

## Chapter 5: Ulterior Motives

After checking up on Sakura, I didn't linger, because I knew that my resolve to stay out of the way until all of my plans came together would disappear just that quickly if I stayed.

Ten years had already been ten years too long. It was only knowing exactly how fearsome my enemy was that kept me from turning back around, running to her, and promising I would rescue her from the hell that she was currently living.

So I left Homurahara and kept on walking, making sure I didn't fall prey to the trap of looking back behind me. So close to the finish line, I didn't intend on stumbling before the race was over.

The first place I went was back home, to grab an umbrella. We weren't forecast to have any rain today, but reliability and weathermen weren't always on the best of terms, and I was going to be prepared, just in case.

I didn't actually expect it to rain.

With an umbrella tucked beneath one arm, I left the house again and began my trek back in the direction of the school, but when I got there, I didn't stop, I kept going until I'd passed it and found myself on the outskirts of town, where the plots of land were larger and the houses sparser. Fuyuki's sprawling metropolis was a distant blob, and even the residential district that the Tohsaka called home was a vague blur behind me.

I had a moment of trepidation as I came upon the stairs that led up the mountain and to the temple that sat at its summit, and an entirely unrelated thrill shot through my stomach at the idea that *she* could be here, already, lying in the grass off to the side of the path, desperate and fading and trying to reach the top for herself. I could start working on my bigger plans, put the things I'd been brainstorming for the better part of ten years into action. My Holy Grail War could finally begin.

But no. I already knew she wasn't here, yet. The image in my head was vague and fragmented, like a watercolor painting that had run together, but I could distinctly remember rain and the evening sky.

"It's not going to be anything truly dangerous that kills me," I told the air. "No Servants, no magi, no curses, spells, or Noble Phantasms. Instead, if these stairs don't do me in, I'll die of the waiting."

That didn't mean there wasn't any point to what I was about to do, though, and so, with a miserable, exhausted sigh, I put one foot in front of the other and began my journey up the steps to Ryūdō Temple.

It was torture.

Although that might be a bit of an extreme way of putting it. I wasn't out of shape or anything, no, not when everything hinged on me being able to outperform the most ridiculous kung fu master since Li Shuwen, but even I felt the burn walking up all of those steps. Forget my excuses and my other plans — making this trip every day just for the workout might have been a worthwhile idea.

I could only imagine how many elderly folk died of heart attacks or strokes trying to make it all the way to the top for pilgrimage.

Nonetheless, I struggled through it and forced myself to go on. There might have been breaks involved. Okay, yes, there were breaks involved. But I didn't back down and retreat, I faced my enemy head on and pushed past my limits to achieve my goal.

That was how Tohsaka Yukio conquered the stairs of Fuyuki City's Ryūdō Temple.

If I had to take one more break at the top in front of the gate, just outside of view of any of the monks living there, well, no one actually had to know about that, did they?

And so I was perfectly poised and casual as I strode into the main compound like it was any other day and I belonged there.

So it was only natural that a man a few years older than me in monk's robes with a head of hair so closely cropped it might as well have been shaved came out of the temple to greet me.

"Yukio-kun," he said to me with a friendly smile.

"Ryūdō-san," I returned with an equally polite one.

"It's been quite a long time," Ryūdō Reikan commented. "What brings you back to our temple, today?"

"Would you believe me if I said I came to pay respects to my father?"

Reikan's smile grew into a grin. "I might, if I was not already aware that you and your family are devout Christians, and your father is buried in the Christian cemetery."

One side of my smile slanted a little further. "And if I were instead to claim that I sought out the tranquility of the temple, so that I might meditate on my life and the meaning of my existence, to purify myself of impure thoughts?"

Reikan laughed. "A little more believable, but I'm afraid I still know you better than to think that's the truth!"

I sighed and ran a hand across the back of my neck. The smile I offered him this time was a little sheepish.

"It seems your brother isn't the only one with an eerie talent for seeing through to people's true selves," I told him.

It always amused me that Issei so easily saw through Rin's "innocent school idol" facade and to the girl beneath it, and I was decently sure she got a kick out of messing with him whenever he accused her of duplicitousness. No, who was I kidding? Rin absolutely enjoyed winding him up over it, just as I had during the short time I'd spent on the student council, back in the day.

“I have nothing of the sort, unlike Issei,” Reikan denied. “My surety comes entirely from knowing what kind of person you are, Yukio-kun.”

“Fair enough.” I shrugged. “Well. To condense a long story into something a bit more bite-sized, an acquaintance of mine is scheduled to meet me here sometime in the next week or two. Originally, I hadn’t expected to be back in town early enough to greet her, and Rin would have been rather, ah, cross with me, to put it mildly, for inviting a stranger into our home without consulting her first, so I asked her to come here where she might receive your hospitality.”

“Rather than putting this mystery woman of yours up in a hotel?” Reikan asked a little skeptically.

“She wouldn’t accept my charity, because she thinks such gender roles are old-fashioned, but she also doesn’t have the money to afford a good hotel in Shinto, so there weren’t many options.”

Lie, lie, lie, lie, but at least this was one I had practiced and prepared and schooled myself in a long time ago, so it rolled off my tongue as easily and effortlessly as the truth would have. It wasn’t like I could tell him that a Servant, the spirit of a distant figure from mythology temporarily revived in a corporeal form, from a secretive magical event called the Holy Grail War would be making her way to the Ryūdō Temple because it sat atop the most powerful ley line in the city and I intended to intercept her.

The worst part of that wouldn’t be him refusing to believe me. The worst part would be what might happen and what might *have* to happen if he did.

One of Reikan’s eyebrows rose. “You can’t contact her and tell her you’ve arrived home earlier than expected? I would think it much easier to meet her at the station than forcing her to walk all the way across the city to here.”

An exaggerated, put-upon sigh left my mouth. “Unfortunately, I don’t have any method of getting in touch with her. She has my home phone number, and she’s supposed to call once she’s made it up here, but in between now and then, I don’t have any way of contacting her. She doesn’t have a cell phone, you see.”

“That *is* rather inconvenient,” Reikan allowed. “Ah, it’s fine, Yukio-kun. As long as her stay isn’t particularly long, we here at the Ryūdō Temple would be happy to accommodate this acquaintance of yours. We’ll gladly show her our hospitality.”

A knot in my stomach that I hadn’t realized was there eased, and I checked another point off of my list.

“Thank you, Ryūdō-san,” I said politely. “Ah, just to be clear, though. I intend to visit the temple every day until she gets here. My business with her is somewhat time-sensitive.”

“Oh?” Reikan grinned. “Perhaps Yukio-kun has fallen for an attractive foreign beauty? An acquaintance, indeed. I should remind you, Yukio-kun, that the temple grounds are not to be used for any illicit meetings. We are not a love hotel.”

Heat flooded my cheeks and I let out a low, quiet groan. “Really? It’s nothing of the sort, Ryūdō-san. My business with her is strictly that — business. I am not sneaking a foreign lover into the country under my sister’s nose or whatever other ludicrous scenario has entered your head.”

“You must admit, it’s suspicious.” And he was definitely teasing me, now. “After all, you’ve never kept company with other women before, aside from your sister and your attorney.”

“In Fuyuki, perhaps,” I said, a little sharper than I intended. “I’ve spent the last six months in the presence of quite a few women, many of them quite attractive, and all of them only for the purposes of contractual obligations. Quite frankly, Ryūdō-san, I have no room for a love life, right now.”

“Message received.” Reikan held up his hands in the universal sign of surrender. “Can you at least tell me what to expect of this acquaintance of yours? How would I recognize her, aside from the fact she’s coming here in the first place?”

A sardonic smirk curled one side of my mouth. “You can’t miss her. If you put aside her bright blue eyes, she’s also probably going to be dressed like something out of a Greek play. For all that she chides me for being old-fashioned, she’s quite the traditionalist herself.”

“She sounds like a complicated person.”

A secret smile curled the edges of my lips. A joke that only I was in on.

“In ways and to degrees that you wouldn’t believe, Ryūdō-san.”

With his agreement and permission to continue my daily pilgrimage to the temple, I bade my goodbyes, turned back around, and began my trek down the mountain. It wasn’t exactly enjoyable, but it was far and away easier on me and my legs than the journey up had been. I was probably going to have sore legs for the foreseeable future, even still.

The things I did for my family and their future.

Halfway down, I paused a moment, closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and as the mirror in my head cracked and shattered, I reached out with that nebulous sixth sense with which I could feel the flow of magical energy. It stretched as far as I was able, up and down the mountain, until I felt like I was spreading myself through the trees and the blades of grass and the very air — and I found nothing.

There were no major sources of magical power nearby. No elfin waif struggling to hold on just a little bit longer so that she could make it to the top. No harried sorceress racing towards the peak. All I could feel was the distant barrier that surrounded the temple and the pulse of the ley line buried deep beneath me. Even when I chanced a glance into the underbrush, there was not the slightest sign.

I sighed and kept going.

It wasn’t like I’d been expecting her so soon. For all that these early stages would be some of the most critical to get right, my timeline on the sequence of events was admittedly fuzzy. Because my previous self had never known for sure, neither could I.

When I reached the bottom, I stopped long enough to look up at the sky, and I was greeted by clear blue, with thin, lazy clouds drifting across the expanse like puffs of cotton candy.

It made me feel like a stranger. Out of place. A pervasive sense that I didn't belong settled in my gut, just under my diaphragm, and for a single moment, I was seized by a sudden certainty that I was going to fail and there was nothing I could do to change it.

But that was nothing new. I'd had nightmares as a kid, vivid dreams where I could only watch as a highlight reel of my family's suffering played behind my eyelids, because nothing I'd done had stopped any of it. Learning to live with the doubt had been one of the hardest challenges I'd faced in those early days.

I just had to remind myself that nothing *would* change if I didn't try. Failure was the same as doing nothing at all.

Sucking a deep breath in through my nose braced me against my fears, like an impenetrable bulwark between me and despair, a castle wall that pushed out that sense of unbelonging. Bolstered, I stepped out onto the sidewalk and started to make my way back home.

There was nothing to be done about it, now. Medea would make her way to the temple eventually, I just had to be diligent and make sure I found her before Kuzuki could snatch her heart. I wasn't fool enough to try and assault Atrum Galliasta in the little workshop he'd set up for himself, even if I was fairly sure I could have beat him in a fight. Not when he could simply order Medea to do me in with one of his Command Spells.

I just wished I had a better idea of when she would show up than "a rainy afternoon in mid-January."

"Well, it can't be too easy, can it?" I asked the open air. "It would just be boring if there weren't a few stumbling blocks here and there. It's no fun if I don't have to work for it."

Now if only I could actually bring myself to believe that.

It couldn't be helped, so I made my way back home, the winter chill on my cheeks and the bleak sun on the back of my neck. I stopped back by the house only long enough to put away my umbrella, now that I was absolutely certain I had no use for it, and to make sure I had both my wallet and the shoulder bag with my laptop on hand before I left and began the trek to Shinto, the modern, more industrial half of the city where all of the businesses and big department stores had set up shop.

Call me old-fashioned, but I preferred the sleepy, less busy little town of Miyama, Fuyuki's residential district where most of the city's people actually lived, particularly its oldest and longest settled families. There was some wonderful history to London, and the old, Victorian era buildings that still stood even now had a charm of their own, but as incredible as it had been to feel like I was stepping back in time in some places, there was just something homey and magnificently archaic about Fuyuki's Miyama district.

Shinto felt cold and indifferent by comparison. An unfeeling monument to capitalism in all its terrible glory, crowding out everything that wasn't of use to the machine of corporate profits.

Well, maybe I was being a little too harsh. Modern cityscapes had their own beauty, it just wasn't to my particular preferences.

There were a handful of tourists milling about in the city proper as I walked, some housewives out shopping with their friends because they had nothing better to do with their free time, but I paid them no mind as I made a beeline for the electronics shop that was my destination to pick up the order I'd placed earlier in the month.

Waiting had been an exercise in patience. Rakuden, the store in question, had had my order days ago, but Rin would have asked way too many questions if she'd seen me come home with a bunch of tiny surveillance cameras specifically designed to be hidden and unnoticeable. "Spy cameras," as it were. She would have asked way too many questions that I really didn't want to answer. Couldn't answer, not truthfully, not without ruining a whole load of my plans, and while I was a decent liar, Rin was way too perceptive to take the chances that she might catch me out.

With my wallet a little lighter and my arms a little heavier, I left Rakuden carrying a couple of plastic bags and made my way on a meandering path out of the city proper and towards the edges. Deliberately, I avoided any road that swung too close to the old Catholic church on the hill, because the very last person whose suspicions I needed to arouse was Kotomine Kirei, and the very last person whose interest I needed to catch was the golden-haired king currently living with him.

Finally, as the sun peaked and noon fast approached, I found myself coming upon the old ghost house, a mansion that had last been occupied almost seventy years ago, during the Third Holy Grail War. One of two, in fact, originally owned by the Edelfelt sisters from that War. Luviagelita had only been too happy to sell the deed for the other one to me — for an exorbitant sum, of course, and even if I had talked her down, I'd still paid well over market value — but this one technically belonged to the Association, now.

Which meant, of course, that it was the Association's foothold in the city, and if anyone decided to come take part in the Holy Grail War on the Association's behalf, well, this was as good a place as any to set up base, wasn't it? Old, Western, upscale, for what and where it was, and already mostly prepared for just that.

Fortunately, no one had yet claimed it, so there was still plenty of time to put one of my side plans into action. A contingency, if you would, to make sure my endgame went off properly, even if other parts went awry.

The front door was locked when I came upon it, but the spell needed to undo that lock was the same as it had been for the other house, so it didn't take much effort to get inside and find myself in a well-maintained mansion. Carpet, flooring, furniture, furnishings — everything had been perfectly preserved by the bounded field, kept neat and clean over the decades while the house waited for its owner to return.

Was Luvia's grandmother still around? I wondered. It had been sixty years, after all. Was that spiteful, old hag still spitting mad over my grandfather seducing her twin sister?

Well, it wasn't like I had any plans of finding out, so I guess it didn't matter.

I dropped my bags on the seat of one plush armchair and set about exploring as I pulled one of the cameras out of its packaging. There were only so many for me to plant, and the very last thing I needed to do was hide one of my limited number of spycams in a useless place — or worse, in such plain sight that it was easily noticed.

“If it’s anything like the other mansion...” I muttered to myself. “A top floor, a middle floor, a ground floor, a basement...”

And naturally, the best place to perform a Servant Summoning would be...

“Probably the basement.”

Isolated, closed off, private, it would be ideal for keeping the magical energy from spreading out, and it would be the easiest place to avoid the attention of snooping neighbors. Or in this case, neighborhood kids who wanted to get a look at the mysterious ghost house and mistook strange lights and sounds for an actual haunting.

It took a little searching, but eventually, I found my way downstairs and walked the perimeter of the basement, looking for a good place to set up the camera where it wouldn’t be noticed. There weren’t many options, because the place was pretty sparse, but fortunately, the basement was dark and didn’t have much in the way of lighting, so when I nestled it in the crevice of the brickwork, it all but disappeared. It had the benefit of a good view of most of the basement, too, although there were a few places where it didn’t have line of sight.

It didn’t matter. As long as I could see people coming and going and had a decent look at what happened inside the room, I didn’t need to see *everything*.

Back upstairs in the living room — parlour? Whatever, I wasn’t *that* old-fashioned — I stuck my next camera in the centerpiece above the fireplace, in plain view but disguised by the structure around it. As long as Kirei didn’t have a chance to inspect it too closely, it wouldn’t get noticed at all.

I stuck one more camera in the shadow of a painting hanging on the wall.

Upstairs, most of the second floor was residential space. Bedrooms and bathrooms and a decently expansive study. I hid one camera in the corner of a bookshelf there, peering out towards the door. I doubted the summoning would take place here, but just in case, I needed eyes on the largest portion of it I could manage.

The bedrooms and bathrooms, I left alone. It felt a little too invasive to plant cameras in places where I knew people were going to be naked, particularly people of the opposite sex. Less like I was spying on the competition and more like I was either collecting blackmail material or just plain peeping.

No matter how sexy I thought Bazett’s abs probably were, they were just going to have to stay in my imagination.

On the top floor, I found attic space. It wasn’t like standard attics, of course, because it looked much more like a top floor that was simply a little more squashed and a little more open, like the builders had simply forgotten to finish adding the walls and left only the bare skeletons of the

support beams. This wasn't the least likely place in the whole house for someone to attempt a Servant summoning, but of the list of places where casting a spell like that would happen, it was the least likely. I stuck a camera on the far wall and called it a day.

With almost all of my cameras planted, I went outside and put my last one in place, hidden just under the doorbell.

Once that was done, I went back inside, pulled out my laptop, and once it had booted up, I did a systems check to make sure everything was connected properly. Through a clever bit of adaptation, I'd merged technology and magecraft using the same principle as the gramophone in the basement: I connected the information recorded by the cameras with my laptop. I just hadn't been sure it would work until I actually sat down and tried it.

So it was with bated breath that I opened up the program that recorded the cameras' feeds and waited...for the video streams to come in clear and complete. For a few handfuls of seconds, each camera sent back video to my laptop, and then, one by one, they winked off to conserve power. Motion activated. There was a reason I'd had to get them special order.

A laugh bubbled out of my lips, and I pumped my fist with a hissed, "Yes!"

Dear old Dad probably would have had something to say about it. Scratch that, he was probably turning over in his grave right that moment, and if he'd been alive to see the very magecraft he once used on an old timey, antique gramophone adapted to a modern laptop and camera setup, he just might have popped a blood vessel or fainted from sheer, apoplectic rage.

Just to make sure everything was working properly and none of it was a fluke, I stood up with my laptop, went down to the basement, and waved my hand in front of the camera I'd hidden — it was so inconspicuous down there that I actually had a bit of trouble finding it again. Sure enough, the instant it detected movement, it turned on and streamed directly to the feed on my laptop. To be absolutely certain, I went around to each of my other hidden cameras and checked them, too.

Each and every single one of them turned on when I walked in front of them, stayed on as long as I was there, and turned back off after thirty seconds of no movement.

"I could kiss you right now," I told my laptop with a grin. Of course, it didn't reply, because voice activated personal assistants wouldn't be a thing for something like another decade. A shame, because this whole thing would be much more interesting and less lonely with a snarky, AI companion.

With my cameras installed and working, I packed up the bags and the packaging, bundled my laptop back into its bag, and left, making absolutely certain I didn't leave anything conspicuous behind for the next occupant to stumble over. A glance at my watch told me I had about an hour and a half to make it to Miyama in time to walk Rin home from school, and I definitely wasn't making that trip by foot, so I dug out my cellphone and called up a taxi service so I could get back in time.

My dominos were set up and organized. Now, I just had to wait for the right people to come and tip them over, so that my plans could truly be set in motion.

I'd already been waiting ten years. What was another week or two?