be shocked, surprised, or insulted all at once – made Shirou cough to avoid laughing again, but he knew that Guinevere had meant no harm. Seeing how the king merely grumbled afterward told him this had to be an inside joke that he wasn't privy to. Shirou followed behind Guinevere and sat down next to her as they both watch the lion cub swat at the king's face, while the woman in question restrained the animal with a gentle touch.

"He hurts at times," murmured Guinevere, stealing Shirou's attention back. "Thank you for not
condemning him. Arthur tries, but he is not the most articulate of speakers when it comes to getting his emotions across."

Another sad smile crossed Shirou's face as he nodded. "I know."

The brunette crossed her hands over her lap. "Times are dark these days. Arthur could use as many allies as he can get."

"I'd never betray the king," he replied, eyes hardening. "Never."

"I believe you," Guinevere whispered. "I hope that my trust is not misplaced. Now, I must see to him, lest he sulk further in my absence."

With that, she gave him one last kind smile before rising gracefully and walking back toward the table. Shirou grinned as she left before it fell from his face as he looked over at the source of his ongoing confusion.

Over the past months he had seen, in the truest sense, the incredible presence of the once and future king. He had seen her take command of troops, deliver a speech worthy of an Oscar, direct her people through slight crises, show limitless patience, undeniable rage, indiscernible beauty that couldn't be measured, a wit most people could only dream of, and a charm that easily slipped past the strongest of defenses. She was...infuriating, yet wonderful, filled with positives he could list forever – something he had learned during their two weeks together. However, recently, he had also seen a number of negatives – her obstinacy, her quick temper and sharp tongue, her coldness, and unwillingness to allow anyone near. More so than when he'd known her the first time, she felt...more real. She wasn't just a title, a fable, a myth with fantastic, redeeming qualities galore, she also had her faults, problems, and tendencies that would annoy the hell out of him.

Shirou ran a hand through his hair with a sigh, and gazed at her as the flickering candlelight cast a gentle glow over her features as she gave a rare smirk to Guinevere. There was a depth of ugliness within her, a reality he had to acknowledge because the king was not simply rainbow and butterflies. A trail of blood and felled swords followed in her wake alongside of a danger that lay in wait to strike with deadly venom. It was, perhaps, something a normal person would run far away from, for fear of contracting an early death themselves. A normal person would want nothing more to do with a king that caused such ravage, such chaos.

But, Shirou had never been normal, and some darkness deserved a bit of light every now and then.

He would wait, and if ever she needed him... Well, he didn't even have to think about it.

OMAKE: How Shirou really got kicked out.

As far he could tell, she, was, pissed. And, for once, it wasn't actually at him. The only time he'd ever seen the slightest bit of hidden fury on her face like this was when she had mentioned her time as a Servant for his old man, and the second time had been when she dealt with Gilgamesh. They were two men she had hated with every fiber of her being, and two instances where he hadn't been able to get a word in both out of respect for her feelings, and out of pure fear for the prana that seemed to emanate from her at the time. Food normally got her out of her funks, so this had to be a hell of a hatred she was holding onto for her not to even bother trying to eat. Maybe he could help?

Shirou cleared his throat. "Your Majesty, if I may? You look a bit, uh, canoodled."

King Arthur froze before slowly lifting her head up and staring at him blankly, and he swore he heard the ticking of a time bomb somewhere.
"What," was the one word that came from her mouth.

"You know, canoodled," Shirou attempted to explain before he realized her expression hadn't changed even the slightest. "Uh, is that not the right word? Maybe you need canoodling? I can help!"

The blank expression seemed to be carved onto her face for all that it never shifted. Merlin approached him from the side, whispering, "Lad, you're inferring that he needs to...participate in lewd activities. And that you would like to perform them on him."

"Oh," Shirou murmured before seeing the oncoming storm of fury as King Arthur slowly stood up.

"Oh."
So, I'd nothing short of forgotten that I had it up on this site. As such, it didn't get updated like the other site three months ago. My apologies about that!

If ever in doubt, check out my fanfiction page. If it's not updated there, then it hasn't been updated whatsoever. :)

The room was dark and quiet, the only light coming from the gentle rays of the sun as it began its ascent into the sky. The door clicked shut behind him, almost sounding as if had slammed for how disturbingly silent it was in the king's study. Shirou swept his eyes around the office quickly before coming to rest on the figure sitting at her desk. He walked forward slowly, wondering if perhaps King Arthur was taking a break from all of her paperwork, and he was about to greet her when he found himself coming to an immediate halt. The candles on her desktop had long since gone out, and it was hard to tell out her features except for where a small sliver of sunlight hit her just right.

Obviously exhausted, her head rested over her left hand, a quill still in her right as shoulders shifted just barely as she breathed in and out slowly. Her eyes were closed, and all signs of her normal stress, concern, and problems were absent from her expression as she rested serenely. The king's tendrils of hair fell over her eyes, waving slightly with each breath she exhaled, and the entire scene made her seem innocent, young, and a complete contrast to her normal countenance.

Shirou couldn't help but stare, and when he heard the telltale sound of his dishes sliding, he quickly righted the tray and, taking a single, deep breath, put the tray aside on one of the chairs meant for the king's guests. When his golden-brown eyes peered back at her again, he found that she hadn't moved even the slightest.

He couldn't take his eyes off of her.

Perhaps he should have been concerned when there was no answer at the very first knock he'd made to her door. King Arthur was not an intentionally rude person – if she was busy, she would simply ask him to come at a different time. But, then again there were times when she was so deep into her work, that she just didn't hear any outside influences. Those times were rare, but still happened every now and then. Actually, it had happened just last week, if he recalled correctly. That time, Shirou had stood outside of the office for at least ten minutes before trying again, and she was certain to apologize about the incident.

When the second knock and call went unanswered, that waved a few red flags that had him narrowing his eyes a bit. Maybe she simply wasn't in her office? But the king was always in her office at the ass crack of dawn, and he would've received a notification from that steward of hers, whatever the hell his name was, otherwise. The steward was nothing if not prompt and quick to inform.

At the third knock and call, Shirou finally realized that there might've been something wrong on her end, and he took a cautious step back. It was probably unnecessary of him to do so, but he immediately thought up the number of things that could have gone wrong: she had Avalon, so that shouldn't have been an issue; it was a closed-quartered room, without any breaches that he'd
noticed, which was another thing to dismiss; any signs of struggle would've been noticed by the guards standing at the sides of her door; he was in charge of everything she ate, but that was still negated by Avalon, which made it a moot point; could something have come in through the window – a sleeping gas, maybe? But, to Shirou's knowledge, that hadn't technically been invented yet.

So, when he had made his way inside, ready for the worst, the sight of her like...this, froze him to the core. Even during his time with Saber, when had he ever really seen her look so relaxed, so calm, so...small and sweet? The time she had been meditating in his house's dojo couldn't compare. The time she had lain in the room next to his to conserve energy, couldn't compare. Not even their night together could compare to how she seemed now. Excepting the last example, the woman had been ready to take on the world if need be – she would have launched from her meditational pose to her feet in a heartbeat, from the realm of sleep to an attacking stance in less than a second.

But her, right now? Certainly, she could, but...it was different. This was *her* safe haven, in *her* castle, in *her* territory, *her* time, surrounded by *her* people, who would jump to protect her at the cost of their lives. It was different, and he knew it. Even if she didn't trust everyone, even if she were wary of problems within her haven, it was still her home, not a battlefield where she had to protect her idiot Master. Shirou forcibly cast down his gaze before involuntarily zeroing back in on her again.

His feet taking him closer to her desk, Shirou couldn't help but continue to stare. His thoughts always pushed him back towards his time with Saber, towards their two weeks together, whenever he saw the king. Never had Shirou regretted letting her go at the end of the war – she hadn't belonged in his time, in a place among the living. He never regretted saying goodbye, but he had wished they could've done more, could've had the chance to experience other things. Shirou remembered her expressions of happiness during parts of their date, remembered her joy over finding something new to take interest of.

Now, as his mind told him to stop and think about what the hell he was doing, he still felt himself leaning down, a hand gently, and gingerly brushing aside tendrils of her bangs. And, as his heart pounded in his chest, and his head telling him, "Damn it, Shirou, no!", he bent down towards her.

*I love you, Saber,* was what he had wanted to say, but the second his fingers left her skin, and her eyes flickered open slowly, Shirou had launched back away from her desk with speed he hadn't known he'd possessed, his heart having leapt into his throat as he watched her stare ahead of herself absentely. He hugged the wall behind him, staring with heavy trepidation as King Arthur groaned softly and slowly rose from her uncomfortable position on her desk. Her left hand massaged her neck as her gaze swept over the paperwork left to be done.

"Funny," she muttered, and Shirou almost felt himself inwardly squeal with fear as he clutched the wall more tightly. "I could have sworn I felt something..."

The moment she paused, froze, and slowly slid her gaze up to look him dead in the eyes was the very moment Shirou felt himself die a little inside. King Arthur's gaze bore into him, as if daring him to make the first move, and he felt goose bumps all along his body and sweat break out along his face. She never turned her gaze away, not for at least a minute straight. Then, she flicked it over towards the tray he'd set on the chair, and then closed her eyes completely.

He watched as she visibly restrained herself from slamming him with an explosion of anger, and then let out a quick sigh when the king bit out a curt, "Good morning, Shirou."

Every delusion the man had of her decapitating him, slicing him up, incarcerating him, and whatever other terrible thing his mind could come up with in that terrible moment of fear finally
vanishing, Shirou let out a shaky breath and almost felt his legs give out from under him.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," he choked out in a high-pitched voice that immediately made him flush with embarrassment. "I apologize for coming in unannounced, but –"

"Enough," she muttered, turning away from him as she cleaned off her desk. "I must not have heard your calls, because, you most certainly did follow the correct procedures, yes?"

"Of course!" he squeaked out, backing up a few steps away from her again. "Three times, uh, sir!"

King Arthur continued massaging her neck as she sat back down and sighed. "Three times, was it? Then, I apologize for not responding appropriately."

As Shirou set down the tray of food on her desk, her hand whipped out and gripped his wrist tightly, making him flinch.

"See that it doesn't happen again," she warned, eyes cold and unyielding. "And, on that matter..."

Shirou watched her open her mouth before she blanked, and shut it quickly with a small clack of her teeth. Her hand released him hastily, and she cleared her throat.

"Never mind. What am I partaking this morn?"

He felt the need to touch his wrist where he could still feel the tantalizing touch of her warmth, but ignored it. When her emerald-green eyes moved to look up at him again, awaiting his answer to her question, Shirou took a moment to judge whether he really was in hot water with her or not. Just as he evaluated her, her own gaze searched his calculatingly.

"It's fine," she eventually breathed. "I am...not angry."

He frowned, staying silent as she cleared her throat. King Arthur averted her gaze. "Not...too angry, at the very least. So long as it doesn't occur again, we will forget his incident ever happened."

Shirou couldn't help but smile at her bare honesty, and pulled off the lid from her plate. On it, much to her disbelief, were scrambled eggs galore, bacon strips, ham, sausage, toasted fresh bread (that he'd made himself), a small salad on the side, and a bowl of bean soup to finish up the entire meal. There was also a glass of drawn wine to complement it all.

King Arthur frowned at the amount of food. "What is the occasion, Shirou? This is double the amount of food you normally serve."

The moment he broke out into a large grin, she almost wished she could take back her question. The king held up a hand and shook her head.

"No, perhaps it is best that I do not know."

Shirou lost his smile somewhat as she started to eat, and took a couple of steps back to allow her some semblance of privacy. Watching as she finished the first half of it with ease, he couldn't really hide the smirk that appeared on his face when he noticed her have trouble finishing the last quarter of it all. Well, she was only still human at this point, not the living black hole Saber had been. Filling her up to the max wasn't an impossibility, though it was still very much a challenge. Whatever – he enjoyed the challenges of meeting her palate tastes.

When King Arthur finally set down her fork and held her left fist to her mouth as she turned away, Shirou smiled happily. "Was that enough food for you, Your Majesty?"
Her darkened eyes met his, and he saw both the weariness and wariness present in them. It was obvious she didn't know what he was trying to get at, and he'd known damned well that he'd forced her to her limits. That had been his intention though, so it was with great joy that he pulled the tray from her desk and plopped down a large box instead. The king eyed it as if it were another enemy to triumph over.

"What is this?"

"A little something I made for you, Your Majesty," he replied without hesitation.

Bewilderment flitted over her features. "More food? Shirou, I do not know what it is you think of me, but –"

"It's your lunch," Shirou said quickly, silencing her protest. "I...think I'm finally ready to go out there, but I don't think I'll make it back in time."

With those few words, her countenance returned to its former seriousness. She looked down at the bentou box in front of her.

"I see," she murmured. "To be truthful, I had wondered why you hadn't gone racing out the very next morning. You seemed so eager."

He scratched the back of his head, chuckling softly. "Well, I'd wanted to, but let's face it, I didn't know anything about what's down there. I needed to do a little research, so I had to ask some people about the place. I had to talk to Zago, because he knows everything about everything."

"Ah, yes," King Arthur sighed out as she slowly leaned back, the fullness of her stomach heavy on her mind. "Your food conspirer."

"Hey, that was his idea, not mine," Shirou affirmed, crossing his arms over his chest. "That guy's going to get me killed someday."

She raised an eyebrow at this, but didn't bother commenting on the matter. "You've finished your research then? You will be gone all day, I take it?"

Shirou nodded. "That was the plan, but..."

"I will allow it," she told him, her fingers running along the outside of the lunch box. "I can only hope this adventure of yours quells some of that restlessness you've gained over the months."

He blinked slowly at that. "I'm sorry, I wasn't trying to –"

"It's fine," she interrupted, a short smile on her face to ease the curtness of her words. "You think I do not realize how confining this place can be to someone used to being on the outside? I would very much love to be out there, testing my sword rather than in here, confronting the idiocy of some people. Enjoy your time, while you can."

A beaming smile lit up his face, and King Arthur found herself unable to turn her gaze away from it. He slid his hands into his pockets and nodded firmly.

"I'll have the time of my life!" Shirou told her determinedly.

She wasn't even aware of when she'd stopped breathing, or when her heart had begun pounding so hard, but cleared her throat the second she came back to reality. "See that you do," she murmured.
King Arthur watched him gather up the tray into his hands and give her his normal greetings as he left. When the door shut behind him, she focused her attention back onto the lunch box, her curiosity overcoming her as she slid it directly in front of her. Flipping the lid, she peered in at the contents, only to see a near copy of herself staring right back at her menacingly. Her lips parted as she was unable to fully contain the shock of seeing her meal in the form of her own face. And, even had she not eaten such a large and filling meal, the idea of eating something that resembled her so closely – and how had he even accomplished that, anyway? – filled her with an indiscernible feeling inside. She slowly closed the lid and pushed the box as far away from herself as she could manage without it toppling over onto the floor. Then, she cupped her face, groaning, "Shirou..."

Shirou glanced down at the king's insignia and initials on his breast pocket. He wished that he didn't have to broadcast his ranking to every person who happened to see him, but this was one of the conditions that had been set when he'd become her Personal Servant. Frowning at the mark, he flicked his gaze up as he walked up to the guards at the gate leading out into the city. He had expected some kind of comment, but the two men simply waved him on after a single glance. Shirou stayed on guard as he passed by them and joined a crowd of several other people heading out through the gate. People gave him odd looks as he walked amongst them, but the moment they noticed the insignia on his shirt, they quickly separated themselves from him a bit, making sure to look everywhere else but towards or at him. It was a perplexing reaction, and Shirou didn't very much appreciate it. He wasn't going to the village as an extension of the king – or, at least, that wasn't his intention, but it seemed like he wouldn't have much of a choice in the matter. It would be more difficult to communicate with the everyday people if they thought he was there to judge them in some way. With all the guards around, though, there was no way he'd be able to ditch the articles somewhere and not have it get back to the king, and if the king found out...

Shirou came to a halt at the top of the incline leading down towards the main village itself. The castle itself was at a higher altitude than the village, making it seem more majestic and overbearing. Looking up at it from down below made it easy to realize just how imposing the building was. Conversely, though, coming down from the castle offered a terrific view of the spread out village, which was practically a city in this time frame. He couldn't remember the exact population figure, but it had to be over 12,000, at least. Shirou marveled at the scenery. It was beautiful.

His gaze fell to the wide road running all the way down to the south gate, and he recalled what Zago had told him not too long ago. Shirou had gone to the other man for advice on what to really expect, particularly as a foreigner.

"Exactly what you experienced here," Zago said, sounding more serious than usual. "Just, times, you know, a billion more. At first, everyone will think you're some enemy figure that's somehow gotten into the kingdom. They'll treat you as a threat. Then, the smarter ones will figure out who you are and try to pander to you, maybe. The nobles will, at least. The other ones will stay the hell away from you."

Then, Zago looked over at Eos, who couldn't even manage her usual comforting smile. Then he turned back towards Shirou, murmuring,

"But those people don't matter. The ones you need to be on the lookout for are the common people, the ones who know absolutely nothing about the king but that he lords over them. The ones who
like him will probably be very friendly to you, but Shirou, you've got to understand – there's a lot of unrest out there. A lot of unrest."

Eos interjected at that point: "Shirou, whatever you do, don't let them draw you into a fight. They may attempt to use you as a bargaining point if they're desperate. If you need help, talk to someone in a position of authority, like a guard."

"It can't be that bad, can it?" Shirou joked, cracking a half-grin.

Zago and Eos had just looked at one another, before the former shrugged. "Sure, whatever, man. I mean, it's not like it's Sparta or anything, dude. You're not going to step out there and immediately get barraged by people trying to rip through your throat. Just, it's good to have a little caution."

Shirou frowned at that. "Even with all that's gone on around here, I still feel like people aren't really that bad, at heart."

"You're a dumbass," Zago stated bluntly. "You're just going to get yourself killed someday."

Eos slapped Zago's shoulder, looking irritated. "Dagobert, enough of that."

Zago merely shrugged. "But, he is. How much shit do you have to go through before you get the picture?"

"I don't really care about my life so much," Shirou told them softly. "I'm just trying to make things right."

"See? Perfect definition of a dumbass."

Eos glared at the blond, with him ignoring her blatantly. Shirou just smiled a little sadly, but neither refuted nor agreed with his friend on the matter. Putting his hands on his hips, he switched around topics.

"Okay, so, where do I start? Where should I go first?"

"Dude, do I look like a walking, talking map to you? It's called 'exploration' for a reason. Get the fuck out there and explore. God damn."

At that point, Eos gave Zago a look, one that was enough to have him back away and shut his mouth for fear of any real retribution by her hand. Then, she turned her midnight-blue eyes over towards Shirou, still looking somewhat angry.

"I'm not altogether familiar with the east side of town, being that I am not a noble, but there's a tavern off of the main road, down a path leading towards the far west. It doesn't have a name, but, it's fairly difficult to miss. Perhaps you could start there? And don't worry – it's really hard to miss."

Shirou gave her a smile and a word of thanks, and just as he was about to leave, Zago came up to him, concern present in his gaze.

"Look, dude, I'm sorry. Just, if shit goes down, get the hell out. Don't get your ass thrown in jail again."

That comment struck him hard, and his blood running cold again. Eos put a hand on his shoulder out of concern, and he did his best to ignore it.
"...Are you going to be all right? Should I go with you?"

"I'll be fine," was all he said before bidding the two of them farewell and heading out of the kitchen. He never even thought to argue with Baeddan again, though he kind of missed the asshole.

All things considered, he'd been incredibly excited. Not being able to see anything but the inside of the keep's walls was limiting, especially when he was used to roaming around on his own whenever he felt like it. He wasn't used to be told he couldn't do something, but more so the act of being given freedom to fulfill a contract in however way he could. The method had never mattered, and Rin hadn't bothered to "rein" him in, either. It was thoughts of memories that spurred him to leave the castle eagerly, his desire to know his surroundings and the people pushing him along through the gates and into the main village.

The difference between one side of the main road hadn't been immediately apparent from the other initially, but he could see the buildings grow seemingly stronger and bigger in the distance towards the east. The wide dirt road itself, large enough to field several lines of horseman and infantry, was lined with several crossroads as well as a variety of shops and stands. A number of people had stopped and stared at him until they saw the initials embroidered on his tunic. Then they all turned away quickly, as if wanting nothing to do with him. Some gave hesitant smiles out of courtesy, but most gave him a large berth.

Shirou hadn't particularly appreciated that – he didn't think of himself as any different than any one of them. While he realized that his position as Personal Servant elevated him in status, he felt that was the only part of him that was different. When he stopped at a stand to look at fresh fruit available, which, all things considered, wasn't altogether much, the vendor had looked first at his hair, his expression darkening. Then, the man's gaze fell to his well-kept appearance, the quality of his clothes and leather boots, and then finally, the initials on his chest, and all irritation fled, replaced instead by concern and an obligated willingness. Shirou had noticed every single detail, but ignored it, only offering a warm smile.

When he'd gestured towards the grapes, asking what he'd need to pay for a bunch (was he supposed to pay with a chicken or something? He'd have to ask the king later), the vendor had shakenly, hurriedly, pushed the bunch of grapes into Shirou's hands, mumbling about Shirou's kindness for paying the lowly vendor a visit, and wouldn't he please come again?

Shirou had stood there, hands full of decent-quality grapes, watching the vendor tremble a little from fear.

"I'll pay," he'd hedged. "I just don't know what it costs..."

"Ye don't need be payin' anythin', Lord!" the vendor quickly reassured him. "Only the best for His Majesty!"

"But, I'm not --"

"Would ye like these here plums, too, sir? Perhaps some blackcurrants?"

"No, I..."

At that point, Shirou had felt somewhat... Well, he wasn't sure what, but he hadn't liked it. Every time he'd offered to pay a certain amount, or do something for the man, the vendor only put up even more of a fuss. And, considering who he was, and how stubborn he was, Shirou couldn't just let things alone. He continued arguing with the man, and when the vendor pushed more fruit at
him, Shirou finally put everything back down on the cart, knowing in his mind that there was no way he could accept the man's goods for nothing at all. He hadn't earned them, hadn't paid for them, and felt resolute in his decision to just leave the man alone after that since his "position" was causing more stress than it needed to and because he was supposed to be on his best behavior or face the king's wrath. But when Shirou saw the vendor's face pale with beads of sweat slipping down, the redhead felt himself swallow hard.

"Are my wares not good enough for ye, Lord?" the man nearly whimpered.

Shirou shook his head adamantly. "No, that's not –"

Clanking from a suit of armor coming closer made him turn his gaze around to see a soldier coming closer, his spear loose in his hand. Shirou noticed the vendor pale further as the soldier approached and frowned.

"Personal Servant," the soldier greeted with a bow of his head. "Is this...person, causing you undue trouble, sir?"

Oh crap, had he already caused a problem?

Shirou gave the patrolman half a smile. "Nah, he's fine. I think I'm more the problem here, actually. He was very good to me. I just couldn't take his wares for free, that's all."

The soldier paused for a moment before turning to the vendor. "You forcin' your pitiful goods onto this man? Don't feel any shame, do you?"

The vendor had bowed his head low, his back starting to crane as well. "Forgive me, Lord, for my rudeness!"

Shirou's eyes had narrowed sharply, and he'd put a hand on the guard's arm, temper sparked. "It's not his fault. I mean it. He did nothing wrong. Leave him alone."

The soldier backed off immediately. "As you wish, Personal Servant."

Shirou hadn't missed the glare the soldier sent to the vendor, nor the constant shaking of the latter, nor the curious and concerned gazes of onlookers who had all stopped in the middle of their activities to see what the commotion was. When the soldier had retreated, and the redhead had turned to look back at the throng of people, not one adult once met his gaze, and the children who did were quietly reprimanded as their parents pulled them away. Shirou had only stood there in front the stall for a little longer, watching as no one would look at him for fear of some kind of retribution.

He hadn't liked that.

The redhead had walked away from the earlier scene, a frown on his face but still rather hopeful that things would gradually get better as he continued along. Shirou paid attention to the scenery he passed by: the dwellings were shabby, made with poor materials, and in a generally less-than-preferred state. He saw pieces of wood splintering away, with the slates rotting at the bases. Some houses had ivy weaving its way around, making for a pretty sight, despite how much of a nuisance it must have actually been. The houses towards the main road were on the larger side, but as he walked deeper into the western section, they gradually grew smaller and even shoddier. Shirou had never been in such a destitute neighborhood before. He didn't really mind it overall, though.

He didn't mind the dirt that flew through the air with every stride, nor the mud that splashed onto his leather shoes and tailored clothing. Shirou didn't mind the heat from the sun that battered down
on him – it was way hotter in the past than it'd been in his time period. Hell, he didn't even mind the horrible smell from the livestock and the people who had probably never heard of a bath in their life. No, what he didn't like, what he couldn't take, were the stares.

As he'd strolled down a branching road into the western side of the city, his eyes had shifted from side to side as he noticed one person after another stop mid-conversation to stare at him as he walked. Some stares were blank, as if he was something they couldn't really comprehend. A few were calculating, like he was a puzzle to be solved, something for them to use to their benefit somehow. An even smaller number of people granted him cautious smiles, like he was some kind of messiah, or a point of hope for them. Apathetic gazes were in the equation as well, but Shirou could deal with apathy. He understood apathy, to a point. The worst ones, honestly, and the ones he had extreme difficulty ignoring, were the stares full of condescension and outright hatred.

When Shirou had looked back at them warily, several men glared back at him, whether at his hair, his clothing, or because he obviously didn't fit within this area of Camelot's society. None of the peasants made any moves towards him, and they didn't try to block his way or push him out of their territory. Shirou had never felt like he was in any danger from them, but all the same, it wasn't the kind of welcome he had been expecting the whole time. Eventually, Shirou had turned his gaze ahead, a frown on his face as he did his best to ignore all of them.

He really hadn't liked resorting to such measures.

...He hadn't liked much of anything so far.

So, now, as he stood in front of a delapidated, defunct-looking, shoddy building, he could honestly say that he wasn't sure it was a good idea that he'd fought so hard to come out here. Shirou was never one to give up when something in his plans went away, though. He was determined to make the best of things and to get the information he'd wanted so badly. There were so many things he wanted to figure out, but wouldn't have the opportunity to do while stuck inside a castle.

Shirou was still wary over whether this building held access to what he might want to know, and for the first time in his life, he wondered just what kind of background Eos had that she would steer him in this direction. He looked back behind him and watched an old, toothless, bald man in tattered clothing stare at him creepily, his mouth agape as spit trailed down his chin. The old man blinked once, slowly, before waddling away with a cheap cane behind one residence, but not before staring at Shirou the whole time as he was slipping out of view. Shirou blinked, as if unable to grasp what had just happened, and then turned back to face the door in front of him.

Yeah, he really had to wonder about that woman, sometimes...

Whelp, no time like the present. Or past. Or...whatever.

Shirou pushed open the rickety, wooden door, immediately catching the eye of every occupant within the small shack. Only hesitating slightly, he took a couple of steps inside, immediately finding himself standing almost in the center near the roasting pit. An emaciated, but large-framed person peered over at him with dark eyes with bags deep underneath. When he stood up, so did a younger teenage man alongside of a big burly one with a face full of hair. Shirou noticed their gazes flick over to his breast pocket before flashing back up to his eyes, their hostility obvious as none of them made a single move towards him.

The first man came forward, head slightly bowed as he hunched his shoulders in an obvious effort to appear humble. "Is there be somethin' I can be doin' for ye, Lord?"

His eyes had flicked down to Shirou's chest again before using that title, and the latter found
himself frowning automatically at the act. As much as he understood the need to show that he was indeed an official representative of the king, it was difficult for him to accept that he couldn't roam as freely as he wanted without complications rising up. But, considering the era he was in, who knew if being independent wouldn't cause more issues? Shirou didn't like it, but he didn't have much choice other than to put up with it. He really didn't like it though.

"Actually," the redhead began softly, noting how all three of the other man stiffened slightly when he spoke, "I was hoping to try some of your meals here – a friend told me that this is the go-to place for local, uh, delicacies."

Damn, he sounded almost formal in comparison to them. He probably had Her Royal Majesty to blame for that one.

At the skepticism that popped up in each of their expressions, Shirou almost smiled wryly. Yeah, he wasn't sure how much sense it made for someone from the castle to come down and ask to point-blank try "delicacies" of the average people, and he didn't even know what would constitute a "delicacy" in this place anyway. Everything smelled like feces, both human and animal alike, there were rodents scrambling around enough to hear their scratch-scratching all the time, and the people looked as if hygiene was some mythical Norse beast. But hell, what did Shirou know? He hadn't taken a dammed bath in months. If he ever got closer to the king, that would probably be his first favor to ask for, and wouldn't she just appreciate that one?

The teenager seemed to tighten up even more, if that were possible. "What kind of friend ye be talkin' 'bout...Lord?"

At that question, Shirou gave them a quick smile. "Her name is Eos, actually. She told me –"

"He be a liar!" the teenager suddenly yelled out, making Shirou twitch in surprise. "Eos would never make good with you pompy types! He's here to trick us! The king's after us!"

I have a feeling the king has no idea who the heck you are, Shirou thought to himself, the irony not lost on him that a "perfect" king knew nothing of her subjects. They'd have to work on that problem, but he'd have to get closer to her first. Somehow.

The first man spun around and gave a harsh glare at the teenager, and if Shirou hadn't felt the killing intent of all the Servants who had tried to kill him, – and nearly succeeded – he might've been a bit alarmed. Nearly dying actually came in handy sometimes. Apparently.

"Ye sit your arse down an' shaddup 'fore ye get us all killed, ye worthless piece o' lard! Ye want the king raining down his fury on us? Be a good whelp an' go clean the damned pen!"

When the first man made as if to throw a punch, the teenager backed down, hands raising in surrender as he gave Shirou an expression full of blatant suspicion. Shirou thought he almost saw a thread of hatred in the young man's eyes and found himself immediately prepping himself for some kind of attack. The teenager never dared move anywhere near Shirou, though, instead keeping a wide berth around him and heading out the door, but not without one final glance. The personal servant watched the teenager leave, confusion flowing through his mind.

What was that all about?

"We don't be 'avin' much of worth for a man of your worth, Lord," the emaciated man continued. "We are but simple folk, an' our tastes must differ from people of your kind, methinks."

"It's okay," Shirou reassured him, as best he could, his gaze flashing over to keep an eye on the
other heavyset man in the shack. "Anything is okay. I'm not here to judge. I just heard about this place and wanted to try stuff for myself."

The peasant men traded glances, and the first man's shoulders dropped slightly as if he felt defeated. Shirou watched the man grimace and wondered yet again if he'd made the right decision in coming out here. He was being turned away at every corner, and he really just couldn't understand the significant difference that came with status around here. Couldn't anything be enjoyed amongst like-minded people? What was with this diverge? How was this anywhere near acceptable?

*Does the king even know about this? No way, there's no way she'd stand for it. I mean, even Saber wouldn't have – I mean, I don't think she would have... She's not perfect, but...*

A sliver of doubt crossed Shirou's mind for a moment but he shoved it aside. No, King Arthur had her bad points, but there is no way she would have allowed this – of that he was certain.

"As ye wish, Lord," the man eventually conceded, looking wary and as if he would rather be anywhere than where he currently was. "It ain't our custom to turn away visitors, none, an' we don't be wanting no trouble down here. Don't want the king thinkin' we bad folk, no sir. It'll take a bit of time though."

Shirou chanced a glance through some of the thatched roofing, noting that it wasn't too, too late just yet. He had some time before the evening bell rang – although, if he was actually still in the village at that point, he'd be dead meat. No way he'd be able to deliver the king's meal to her on time. Besides, he was kind of excited about taste-testing the local grub. The painfully cold reception kind of hit him hard, but the thought of trying something new to better his own repertoire always put him in good spirits. Besides, the food here couldn't be any worse than Caster's mess.

He tried giving them an assuring smile. "Don't worry. Take as long as you need."

Conversation between the men died off quickly, and Shirou immediately felt how much he definitely didn't belong in this setting once the men set to work on making something. He quietly watched the burly man leave the shack and then leaned against a wall, his arms crossed over his chest. As the emaciated man sparked a flame in the pit, adding more firewood to make incite the fire, Shirou found himself relaxing slightly with the age-old motions. He shifted his gaze upward when he heard the telltale muffled sound of conversation outside before his entire body flinched at the screech of a pig before it fell suspiciously silent.

Shirou frowned, his heart beating fast as he realized what had just gone on. It was a reality he was well aware of, but that didn't make it any easy practically hearing it for himself, and from so close a location. When they brought slivers of meat inside with some wilted vegetables – he was surprised they had any at all, honestly – he felt his hopes sort of die when the emaciated man chopped the meat into pieces and threw them into a pot. What should have taken at least twenty minutes to properly boil a soup took them around ten, and when the burly man cordially handed him a mud-caked bowl that looked as if it hadn't seen water since it was first sculpted with the soup inside showing bits and pieces of insects, Shirou found himself in a situation that he had never once imagined. Not even the meals as one of the lowest servants in the castle looked even half this bad.

One insects wings fluttered slightly before falling still, and the meat looked ridiculously raw. That wasn't to mention the fact that he had never seen a meal look so disturbingly terrible, but now he was repeating himself.

When the men turned to him to watch his reaction, as it might mean life or death for them, Shirou struggled to recall what was considered decent cuisine, historically speaking. Raw meat meant the
juices would hold more flavor and would go better with whatever additives or seasonings were added. And that wasn't a problem – he'd had steak tartare. It hadn't been his favorite, but he could deal with it, and it'd tasted reasonably well.

But this was pork. There were insects in it. The vegetables were barely cooked.

Baeddan would be aghast, and he doubted that a foodie like Saber would ever even think of touching it.

...I-It couldn't be much worse than anything Taiga's made me. Those "meals" were abominations. She had to be kidding, thinking kani-tama and okonomiyaki were both the same damned thing. Nah, this couldn't be worse.

Shirou took a slurp, optimistically keeping his older sister in mind as the two men plus teenager watched his every motion. The taste of the slop hit his tongue immediately and an involuntary shudder swept through his body. He felt the bits of insect cross his tongue and the softness of the half-heartedly cooked pork rub against his teeth.

HOW THE HELL CAN THIS BE WORSE? he mentally shouted to himself.

His first impulse was to spit the detestable concoction out, but when he considered his position and what consequences that might possibly bring, he prayed to Buddha for good health and forcibly swallowed it down. His eyes watered slightly at the horrifying taste, but he kept his coughs at bay as he mustered a smile for his company.

"Ah... Tastes...great," he lied through his teeth.

There was no way in hell he was feeding this to the king. She'd kill him.

He'd held a more romanticized view of things before coming out to the village itself, but now considered himself better relieved of his previous ignorance.

"...He don't like it," the teenager murmured coldly. "I knew it. The king done sent 'im here to make fools o' us. Are ye laughin' now, ye noble pig? See what ye get fo' makin' fools o' the little peoples?"

The emaciated man turned to the teenager slowly with a murderous gaze. "Shut. Up. I hear one more word outta your mouth and I'll rip that tongue straight out."

Shirou gritted his teeth – he'd ask for this, and he'd see it through. He had a goal, and unfortunately for these people, he wasn't planning on ending things here. He hadn't died yet and wasn't intending to.

Taking a deep breath, he downed the rest of the contents without bothering to chew and tried to ignore the taste and feel of each part of it. Another shudder came over him and his stomach gurgled as if he'd introduced it to a new kind of hell. This...wasn't what he'd expected of his first visit at all.

He held out the emptied, soiled bowl for the burly man to take, and sucked in a deep breath. The emaciated man rubbed his filthy breeches – he hadn't washed those hands of his, had he? – and asked Shirou how it was, but the latter knew what he was really asking for.

Are we going to be punished for this?

Shirou could see it in their faces, could practically feel the anxiety flow from them, and it bothered him. Had it not been him... Had it been some other noble who had eaten that, these men might've
been accused of intentional poisoning of a high official, even if they had tried their best to please the person. With the single question, Shirou knew that telling the truth to any guard, much less the king, would result in their deaths – he held that much power now, at the very least. It was his word against that of the lowest.

It was an unsettling, terrible feeling. Shirou didn't like it. He hadn't liked much of this day at all.

"It was good," he told them softly, his stomach churning from both his realization and the nasty slop he'd just ingested. "I've never tried anything like it" – that much was true – "and wouldn't mind seeing what else people eat around here. I'll tell the king that it's met my expectations."

It would be a total lie, but sometimes, lies were necessary to facilitate better relationships. He'd learnt that the hard way. Besides, the expressions on all three of their faces made him warm with happiness – they looked pleasantly surprised, and almost ashamed of doubting him. The teenager, however, immediately turned frosty, his glare frighteningly hard and unyielding. Shirou wasn't sure what to make of the young man's attitude, and so decided to just ignore it. He could deal with whatever the kid wanted to throw at him anyway.

"I'll come back again," Shirou promised, though he wasn't sure his company would take the declaration well. "I'm looking forward to getting to know the people of this village better. Being cooped up in the castle all the time doesn't make for as great a life as you'd think."

"These people be good ones," the emaciated man said softly. "Nobody dare give ye any trouble, Lord."

"Looking forward to it," the redhead told them, giving a wave as he left the shack.

Another shudder came across him and he exhaled slowly, hoping the contents would stay down until he could get to a more private place. Shirou tried to ignore the open-mouthed stares as he passed by people on his way to the main road. He steadfastly kept his gaze forward, his jaw tightening as he found himself back in the reality of this world where he was a foreigner that didn't fit in with anything. His red hair, his nice clothing, his straight(er) posture, his more formal manner of speech... Everything pointed to him being different, a strange and unwelcome feeling.

Yeah, that was it. He felt...unwelcome. The worst part was, he couldn't go back to where he was from if he wanted to, and there were times when he definitely did.

He took a turn at one house and found himself coming to something of a dead-end. Shirou peered around, trying to regain his bearing as rodents scrambled at his feet. Backtracking, Shirou wound himself around a few other houses until he was at a different, wider path. He ignored the stares of children that came upon him, ignored the women who chittered at the sight of him, ignored the men who grumbled at his presence. And, just when he'd thought he'd gotten the hang of blocking everyone out, he felt killing intent swarm around him, the hairs on the back of his neck rising. Shirou quickly spun around, fists ready as his eyes narrowed dangerously, but the only things he saw were the people terrified at his sudden movements, as if he were ready to beat all of them down.

Seeing this, his fists fell and his shoulders loosened, and Shirou turned away. The moment he found his way back to the main cobbled road, he didn't bother looking back. He didn't have the confidence for it.

His mood was still sour as he stood near the wall in as perfect a posture as he could maintain, his throat burning from having thrown up the poor excuse for food. His mind raced with the burned
images of the people's cold stares and cautious steps away from him. The suspicion and barely concealed hatred for him from the teenager ripped at him, and Shirou wondered why things had to be this way. He had only wanted a glimpse into the lives of normal people, to better understand them and to search for the missing links to his various dilemmas. Instead, he'd come out with ostracism, xenophobia, and a clear distrust for nobility.

With this, he could only surmise the chasm between the people and nobility, and how those in the castle were seen to be in so much better a situation. It irritated – no, angered Shirou that there would be such a vast difference. Those people had practically nothing, and what they did have wasn't really theirs to own – it was for the higher-ranked society. That wasn't just poverty, that was...an abysmal living situation. They shouldn't have had to live like that. The castle had better resources – he'd seen them for himself! Why keep that contained to a select few? Was that intentional?

Shirou felt another sliver of doubt race through him, but bit his bottom lip. King Arthur wouldn't allow this if she knew... She didn't know that, right? She couldn't.

The woman in question silently ate at her meal, but clearly felt the tension in the air. Her main concern, however, was whether to both addressing it. She could only assume that things hadn't gone the way Shirou had hoped.

"...How was your time in the village, Shirou?"

He grunted in slight surprise at the question, his mouth trying to stretch into a smile before he ended up turning away. "It was...all right."

That answer did not bode well whatsoever, but he seemed unwilling to say anything further, and she wasn't of a mind to push him into doing so. She watched as Shirou's gaze burned a hole into the floor and looked down at her stir-fried medley. What should it have mattered to her whether he was happy or not? She'd known that he'd had high hopes – he was always overly optimistic. It did not concern her in the least.

Her spoon clacked against the bowl.

"All right," she sighed. Why was she even asking? "What happened? What's wrong?"

Shirou looked as if he would ignore her at first, but his darkened eyes slowly turned to meet hers, and she was surprised at the jolt of concern she suddenly felt. This was not the Shirou who had left her that morning, jubilant and excited for a new experience, and a sense of sadness and disappointment filled her when she thought that her village did not meet his expectations.

"There was so much hatred," Shirou murmured softly, and King Arthur raised a brow.

"Hatred, you say?" she asked. "Of what –"

"I just wanted to see how things were there," he continued, as if she'd never said a word, and her alarm only grew.

"Shirou," King Arthur started, choosing her words carefully, "what were you expecting to happen?"

He hesitated slightly, his shoulders slumping a bit. "I just didn't think I'd be treated like such an outcast. I didn't expect them to look at me and think I'd want to cause harm. I was just hoping to gain some insight, but..."
"And did you?"

"What?" he asked, eyes wide from surprise at the question.

She focused her gaze on him fully before narrowing and averting her eyes. "Expectations are a mighty and powerful device, Shirou. Not everything can go as one would dare hope. There are things I would have never wanted to happen in my life, but perhaps because they did, I am better for it.

"Shirou," she continued, turning her gaze back to him, "you are an unknown to the people out there. Alas, you were once an unknown even within the castle. But, what did you do about it?"

"I wanted to..."

Realization seemed to dawn upon him and he fell silent again. The king felt herself smile a bit.

"If we all quit when something didn't go as we'd hoped, nothing would ever get done. I do not think the people meant any harm – the more they see of you, the more they will learn to know and trust you. That is to be human."

The redhead let out a deep sigh and ran a hand down his face. "You're right. Yeah, you're right, but... I can't deal with the 'lord' thing, Your Majesty. I'm not nobility. I don't want them to think they're going to die or something if I don't like what they say to me or give me."

At that, King Arthur rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "I'm afraid you'll have to deal with it, Shirou."

She almost chuckled at his obvious disgruntlement, but made certain to maintain her façade. "Consider it this way: you've already shown yourself with such clothing, and received a less than welcome reaction. What might they think if you suddenly appear again in regular clothing this time? Then you would be more untrustworthy, because they wouldn't know if you were pretending to be something you weren't the first time, or if that held true for the next time."

"So, I'm stuck like this?" he muttered under his breath. "Great."

"Consider it a means of growth," she tutored him, and he immediately thought back to that night she'd given him advice as to how to rise up and better himself. The thought made him inwardly groan, but he could feel his mood brightening a little.

A smile, though slight, came across his face as he rubbed the back of his neck. "I guess I can't give up here."

"I suppose you can't," she agreed, humoring him.

In hearing that, Shirou gave her a true smile, one she'd come to expect from him. The fact that he'd seen her when she had been asleep came roaring back into her mind and she felt her heart skip a beat. King Arthur cleared her throat and turned away, her lips forming into a scowl.

"If you are feeling better, then you may leave," she directed him irritably.

Shirou noticed the obvious change in her attitude, but managed a smile anyway. He went up to take her tray, holding it in his hands as he looked down at her. Her narrowed eyes caught his gaze, and she raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Thanks for supporting me, Your Majesty. I hope you have a wonderful evening."
Her scowl died away at his words and the absolute sincerity behind them, and she only just managed to nod her head in consent for him to leave. When the door closed behind him, she frowned, and kneaded the skin of her thumb in between her teeth in thought.

...This might be a problem.

"I see," had been her only words.

Zago had stared at Eos with trepidation, his grey eyes open wide as he created space between himself and her. Despite the fact that Eos had been smiling kindly, the blond could easily tell that her smile didn't reach her eyes, and her corded forearm muscles only belied this truth even further. Zago had shifted a bit closer to Shirou, with the latter not realizing anything was awry.

"Might you wait some time before your next jaunt, Shirou? There is something I'd like to check on."

"Uh, sure?" he'd said inquiringly, not altogether sure what she'd need to check on and how it had anything to do with him.

The next day, she'd given a brilliant smile and wished him a wonderful time in the village when next he went. Zago had grown suspiciously pale and chosen not to offer any commentary whatsoever. Shirou had only known that something had happened, but what, he couldn't be certain. It gave him flashbacks to Rin which inadvertently made him cringe, despite not understanding why.

Some things were better left unknown.

So, after delivering the king her breakfast, complete with another bentou that he had painstakingly made, he headed off into town. King Arthur's expression at the bentou had been fabulously adorable, and Shirou had chuckled to himself at the memory. He would have to take advantage of her dismay before she developed a coping mechanism for it. Hopefully, he might have one or two more surprises before that happened, but most likely not.

Needless to say, he was in a far better mood upon arriving once again at the shack. The stares still bothered him a great deal, but the king had been right in her assessment: they didn't know him, and they definitely didn't know her. Hell, there probably were people who would take advantage of their power and wrought devastation in their wake for every isolated incident that so happened to wound their pride. It was disgusting that anyone like that could exist, but Shirou wasn't one of those people, and he was bound determined to change their perceptions of him.

He pushed the door to the shack open again, clad in a the black clothing from his personal set to hide all the crap he might get on him. The emaciated and burly men from before rose quickly, jolted out of their conversation when he walked in. Shirou noticed that the teenager was very slow to stand, his gaze shadowed with a silent promise of nothing particularly wonderful, but while Shirou wasn't really concerned, something about the boy made him a little cautious.

I'll have to keep an eye on that one.

"Be a pleasure seein' ye again, Lord. What can this humble 'stablishment do for ye?"

He rubbed the back of his head, letting out a sigh as he frowned. Then, he narrowed his eyes and stared straight at the other man.
"I'm sorry for the other day," he started, shocking the other occupants. "I'm new to this area, and not really used to the reception I had, but I should've been a bit better with my attitude."

With that, Shirou gave them a genuine smile, eyes showing determination. "I never formally introduced myself. My name is Shirou Emiya, but feel free to call me Shirou. Pretty sure it's obvious, but I work up in the castle as a servant. So, I'm not a 'lord' – I'm just a regular person lucky enough to have landed a job up there."

At first, he considered telling them he cooked for the king directly, but better to let a surprise attack wait until he knew them better, and vice versa. He had a feeling that wouldn't bode well for his trying to create better relations between the castle folk and the regular people. Yeah, he'd definitely keep that under wraps for as long as he could.

"Whatever ye are, we don't much care," the teenager was quick to announce. "If you're that sorry, how 'bout goin' back to where ye came from, huh?"

The emaciated man slowly turned to the brat, eyes glittering dangerously. "Huw, if ye don't shut up that yap o' yours, I'm gonna give ye a real reason to yip! If ye hate the idea of people wreckin' how you live so much, then maybe ye best consider who ye be treatin' like dung!"

"It ain't that," Huw immediately argued. "It's 'im! He come in here with that cockamamie shit, demandin' we wait on 'im hand an' foot like the noble he be, an' expect us to actually do it? I don't care 'bout no lord, and I ain't 'is slave! I ain't gonna take this crap lyin' down, like you, Pawl! Go on, show 'im your belly, why don't ye? Wag your tail an' bark a bit, eh?"

Pawl's fist flew before the boy had even finished talking, but Shirou managed the catch the man's wrist, holding it effortlessly as he turned to carefully analyzed the Huw. Pawl was completely taken aback, but Shirou offered him no resistance when the man attempted to pull back his hand. Shirou gave Pawl a look, asking him silently to back off as he faced Huw head on.

"Lord –," Pawl attempted to say, obviously trying to plead the boy's case, but Shirou interrupted him quickly.

"I'm not a lord," he stated with finality. "I'm not nobility. I don't have any say in anything. I didn't come here with the intent to command you to obey my every desire, I came because I want to get to know you as you are. I don't mean to cause problems, and I came out into the village because I genuinely care about what's going on. But, if you have a problem, that's something you should say to me instead of taking it out on others."

Huw's face reddened ridiculously, showing his agitation. "Ye don't know anythin', ye miserable sod! Eos be ruined 'cause of ye! Go back up to that pretty, li'l castle o' yours and leave us good folk be!"

Shirou was prepared for another punch, but Huw just glared at him harder before turning and storming out of the shack. The redhead maintained a frown as he watched the teenager leave. He was glad Huw hadn't turned to violence against him, because that wouldn't have ended well. Had any guard noticed the possible altercation, Huw wouldn't have fared well at all. That wasn't forgetting the fact that if King Arthur had heard about it, they might both get into trouble – him for making things difficult, and Huw for daring to hit someone of some importance.


"Lord –"
"'Shirou," he corrected firmly, turning back around. "I'm no dignitary. Just me."

Pawl looked understandably appalled at treating Shirou like an equal. No words came from his mouth for a moment, but then he finally closed his mouth and looked at Shirou with serious contemplation.


Shirou just smiled at that comment before walking away and picking up a leather bag. "So, I wanted to thank you for that dish you made me. The king doesn't know I brought this out here, so this is just going to be our little secret."

Pawl and the burly man watched as he took out a couple of bread rolls and handed one to each of them. The larger man looked at the bread, not at all impressed. He peeled off a part and rolled in between his fingers, looking disgusted by the feel, while Pawl bounced it up into the air a couple of times, feeling the weight.

"Don't think ye cooked this right," he told Shirou. "It still be soft an' lightweight."

Pawl took a couple of sniffs. "An' it smell funny."

Shirou slowly smirked and put his hands on his hips. "Why don't you try it, huh?"

He watched the two men glance at one another before taking a bite, and took childish joy in their expression of complete and utter surprise. Pawl stared at the inside as he chewed slowly, and the larger man stopped eating entirely, unable to deal with the sensation.

"There be fruit in it!" Pawl exclaimed. "An' it taste like butter! I ain't never had somethin' like this befo'! From what heav'n ye be?"

Shirou just chuckled in reply, not bothering to give either one an answer. "I like figuring out new recipes and sharing them with others."

Pawl inspected the bread once more before turning to look at his friend. "Ey, Madog, what say ye?"

"I don't like it," he grumbled in a deep, rumbly voice. "It ain't right. Bread supposed to have some toughness to it, an' this feels like wool from a sheep. It ain't right."

The personal servant struggled some not to feel insulted, and was very glad Rin hadn't been there to hear that. After being aghast at the slight, she might've done something he would have regretted. For now, he just had to reel in his impulses and think of things from their side. If a person was only used to eating a specific thing a certain way, then, obviously, any other way would seem wrong. Shirou would just have to prove he was in the right.

He crossed his arms over his chest, wondering what to say without seeming rude or pushy. Pawl saved him by murmuring,

"She done said ye were different. This definitely be different."

"Who?" Shirou asked, eyebrows raising in curiosity.

"Eos, the vixen," Pawl replied with a slight smile. "Ripped us a new one, she did. Told us that if she had to come down again, she'd rip out our dicks and feed 'em to the pigs."
Shirou stared at them, horrified. "She what!"

"Aye, she a fiery one, that woman. Just like me mam and wifey," Pawl said with pride. "She also told us if we tried to poison ye again, she'd flay us alive. Ah, what a mighty fine woman."

Swallowing slowly, Shirou reconsidered what he knew about Eos, and was very, very determined to never piss her off. Now, he somewhat understood why Zago always tried to flee whenever she seemed irritated, and for half a second, he felt sorry for Gawain. Why did a guy like him marry her? Not that she wasn't amazing or anything, but...damm. And wait, so that crap he'd been given had been intentional? Seriously?

Madog tossed his bread back over to Shirou with a frown, though it was barely visible beneath his glorified bushy beard. His hairy, beefy arms crossed over chest as he peered at the redhead thoughtfully.

"Next time, bring somethin' we can eat, eh? Methinks we need be showin' ye what real food is – not that foo-foo whatever. I'll make ye a big pot o' me special."

"Uh-oh, Shirou internally agonized, but only showed a smile on the outside. "Sounds...good."

Pawl gestured for Shirou to sit down on the ratty, dirty ground, which the latter did with only some slight hesitation. As Madog left the shack for some ingredients presumably, Pawl plopped on the ground, elbows propped on his knees as he leaned in near Shirou.

"Now, 'ow 'bout ye tell me 'ow a foreigner like ye got into that there castle? 'Ow ye know Eos? Ye ain't done nothin' wrong to the lass, 'ave ye? What ye do in that fancy place?"

Shirou was somewhat taken aback at all of the questioning, but when Madog came back holding who-knew-what and obviously showed signs he was listening in on their conversation, Shirou couldn't help but make a slight grin.

"You wouldn't believe me even if I told you," he began, remembering back to the day King Arthur's troops had swooped down upon Tryst. "So, it all started when the king found me basically wasting away in the remains of this town... He promised me a job and a new life."

"No!" Pawl protested. "I can 'ardly believe any o' that! Why you?"

"No!" Pawl protested. "I can 'ardly believe any o' that! Why you?"

Question of the century. Indeed, why him?

Shirou just shrugged and grinned.

Then, as Madog and Pawl listened on, he continued to talk about his journey to the castle, how he'd meet Eos and Zago, and some of the more...entertaining...characters who'd worked alongside him. The other two men listened with fascination to some of his awkward circumstances, calling him out at some points because, really, his life was just fucked up sometimes. He never told them of his time in the underground sewers, nor his jail time, or anything else that might put him in a precarious position if others were to know. Instead, Shirou concentrated more so on the amusing periods of his time in the castle, and really laid it on thick about how much the king had done for him.

When Madog finally produced something for him to eat after nearly an hour, Shirou took it gingerly, unsure of what to make of it. The first bite wasn't anything to shudder over, though it was a bit dry and could do with some seasoning. The salt that was there went well with the meat, whatever the hell it was.
"What's this?" he'd asked, receiving the answer: goose.

Goose? Truthfully, he'd never even considered cooking with goose, and hadn't really worked with it before. He'd had foie gras before, but stuff like that was probably a bit too fancy for his tastes, and he really didn't want to know what the king would have to say about eating livened up liver. Still, the prospect of working with a different kind of animal meat excited him.

"Today, I learned," he muttered to himself as he finally walked out of the old shack a couple of hours after finishing his stew. Pawl and Madog, well, mostly Pawl, had regaled him with stories about their lives as commoners. Their lives didn't seem too much different than his had been in Tryst, but Shirou soon realized that living under the shadow of a king was both a blessing and curse. While he'd already known about the topic of safety, Shirou hadn't quite known the impact of taxes and levies, as it were. Though money was a concept that hadn't quite made it over the canal to Britain yet, losing livestock or produce really put the people in a bind. He hadn't considered where his goods came from and had just assumed people were being paid their dues.

"I might need to find another avenue to getting my ingredients," Shirou murmured as he waved farewell to his new acquaintances (friends?) and started walking down the dirt road even as he saw the low sun in the distance. Luckily, the king would be in a meeting until late, so he had a bit of time to spare.

The hair on the back of his neck slowly began to rise and he immediately slid his gaze over to find Huw staring at him alongside a few other young men.

Wow, talk about creepy, Shirou thought to himself. He waved a hand in their general direction, but only received glares in return. A frown overtaking his smile, the redhead turned away, his own eyes narrowed.

"Well, so long as they don't do anything, then I guess I don't really care..."

King Arthur looked at him expectantly and Shirou had to ponder on it for a bit.

"Actually, all things and done," he started, "this time wasn't half-bad. Except for the little blip on the radar, the people were good to me. I didn't really talk to anyone but Pawl and Madog, though, so I can't speak for anyone else, but those two were nice enough."

"Pawl and Madog?" she inquired. "Your two new friends, I take it?"

"Well, I wouldn't call them friends, but I hope they might turn into that someday," Shirou replied gently.

"Hmm," the king hummed. "I am pleased to hear your experience turned for the better. But, what is this 'blip on the radar' matter you spoke of?"

Shirou met her gaze before looking away as he rubbed the back of his neck. "There's this kid... I'm not sure what his deal is, but, so long as he doesn't cause any problems with me, I don't really care, I guess."

Her green eyes narrowed slightly, her hand rising to hide her mouth as she thought silently.

"Need I assign you a detail to ensure your safety?"

"What? Nah," he told her absentmindedly, starting when he noticed her raise an eyebrow at his vocabulary. "Uh, no, I mean, no sir. I'm fine, thank you."
"Very well, then," she sighed, more so at his lack of awareness than anything else. Then, she cracked somewhat of a smile. "Keep me posted, won't you?"

He grinned back cheerfully. "Will do! I've got to think of what to make you for your next bentou!"

King Arthur's smile promptly fell away and she stood, as if that would make her case any better. "No, you needn't concern yourself with –"

"I'll make one with you holding Excalibur!"

"That's not entirely necessary, I assure –"

"I'm so excited!" he finally told her, fists clenched as he thought of what he'd need to create the picture in his mind.

At that outburst, King Arthur found her protests dying off – she couldn't maintain them when she saw how taken he was by the idea. Though seeing food art of, well, herself, was rather disorienting, she couldn't deny how good a feeling it was to see him so moved to create something. She would just have to...deal.

"Blasphemy! What be the point to all this?"

"It's called 'tenderization' and is basically one of the fundamentals of handling meat."

Pawl seemed as if he wanted to tear his hair out. "Why should I be beatin' me meat? It all tastes the same!"

Shirou stared at him with an aghast expression. "No, it doesn't taste the same. Tenderizing it helps bring out its natural properties and makes for a better tasting, more flavorful concoction. It will take whatever other flavors are put together with it and naturally absorb them."

Pawl and Madog shared a dubious look between themselves while Huw sulked in a corner, watching on grumpily. Shirou gave him a side glance, still unsure of what to do about the kid. It had been a few weeks now since they'd first met, and Shirou was making absolutely zero headway in that department. The fact of the matter was that Huw didn't really do anything other than pass acidic glares and make asinine comments, so there wasn't much for Shirou to do. He'd just have to keep wearing the brat down.

Huw met his gaze and sneered before rising and stalking out of the shack. Shirou watched him go, golden-brown eyes narrowed as he held back his frustration.

"Ye full o' horse dung, Shirou," Madog grumbled. "Meat be meat. This green stuff ain't gon' change that none."

Shirou came back to reality with a jolt, before growling deep in his throat. He snatched away the steak out of Madog's large hand, muttering, "Give me that. And it's called 'basil', not 'green stuff'."

And I'm really starting to run out. Where am I going to find more? I might have enough for a month more, maybe.

"Can ye even cook?" Pawl asked, an eyebrow raised. "Ye always be comin' here, acting all high and mighty. Lord."

Shirou glared in rebuttal at the title before smirking. "Didn't I tell you? I'm a cook in the castle."
Used to work in the kitchens."

Pawl rolled his eyes and shrugged his shoulders. "So ye worked in the kitchens. Don't make ye no better than us people out here."

Shirou's knife cut through the steak as the redhead continued to smile. "Then, a month ago, I was promoted to His Majesty's personal servant and cook all his meals for him."

The slack-jawed expression on the two men's faces nearly made him burst out laughing. He settled for pushing a couple of cooked steak cubes into their mouths.

A couple of hours later, Shirou passed along his farewells – it had been a few weeks, but he had been concentrating most of his energy on making a couple of friends as foundation for whatever other activities he wanted to pursue in the future. But, today, he was intent on finally exploring a bit more. Madog had told him to head deeper into the district, farther away from the main road if he wanted a better experience for himself.

Walking along the road, he passed by several people along the way, each one who knew nothing of him staring as they passed. The ones he'd seen off and on gave him shaky smiles, which he returned with pleasure. One young girl offered him a somewhat wilted flower, and he noticed the child's mother paling from where she stood a couple of meters away. Shirou accepted the flower with a soft smile, gently patting her head and offering the mother a, hopefully, reassuring smile as well. The mother didn't seem to calm down even after her daughter returned to her, but she did bow her head slightly in greeting.

Considering that people wouldn't even make eye contact with him before, this felt like he'd made some progress. And honestly? It felt good. Still awkward, but...good.

Shirou mentally calculated the direction he was going, scaling a map in his mind for later contemplation. He was so busy looking around at the rundown décor of everything that he didn't notice the mangy dog until he practically tripped over it.

"Shit..." he cursed when the dog whipped around to glare at him.

The dog's fur was matted and shedding at various points. Its reddened eyes looked straight at him, even as Shirou could see it was tired and worn out. The dog bared its yellow teeth, and they seemed to be lot bigger than he recalled ever seeing on a dog. Its pointy ears stood tall until it growled dangerously, bending low to the ground. He could see its muscles coiling and tremoring at its perceived threat.

"Whoa, there," he said, his hands in front of him as if to calm the dog down. He was all too aware of several people staring at the spectacle, but Shirou tried to focus solely on the angered mutt. He leaned down as if to pet it when it snapped at him, and he whipped his hand back.

Eyes widening when he saw a few more flea-bitten mongrels slink into view as the first one moved closer to its prey – namely, him. Shirou shuffled a couple of steps back and winced when he heard the surprised yip of yet another dog. Taking a deep breath when the first dog seemed to grow irate, he whipped his gaze around to look back at the one he'd stepped on. It was on the smaller side, making Shirou suck in a breath.

"A puppy? Doesn't even look a year old."

Shirou didn't even bother to try to do something about the situation and instead, unashamedly, bolted down the dirt path. He heard one dog raise up a cry and the sound of them following after
him. He raced past one person after another, each one darting out of his way and staring openmouthed at the havoc chasing after him. As he raced past a couple of kids, they screamed out upon seeing the charging dogs, effectively spooking the mutts for just long enough for Shirou to duck into an alley and out of their sight. The alley was overshadowed by several houses all the way down, enough that it was too dark for anyone to see anything incriminating.

Coming to a sliding stop, Shirou spun around, ready to trace something that he could use to beat the dogs off. Just as his prana gathered within his hands and formed an unrecognizable object, Shirou jumped backwards to give himself a bit more distance as the first dog came ripping around the corner. He readied his traced baton and while inwardly cursing himself for causing this kind of mayhem, swung it in an upwards arc, catching the first beast under its front leg.

The dog made a high-pitched whimper of pain, but Shirou could tell he hadn't done any real damage. The dog would be fine, and would hopefully be deterred from following the personal servant any more than that.

His golden-brown eyes instead focused on the other dogs that came barreling into the alley at him, their mouths open wide as froth spat out. Clucking his tongue, Shirou quickly analyzed the best and most merciful way to take the dogs down, his baton set and ready. He stepped forward smoothly and slapped the weapon against one mongrel before letting the ricocheted force swing his arm back into yet another. Each dog hit the ground hard, stunned from his blow and too surprised to rise quickly again.

"What ye be doin'?" came a cry behind him, and Shirou cast his gaze back to see a young woman stare at him with fear and dismay, a bag of bread in the crook of her arm.

Shirou gave her a cursory glance before refocusing on the situation at hand the moment he heard a deep, menacing growl. He looked down at his baton, back at the girl, and then at the dogs ready to tear him a new one. Then, he realized that it might not have been a good idea to cause such a scene and that if the king found out, she'd be pissed. Rolling his eyes, Shirou took one step back, then another, and another after that before progressing into a run as he grabbed the girl's hand and ran down the alley with her in tow.

"What ye be doin'?" she shouted. "Who are ye? I'll call the guards!"

"I'll call them myself!" he promised. "But did you see those dogs back there? They're out for blood!"

"Maybe if ye hadn't beaten them half to death –"

"Less complaining, more running!" Shirou chastised.

Shirou dragged her after him before noticing the bread she still held onto so religiously. He bit his lip for the slightest second, finally coming to a decision and stopping in place. She stumbled into him, eyes fiery with indignation until he stole a loaf of bread from her – then she was both aghast and furious alike.

"What ye be doin'!" she cried out with disbelief.

"Sorry, just –" he tried to reason, but gave up and just threw the food item at the frothing dogs.

It bounced across the ground like a rock – that's how hard it was – and the dogs looked at it with confusion. That was good enough for him. Shirou grabbed the girl's hand again and flew down the path just as one dog perked up, realizing its prey was running away. Shirou didn't even bother
looking back, so intent on getting away to relative "safety". Only the moment his feet crossed onto the cobbled main road did he finally stop running, his chest heaving a bit. He hadn't a good bit of exercise for some time, but he had to say that it felt good to run as if his life were on the line. Well, his hadn't been, but taking hers into consideration is what made skedaddle so fast.

"How dare ye!" the young woman screamed at him, making Shirou wince.

"I'm sorry," he apologized sincerely. "If we hadn't run away, those dogs would've hurt you."

Her pale green eyes widened slightly before narrowing. "Obviously! I be talkin' 'bout takin' me fam's livelihood an' throwin' it to the dogs! Literally!"

Shirou sighed and placed his hands on hips. "I know. I shouldn't have. That was wrong of me. But I promise to bake you another in exchange, I swe--"

His sentence cut out when her hand slapped across his face. It didn't necessarily hurt, per se, but it was enough to throw his head to the side. Shirou lamented inwardly as he placed his hand against his heated cheek. Rin and Taiga would've been proud of this girl, but why did it always come at the cost of his physical health?

Honestly, he could've avoided the blow easily, but this was hardly the first time he'd pissed off a woman and had it taken out on him with physical abuse, and it was usually better for them to get the anger out of their system before it boiled into a bigger rage. Shirou kept cupping his face as he grimaced.

"I said I was sorry," he grumbled more to himself than her.

She looked less than appeased. "Me da and ma slaved to make that to pay our dues, an' ye just tossed it to the dogs. Then ye say you'll just...bake another? Like it be that easy? Who do ye think ye are? We don't be needin' your charity, ye hear me?"

Shirou took a hard look at her, frowning when he realized she was sincerely offended, thinking that he was trying to bribe her with anything less than her family had strove to make. He could understand how she felt and he let out a deeper sigh. She was completely right – he wouldn't have liked it if anyone messed thrown out something he'd made and whimsically promised to make something they thought to be of similar quality. On the contrary, he'd be a little pissed off. If there was anything Shirou prided himself in, it was definitely and most certainly his cooking. He shouldn't have spoken of it so lightly. He opened his mouth to apologize with all the sincerity he was capable of.

"You there! What is the commotion all about?"

Both the girl and Shirou turned to see a couple of guards making their way over, their expressions hardened with annoyance. Groaning inwardly as the marched up, Shirou wished the road would just suck him down and out of this situation. The girl pointed her free arm at Shirou, obviously intent on ratting him out, but the guards ignored her in favor of him.

"My Lord! Has something happened?"

The girl stared at the guard who'd spoken for a moment before her widened eyes turned slowly towards him. Shirou actually did let out a groan when she mouthed the word, 'lord'.

"No," he told them in a clear voice, feigning authority. "Nothing, it's fine."

Go away.
"I saw 'er hit 'im!" declared the second guard, and Shirou nearly glared at him for making the situation sound more complicated.

"That right?" asked the first guard to the girl who looked as if she'd stepped into an alternate reality. "Did you hit His Majesty's Personal Servant?"

Shirou knew the instant the gravity of the situation had slammed into her as her face slowly but surely drained of color. The fingers wrapped around her bag of bread tightened as they started to tremble almost violently. Her pale green eyes looked first towards his own before trailing down and seeing the embroidered initials on his chest. Shirou immediately realized that she was petrified, absolutely terrified that she would be killed for her actions. The scenario gripped at him and he stepped in front of her to face the two guards.

"It's fine. I asked her to because I did something stupid."

"My Lord, she needs to be punished for her slight against you," the first guard reasoned.

"The only slight here," Shirou told them as he diverted the conversation at hand, "is that you guards aren't taking care of those dogs in the western sector. They're rabid and cause disease – a lot of people could get hurt because they're running around uninhibited. What's His Majesty going to say when I tell him that I nearly got killed by a pack of them?"

Both soldiers froze from his chiding and looked at one another. The first guard muttered something to the other one, with the latter dashing away soon after. The former then bowed to Shirou.

"We will perform a sweep of the western sector immediately... Uh, My Lord, do you mean the entire western sector? Both the northern and southern sides?"

Shirou leveled his gaze at the man, one eyebrow raised.

"So, are you telling me you want a plague breaking out near His Majesty's castle thanks to those beasts? Yeah, both sides!"

"Yes, of course My Lord! Consider it done!"

"I'll be sure to inform His Majesty of your dutiful service," Shirou replied in monotone. The guard bowed again before rushing away and out of sight. Shirou glared at his backside before slumping his shoulders as the danger was averted.

Turning back to look at his acquaintance, he found her on the ground, her head pressed hard against the cobbled road. Her entire frame was trembling and her bag of bread went unnoticed. Shirou felt a twinge in his chest and gritted his teeth as he bent down and gently pulled her back up by the arms. It took some time before she would stand fully on her own, and he used a finger to tilt her head back to look up at him. Tears ran down her face, her eyes wide with abject terror. Shirou felt a wave of revulsion run through him as the thought that a mere title could cause so much unwarranted distress. It was as if he held her life in his hands, and it really didn't feel good to him.

Shirou noticed another crowd had gathered around him, and he found himself glaring at all of the onlookers. Silently reaching down to pick up her bag of bread, he held it in his arms tightly before taking hold of her hand.

"Come on," he murmured. "I'll take you home."

He'd be late getting back to the castle, but he felt this was somewhat important, and he'd explain as much to the king if she happened to get irritated over the matter. She'd probably be more
concerned than annoyed though – he was never late with her meals. Ever.

"I slapped ye, I mean, you," she whispered through her tears as he pulled her along. "I hit a lord. I'm so sorry, me, uh, My Lord. I'm so sorry. I should've never... I'm so sorry. I beg o' ye, you, your forgiveness..."

Shirou stayed quiet as she started to apologize over and over again. She continued for the next straight ten minutes before he'd finally had it. As he heard the sounds of yelping dogs in the distance, much to his disgust, Shirou finally pushed her into an area that didn't yield as much foot traffic. He set the bag down before sitting down himself and patting the ground next to him for her to join. She trembled ridiculously as she slowly, slowly, sat beside him.

"Hey," Shirou whispered to her, catching her attention immediately. "It's okay. I'm not mad."

"I-I hit ye, you. I'm..."

"Yeah, and pretty hard, too. Damn," he tried to joke, rubbing his cheek for dramatic effect. "Girls are scary creatures."

She just stared at him before lowering her gaze docilly. Shirou felt a one-ton rock of guilt crush him down.

"Hey," he tried again. "What's your name?"

There was a pause as she swallowed and wiped her nose. Looking completely miserable, she murmured, "Lodes, My Lord."

"That's a beautiful name," Shirou told her, and he fully meant it. "Mine is Shirou. I'm glad I got to meet you."

Lodes looked up with some trepidation. "M-My Lord?"

"Uh-uh," Shirou corrected with a grin. "It's Shirou. And guess what, only the people I like get to call me that."

He saw that some of her trembling had gone away as they talked just to one another. "People you like?"

"Yep," he replied with a nod. "Besides, I don't get to meet many girls like you. English women are so fiery, did you know that?"

Color began to return to her face as her cheeks reddened a bit. "I-I'm sorry. I was... I was so mad... And then I..."

"Nope!" he told her so quickly that she jolted back. "No more apologies. I apologized, you apologized. We're good now. No harm done."

The panic drained from Lodes' face. "H-How can I make this up to you, My, I mean, Shirou?" She stumbled mid-sentence when he glared at her.

"Hmmmm," he hummed to himself. "I don't get out of the castle much, so I don't really know anyone. I could use some friends. Ah, I know. I nominate you to be my friend."

"Me?" she squeaked. "But, a friend o' a lord...?"

Shirou only smiled at her softly. Lodes looked at him, her eyes searching his face for any hint of
jest or insincerity, and her cheeks flushed more as she looked downwards.

"I-I would like that," she whispered, her hands clasping. Shirou grinned at her.

"Good," he said with some finality. "Friends for life."

He was happy to see the small smile on her face as she looked back up at him. With that said, Shirou stood up and reached out a hand to help her up. Lodes looked at the hand, and after a moment of hesitation, lightly placed hers in his. Shirou pulled her to her feet before picking up the bag of bread and holding it out to her. She took it graciously and looked happy until her expression darkened.

"What if those soldiers recognize me?" she asked worriedly.

"Oh man," Shirou complained. "Those guys are a real pain. Don't worry – I'll be back to visit you. That's what friends do, after all, right?"

Lodes couldn't stop the smile that threatened to spill across her face. "Th-Then, ye had best come around a lot."

"An invite! Awesome!" Shirou cheered. "I'll take it!"

His dramatics finally made laughter bubble out of her as she tried to grasp for some control over herself, Shirou just smiled again. It was unfortunate that he had put her in this kind of position, but he was glad that he could do something about it, more or less. She seemed...better than before, but he'd have to visit her a lot more to seal the deal, and that was fine. He was more than willing to see her again, if at all possible.

"Let me take you home," Shirou said gently. "I need to know where I have to go so I can visit again."

"Okay, uh, jus' follo' me," she directed him, her hand still in his.

Hopefully the king wouldn't be too mad at him.

Shirou prayed to whatever god existed that he survived this encounter unscathed, for the most part. His muscles tightened as he pushed his shoulders back while King Arthur frowned at him from behind her hand – and he knew she was frowning, even if nothing was blatantly written on her face. She made as if to speak before shaking her head a tinge and looking away from him.

"Let me see if I can aptly summarize your latest particular fiasco," she began, causing him to wince. "According to reports, you caused some mayhem within the guard by essentially telling my guards – and I assume we are on the same page that I command them, not you? – that they should deal with...dogs. Nothing so eventful as murder or anything else that would cause pause, but...dogs. Explain."

If Shirou had known what kind of day this would turn out to be, he might've just lounged around some with Zago instead. But, had he done that, he wouldn't have met Lodes. It was basically worth it, he guessed.

"As I was leaving Pawl and Madog's place, the same one I've been going to for the past few weeks or so, I more or less ran into a rabid dog. I think I caught it off guard and made it angry. Maybe I was in its territory – I don't know. But then, more came, and –"
He fell silent for a bit. "I should've handled it better. But I came across the girl, and the first thought on my mind was to get her out of danger. I dragged her towards the main road where I knew we'd be safer, but I also threw one of her loaves of bread at the dogs as a distraction. She was mad, and didn't know who I was and slapped me. That prompted the guards to come over, and I made them go dog-hunting instead because I didn't want her to get in trouble for something that was my fault in the first place. And... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause you any problems."

Shirou felt her eyes on him, studying him carefully.

"Is that absolutely what took place, Shirou?"

He looked up at her serious expression, as if she would strike him down were he to tell a single lie. He couldn't deny that he loved seeing this side of her at times, even if she scared the bejesus out of him at the same time.

"Yes," he replied, any hint of humor gone from his voice.

She narrowed her eyes at him, her fingertip tapping against the desktop in a slow rhythm as she thought things through in her head. After what seemed like forever, King Arthur let out a long sigh and rubbed her face with a hand.

"Very well," she finally said almost listlessly. "I will take your word for it."

There was another pause and she looked back at him. "I can trust your word, can't I?"

Shirou looked back at her as if they'd reached a breaking point in their relationship before nodding earnestly. "I wouldn't lie to you."

She slowly nodded back, her green eyes showing a tiredness he really disliked seeing. "I want to trust you," the king murmured. "I will contend with the commander of the guard. I only ask that you don't cause me much more trouble, even though I realize this wasn't wholly your fault."

He didn't bothering saying anything in return as she stared into space for some time. Eventually, she sat up fully and looked down at her cooled meal. Without hesitation, she picked up her fork and knife and cut into her slice of steak.

"How was your day otherwise?" she asked in a muted tone.

"Not bad," he answered, never missing a beat. "No, actually, it was pretty good. I made a new friend and might have discovered some new recipes to work with. It's pretty fun going out there now."

"That's good."

Shirou fell silent, watching as the king calmly ate her meal. She never once looked at him, but seemed to be in her own world, thinking of something deeply in her head. He could tell she seemed a bit more stressed than usual, which was nothing out of the ordinary considering her job, and he felt pretty crappy about adding to her load. Looking around himself once, he lifted a hand to his mouth as he cleared his throat. She slowly directed her gaze over towards him, eyebrows raised.

He met her gaze head-on. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

Confusion marred her features with a tinge of amusement. "I feel as if I've heard that phrase more from you in the past months than my entire life."
Shirou couldn't help chuckling. "I'm just grateful that you've helped me so much, even though it's obviously taking its toll on you. I'll be sure to create a magnificent lunch for you to enjoy. I wonder what I should make it look like this time..."

"No, no," she was quick to say. "You need not concern yourself on my account. I wouldn't wish you to focus on such things when you've more important matters to see to."

He almost smiled – he knew *exactly* how little she liked seeing her own face on the top of her lunch box, but it was ever entertaining for him. Grasping for every ounce of control he had, Shirou gave her an expression full of dismay.

"...You don't like my creations?"

King Arthur didn't answer immediately and only gave him as blank an expression as possible.

"...They're not of a high enough caliber?"

Shirou saw a sliver of guilt creep into her expression, though he only noticed because he thought himself rather good at reading her.

"I don't recall saying that," she muttered, turning away. "They're finely made, of course."

"Great!" he exclaimed. "I think I'll try to design Sir Kay's face into it as well, with the both of you smiling. That'll be a challenge, but should be worth it."

He took away her tray even as she stared at him with unmasked horror. Quickly bowing, he rushed from the room before she could find the words to tell him otherwise. And, in his wake, King Arthur stared some at the closed door as she reseated herself and then looked at her stacks of paper, giving a soft sigh.

After visiting with Pawl and Madog for a while and staying far, far away from the creeper Huw, Shirou took it upon himself to pay a visit to his newest buddy. It took some time for him to navigate the streets again, but before long, he was standing in front of a somewhat mediocre stand. The stand looked as shoddy as any other, but the smells wafting from it were wonderful. At least, they smelled a whole lot greater than the feces and dirty livestock crossing the street. Shirou had even noticed a couple of chickens just strolling across the dirt paths – that wasn't mentioning the goats, pigs, dogs, and whatever else he'd happened upon thus far.

He couldn't deny the interesting experience of spending so much time with all those animals, but the smell really was god-awful. Shirou could definitely say that visiting the bakery had to be the highlight of his day.

Approaching the stand with a smile on his face, he was pleased to note that Lodes knew who he was immediately. She hesitated at first, but a smile slowly grew across her face.

"Decided to show, did ye?" she asked somewhat playfully, although he could tell she was still concerned about any punishment that might directed her way.

Shirou just grinned before looking around. "So, you sell your wares here in the square?"

"Well, mo' a circle, really," Lodes corrected, almost automatically. "An' yes, that's right. Normally, me ma would help me, but with a wee bit on the way, Pa wants 'er restin' as much as possible."

"Another one?" Shirou inquired. "How many siblings do you have?"
Lodes held up a hand to ask him to wait as one person came by, holding up a bloodied package.

"'Ow much can I get fo' this, Lodes?"

"What kind o' meat ye got there, Adda?"

"Cut from me own goat. She was getting' sickly and done gave me a few litters already, so I put 'er out o' 'er misery."

Lodes was all smiles. "Oh, she were a sweet one! That'd normally go fo' three, but ye always been good to us. Take a fourth, but keep it a secret from me pa, eh?"

The man named Adda let out a round of laughter. "He'd string me by me neck if I took too much. Give me three, and I'll go drop this off personally."

When Adda left and made his way down a dirt path, Lodes turned back to Shirou. "Sorry Lord, er, Shi...?"

"Shirou."

"Interesting name," she said with more hesitation than before.

He shrugged. "I get that a lot. Anyway, siblings?"

"Right," Lodes replied, a hand on her hip. "I be the oldest o' four so far. With the other one comin', that'll make it five. I quite liked bein' able to sleep through the night, though."

"Holy," Shirou muttered disbelievingly. "Four kids? And you're the oldest at what, fourteen?"

She gave him a frown full of irritation. "Sixteen springs, if you will. I am hardly a child. Fact, when I get married meself, I plan to have a few dirt rats of me own, ye see."

"Any prospects so far?"

When her gaze fell downward, Shirou instantly felt like a jerk. He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly and then cleared his throat, showing her the bag he'd brought. Lodes looked at it curiously with an eyebrow raised as if it might be some kind of bomb. When he entreated that she take it, she did so, warily. With the go-ahead from him, Lodes reached into the bag to pull out a freshly baked loaf of bread, although it looked nothing like any of the ones her family had cooked.

"Be this...bread?" she asked while turning it over in her hands.

Shirou shrugged. "I promised to pay you back for that one I, literally, threw to the dogs. The one you slapped me for, remember?"

Her cheeks flushed red at the memory, although he wasn't sure if it was from embarrassment or anger. Lodes eyed the bread instead of looking back at him, inspecting it slowly.

"I ain't neve' seen a bread like this befo'. Ye sure ye cooked it right?"

"Positive," he answered dryly.

Breaking off a piece between her forefinger and thumb, she tested its elasticity before frowning at him, obviously unimpressed. "I don't think ye did."

"Ugh, just taste it first, at least."
Lodes wrinkled her nose, her brow furrowing as she stared at it with obvious distaste, but eventually did as asked. Her eyes widened incredibly as she chewed through it, but she adamantly refused to look over at him. She swallowed it softly, almost demurely, and didn't offer a word about its taste.

Shirou smirked, his arms crossing over his chest. "You loved it."

"It was positively disgusting," she muttered.

"Wha –" he sputtered, his pride taking a hit. Then, he eyed her a bit harder before seeing another tinge of rose across her face. "You liked it."

Lodes stomped on Shirou's foot, making him flinch back. He grunted out his pain and took a couple of steps away. Wincing as he looked remorsefully at his injured foot, he shook his head.

"You must've really liked it."

"It be too soft," she complained.

Shirou rolled his eyes. "You're still eating it. That was supposed to be big enough to share with your family."

Lodes sniffed before quickly smiling at a passerby and then taking yet another bite. "I would hardly allow me fam to eat somethin' this poorly cooked. Disgraceful."

"How utterly rude of me, Your Highness," Shirou deadpanned as he rubbed his foot against the ground. "I'll be certain to make a good showing next time around."

She passed him a gentle smile which he found to be contradictory to her everyday personality. It was pleasant to see on her face and he found himself smiling right back.

Lodes quietly ate the rest of the loaf as the two of them stood at the stand, watching people walk by here and there. Not a great many people appeared in need of bread that day, or any other by what he could tell, and business was slow-going. Lodes didn't seem fazed any, though, so Shirou assumed this was par for the course, but still felt it was something of a shame. It had to be hard to make a living if no one was really interested in what you had to "sell", so to speak. He didn't really understand the trade system, either.

"I think me little brother would o' loved that," Lodes told Shirou quietly as the sun began to make its way down through the sky. "One o' them, anyway. Always gettin' into messes, makin' problems, but he loves tryin' new things. Unlike me an' me pa. Takes after Ma, methinks."

Shirou knew he didn't have much time left before he had to make his way back to the castle, but this was the first time someone had opened up to him about their family ever since Tryst, aside of Eos admitting it out of some kind of guilt. He couldn't deny that he was feeling a bit eager to make some tight connections to other people and spread out his network a bit. Sliding his hands into his pockets, – pockets he had fought hard to have in his breeches – he nodded slowly.

"Tell me about them," he encouraged her.

An expression of innocent happiness came over her, probably without her noticing whatsoever. She began to brighten up.

"Well, there's me ma and pa, an' they're great. Pa works the oven an' takes care o' the firin', and Ma helps get the materials together – the flour and stuff. Then, there's me – I'm the oldest, that is.
Sometimes, when me ma ain't feelin' too good, then I'll help Pa with things, but I'm normally out there passin' off the wares. Then, I've got three younger brothers – Aron, Meical, an' Brice. Aron's eleven winters around, Meical's seven autumns, an' Brice was born three springs ago.

"Aron be a prat, really. Always actin' as if he knows better than me, but don't want to put forth any effort when I try to get him to do me job. A pain in the rear, if you ask me. Meical's still cute, but likes to pretend he be some dashin' knight. He falls on his face more often than he manages to his anythin' with a stick. An' as for Brice?"

Lodes fell silent for a moment, her face scrunched up into an odd expression. "...Brice is Brice."

"...Sounds difficult," Shirou commented after a short while, nodding his head at a passerby. "I only have an older... Well, actually, I guess I have two older sisters, and I only met the second one about seven years ago or so. It was a weird meeting."

"Lord willin', I sure hope to have another girl get born," she muttered. "I'm so tired o' seein' willies everywhere. Boys be so crude."

Then, as Shirou was chuckling at that, she looked him up and down. "I hope ye don't be runnin' 'round with your knickers off, eh?"

He burst out laughing while thinking of what King Arthur might say to that. "No way in hell. It's nice to be free and all, but I'm cool with clothes."

Bumping him on the shoulder, Lodes nodded her head up at him. "Well, ye plan to tell me 'bout these sisters o' yours?"

"Hah," he chuckled. "I couldn't begin to describe them. Taiga, my adopted sister... She's a pain. I mean, she means well and wants the best for me, but, she's a mess all the way around. Can't believe a woman like her became a teacher, but, eh, she's good at it. And Ilya?"

Tilting his head, Shirou then shrugged his shoulders. "Hah, Ilya's...Ilya. That's all I can say about that."

"Kind o' like to see Brice meet this Ilya o' yours," Lodes joked.

"She'd kill him," he said with a smile, not a hint of jest in his tone, but Lodes took it as a joke anyway.

The two of them looked at one another before bursting out laughing.

"Family, right?" he hedged, and she gave him a wink.

"Got to love 'em, eh?"

Their laughter came to an abrupt end once the bells starting ringing across the sector, signaling that evening had fallen. Shirou lost all sign of amusement, a frown coming across his face as he looked back at the castle.

"Damn," he murmured.

"Get on, then," Lodes told him. "I look forward to a better piece o' bread next we meet, hm?"

Shirou put a hand on her shoulder as a sign of greeting before jogging away down the dirt path.

He zigged and zagged around people making their way home for the night, but was too busy to pay
much attention around him, his thoughts solely on getting to the castle in enough time to make
dinner. He was just worried that he wouldn't make it back in time.

"Hold on, Your Majesty. So duck is basically the same as a chicken?"

"Raising geese and chicken go hand in hand, Shirou," King Arthur informed him. "There are
plenty of geese around, it wouldn't make sense to have one be any more valuable than the other.
Horses and cows are far rarer and more difficult to breed and raise, and thus when you intend to
buy something of incredible value, those work as a better type of deposit. With a horse, I might
possibly get armor, weaponry, food, and housing altogether. A chicken will grant me barely
enough food, and a duck equates to just as much. A cow would get me three of the options, but
there's also the possibility that it will feed a family, which gives it even higher value."

"What about pigs, then?" Shirou asked, still somewhat confused.

"If you need an order, I suppose it might go something like: chicken, goose, pig, cow, horse. That's
for normal livestock, in this case. It is completely different if you also mean to refer to what can be
cought in the wild. Wolf meat is absolutely disgusting, but the pelt, if of decent quality, might gain
you some goods. Deer is also very important in that the hide, antlers, and meat can all be used in
some manner. You need to consider what use can be gained from each part of the animal and that
will form an appraisal of how valuable it is."

Shirou hadn't been prepared for a lecture when he'd posed the question of how the hell the trade
system worked, but he supposed he shouldn't have been surprised. It was also something King
Arthur appeared willing to instruct him over without any misgivings, and she seemed pleased that
he was willing to learn at all. The system really didn't apply to him whatsoever because he didn't
deal with transactions within the castle, but if he planned to keep visiting the village, it would be
nice to know what he was talking about, at least.

Rubbing the back of his head, he tried to consider each part of her explanation, but it was so
completely foreign to him that he'd probably need some more time to let it soak in. And, if the
knowing look on her face were any indication, she hadn't expected him to understand from the get-
go anyway.

"Right," Shirou muttered. "I'll...figure it out."

"Excellent," she retorted with that same knowing grin, and he knew that SHE knew it irked the
living hell out of him.

"You're doing this on purpose, Your Majesty," Shirou complained irritably.

King Arthur shrugged one shoulder loftily. "Whyever would I do that to my most favorite
servant?"

And suddenly, it clicked: "This is about your bentou boxes, isn't it?"

She gave him an inquisitive expression, something full of played innocence. "I am not nearly so
petty."

"I'll stop," he grunted, kind of annoyed that she was taking away his fun. "I promise. I'll just make
regular lunches."

"Wonderful," King Arthur replied, finally melting into a natural, soft smile. "But, enough of that.
Tell me of your day, Shirou. It must have been something grand for you to have stayed so late."
At that, Shirou felt his frustration die away. "Your Majesty, today was...brilliant. I mean, I didn't do much other than talk to this one girl – the one I spoke to you about before, but it felt...normal. It felt like I'd never left home and was talking to one of my everyday friends about just normal things. There was no question of status, nothing about the harsh world we live in, but just... We were just talking, and it was great. I got to share stuff about people who mean a lot to me, and she told me about her family, too. I feel like it was the first day when everything felt right, you know?"

When he saw her look of contemplation, he flinched somewhat and ran over what he'd said in his head. He didn't notice the smile come across her face and when he looked up with some confusion, it was already gone.

"I'm happy to hear that, Shirou," the king said quietly, without any pretense. "It has been a difficult month for you, but it truly is wonderful to see that each adventure has come to be more gratifying for you. I want you to love Camelot as I see and experience it as I cannot."

Shirou didn't know what to say to that, but he what he did know was that he felt a sense of pride, a sense of justice in the king cheering for his success. It was humbling and he was glad to be experiencing it.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," he replied sincerely. "I know it's only going to get even better."

Every time he sat and ate with Pawl and Madog, they always managed to get into some escalated argument about his food, but this time, when he showed them how make a creamier soup using cow's milk, he didn't receive any backhanded retorts or complaints. In fact, they didn't really say much of anything as all he could hear was the sound of them slurping it down. That worked for him.

"I ain't never really drank milk befo'," Pawl murmured while looking back into the empty pot over the fire pit. "An' now I'm drinkin' it in me soup. I practically feel like royalty now. Be this how the nobles eat? I can't damn well imagine eatin' like this ev'ry day."

"Eh, technically, I'm not supposed to take stuff from the castle, but," Shirou whispered, looking around conspiratorially, "but I won't tell the king if you don't."

Madog let out a gruff huff. "Me lips be shut."

"Same here, mate," Pawl said eagerly. "I want me a piece o' that bread again in exchange."

"Ugh, you're killing me, Pawl," Shirou grumbled, acting agonized. "Fine, I'll make something for you."

"Goin' be visitin' that there girl friend of yours, eh?" asked Pawl, elbowing Shirou with a wink.

Shirou just stared at him uncomprehendingly. "Yeah, planned on it."

With a look outside, he stood up quickly. "And I'd better get to it before it gets too late, I guess. I've been talking to you guys way too much for one day."

"An obvious highlight of your day, boy," Pawl rebuked unashamedly.

"Yeah, whatever," Shirou told them as he waved good-bye.

He'd honestly hoped to get in a bit more time with Lodes than he would have, and he only hoped she hadn't packed up her stand for the day. It had been a few days since he'd last seen her, and he
was eager to catch up on how her days had been and if she'd sold well. He even had prepared a few loaves so that her family might hopefully be able to eat some, too. With how she'd stuffed the last piece down her throat, maybe he should have doubled the amount, but who's to say she wouldn't be generous for once?

Eh, it didn't seem like her style.

The moment he reached her stand, disappointment came over him – he'd probably just missed her within the past half-hour or so, but that probably meant her family hadn't quite sat down for dinner just yet. At least, he hoped they hadn't. Even if so, Shirou would just drop off the bread and wish them a good evening.

Walking by the area near her house, he realized he didn't quite know which one it was, and ended up asking some passersby.

"An' who you be?" one woman asked him cautiously, a hand over her bust as if he were going to maul her or something.

"A friend," he explained easily. "I hang out with her in the square sometimes."

She still looked incredibly suspicious as she stared him up and down until a man came up to her and gave him a glance. Shirou looked back over at him, instantly recognizing him as the man who'd bought some bread with meat to trade.

"'Ey, I remember ye," the man called out. "Ye be the one hanging 'bout 'round Lodes the other day."

The eyebrows of the woman shot up as the man solidified Shirou's explanation, and after paying him another cursory glance, she walked away without another word.

"Yeah," Shirou replied with relief. "I was looking around for Lodes. Have you seen her?"

"Hm," Adda said as he rubbed his beard. "I seen her close for the day, but you'd know if she got home. She an' her brothers always argue up a storm. If ye ain't used to it, it's somethin' incredible, to be sure, so doubt she's home yet. She probably done gone to the waste area to toss the inedible stuff."

Shirou nodded a couple of times. "Okay, well, maybe I can go help her. Could you tell me where it is?"

Adda scoffed at the redhead and pointed at his nose. "Jus' follo' your nose, boy, an' trust me, you'll fin' it."

That was a terrible piece of advice in that he had really hoped there wasn't a major source for the terrible smell wafting around this side of the city. Shirou breathed out a sigh before taking in a deep breath through his nose, resulting in doubling over and letting out a few coughs. He almost covered his nose again, but just tightened his fists and ground his teeth together.

"Think I found what direction it's in," he complained to himself. "Next complaint to the king: figure out what to do about this dump site."

Shirou moved down the roads quickly, following his nose and keeping an eye on the setting sun up above. He didn't have much time to devote to this, but he really did want to see Lodes at least once and had a feeling that if he didn't, she'd be pretty annoyed with him. Plus, what else was he supposed to do with all this bread? No way in hell he was going to eat it all.
The smell grew stronger and stronger as he closed in on the right area, and he found that there were way, way, way less people milling around except for those who were throwing garbage away. Shirou paced back and forth for a while, trying to figure out where she might be. Nowhere around was there any sign of bread, and he could tell which part of the mound was freshest.

"Maybe she hasn't gotten here, yet?" he wondered aloud.

The bells rang throughout the sector again and Shirou let out a sigh. He'd just have to go back without seeing her today, which was a real shame. Rubbing the back of his head, he was about to head back when he saw some upturned dirt. It shouldn't have bothered him because everything had dirt in this area, but it kept drawing his attention back to it. Shrugging his shoulders, Shirou walked over and felt across the ground before seeing some kind of liquid.

"What the hell?" he muttered to himself. "Is this...?"

His eyes narrowed as he thought things through. It could belong to anything – hell, there was a pig trotting its way across the dirt right in front of him.

"Damn, I've got a bad feeling for some reason."

He couldn't see much through the darkening area, but was quick to push prana towards his eyes, enacting Eagle Eye. The hazy parts in the darkness quickly sharpened as if it was broad daylight and he glanced around. In the area from where he'd originally come, he saw traces of something having been dragged through the dirt. Another spot had upturned dirt, with a hint of urine, and further down, he could see where there had been the outbreak of some kind of struggle, and the thought of someone getting hurt was strong enough to push Lodes right out of his mind.

Shirou set into motion, realizing he wasn't getting a good reading down on the ground. Making a quick glance at the thatching of a nearby roof, he knew it wouldn't be high enough, and he instead looked over at the large wall encasing the entire city, as well as the western gate. Knowing that not a single soul was looking at him, he pushed prana into his feet and raced across the ground, getting enough acceleration to boost him up the wall at least halfway as he quickly looked back down and around him.

He saw a woman pick up her son and kiss him. He saw a man embrace another with happiness. He saw a horse start to defecate and then he saw...

A coldness spread across Shirou's body as he fell back down towards the ground before rage swept through him with the force of a ten-ton hammer. With prana supporting his body, Shirou hit the ground rolling before getting back onto his feet and darting down one path. He heard the muffled cry and pushed his body harder, flying out into a closed off area and slamming his fist right into the jaw of a man, sending him flying into a pig sty.

The other men whipped their heads around to stare at him with disbelief as he glared back at all of them. He took in the four men holding someone in a spread-eagle position, with a fifth one holding hands over the person's mouth tightly. Shirou felt a sense of calm rage take control of him as he saw just who the person was being held down – he saw her reddened pale-green eyes looking imploringly at him, tears cascading down her face through all of the caked mud on her. Her clothing was ripped apart, each breast in one hand, and he saw bruises all over her.

Shirou slowly turned his gaze to see the other man stand up from the mud, his nether regions there for all to see as he wiped mud and feces from himself. The man looked at Shirou and gave a sneer. Huw.
"What," Shirou began quietly, "do you think you're doing?"

Not one of the men, no, boys bothered answering him, each one instead just standing up and cracking their knuckles. Shirou took in a deep breath before finally yelling,

"What the fuck do you think you're doing!"

OMAKE

Shirou chuckled to himself as he looked down at the bentou box. Honestly, he was probably pushing it a bit too far with this one, but whatever. She was a big girl, she could take a few hits thrown her way in the manner of food. Nothing lost, nothing gained, except a bit of fun on his part. Shirou lifted his fist to knock on King Arthur's door when he heard a hail come from down the corridor. Turning, he saw Kay walking down and giving the redhead a cheerful wave.

"Ah, Shirou, wasn't it? Bringing my dear brother his morning meal, I see!"

Shirou gave him a smile. "Good morning, Sir Kay."

Kay walked up calmly with something of a grin on his face. He brushed his ash-blond hair out of his eyes and then placed his hands on his hips. Clucking his tongue, he said, "Good, old Arthur has been avoiding a very important discussion with me, and I'm of a mind to corner him. What better time than when he's being fed? Perfect!"

At that, Shirou's smile wavered, and fell completely when he remember exactly what he'd designed for the lunchbox that morning. Looking up at Kay's wide, pearly-white smile, he gave a hesitant laugh and then felt a need to pray to some deity to get him past this.

"Knights first," Shirou said, stepping back to let Kay pass by. As soon as the man opened the door and bellowed loudly, the redhead muttered, "I'm so dead."

King Arthur already looked irritable when Shirou came inside, which didn't bode well for him. Kay turned to the other man.

"I've heard you make magical delights! There, set his breakfast in front of him while I have a look at this magnificent creation in this strange box of yours."

Shirou could feel himself break out into a sweat as he slowly turned to glance at the king and found her glaring back at him. As soon as he set her breakfast tray in front of her, Kay grabbed the box from his other hand. He looked pleadingly at the king, but she turned her gaze away and focused on the meal in front of her.

"Arthur, why is it you never think to share?" Kay complained as he plopped into a chair.

She scowled at her brother. "How is it you can never shut up?"

"A skill, dear brother."

"No wonder your swordsmanship lacks."

Kay put a hand to his chest, feigning at being insulted before looking over at Shirou. "You see how he treats me? I very much think Percival had the right idea – perhaps you would rather cook for me instead?"

When King Arthur turned a scalding glare on her brother, Kay stuck out his lip. "I was just jesting. 
"Must you be so serious?"

"Look at the ridiculous box if that's your intent, and then get out," she muttered between bites.

"I shall, then!" Kay vowed vehemently before opening unknotting the sheet and opening the box.

Shirou felt his life flash before his very eyes when he saw Kay stare down at the food inside, all sign of amusement absent as he fell completely silent. In fact, he was so silent that King Arthur looked up from her meal, a touch of concern on her face.

"Kay, are you all right?"

Kay didn't say anything in return, prompting her to stand up and walk over to him while giving Shirou a strange look. The moment she got close, Kay swept into motion as he jumped to his feet and wrapped an arm around the king's neck, bringing her in close for a "brotherly" hug.

"Ah, but I knew you loved me, Arthur! What a kind gesture!"

She let out a sound of surprise, her hands immediately reaching to try and pry his arm away so she could breathe. Kay rubbed his face against hers lovingly and as her face reddened more and more, Shirou felt his life fade away. Her brother shoved the box almost right under her nose.

"Look how happy we are together!"

King Arthur, shocked out of her struggling, stared down at the scene of her and Kay rubbing cheeks, smiling gleefully.

Shirou inwardly said a prayer as he felt a spike of killing intent suddenly direct itself towards him. He tried to make a smile, but her green eyes bore into his as she mouthed one word:

"Run."

Additional Scene

Shirou stared at the fortified wooden door that would lead back down there. Percival, in a rare state of seriousness, looked over at him without a hint of mirth.

"I shouldn't be doing this," Percival murmured, looking around to make sure they weren't being watched. "I should have turned you away, but whatever is down there, I trust it's important to you. I can give you fifteen minutes, and no longer. The soldiers will be changing shifts soon, and people will wonder where I am."

Shirou was silent for a moment before finally murmuring, "Thank you, Percival. I know this is putting you in a bad position."

The brunet shrugged his shoulders. "The things we must do, my friend."

"Yeah," was Shirou's only reply before he pushed down on the lever to open the heavy door.

The first thing he noticed was darkness, only barely lit by the sconces running along the stairwell. Shirou heard the door close with a sense of finality and let out a short sigh. His feet pushed him forward, moving him in a downwards spiral to the first landing. He looked up at the cells lining the corridor and felt his shoulders slump even more, if possible. His steps echoing with each brush against the stone floor announced his presence to the current prisoners, all of which he ignored steadfastly. The soldiers on duty stared at him as he walked along to the very end of the corridor.
towards yet another set of stairs.

Another corridor greeted him and felt, yet again, like another walk of shame, but there was little to be done about that. It wasn't until he reached the end of that corridor that his burden seemed to weigh him down the most. Shirou hit the lowermost level with trepidation, but made his way through the darkness, regardless.

There weren't any prisoners down here – Camelot didn't have very many to keep behind bars, yet. That would more than likely change in the future, but for now, it felt empty. Normally, he would have preferred it this way, but now...

His feet stopped him in front of one cell in particular, and Shirou couldn't take his gaze away from the body lying still on the pieces of straw and dirt. The rats that moved about the body paid him no mind as they scurried around the corpse without any consideration for him.

Shirou lightly touched the bars of the cell before banging against them, kicking at the ground, shouting,

"Get away from him!"

The rats screeched and sped off, each hissing nastily at him, but he couldn't have cared less.

He hadn't been granted a key – that was beyond Percival's power without the king's permission. All Shirou could do was hug close to the bars, sliding to his knees as he stared at the man's cold, dead face.

"Meilyr..."

Shirou gritted his teeth, his hands tightening around the bars. "I didn't meant to... I tried to... I swear..."

He shook his head then. "No, I could've done better. There were ways – there are always ways. I should've come clean to the king about everything, but..."

He set his head against the bars, breathing in and out slowly. "Why did this have to happen? You didn't deserve this, Meilyr. Dai, that bastard..."

Lifting his gaze back up, he was ready to apologize again when he noticed the expression left on the man's face.

"He..." started Shirou, full of disbelief. "You're smiling...? D-Did you think I would come back for you all this time? Y-You don't look like you regretted a thing..."

Shirou closed his eyes tightly and slammed a fist against the ground before falling silent. Then slowly, he rose up to his feet, pushing back his shoulders as he looked over at the corpse again.

"This won't happen again," Shirou promised in barely little over a whisper. "Thank you for everything, Meilyr."

Shirou placed a hand gently against the bars in a form of a good-bye before turning away and walking back down through the corridor. His facial features were steeled and his eyes hard as he made his way up all of the stairs, until he finally pulled open the door leading into the castle.

Percival looked over at him, seeming a tinge concerned.
"All right there, Shirou?"

Shirou forced a small smile for his friend's sake.

"I will be."
Chapter Notes

So, here's a whole new chapter.

This was released a few days ago for those on my Patreon, but if you have any inkling whatsoever to support me and help me get these out faster, come on over and pay me a visit there at /serenareychiba. Thanks, I'm really appreciative, and hope you like the chap.

"Maybe you didn't hear me correctly," Shirou growled out. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Huw wiped some of the muck off of his face, narrowing his eyes at the redhead as he pulled his breeches back up. He gave a nod at his mates and all of them stood up slowly, cracking their knuckles as if to intimidate Shirou, but it did nothing if not incense him further.

"Damned foreigner," Huw spit out crudely. "This be what happens when ye forget your place."

"You forget that I outrank you," Shirou murmured back, his blood coursing through his veins as his anger only amped.

Huw burst out laughing, something that all his other friends mimicked. "An' anothe' thing that damned fool king can't be getting' right. I hate livin' like this, oppressed by a man who think he be some kind o' god. He jus' sit there on his throne, not even liftin' a finger to help people like us. A dictator like that ain't even worth the grime under me boots!"

"You have no idea of what you're talking about."

"Shut it!" Huw yelled back, pointing his finger determinedly at Shirou. "I told ye, din't I? Ye chose to show your ugly mug all the time, an' us here? We gon' teach ye a lesson! That there girl be ours, now! Jus' try an' stop us!"

Shirou raised his gaze to stare straight at Huw, his golden-brown eyes darkening and narrowing.

"Gladly."

Before the boys even had a chance to register his retort, prana swept towards Shirou's feet as he burst forward, one clenched fist grinding into a teenager's stomach with enough force to regurgitate whatever he'd eaten that day. Shirou coolly stared at the teenager's widened eyes and slowly retracted his fist as the young man fell to his knees and then hit the ground completely. Shirou glanced, annoyed, at the vomit covering his sleeve, but then turned to face the other four.

Huw and his three friends stared disbelievingly at the redhead. Huw turned on them, yelling,

"What, do ye need an invitation or somethin'? Get 'im!"

Shirou didn't even bother getting into a fighting stance as the three boys rushed at him. One boy threw a swing, and Shirou, catching it, spun around and launched the boy over his shoulder to slam
smackdab on his back. Turning back around, Shirou sidestepped a different assault, swept his foot
back behind the second boy's knees and threw him down to the ground with a forearm to the boy's
throat. The last boy hesitated for half a second before outright leaping at Shirou. Eyes narrowed,
the redhead took it in stride by rolling with the force onto his back, pushing prana into his feet, and
launching the teenager into the air for the boy to hit the ground with a sickening crack some ways
away. Shirou rose back to his feet, brushing himself off easily as Huw stared with disbelief, his last
line of defense gone.

"I'll kill ye!" the lanky boy screamed as he charged at Shirou.

Shirou chose not to comment, and with a roar of his own, slammed a fist directly into Huw's face,
sending the boy reeling back and onto the ground. Huw clutched at his face, a few whines escaping
his mouth before he pushed himself back up and stumbled at Shirou again. Shirou simply popped
another fist in Huw's face before grabbing at the teenager's tunic and dragging him in close.

"You don't get it," Shirou stated, his voice loud and clear. "No matter what you might have against
me, you don't take it out on a girl who has nothing to do with this. You don't hurt people to satisfy
your own jealousy, or rage, or whatever the hell your problem is. Lodes didn't do ANYTHING to
you. Nothing!"

Huw cried out to express his pain, blood dripping down from his nose and a few teeth missing from
his mouth. One eye was on the verge of bruising, but the boy tried to open it anyway, just so he
could glare at his enemy.

"What, ye jealous she ain't suckin' jus' yours, eh? Jus' ye wait 'til I be balls deep in again! I be
runnin' her –!"

Shirou cut him off by slamming a fist into the boy's gut so hard, he almost thought he'd killed the
kid. Blood spilled from Huw's mouth onto Shirou's own tunic before the boy slipped down to the
ground, too winded to breathe properly. Shirou breathed in and out harshly, closing his eyes for a
moment before refocusing on the one who he'd come to save in the first place.

Lodes stared back with some fear in her eyes, and for a second, after looking around at the damage
wrought by him, and at the gathering of people who stared at him with their mouths agape, he
thought Lodes was afraid of him. But when he took a step forward, she whimpered and reached out
for him, the fingers on her hands trembling.

"Did he jus' kill that boy?"

"Damned dog o' the king..."

"How could this happen?"

"He be killin' us next..."

"Nowhere's safe anymo'!"

"We're all doomed!"

Shirou ignored all of them as he pulled off his tunic and forced it onto Lodes to hide her naked
body. Tears streamed from her eyes as she clung to him, the only sounds coming out of her mouth
full of cries and sobs. Shirou held her tightly to him, whispering apologies as he tried to soothe her
distress. He knew that was far from likely though, and he couldn't imagine what it felt like to be in
her position.
"Lodes, hey," he murmured, trying to gain her attention, but she dug her face further into his chest, as if to block out the entire world. "Hey, I need to know... Did... Did they...?"

She went still for a moment and he could a sense of cold foreboding strike through his body, but when she slowly shook her head against him, all of the wind went out of his sails. Shirou sighed, holding her more tightly as he rejoiced inwardly over making it in time enough to save her.

"Thank god," he muttered in Japanese, unable to contain his relief.

"Make way! Make way, I said! Move! Give heed to His Royal Majesty's soldiers!"

At that, Shirou almost groaned vocally, but swallowed the urge as he forcibly separated himself from Lodes, making sure to keep an arm around her shoulders to provide some form of protection. Shirou eyed the ten armed soldiers warily, his left hand clenching tightly into a fist. The soldiers caught glimpse of him and Shirou could tell the instant they became uncertain of how to handle the situation.

"My Lord," spoke one soldier with some semblance of confidence. "What has occurred here?"

"He done killed that boy, that's what!" shouted one villager.

"Haven't we suffered enough as is?" cried out another.

"Look at 'em! Ain't none o' them movin'!"

Shirou gritted his teeth and the soldier barked at the civilians to shut up and stay that way. The latter walked towards Shirou, and as he reached both him and Lodes, the redhead could feel her flinch away from the other man. Shirou gripped her shoulder more protectively as he glared at the soldier.

"My Lord, I'm sure you're aware that this doesn't look good on His Majesty."

Shirou just stared at him. "Which part? The part where you guys weren't around to keep this from happening, or the part where I kept her from getting hurt?"

The soldier fell silent. "My Lord, there are several boys injured here –"

"Who outranks who, here?"

"Well, I," the soldier fumbled before bowing his head. "You do, uh, sir."

"They just tried to rape this girl!" Shirou yelled out. "And no one tried to help her! No one saw anything! No one did anything! They just committed a crime, and you're worried because they got a little hurt? Are you seriously telling me that there's nothing wrong with that scenario?"

"My Lord, please understand how this makes the king look..."

"I will talk to the king, personally!" Shirou told him, forcefully. "I will explain what happened, and I will make sure they understand the repercussions of their actions! But, you! You guys need to do your damned jobs and put these kids in a cell, like the criminals they are!"

The soldier looked bewildered at the demand, and when he started to protest, Shirou cut him off immediately.

"You want to tell me what makes the king look worse: the fact that his servant came to the aid of someone in need, or the fact that his soldiers ignore the people when they need help? I don't think I
need to tell you the answer to that one."

Lips tightening, the soldier relented, bowing his head and turning to the other soldiers. "You five: arrest those five men and put them in cells, as so ordered by Lord Shirou! And the rest of you do damage control! Get these people out of the way! Now! And you, escort Lord Shirou back to the castle!"

"No, hold on," Shirou interrupted. "I've got to take her home, and I want to make sure she's safe. That guy should run ahead to the castle and inform the king that I'm going to be a little late."

The soldier in question hesitated, looking instead at his commanding officer, but the latter just glared at him.

"Do as he says! Quickly!"

Shirou watched as a muted form of chaos erupted with the guards corralling the villagers away from the site and yet even more guards taking hold of the teenagers and dragging them away. He absolutely knew that this was going to put him into hot water with the king, but at the moment, he really couldn't care less. Why hadn't there been any guards around to prevent this debacle? How could no one have seen anything that had happened here? This wasn't like the future, where minding one's own business was more heavily valued than looking out for that of another. People knew Lodes, so why didn't anyone suspect anything was wrong? How often did this even happen?

He heard a muffled sob from Lodes as the soldiers dragged one boy – Huw – down the street leading away from the western gate. Hugging her again tightly, Shirou forced her to look up at him.

"Don't worry. You're safe now," he whispered as her eyes filled with tears. "Let's get you home."

When he attempted to walk forward though, she held him back, her expression full of fear. Shirou frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"...Th-The king..." was all she could murmur, and Shirou immediately understood the problem.

"It'll be fine," he told her confidently. \textit{And even if it isn't, whatever. At least Lodes is safe – I don't care about what might happen to me. I just want to make sure this never happens again.}

Shirou walked alongside Lodes as they moved through the village towards her residence. She was jittery, and understandably so. He wished there was something more he could do for her, but he would have to settle for just being a source of protection and consolation. And, although Lodes never once looked at him the entire way home, he could see her tightly grip his tunic around her, as if it would keep her safer from harm. Shirou felt a bit embarrassed to be walking around – note: stared at – in his half-naked glory, but so long as she felt better about it, then he couldn't really complain.

He didn't walk her to her door, but merely stood aside just far enough to give her privacy, and just close enough to intervene if anything happened. The shouts of dismay and cries of worry and joy were as easily heard as ever, despite him being outside. Shirou crossed his arms over his chest and sighed, wondering how he was going to approach his conversation with King Arthur. It wouldn't go well, that much he knew for certain. Obviously, King Arthur's soldiers couldn't be everywhere at once, but, it was like there were the bare minimum on the west side, protecting the poorer villagers. First there was the issue with the dogs, and now Lodes' near-rape? The way the soldiers
had looked at him with confusion over how angry he was about the whole situation irritated him more. There was no way that the King Arthur he had come to know, or the Saber he damned well knew, would allow for such a thing to ever happen. Ever. He was sure of it.

The door to Lodes' house creaked open and the soft glow of candlelight made him squint a bit. A man of average height slowly walked out with a rather beautiful, obviously pregnant woman at his side. The man frowned at Shirou, his mustache ruffling as he grunted.

"Ye must be Lord Shirou," the man gruffed, holding out Shirou's tunic. "Ye saved me daughter. If there be anythin' we can be doin' for ye..."

"No," Shirou said with a soft smile. "I'm just glad she's safe, and I'll make sure those boys pay for this."

"Good man," Lodes' father said with a tone of approval. "Me name be Bryn, and this here be Glynis."

Glynis took a couple of steps forward, her head bowing so many times he thought she'd get dizzy. "Oh, dear Lord Shirou, ye be such a kind soul! May our Lord in Heaven rain blessin's upon ye fo' bringin' our child back safe and sound. If there be anythin', an' I do mean anythin', say it, an' we be answerin' your call."

Her trembling hands reached for Shirou's and she simply held them in hers as she kept bowing. "Praise be to ye... Ye be welcome here anytime..."

Shirou set a gentle hand on her shoulder, stopping her from bowing further. "Don't worry. It's okay. I wasn't going to let her get hurt, and I never will. Just let me know if you need me, okay?"

Glynis cupped her mouth, tears threatening to spill from her own green eyes. Shirou smiled again as Bryn wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Shirou waved bye to them as he started his trek back up to the castle, his eyes burning with a rage he had difficulty suppressing.

The object in her hands was bound to shatter if she continued squeezing it thusly, but she was having some difficulty finding her sense of calm. She had trusted him – trusted him – to not cause an incident, and he had promised her he wouldn't. The problem that had occurred when he first went to the village was easily forgiven. After all, the man hadn't had any opportunity to deal with those types of situations, and she probably should have warned him a bit more firmly that his position would make things difficult in a variety of ways, but this...

Truth be told, she knew she didn't have the full story, and Shirou was not someone who voluntarily caused problems wherever he went. Rather, the problems seemed to attach themselves to him and make things ridiculously difficult for everyone else... Like her.

"Your Majesty," a masculine voice spoke out, interrupting her thoughts. "Your authorization is required for the containment of five peasants found at the scene. Lord Shirou has demanded they be locked up promptly."

Arturia felt another peck of irritation flash through her, but made certain to mask her emotions. "Walk with me. Explain."

"Yes sire," the soldier responded quickly, matching pace with the king as she walked down the corridors. "As I'm sure you are aware, there was an incident in the western sector of the village – an altercation between five teenage peasant boys and your Personal Servant, Lord Shirou. While the specific reasoning behind the instance isn't yet known, the conflict apparently occurred because
of the treatment of another peasant, a young woman. Lord Shirou insisted that the boys be locked up for the crime, whatever that might have been, and that he would discuss the instance with you personally."

"And where is Shirou now, Captain?" the king asked as she briskly walked into the Great Hall.

"Attending to the girl, Your Majesty. What will you have done?"

"Where are the perpetrators?"

"In a holding cell awaiting your instruction. One in particular appears to be quite rowdy."

"Put them in the dungeon until I oversee their trial."

The captain of the guard bowed and she turned around only to see Dylan approaching her at the rapid speed he always seemed to walk with. She crossed her arms over her chest as she frowned at him.

"Dylan. Where have you been?"

"You are a difficult person to track down, Your Majesty," the squirrely man stated first and foremost without a hint of accusation apparent in his voice. "If I may?"

She nodded curtly. "Report."

"A riot has broken out amongst the rabble –"

"'Villagers,' Dylan," Arturia sharply corrected. "Or 'peasants' if you must."

He fell silent for a moment. "Yes, of course. A riot has broken out amongst the...peasants, over the scuffle that occurred between your servant and some teenage boys. I, however, have taken it upon myself to dispatch some of the guard to contend with the matter. I believe it will be handled accordingly without further delay."

"Good," she replied. "What else?"

"The people are wary, but there is little to be done about that at this point, and our noble families are rather shaken by this act of violence. I might suggest talking to your servant about the source behind the incident."

Arturia turned her gaze away. "I fully intend to. Any word on where my errant servant might be?"

"As far as I am aware, he recently returned to the castle not too long ago. I believe he said something along the lines of preparing your meal."

"Forget the meal," she said irritably. "See that he is in my study within the next ten minutes. If he is not, then I will be taking my anger out on you first and foremost."

Dylan, for once, appeared surprised at her order. "Sire, it may take some time to –"

She turned toward him with a cold gaze. "Then, I suppose you had best start searching. Now."

It was brief, but she could have sworn she saw his expression morph into a dark, sinister sneer, but he scurried off before she could be absolutely certain. Placing her hands on her hips, Arturia breathed in deeply before letting out a slow, long exhale. She clenched her hands into fists as she set back into motion, heading for the stairs to the fourth floor. With each echo of every step Arturia
made, she felt as if her frustration was seeping out for all to see, and the object in her right hand felt almost as if she were crushing it to bits. She wasn’t sure of the material – it was yet another one of Merlin’s endless experiments, but it did keep her from throwing things, or yelling at people.

*What have you done, Shirou?*

As she reached her study, she sent the two guards away – the fewer who were near her at this time, the better. Walking into the room with the door clicking shut behind her, Arturia gently set the object in her right hand onto her desk. She laid both her palms flush against the desktop, feeling as if a heavy weight were pushing down on her. Arturia closed her eyes slowly.

*I'm tired of, no – I'm just...tired.*

She finally opened her eyes when a knock came to her door.

Shirou pushed the door open gently when given entrance, his eyes downcast and muscles tense. He stood only a little ways from the woman, her back to him as she leaned over her desk. When the door clicked shut, he took in a deep breath and gritted his teeth, but she spoke before he could say a word.

"I believe," she murmured softly, "that we held an agreement, you and I. Starting a brawl with half-grown men in the streets? Practically incapacitating them? Causing a ruckus and incensing the villagers to riot?"

He kept his gaze on the ground. "I had no choice."

At that, the king shifted her head slightly. "No choice?"

She stood up fully, looking back at him with a blank expression. "We all have choices, Shirou. What I want to know is what would incite you to needlessly beat down helpless villagers."

"Nothing about those kids was 'helpless'!" Shirou exclaimed. "Is that what those soldiers told you? How can you take their side after what happened?"

"Told me?" she questioned. "No one told me anything, Shirou, because no one knew the source of the issue. All I know is that an incident took place and that people are pointing fingers at me because of your actions."

"I did what I thought was right," Shirou retorted. "Why can't you understand that?"

"Fine then," she acquiesced. "All right. Then tell me so I can. Shirou, to be quite frank with you, this is a mess, and not an easily disposed one, either. I allowed you to visit the village because you said you wanted to explore, to understand what's beyond these castle walls, and to be honest, I agreed with that mentality. As my personal servant, you need to mature to be able to handle your own in situations that you won't confront here in the castle. I trusted you to take on this task, knowing that the eyes that followed you and the ears that heard your words would formulate a distinct opinion of the world far out of the villagers' reach. I trusted you, but I can't help but feel that it was misplaced. Why would you --"

"...Rape..." Shirou muttered, fists clenching more tightly.

Cut off though she might have been, King Arthur's eyes narrowed somewhat at the short bit he'd choked out. "...What was that? Speak more clearly."
"...They nearly raped her," he ground out loudly enough to gain her complete and avid attention. "Helpless? There was nothing helpless about them. They orchestrated the entire thing, to get back at me! She didn't even do anything, and they were going to ruin her life, forever. There was no way I could stand by and watch that happen without doing anything!"

She held out a hand to stop him. "Wait, I don't understand. Who did those boys try to rape? Why were they trying to get back at you, and for what?"

Shirou forced himself to exhale. "They tried to rape a friend I made, someone named Lodes. She's just a girl I happened to get close to, and so they used her. They wanted to wreck her life, just for a shot at me."

"Shirou, why did they want to get at..." King Arthur trailed off, her eyes centered on him before falling away as she held a couple of fingers to her temple. "...Of course. They saw you as an extension of me. Yes, I see."

He tilted his head slightly, trying to formulate a question but wishing he didn't have to.

"Did..." he started, catching her attention again. "Did you know something like this might happen?"

"I can't say that I wasn't aware of the possibility," she conceded a bit warily. "This does make things a bit easier to contend with, however. If the incident was an attack against you, and by extension, myself, then that is an act of treason, which certainly makes them punishable by law. Very well, I will take care of everything else. Thank you, Shirou."

He stood there, head still tilted when she turned for the door. When she neared him, he just stared at her.

"Wait, is that it?"

"Hm?" she hummed as she looked back at him. "Ah, yes, my apologies. I should not have insinuated you would do anything untoward without due reason. Forgive my slight."

"Are you serious?" he asked incredulously. "What about the girl? Don't you care about her? Doesn't she get any type of support?"

King Arthur looked tired when she faced him again. "Support, as far as what? And by what means? This might sound cruel to you, but I cannot give personal support to every villager who comes by some kind of harm."

"But they're your villagers!" Shirou argued. "How can you not help them when they need it?"

"I'm aware," she told him, a hard edge starting to line her tone. "But I simply don't have the time to give everyone the attention they might need. It's unfortunate, but there's nothing I can do about that. Heartless though that may sound, it is a matter of reality. A matter that you need to come to terms with, and soon."

As soon as she turned away again, Shirou felt his anger come to head, and without thinking it through, his hand shot out to grab her arm, his fingers coiling around tightly. Her reaction was immediate as she shoved him away, eyes cold as ice when she glared harshly at him.

"You are on very thin ice," she hissed. "I would watch that tone, and above all, your actions towards me. This is your last warning."
"...Don't you know what's going on in your village? The antagonism towards you, towards anyone who hasn't experienced their plight? Do you even know what it's really like down there? Do you have any clue?"

Her eyes narrowed sharply. "As king, I have a kingdom to run – and that does not involve just these people. I am in no position, nor do I have the time available, to mingle amongst the common people or sympathize with their every issue."

"No...time?" Shirou murmured with disbelief, as if incapable of comprehending her words. He shook his head, taking in another deep breath.

"I feel like I expected more," he whispered. "But, fine."

King Arthur lifted an eyebrow. "Fine, what?"

"All right," Shirou said, all warmth gone from his voice as he looked back at her coldly. "If you can't spare the time to care or understand, then fine, do what you have to. But, I'm not going to sit around here waiting for something better to happen for them."

The abrupt change in atmosphere caught King Arthur off-guard. "What...?"

He looked down at her, and for once, she felt a shiver run down her spine. Shirou turned away.

"I'll just deal with it myself. End of story."

She froze at the harshness of his tone and at its conclusiveness, and when he opened the door, shoulders straightened and head high, she found herself speechless. He looked back just enough to make eye contact briefly, before turning around completely, bowing his head, and softly saying, "Have a good evening, Your Majesty," before closing the door behind him with a gentle click.

Arturia's fingers dug into her arm as the muscles in her jaws jumped from her constant tooth-grinding. She stood silently, eyes a frost green, as looked along the populous of people gathered together, their eyes flickering over to look at her with a mixture of fear and respect. Immediately behind her stood several of her closest and most loyal knights, and within the vicinity were a number of soldiers standing guard and keeping the people corralled. To her right was the large, erected scaffold with all five of the teenagers associated with the rape crime standing upon it, bared for all to see, and to her left... Shirou.

She turned her attention away from him to study those officially charged with treason. Glancing behind her, she met the gazes of her fellow knights before nodding, pushing back her shoulders, and walking up the wooden steps of the scaffold. It wasn't a particularly large scaffold, merely large enough to do one hanging at a time. Each criminal would take their turn, and each death would hold a significantly meaningful impact for the villagers to remember for all time. That was the point of it all – she knew that.

She absolutely hated it.

Arturia took in a deep breath, her eyes closing briefly as she turned towards the large crowd of people.

"People of Camelot: I do not stand before you to speak of a joyous circumstance. I am certain many of you are aware of the altercation that took place three days prior. A person directly affiliated with me nearly came unto harm in an effort to strike at me, your king, and I take such appalling action very seriously."
"People of Camelot: I have seen fit to charge these five men with treason. They thought to hurt me by attacking my servant and sullying a young woman. There is no excuse whatsoever for their decisions, and they will be met with swift repercussions. I hereby sentence them to death by hanging! They would not only dare to use their strength against a young, defenseless girl, but would also attempt to strike at me indirectly as well? This is intolerable, and I will not stand for such insolence!"

"I din' do nothin'!" cried out one teenager. "That bitch asked for it!"

"Down with the king!" yelled out another. "Burn in hell, heathen!"

"I just want go home," one teenager sobbed. "Please don't kill me! I gots three siblings!"

Another young man just wailed out his grief, while the last remained silent. Murmurs swept amongst the crowd as they saw the two teenagers cry out pitiably, and Arturia could sense some discontent. Although her soldiers tightened the grips on their weapons, she knew she needed to take control again. She flung out her arm, shouting at them with a voice that rang out loud and clear to everyone present:

"Silence!"

It was as if she had personally slapped each person in the face – they all fell into a shocked quietness, save for the sniffling of the two boys. Turning her gaze back on the public, she could swear that she saw a few flinches here and there, and some people wouldn't make eye contact with her. That was just as well.

"If there are any who would challenge my judgment," Arturia began quietly, although her voice was sharp enough for everyone to hear, "you are more than welcome to join them."

Not a single person spoke up after that announcement. Arturia turned to face the criminals.

"Unmask them."

The executioners stepped up and began pulling off the bags from each boy's head. She looked on with affected aloofness, but she could feel the ice churning within her veins.

"Start from that end."

Her soldiers, clad in black masks, roughly grabbed one crying boy and pulled him across the scaffold, making him stand atop a firm barrel as a noose was lowered around his neck. His entire body trembled as big tears fell down his face.

"No, please! I'm sorry! Please don't kill me, I don't want to die!"

He struggled with his hands tied behind his back with rope. His face continued to pale as he looked around wildly for some kind of support, for someone who would help him in his last hour. Looking at the king, he tried to beseech her for another chance.

"Please, I beg o' ye, Your Majesty! I swear, I can be better! I'll be better! I promise! Please! Please!"

Arturia turned her gaze to look at the executioners.

"Do it."
"No, I –!"

The boy's voice cut off the moment the barrel was kicked out from under him, his body falling heavily as the noose tightened around his throat. Tears flowed from his eyes freely as he struggled to breathe, his body shifting and jolting as his pallor whitened by the second. His fingers tightened into fists before flexing outwards, over and over again, and his eyes rolled wildly, seeming as if they were going to pop out in his distress. Even still, he whispered out his pleas and continued to beg until his oxygen cut out and he lost consciousness.

Arturia watched on with as calm a front as she could manage, but executions always wore her down. Death was inevitable, and she had killed countless many herself, but something of this nature was planned, and deliberately served to suit a justice that she wasn't sure was actually there. These people were punished with a death that took minutes of suffering, and by far, a long enough time to regret one's actions and hope desperately for a different end. Desperation and fear took control until fading away into helplessness in realizing one was dying, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

Arturia hated watching as they silently screamed out fearfully, hated seeing their eyes roll up and their mouths gape open, hated seeing the light fade from their eyes. There was little justice to be found here. There was no honor in such a death. However, there was hardly any honor in a terrible crime going unpunished either, and that was where it was her duty to see that these criminals paid the consequences for their mistakes. That was the task presented to her as king, after all.

As the young boy's body swung back and forth, all life vacant from it, Arturia only narrowed her eyes slightly. It wasn't supposed to be like this – her killing young men like this, men who hadn't even held a sword before in their life. Things should have been different...

"Next."

She stayed rooted to where she stood as the next three young men experienced the same fate as the first, and with each last breath they took, Arturia could feel herself growing steadily colder inside. At some points, she almost felt disembodied, as if she were watching everything from afar. Once the fourth boy was tossed into a pile to be burned later, Arturia slowly turned her gaze to look at the last one, a young man whose jaw muscles were strung tightly as he stared straight ahead of himself.

"Any last words, boy?" she asked, inwardly surprised at how hollow and icy her voice sounded to her.

He turned his head to look at her, his eyes dark with a cold fury, and then he looked beyond her at something else. Arturia frowned, her own eyes narrowing as she followed his gaze to look back at the redhead that was at the crux of all her problems as of late. And he, Shirou, met her gaze head-on, golden-brown eyes no longer warm nor welcoming. Then, he looked past her at the boy and Arturia felt as if she could sense his agitation, his rage. It was an unpleasant feeling to note, and she had never witnessed Shirou in this state before.

"Ye care mo' 'bout playin' nice with enemies than lookin' out fo' ye own."

The boy's voice drew her gaze back, and she stared at him blankly, without any emotion on her face.

"We been dyin', cryin' fo' help, wantin' a better life, an' yet ye would take 'im in?" the boy continued. "Ye'd feed 'im, clothe 'im? We mean nothin' to ye? 'Ow many have to die 'fo' ye to care? Ye be a devil playin' at bein' king, citin' the good Lord's name for your evil. I hope ye rot in hell."
Arturia stared at him for the longest time, then nodded for the executioners to take him away. The young man didn't struggle, didn't do anything other than stare back at her as the noose was looped around his neck. Arturia walked over to stand in front of him, looking up with her shoulders and back ramrod straight.

"Pray that you do not meet me there, then," she told him softly, and the young man gave her a malicious sneer right before the barrel was kicked out from under his feet.

A gasp of alarm escaped his lips as the noose bit into his neck and he tried his hardest to take in as much air as he could. His feet began to whirl as he fought to attach to something, to find something that would aid him somehow. When he finally stopped breathing and his head rolled to the side, Arturia finally turned away to address the crowd, her heart and mind both heavy.

"What you have experienced, people of Camelot," she started, her voice loud and clear, "what you have seen this day – let it never be repeated. In order to survive, we must trust in one another, and you must all place your trust in me. With the Lord as my witness, I am endeavoring to work for your sakes, that we may be able to unite all of Britain as a single entity and fight away those who would destroy our namesakes, our livelihoods. Those who would seek to tarnish these values of ours must be met with a swift punishment, and that is something I only hope you've come to understand.

"I take no pleasure in this event," Arturia continued, speaking truthfully. "There is little to be enjoyed in watching four young men pass, but they must answer for their crimes, as should we all. Never forget this moment."

With that, she turned away from the audience and her gaze once again sought out Shirou's as the crowd began to disperse quietly, hardly a murmur from anyone in the crowd. Shirou looked back at her, but yet again, she could see nothing of the man she'd used to know. Arturia reflected back on the words the last criminal had said, thinking that it was just as Shirou had accused her of. She had become a king and strove for absolute perfection, but it was as if she was losing sight of her goal. This wasn't what she had intended to do, but if she faltered for even a second, then surely absolute destruction was in her near future. She couldn't falter... She had to keep pushing forward – what she was doing had to mean something. It had to.

Arturia let out a soft sigh, turning back around as she headed back towards her castle, never looking back at the redhead who watched her every move.

"I know I never will," she whispered.

"What, exactly, is it you expect of me?"

Shirou stood next to the wall, waiting for the king to finish her meal. He casually ran his hand along his neck to catch the sweat that continued to bead in the hot weather. What with it finally being August – that was what he assumed the month was, anyway – the heat was really starting to home in on Britain. It wasn't necessarily burning up outside, but being on the fourth floor in clothing that didn't really breathe was taking its toll on him. A short-sleeved shirt would've been great, but that wouldn't have been ideal for the king's servant to wear.

As he wiped his brow, Shirou did his best to ultimately ignore the woman in front of him. He was still nothing short of pissed off at her, and couldn't believe that she would go so far to drive home a point. A public execution? He'd just wanted to make sure they were punished, that they knew the consequent severity of their actions. What was a public execution going to do other than make the villagers distrust her even more? He'd seen several of the women outright crying, albeit
silently, because they didn't want to be next on the chopping block, so to speak.

Shirou forcibly held back a growl as he reflected on how a couple of the teenagers had begged for their lives to be saved, only for King Arthur to blatantly ignore them and leave them to die an excruciating death. What was the point? What purpose did that serve other than to estrange people? Did she enjoy watching them suffer?

Wait, no. Damn it, she wasn't cruel. There was a point to be made, and he'd gotten it, but there was a line and as far as Shirou was concerned, King Arthur had essentially pole vaulted the hell over it.

He was mad. So, fucking, angry. This was not the King Arthur he'd come to know, or did he even know her at all? Maybe he never had, but... Shirou just couldn't wrap his head around what had happened a few days before. He was so ridiculously shocked that there were no words to properly describe how he felt. Regardless, the only thing he was certain of was that he couldn't deal with it, with her. He couldn't talk to her like before – he didn't feel comfortable with her anymore. Shirou couldn't even trust that she had the best of intentions in whatever she did. He needed more time to process things, and it was strange because...although he had nearly, almost completely, lost faith in her after what she'd done, he couldn't withhold his trust in her. Something about her still made him want to think that this wasn't all there was to her.

He was mad, but... Shirou sighed inwardly. He was a hundred percent sure that this woman was not the one he'd so quickly fallen head over heels for, but...he had the smallest inkling that he was falling for this version, too.

Maybe that's part of why I'm so fucking ticked off right now.

Shirou nearly glared over at her, but forced his gaze over to glower at the door instead. He continued silently doing this until he heard the distinct clink of her silverware hitting her plate. Sucking up his irritation, Shirou turned to collect her tray and mumble his goodbyes. He couldn't feel her gaze on him and assumed she was probably ignoring him, too, which was perfectly fine as far as he was concerned. He took the tray in his hands and lifted it up slowly, up until it came to a hard halt as her own hands gripped it tightly.

Confusion flooded him, but he refused to meet her gaze.

"For how long do you intend to avoid me, Shirou?"

Gritting his teeth, Shirou attempted to pull back on the tray again, gently, but her hold on it was too strong.

"Please let go," he muttered.

"Pay attention to what I have to say."

"Let go," he once again requested, though it sounded significantly more demanding this time.

"Look at me, Shirou," he heard her ask once more.

Shirou almost let out a sardonic laugh, but restrained himself. "What, are you going to command me to look at you now, Your Majesty?"

Fine. He was a bit on the spiteful side right then, so sue him. Still, the pull on the tray disappeared as her hands fell away. Shirou kind of just stood there, somewhat uncertain for a moment before finally shifting around and heading towards the door.
"What...have I done to incur such anger?"

At that, Shirou came to a complete stop, his mind bewildered. He looked back at her with transparent disbelief only to see her standing up and staring down at her desktop, her shoulders nowhere near as ramrod straight as usual. A spark of concern blitzed through him, but he stamped it down.

"Are you...asking about what I really think about that? Or the polite version, Your Majesty?"

Shirou asked back, unable to deal with that fact that she honestly seemed to have no idea on why he was mad.

King Arthur looked at him with those green eyes of hers and it irritated the hell out of him that he couldn't just shout at her, couldn't yell that she should know what she'd done wrong. She just continued looking at him in an almost subdued manner.

"I don't understand what's irritated you so," she started softly, "but isn't this over the top, even for you? You're acting like a child, constantly ignoring me and glaring at everything in sight. What have I done for you to act this way?"

"Y–," Shirou stuttered, gobsmacked. He set the tray down with trembling hands, marched up to her desk as she made direct eye contact with him, and slammed his hands on her desk.

"You executed them! You killed them, in front of everyone!" Shirou ended up shouting, his frustration palpable. "They begged for forgiveness! Begged for their lives and you just... You stood there, coldly, like you were throwing out garbage! They asphyxiated and struggled and suffered, so how can you stand here and ask how the hell I'm pissed the fuck off?"

His raised voice was enough for the two guards standing outside to burst in, ready to deal with whatever troubled the king. King Arthur didn't even spare them a glance, her eyes centered on Shirou as she held up a hand and waved them away. They hesitated just long enough for her to make a fist and grit out, "Leave."

Then, she spoke back to Shirou: "You desired punishment, and their crimes were treasonous."

"Yeah, punishment," Shirou sarcastically retorted. "Not death. They were kids! Yeah, I was mad, but I didn't want them dead! You could have had them picking up cow dung or cleaning the dungeons for the rest of their lives or something. Did you... Why did they have to die?"

King Arthur's lips thinned as she frowned at him. "I served a punishment that best suited their crime. I did my duty. I tried to appease you and the laws simultaneously. What, exactly, is it you expect of me?"

Shirou rubbed his forehead and bit his bottom lip, his head shaking side to side.

"I guess," he began as his voice cracked a little bit, "I guess I expected you to act like a real king, someone who cares for his people and not some kind of... I don't know. It's like, they don't matter to you at all. How could you just watch them die like that?"

He barely saw the flicker of hurt and pain in her expression before she hid it away like a true professional. "You seem very certain that I have taken the wrong path. However, allow me to inform you of what you can't seem to grasp: there is far more to being a king than simply caring for individuals."
"Well, yeah, I know, but –," Shirou tried to say before getting cut off.

"No," King Arthur interrupted, her voice stone cold. "This isn't simply a matter of right and wrong, Shirou. There is no black and white world to contend with here. Yes, they died. Did they need to? I believe so. Why? To serve as a point, and a demonstration to all others."

Shirou furrowed his brow as he frowned at her. "That's called being a tyrant!"

"No!" she argued, obviously growing angry now that her initial shock had worn off. "That is called being proactive. You do not need to understand why I do what I do, and quite frankly, I'd rather you not poke your nose into my business. I have made allowances for you, but no longer. Do not interfere with whatever I do ever again. Are we clear?"

He closed his eyes, almost feeling resigned. "So, that's it? People are just going to keep dying if they ever disagree with you? You're just going to let fear spread around and ignore those in need?"

"Enough!" she yelled. "Right now, stamping down possible insurgences, from your actions if I need remind you, is my main priority. My goals apparently do not coincide with yours, though I see no reason for them to."

"There are other ways to deal with things!"

"You seem to have all the time in the world for such nonsense," King Arthur told him softly as she walked up to him, her voice like ice. "I'll leave you to it. Now, get. Out."

Shirou stared at her challengingly for a while longer before tightening his fists and turning away abruptly. He grabbed the tray off the ground and marched out, ignoring the eyes on him as he walked down the corridors, his boots stomping against the stone floors with each step. He didn't bother going back to the kitchen, and instead went to his room and let the traced tray dissipate into thin air.

At first, he just paced back and forth, letting out harsh breaths as he struggled to get his emotions under control. He wasn't wrong about this – he knew he wasn't. Why couldn't she see that the way she was going, she'd only end up hurting herself and everyone involved? He had to do something to keep things swirling in an endless downward spiral. He paused in his pacing for a moment, his right hand stroking his chin as he mulled it all over.

He stole a glance over at his window, watching as the stars twinkled in the night sky.

Well, there's always that option...

Arturia stared blankly into space as she hugged a knee close to her chest. The fact that her hair still hung loosely around her shoulders and that she still hadn't bothered prepping herself for the day were not lost on her, but she wasn't particularly inclined to care at the moment. Her irises shifted left and right absentely, thoughts racing through her head, although none she could focus completely on. She almost jolted when a hand waved itself in front of her face.

Arturia warily looked over at the other woman sitting right beside her. "Guinevere."

Guinevere gave the briefest of smiles to her "husband" before it fell away. "You've been rather quiet lately. I almost feel as if I am sleeping next to a doll."

"I-I apologize," Arturia stuttered. "I have had a bit on my mind recently."
"Hoh, do tell," the brunette teased, though she couldn't hide the concern glimmering in her eyes. "What in the world could possibly be bothering you? You would almost think you were running a country."

A ghost of a smile fluttered across Arturia's lips before vanishing as if it were never there. She leaned forward, both feet firmly on the floor as she cupped her mouth with her hands. Guinevere sat next to her patiently, waiting for the blonde to gather her thoughts together.

"I'm troubled, to say the least," Arturia said softly, countenance serious. "Already two months have passed and I have absolutely nothing to show the Vikings, nothing they probably haven't yet witnessed. Weaponry? Food? Tactics? I hate to admit it, but Camelot is not a pioneer in any such matter. If I do not come up with something with which to placate them, then I dare not even assume what terrible scenario this village might face. I simply do not have the manpower to repel what assaults may come."

Guinevere frowned as well, her own eyes darkening as she considered the situation. "The circumstances are grim, to be certain. Admittedly, I am also unaware of what would serve as a suitable gift to an enemy we've never once dealt with. What would nomads like the...Vikings, was it?"

"They travel all over the world, apparently," Arturia replied, running a hand through her hair. "They have access to supplies and technical knowledge that we've never encountered before. I can't willingly and knowingly dispatch my men against an unknown. There is far too much at stake, but I'm steadily running out of time."

"Is there more to this, Arturia?" Guinevere gently asked, resting a hand on the small of Arturia's back. "Tell me what ails you."

Arturia hesitated for a split second before taking in a deep breath and letting it flow out.

"You recall, of course, the public execution I enforced," she murmured, eyes downcast.

"Hm," Guinevere hummed, lips pursed. "I recall your irate state, most certainly. Any angrier, and I feared you would combust into a large ball of fire. Do not tell me you regret your actions."

The blonde remained silent, shoulders slumping as she looked down at the floor. Guinevere let out a harsh sigh and shook her head. "Don't you dare back down now. Don't you remember what you told me from the start? Do you remember why you did it in the first place?"

"I'm just concerned," Arturia said in the smallest voice Guinevere had ever heard from her. "I took no pleasure in seeing them suffer. I despised using such measures to ensure nothing would sprout up among the people. I believed this was a justice that needed to be served, that they needed to be served a consequence that would fit their crimes, but... Now, I question my decision, as to whether it might have been a touch too hasty..."

"Arturia," Guinevere called, her tone absolutely demanding that the blonde pay attention. When the latter didn't even glance up, Guinevere tenderly placed her fingers under Arturia's chin, forcing her to make eye contact. Arturia's green eyes were filled with doubt and wariness, and that would not do.

"Listen to me, Arturia," the brunette demanded, "and listen to me well: you, yourself, told me what might happen if you didn't act quickly. Insurgences, possible coup d'états, discontent, a general understanding that something of that notion is tolerable under your reign... Who knows what might have happened as a result?"
Arturia shifted her gaze away, although her chin was still firmly in Guinevere's grasp. It wasn't until she gave another sigh and nodded that the brunette released her.

Guinevere looked up towards the ceiling. "I know it's difficult now. But you are only a few years into your reign, and you are still young, yet."

A scoff left Arturia's lips with an eyebrow raising to contest that last statement. Guinevere swatted the young king's shoulder as she glared half-heartedly.

"How dare you! If you are old already, then what does that make me?"

Both of Arturia's eyebrows rose in response as she wisely chose not to answer that question, her gaze steadfastly looking far away.

"Prat," Guinevere muttered, seeing Arturia's shoulders tremble a bit as the blonde held back a laugh. "Listen to me, though."

Arturia looked back at Guinevere, shoulders far straighter than they had been before. Guinevere smiled kindly and ran a hand through the blonde's hair.

"Things will grow worse before they get better. That is what it means to live," the queen spoke, her words striking a chord in Arturia's heart. "Do you understand?"

Arturia gave Guinevere one of her rare, beautiful smiles. "I believe I might."

"Good," Guinevere replied, smiling genuinely as well before all humor left her expression as she stared at the blonde with some annoyance. "Now. What's the real issue here?"

Arturia lost her smile almost immediately. "What do you mean?"

"Do not even try that deflection with me, Husband. I mean it. Who started this fussiness?"

"No one at all," Arturia readily said. "I just want to live up to the expectations cast upon me."

With a short nod of understanding, Guinevere crossed her arms over her chest, an expression of concentration overtaking her face. "In other words, someone must be awfully disappointed with you. Who might it be? Merlin? No, he was never one for overtness. Kay, perhaps?"

Arturia acted as if the conversation was already over as she stood up and started changing her clothes. Guinevere simply watched the blonde, an eyebrow raised as she continued thinking aloud.

"No, I suppose Kay's dissent would have rattled a few doors. Lancelot accepts all of your decisions without a single complaint... Bedivere somewhat reminds me of a stray puppy who snarls a bit too much, but is obedient until the end. Percival... Well, you've always ignored him for the most part. Who could it be?"

Arturia had already dressed and sat down in front of her mirror to contend with her hair while Guinevere was humming and hawing. The brunette stared at Arturia intently until an idea flashed across her mind. Tilting her head at the absurdity of it, she let out another sigh.

"Perhaps that servant boy... Shirou?"

The very slight flinch of Arturia told Guinevere she was right on target. "Ah. So, that's who it was."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Arturia shot back, running the brush through her hair once again.
"So quick to protest, too," the queen said, her gaze sharp. "I take it he did not appreciate your actions very much."

"What I do is absolutely none of his business whatsoever."

"Oh? That wasn't the sense I got from you not ten minutes ago. To me, you sounded quite regretful. Ashamed, even."

Arturia stood up and spun around quickly, mouth open to rebuke, but seeing Guinevere standing right in front of her, glaring straight into her eyes, made her avert her eyes. The queen snatched Arturia's brush out of her hand and pushed the blonde's shoulders down forcefully until Arturia was sitting on her stool. The younger woman continued looking downward, eyes clouded by indecision. She felt the strokes of the brush against her hair and let out a heavy sigh.

"He was...rather upset," Arturia confessed eventually. "Is there something wrong with me that I should note his opinion so much?"

"I dare say not," Guinevere replied, biting her bottom lip as she started on Arturia's long braid. "Rather, it is always good to have someone else to respect so wholly. I am just glad it is someone with such seemingly honorable intentions."

The queen patted her husband's shoulder after finishing, and Arturia rose in her full regal glory. The blonde turned around to face her wife as Guinevere looked back at her.

"If it really bothers you so, however," the brunette began, Arturia's attention never wavering, "then it would hardly be beyond you to apologize, would it?"

"I did what I thought was right at the time," Arturia argued softly. "I still feel that is true, more so than not. I was just...concerned."

Guinevere nodded once and clasped her hands in front of her. "Then, don't apologize. Do what you feel is right, and make it all right. For both your sake, and his, if it means so much to you."

Arturia held eye contact for a while longer before seeming to come to some kind of conclusion.

"I need to go," she told Guinevere as she walked away. "But, thank you, Guinevere, for forgiving me despite my mistakes and foolery, and for always lending an ear."

Guinevere's wonderful violet eyes seemed to glimmer as she smiled. "Of course, my dear Arturia. I only hope that you may forgive me of mine should such a time come."

The king looked back blankly before finally giving the other woman a smile.

"I doubt I'll ever need to."

She walked away, opening and closing the door behind her as she made her way down the corridor. Her blank mask automatically fell into position the moment she saw Dylan waiting for her in front of her office, although she noted there was no sign of Shirou just yet. Dylan bowed his head as he held some papers tightly against his chest.

"Your Majesty."

"Forgive my tardiness," she apologized, her tone as cordial as ever. "Come."

Ignoring the two guards, Arturia swept into her room, showing none of her earlier discomfort and
weakness. Sitting back into her chair, she held her left hand out silently. After Dylan gave her the documents, Arturia sat back, eyes roaming up and down the page quickly.

"News?" she asked without preamble, still looking over the pages' contents.

"The Vikings are growing anxious, Your Majesty," the squirrelly man mentioned softly. "Men have come asking if you're reneging on your agreement."

One eyebrow raised in feigned amusement. "By my calendar, I have yet another couple of weeks. Perhaps they should get theirs fixed? Have a letter written detailing the stipulations of our agreement as a reminder to Fiona for me. I don't have the time to do it myself, today."

"By your command, Your Majesty," her faithful servant replied. "There is also the matter of the, ahem, plebeians. Some are still outraged over the event from two weeks ago."

"Increase security in the western sectors. Allow force if absolutely necessary, but I do not want blood shed under any circumstances. Speaking of: how fares our recruitment?"

Dylan cleared his throat. "Several lack the proper qualifications to be suitable knights."

Arturia cleared the third page as she shuffled it to the back of the stack, her eyes scrolling down the next one. She raised her gaze, demonstrating that she wasn't at all impressed with the man.

"If they're large, have them work it off. If they're daft, repetitions are key. Whatever the excuse, find an answer. Regardless, I am not in a position to be choosy. Short of criminals, I will take whatever I can get."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

As she scanned down the next page, a few phrases in particular caught her eyes and she zeroed in on them, brow furrowed.

Another one? How many does this make?

Arturia covered her mouth in thought. "Dylan, haven't our cells been filling rather rapidly as of late?"

"Ah, yes, I also needed to —"

The two were jolted out of their conversation when a knock came to the door and Shirou's voice filtered through. Announcing that he may enter, Arturia turned her focus back on Dylan.

"Revisit with me in an hour. I want to hear more about this in detail."

Dylan bowed his head, barely glancing at Shirou as the redhead walked in. "Of course, Your Majesty. Should I bring the one in charge of the investigation?"

"Do that, yes," she said, sitting back to allow Shirou space enough to set down her tray of food. "I also want a written report from him sooner rather than later."

"Very well, Your Majesty."

Arturia looked back down at her documents, glanced up once at Shirou, and then frowned in thought. As soon as the door clicked shut, she gently set the papers down, a hand resting on them as she continued gathering her thoughts together. Guinevere's words from earlier floated through her mind as well, causing her let out a sigh.
"Have a seat, Shirou," she ordered just as he was about to explain her meal, her hands clasping together. "There is something we need to discuss."

Feet thudded against the ground, drawing up dirt and dust. One man raced down the dirt path, arms pumping as he rushed past one house after another. Another man clad all in black chased after him, his gait calm and smooth. The first man swept into an alleyway, running through the darkness until the back of another rickety house barred his way. Taking a step back, annoyance obvious in his stance, he slowly turned around to see the black-clad individual standing near the alley entrance.

"You're him, then? That goody fellow that takes down the baddies? The Black Archer, was it?"

'Black Archer' walked down the dirt path slowly, eyes focused on his target as a bow materialized in his left hand as an arrow appeared in his right.

"End of the line, mate," the man said, shoulders straight as he lifted his bow.

The target grinned evilly, his rotting teeth looking foul and disturbing. "You think killing me ends everything? When my boss finds out, you'll have nowhere to run, little puppy. And that king? He'll be dead as a doornail."

Black Archer drew back the bowstring, aim tried and true as he released it with ease, the arrow zipping through the air and piercing straight through the other man's shoulder. The man grunted, a trembling hand reaching for his shoulder as he suddenly fell to his knees, his hand falling back to his side. Moving his body seemed to be a struggle and he tried to force his head up to watch as the man in black walked away, boots thumping softly against the dirt.

"You'll pay for this. My people will leave no stone unturned until you're dead!"

"Let them come," Black Archer replied softly, hearing the telltale sound of the man's torso hitting the ground and falling silent. "I'll never let anyone else get hurt."

He passed one last glance at the man eating dirt behind him before facing forward again and walking away.

"Count on it."

OMAKE:

His right and left arm shot to the left as his right knee came up high. With a huff of exertion, he wheeled his arms around as he fell into a deep lunge, pretending to slam a fist into the stone floor, and then he was up again, with another fist shooting out in front of him, his legs wide and bent and other fist tucked at his waist. He spun around, slammed a foot down and yelled out,

"Hyah! The Masked Avenger takes his stand! No foe shall go unvanquished!"

Shirou grinned at himself, striking another pose as his cape billowed behind him. "Kamen Rider's got nothing on me. Now, to add the cape."

"This should be good," quipped another voice from a corner in the room.

"Fuck you, Zago," Shirou said with a grin. "I'll look so cool, you won't know what to do."

Zago just rolled his eyes and sat back.
Looking back at the long piece of fabric on his bed, Shirou swirled it around him and tied it around his neck. He then executed another powerful pose before jumping high into the air and flipping backward to land with a thump, his right arm in a fist pump position. He grinned again and as he tried to step back, Zago's eyes widened.

"Wait, watch –"

Shirou's foot caught on the cape's end, sending him tumbling backwards with his ass hanging in the air. At first, he didn't know what he'd done and was more preoccupied with the fact that he couldn't see a damn thing and how the hell had he fallen?

"BAHAHAHA!"

The burst of laughter from Zago made Shirou's cheeks flame, and he pushed himself back into a sitting position as he glared at his friend.

"Shut up! The cape is still cool!" he ranted as he tore it off.

"You look like some dumbass jester for kids! What's a fucking cape going to do? Hah, guess you could use it to fly!"

"This isn't for kids!" Shirou argued, somewhat incensed. "Kamen Rider totally wore one and the Power Rangers had their cool masks and..."

Then, the fact that those were both heroes made for the sole purpose of entertaining children hit him like a brick and he fell silent, glaring down at the cape. Zago was doing his best to muffle his laughter, his face red from the struggle. Shirou took one look at him and tossed the cape.

"You know what? Fuck it."

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